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Affects and Emotions in Cultural Research

– Cornucopia or Pandora’s box?

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Rinne, Jenni, Kajander, Anna and Haanpää, Riina (eds). 2020. *Affektit ja tunteet kulttuurien tutkimuksessa*. [Affects and emotions in cultural research.] Ethnos Toimite 22. Helsinki: Ethnos, the Association of Finnish Ethnologists. 348 pp. ISBN 978-952-68509-5-5 (print), ISBN 978-952-68509-6-2 (PDF), ISSN 0957-511X. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31885/9789526850962>

In recent years, we have seen a massive growth of affect and emotions research. Emotions are no longer placed opposite to reason, but understood as fundamental parts of humanity, as “ways in which we engage actively in the world” (Jaggar 2009, 55). People are connected to the world via their senses, habits, and experiences, and they make the world look like their own (Frykman, p. 147).

The book *Affektit ja tunteet kulttuurien tutkimuksessa* is based on the keynote speeches and papers presented at X Ethnology Days (Sense and Sensibility – Ethnology of Affect) in Pori in 2018. About 80 researchers attended the conference, which was arranged by Ethnos, the Association of Finnish Ethnologists, and the Pori University Consortium. The two-day event included three keynote lectures and seven parallel sessions. (Kajander & Salmi 2018.)

Theoretically, the book is connected to the so-called “affective turn” in the social sciences and humanities. The study of affects has brought their potential to the focus and increased our understanding of how affects and emotions act in our lives. Many researchers see this potential as a cornucopia, while others may compare it to opening a Pandora’s box.

The book consists of an introductory chapter and nine individual articles based on empirical, ethnographic research. In the introduction, the editors bring together different definitions and understandings of the concept of “affect” or “affective experience.” They focus on the definitions used by the authors of the different articles in the book. For example, when discussing the similarities and differences of emotions and affects, or the cultural engagement of affects, the introduction centers on researchers like Brian Massumi, Margaret Wetherell, and Sara Ahmed, who are all widely referred to in the articles of the book. The authors of the articles ask what affects and emotions do, and how affects are attached to certain bodies, things, and events, but not to others. Affects are seen as a certain kind of power beyond the social and the

cultural, and the authors offer a good analytical starting point to enlarge our understanding of the concept of culture (e.g. Hörnfeldt, p. 119–120).

This book is a very welcome contribution to the field of ethnology and cultural studies in Finland. We also highly value the fact that it offers knowledge in and translates theoretical concepts into Finnish.

Methodologically, all articles in this book are very interesting, because doing research on emotions and affects is very challenging. For example, you need to know how to “read” affects in your research material. This is connected to the very fundamental idea of what is considered “knowledge.” Each and every set of research material demands a special way of reading and recognizing emotions.

Affectivity can be read from sighs, body language, laughter, or gestures. The most challenging to interpret are bodily experiences, which are usually difficult to describe by words. In the process of interpreting their research data, researchers need to rely on empathy, creativity, and imagination. Reading affects in research material may also be complicated because it has not been in focus in the first place. However, these articles prove how the researcher does not always need very thick descriptions in order to find affects and emotions. For example, Åsa Ljungström illustrates how, from the first sight, very modest diary notes may form very rich and relevant research material and reveal affects and emotions in multiple ways. Even though the diary notes Ljungström studies are short and somewhat un-descriptive, with the help of her analysis, she is able to identify emotions and thus helps the reader to see the deep emotional life of the diary writer. From our viewpoint, the diverse methodologies of studying affects also need to be discussed further in the future, as the editors of this book suggest (p. 28).

One may wonder about the need to define the concepts and theoretical background in each article instead of relying on the definitions provided in the introductory chapter. It is true that all authors interpret affect theories and concepts from slightly different viewpoints, but because this variation is often very modest, relying on the introductory chapter would have left space for a more profound presentation of the case studies and deeper interpretation of the data.

Some of the writers make interesting connections between affects, memory, and the material world. For example, professor of ethnology Maja Povrzanović Frykman describes in her article how objects can be charged with the affective power of experiences. These objects may be very mundane, but in remembering the past, these objects become meaningful (p. 59–60). For example, in the process of inheriting a summer cottage, even the most mundane objects can gather so powerful meanings and emotions that the people

involved end up in endless discussions about who should get what, as professor emeritus of ethnology Jonas Frykman describes in his article. Frykman analyses emotions attached to summer cottages, and how these often rather nostalgic emotions are evoked when a summer cottage is inherited and this inheritance should be shared.

We found the article written by ethnologists Jenni Rinne and Pia Olsson especially captivating. They write about affects as patterns where lived, affective experiences are constructed in current public discourses, shared narratives, and individual, personal memories and background. They suggest that affects or places can be expressed through everyday nostalgia. Nostalgia demands from us active and affective presence that bridges the past and the present, time and place (p. 321). Rinne and Olsson combine nostalgic memories, emotions, and spatial experiences in an interesting way.

The role of emotions in ethnography has also been intensely debated. Some scholars have been worried that emotions mostly “fall outside the ethnographic frame” (Beatty 2010, 437), or researchers have not been able to specify whose emotions they are actually interested in. Therefore, it would have been nice to read some critical remarks concerning affects and emotions in these articles. For example, Rinne and Olsson write about how understanding affects is always connected to cultural meaning making (p. 311–312).

Affects and emotions come into being in interaction. Thus, ethnographers’ personal affects, emotions, and feelings are always present in doing research, and it would be vital for researchers to be able to reflexively analyze and understand their own role. Consequently, it would have been interesting to read about some peculiar or even confusing situations affect studies have led researchers into. For example, the role of laughter in interview situations may produce a totally different conclusion/interpretation depending on whether the researcher laughs along or not.

Individual case studies are always interesting, but in the future, it would be nice to move beyond fragmented knowledge, towards a more, if not converging, at least profound understanding. Even though this book is very well written and important for Finnish affect scholars, the results would have been stronger if there had been an epilogue or a final chapter that had discussed the results and also outlined possible future avenues for affect research.

Reading this book was very thought evoking, and thus it is suitable for all scholars and students interested in the various ways affects and emotions are present in our lives. Emotions and affects may also be aroused by reading some of the articles. For example, the article written by Tuija Saresma is a very concrete example of how affects work. Saresma has studied the intersections of antifeminism, misogyny, masculinism, and racism in internet fo-

rums to show how affects make things happen and produce emotions. Besides the importance of the topic, the article is also very well written and a good example of how an author can describe their use of the method and theory in a way that the reader can follow how the conclusions are arrived at. This makes the data, method, and concept of affect understandable even for first-time readers of the topic.

Affect research offers plenty of possibilities for the social sciences and humanities. Currently, however, the related concepts are defined and understood in many different ways, of which researchers must be aware when using them. In order for affect studies not to become a Pandora's box, it is necessary to use accurate definitions and commit to them. In multidisciplinary fields, too, understandings of affects and emotions vary, but nevertheless, ethnologists and anthropologists play an important role.

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