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A common disadvantage of compilation theses is that repetitions tend to occur in the different sections, and in that respect this one is no exception. *Anders Gustavsson, University of Oslo/Henån*

### **Rural Shopkeepers in a Time of Crisis**

*Liisa Kurkinen, Tiskin takana. Kauppiaselämäkerrat maaseudun murroksen kuvaajina (Behind the Counter – Shopkeeper Biographies as Descriptions of Countryside in Social Crisis). Kansatieteellinen Arkisto 60. Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys. Helsinki 2020. 247 pp. Ill. Diss. English summary. ISBN 978-952-6655-17-8.*

■ Liisa Kurkinen's dissertation research examines the work, everyday life and work strategies of country shopkeepers through their biographical perceptions. The area in the focus of the research is Kainuu province in Northern Finland and the research period reaches from the 1940s to the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, including a social and cultural crisis that shook the Finnish countryside. In the 1950s, Finland was still a mainly agricultural society. In the 1960s, rapid mechanization of agriculture and forestry decreased the need for manpower. The 1960s and 1970s also witnessed a large-scale wave of migration from the countryside into towns and cities and to Sweden. Its effects were most pronounced in Eastern and Northern Finland. The migration had an irreparable impact on the operation of village shops. While Finland was being developed into a welfare state, many remote rural areas regressed. Kurkinen asks how rural shopkeepers operated through everyday life, what kind of action strategies and solutions they adopted during the structural change, and what kind of an image of their profession the shopkeepers build through their own narratives.

The study has a clear and coherent arrangement. In the introductory chapter, the writer presents the research questions, research material and the researcher's role, the biographical approach, and the main concepts and ethical considerations. In the chapters on material analysis (ch. 2–6), she

addresses the different routes to becoming a shopkeeper, the shop as a space for interaction and activity, the shopkeepers' roles within their village community, finances and livelihood, other areas of the shopkeeper's life (home, family, childcare, hobbies), and the reasons for ending one's working career. The final chapter, "Rural shopkeepers in a time of crisis" ties up the aforementioned aspects of life as a country shopkeeper as well as their different career phases during a "surge of structural change".

Kurkinen's fieldwork took place in 1996 in all eight rural Kainuu municipalities as well as rural villages outside the urban area of Kuhmo. The research material consists of 37 biographical interviews of rural shopkeepers. Most of the informants, who were born between 1911 and 1942, were already retired at the time of the interviews. There was an equal share of male and female interviewees (18 and 19 respectively), and there were nine shopkeeper couples. The researcher wrote down most of the interviews during the interview. Nine interviews were taped and form a basis for extensive citation and subsequent analysis in the study. Some of the taped interviewees become more familiar, which gives the material-filled text more structure. Kurkinen has done her fieldwork in a familiar field. Her knowledge of the area and dialect, her background as a member of a village shopkeeper family and experience of the work itself helped in building a trusting relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. This comes across in quotations from the material, some of which address highly personal issues and feelings.

According to Kurkinen, the central themes of the study arose from the narrative content of the interviews. The biographical approach used as the theoretical-methodological basis is appropriate for this material-driven study. The writer has also relied on research on memory and remembrance, although with less methodological and analytical mastery. The chapter on material analysis shows that the writer is well-read, although the short quotations of ideas and opinions picked from various researchers leave the overall picture slightly

fragmentary. Even though Kurkinen collected her research material 25 years ago, her research considers the conceptual, analytical, and paradigmatic changes that have happened in ethnology since then.

The studied shops did not form a homogeneous group; some had operated mainly in rural areas, others in village centres. Most of the shops were family businesses whose operation also included the whole family. Likewise included were some larger enterprises that employed several shop assistants at the same time. The shop owners included founders of their own shops as well as second- and third-generation shopkeepers. The text does indeed present these differing operational baselines and environments. However, it would have been easier for the reader if the bibliography had listed each interviewee's generation. With regard to research ethics, Kurkinen has changed the interviewees' names and the research localities or villages remain unnamed. Sequential numbering has been used for the interviewees in source references, but this numbering has been left out of the interviewee list itself.

Most of the shopkeepers in the study came from an agricultural background – some of the shops started as an annex to the farm. Kurkinen compares shopkeepers to farmers, with shared values and a view of their work as a way of life. The shopkeeper profession was held in high regard and seen as pleasant work; it was varied and versatile as well as meaningful. The best features of the job were the freedom of entrepreneurship, sense of community and interaction with the villagers. On the other hand, the work was seen as having several downsides: the work was heavy, constraining, with constant pressure and never-ending labour as well as stress from sales on credit. One of the female shopkeepers stated: "All I needed was working clothes and nightwear" (p. 81). Hard times had an even greater impact on small family businesses.

