
CONFERENCES

Voices and Practices in Research – The XII Finnish Ethnology Days, Helsinki, 14–15 March 2024

Aino Laiho & Sauli Okker

One of the main principles in ethnological research is to give a voice to research participants. On the other hand, researchers also possess unique voices. This challenges us, as researchers, to reflect and understand the ways in which we influence the world through our studies, raising questions such as: where and how are the voices of our research heard? Whose voices are heard, and who listens to them? What kind of research is valuable?

These questions inspired the XII Finnish Ethnology Days' theme this year: *Voices and Practices in Research*. The annual conference, organised by the *Association of Finnish Ethnologists Ethnos ry*, took place this year in Helsinki at Tieteiden talo (the House of Science and Letters). The two days included three keynotes, eight workshops, one experimental affect workshop and an evening get-together with dinner at the Helsinki City Museum. The conference gathered 140 participants to reflect on the voices of ethnological research. To stay with the theme, the voices of this report are Sauli Okker (SO), who gave a presentation during the conference, and Aino Laiho (AL), who is a first-time attendee of the Finnish Ethnology Days.

After a warm welcome from the organisers, the first conference day started with a keynote introducing the main topics of the conference. Fataneh Farahani, professor of Ethnology at Stockholm University, delivered a keynote titled 'Diasporic Epistemic Vulnerabilities: Troubling the concept of voice within the compulsory Eurocentric knowledge production'. It critically explored the concept of 'giving voice' in academic settings and aimed to move beyond mechanistic and singular approaches, as well as the romanticisation of this notion. Does being granted a voice automatically mean receiving power too? Not necessarily, she argued, as this may lead to 'representational tokenism', whereby the so-called 'white we' decide to practice white hospitality towards marginalised groups and choose how and to whom a voice is given, causing narratives to become singular.

(AL) Although I am ethnically white and European, due to my position as a Deaf person and signer, Farahani's examples and thoughts were not completely unfamiliar to me. I eagerly wrote down useful terms in my notes, such as 'unhomed', and 'racialising academia'. Farahani quoted Poppy De Souza when referring to "willfully mishearing white ears". Coincidentally, I

found it quite fitting in my case, because as Farahani points out, white individuals, and in my opinion, hearing and non-disabled individuals as well, have the privilege to appeal to ignorance and expect education from marginalised groups.

(SO) After lunch, the program continued with the first workshops. The workshop titled 'Moniäänisyys ja äänettämyys terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin määrittelyissä' ('Multivocality and silence in definitions of health and well-being') contained presentations about voices of people with disabilities, high school students' voices about well-being, and two presentations on voluntarily childless people. The workshop started with Kia Liimatainen's presentation about her ongoing dissertation research on people with disabilities and their experiences of transition to work, in which she plans to analyse the data together with research participants. It will be interesting to hear about her experiences with this inclusive method of analysis at a later time. Nina Väkeväinen gave a thought-provoking presentation about the sterilisation processes of voluntarily childless people. After presenting their voices, Väkeväinen proceeded to the voices of doctors. In my personal "social bubble" and in the media, the discussion is usually limited to voluntary childless perspectives or people with opposing opinions, which made hearing about doctors' perspectives a welcome addition.

After the afternoon coffee break, Tytti Steel from the University of Turku gave a keynote titled 'Osallistavat menetelmät ja tutkimuksen vaikuttavuus' ('Participatory methods and the impact of research'), which engaged with the terms of participation and inclusivity, which are currently ubiquitous in the field of humanities. Steel spoke about participatory methods as an inclusive form (osallistava), which can also be understood as a way for researchers to give a voice to participants or to topics that touch participants' lives. Steel's thought-provoking keynote highlighted numerous ethical questions, such as how researchers might overemphasise the vulnerability of research participants. This encouraged me to think further about the importance of reflecting on our positions as researchers when conducting participatory methods, as they involve power hierarchies by default: the researcher is in a position of authority and the "middleman" by implementing the participation process.

The first day ended with a get-together at the Helsinki City Museum, with a delicious vegan buffet and the Ethnos award ceremony, which Helsinki City Museum's intendent Mikko Teräsvirta awarded to Kamilla Billiers from the University of Helsinki. The evening concluded with Alice Aloof's folk music, and I was fascinated by their 'reggae-ish' – melancholy but danceable – adaptation of the Finnish folk tune "Juokse sinä humma".