As the Winter War (30.11.1939– 3.3.1940) began between Finland and the Soviet Union, some Kainuu municipalities close to the border were trapped inside the war zone. The inhabitants were

evacuated to safer areas further away. A special feature of Kurkinen's research is studying shops started by evacuated shopkeepers in their new communities. After the war, people returned to their home and continued their shopkeeper profession. Sometimes a family member stayed behind to run the new shop, thus developing their own business. As Kainuu is an area dominated by forests, large logging and timber rafting sites were frequent up to the 1960s. Another speciality in Kainuu were logging site shops which were needed to supply these worksites with food, which in turn supplied the shopkeepers with extra income.

An important part of the study considers women's role as village shopkeepers. The writer shows how strongly women's chances to operate as independent village shopkeepers were defined by their gender in the patriarchal atmosphere of the research period. Women might encounter credibility problems, prejudice, and discrimination. Still in the 1950s, a shop founded by a woman would officially be named after her husband. The interviewed women include some that could be called "glass ceiling breakers", who pioneered more equal treatment of women. Activity in varied women's organizations encouraged female shopkeepers to seek cooperation also in issues concerning trade. Collaboration and a realization of the importance of education paved the way for the crumbling of women's unequal status.

The great structural change emptied rural villages. When the shopkeeper's most important resource – customers – left for the cities, the village lost its post office, its school, and in the end, its shop. The severity of the structural change can be seen in an account by one of the shopkeeper couples of how, standing on the steps of their shop, they could see eleven abandoned houses. Many previously vibrant agricultural villages turned into retiree villages inhabited by senior citizens, some whole villages even became deserted. However, the emigration wave out of the countryside was not the only reason for the plight of village shops. Several structural changes in trade had an impact on the weakening of the operating conditions of village shops. Structural changes mentioned in the

study include switching from counter service to self-service, health care regulations, competition between shop clusters, increases in freight costs, tightened demands from wholesale businesses, taxation seen as harsh, and especially the increase in the number of cars, which drove customers to the modern stores in population centres.

Decreasing living space for village shops caused defensive adaptation. Shopkeepers had to come up with other sources of income, for example, the aforementioned food supply of logging and timber rafting sites, managing the mail and telephone exchange, cafeteria operation, transporting milk from the farms, and driving a taxi. Supplying retailing cooperatives with berries and other produce was a noticeable source of extra income for shopkeepers in the Kainuu villages. The berry trade provided the customers with spending money, which they then could spend in the shop, thus also benefiting the shopkeeper; the shop could remain in the village for longer.

The structural change that took place in the countryside impacted the continuation or ending of the career of village shopkeepers. Kurkinen has divided narratives on career endings into three groups: retiring with entrepreneur's pension, retiring with disability pension, and having to close down the business due to unprofitability. Retiring from working life was a life change that was undertaken under compulsion. When the interviews were conducted (1996), only a few of the stores that had developed from a small village shop into a well-established business were still operating. The study does not disclose when each narrator had ended their shopkeeper career.

In addition to being a piece of biographical research, the study exemplifies ethnographic research on occupational groups. In Finnish ethnology the earliest point of reference can be found in Ilmar Talve's research on the "folk culture" of industrial workers and occupational groups that started in the 1950s and 1960s. This research trend has gained new popularity in the 2000s. Some recent Finnish doctoral dissertations concerning a specific occupational group include those by Leena Paaskoski (2008, university-ed-

ucated foresters), Tiina Suopajarvi (2009, forestry professionalism), Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (2013, life story of a female factory labourer), Maria Vanha-Similä (2017, everyday life of workers in textile factory), and Miia Tiili (2018, Coast Guard officers).

Kurkinen's doctoral dissertation can be seen as the first in making a less-noticed occupational group more visible – she has successfully chosen an interesting research topic and period. The study is a consistent and comprehensive narrative about shopkeepers in the Kainuu region and the social crisis of the countryside that had a crucial impact on the careers and lives of shopkeepers. Individual memories and experiences of shopkeepers from the Kainuu region also mirror the general societal and social development that took place in the Finnish countryside after the Second World War.

*Pirjo Korkiakangas, Jyväskylä*

### Space, Bearings and Queer Orientations

*Evelina Liliequist*, Digitala förbindelser. Rum, riktning och queera orienteringar. Institutionen för kultur och medier, Umeå University 2020. 238 pp. English summary. Diss. ISBN 978-91-7855-219-1.

■ Evelina Liliequist begins the dissertation *Digital Connections: Space, Bearings and Queer Orientations* with a revisit to her teens when she sat at the public computer in a corner of the small-town library. She describes how the feelings of exclusion, boredom and being lost were replaced for a while with feelings of inclusion and confidence when she logged on to the site "Sylvia.se – for girls who like girls". This snapshot highlights the heart of the dissertation and area of inquiry: the importance of digital environments in the lives of LGBTQ people, not least those who live beyond the hectic pulse of the metropolitan centres. More specifically, it is the northern part of Sweden, Norrland, that is in focus – a choice that draws its analytical power from the intersecting notions of non-modernity, homophobia, macho culture and isolation tied to the specific area. Norrland, and