The second day started with a morning workshop titled 'Moraalisesti haastavat tutkimuskohteet' ('Morally challenging research topics') that discussed themes of fascists, incels, football ultras and Finnish "gangsta rap". These themes raise ethical concerns about how to handle voices coming from controversial fields. For example, it is a very relevant question to what extent a researcher wants to make fascists' voices heard when their agenda might be to push their message into public discussion.

(AL) I joined the parallel workshop dealing with voices in the museum, 'Äänet museossa: Kenen äänet museossa kuuluvat, miten museon ääni kuuluu?' ('Voices in the museum: Whose voices are heard in the museum, how does the museum's voice sound?'). Karoliina Autere connected the well-known wheel of privilege and power diagram in her presentation about the dynamic museum with ideas of inclusivity and participation, through which, in the best case, power imbalances are evened out. As Autere addressed, that will also mean that some people will lose their power and privilege. Under this premise, are we ready to give space to the oppressed or marginalised? If before I was hesitant about working in or with museums, this thought-provoking session made me reconsider my doubts. Museums can serve as places where norms are questioned and where new ideas are built, and I would love to be part of that process. Helena Laukkoski's presentation on the business-based museum, blurring of museum boundaries and the concept of experience taking space generated the most discussion during the workshop.

The afternoon continued with the second session of 'Moraalisesti haastavat tutkimuskohteet' ('Morally challenging research topics'). Jaana Ahtiainen's presentation concerned the challenges in researching commercial sex, during which she highlighted issues such as terminological decisions, stigmatisation and the power of gatekeepers as informants and contact persons. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the hierarchies among society and sex workers, it may happen that some voices remain hidden while others, often those of the gatekeepers, are emphasised. Aila Mustamo presented a paper on researchers' drug and psychedelics experiences; the (privileged) positions of the researchers depending on their background were recognised as well. Sauli Okker's presentation gave insight into his research on unauthorised rave-parties and reflections on research ethics regarding encountering subcultural communities. He mentioned the term 'heterotopia', which means a space for the alternative action, and which he uses as a theoretical tool to explain how and why the social space of rave-parties differs, for example, from parties at the legitimated venues. All three presentations dealt with the position of the researcher with regard to the informants versus within academia, and the process of gaining informants' trust.

The last keynote speech was held by Sharon Macdonald, professor of Social Anthropology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, and provided a good summary of the previous keynotes, workshops, and the issues raised in them. While Farahani warned in her keynote speech about (white) researchers' hegemony and singularising narratives, Macdonald spoke about a long-term, multi-researcher project at Berlin museums (2015-2022), which had taken these points into consideration. One of its aims had been to investigate the best practices for hearing or sensing multiple, diverse types of voices.

An interesting term she used was "recursivity", which we should move towards from simple one-way reflection. As described in the keynote, recursivity could be seen as the perfection of a hermeneutic circle, whereby different perspectives take an active role and uphold a continuous discussion with each other, redefining and re-creating meanings. Macdonald also showed a video titled 'Who is ID8470?' that combines art and research and was produced as a part of the project mentioned above. The message in the video, in short, was how it is the institutions', like the museum's, responsibility to reflect both on the dilemma of representation and on the reception by the target audience. Moreover, Macdonald noted that ethnographic understanding plays an important role when defining the value of museum collections: what will be shown, what hidden, and what will be destroyed? What practices enable or disable making voices heard or sensed not only today, but also in the future?

(AL) As I reflected on the event afterwards, I noticed that choosing between workshops was a major but positive dilemma. I found myself gravitating towards some based on personal interest, but also those relevant to the current phase of my studies. However, my biggest motivation was "the desire to help one's own community", as depicted in a photograph presented during Macdonald's keynote speech, showing the slogan written on the entrance to a German museum ("Ich kümmere mich um mein Umfeld"). The alternative entrance was marked with the text "Ich Sorge mich um die Welt", with English text "I want to help the world". In that sense, I believe that some Deaf-related research projects would have been suitable for these workshops, as many utilise ethnographic methods, but above all, they address the theme of the Ethnology Days by highlighting 'voice' in an unconventional way. Deaf-led studies perhaps could force us to consider the definition of 'voice' from a different perspective.

(SO) My thoughts after the conference can be summarised as that I felt very welcomed by the reflective atmosphere of the Ethnology Days. The aim of my own presentation was to ethically prepare ethnographic fieldwork that

will be conducted later this year, and the workshop, as well as informal conversations during lunches and the get-together dinner, proved to be the best imaginable environment for this aim.

AUTHORS

Aino Laiho is a student in the Department of European Ethnology at the University of Turku.

Sauli Okker is PhD student in Cultural Policy at the University of Jyväskylä.