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## **Mothers from Rural Areas Discussing Their Wellbeing and Networks**

Hämeenaho, Pilvi 2014. Hyvinvoinnin verkostot maaseudulla asuvien äitien arjessa. Etnologinen tutkimus palvelujen käytöstä ja hyvän arjen rakentumisesta. (English Summary: Everyday networks of wellbeing in sparsely populated rural Finland. Ethnological research on mothers' perceptions regarding public services.) Tutkimus 129. Helsinki: Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos. 236 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-952-302-221-8 (print). ISBN 978-952-302-222-5 (electronic). <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-302-222-5>.

Ethnological dissertations today are often written in co-operation with the field of ethnology and other disciplines. Pilvi Hämeenaho's dissertation is the result of a co-operative project between the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) in Helsinki and the University of Jyväskylä's Department of History and Ethnology. This aspect is quite evident in the study, and it offers some good points and also challenges for the dissertation, which I will discuss at the end of this review.

The dissertation is a study of everyday prac-

tices and perceptions regarding the good lives of mothers living in sparsely populated rural areas near the town of Jyväskylä, in Central Finland. The opinions of young mothers, public welfare services and their importance in everyday life are the focus of the study. The author studies public services as part of a wider network of distributing wellbeing. Wellbeing consists here of the private, local and public resources available to mothers in their everyday lives.

The author focuses on the following questions in her study: 'How do mothers define a good life and what elements does it include? What is the meaning of the countryside and the local community to those living their daily lives in sparsely populated rural areas, and what role do public welfare services play in the everyday networks of wellbeing in mothers' daily lives?' (p. 8). Her intention is to give space and voice to mothers, who will provide answers to the questions based on their own points of view. In addition, the mothers – or this study – will unravel the cultural stereotypes so easily attached to life in rural areas. This is an important part of the study, since we can all so easily tap into our own pre-

existing stereotypes with when discussing life in the countryside.

This study consists of five main chapters. The division of the study is logical, but it somehow deals more with health care and welfare studies than ethnology as such; the whole disposition resembles more the fields of medical or the natural sciences than ethnology. But all in all, the logical approach taken by the author describes well the content of the study. The first chapter, 'Rural Services in Focus', includes background information on the study, main terms and concepts as well as how the countryside is viewed as a place and a space. It also includes the analytical tools used to study everyday life. Hämeenaho describes carefully her main concepts, which is one dimension and aim of the study and which is firmly grounded in ethnographic study. Her main concepts include everyday life, countryside, services and wellbeing. In addition to these concepts, she also uses other concepts as an aid; they include rurbanisation, social capital, idyll, living countryside, everyday life knowledge, networks of wellbeing and time-space. All in all, Hämeenaho studies local rural society as a part of the wellbeing network where the families are living. The networks and everyday life are quite important issues throughout the study.

The second chapter focuses on Hämeenaho's material and methods. Her principal material consists of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and participant observations, which are the result of two different projects conducted in 2008 and 2009. The main material consists of 14 focused interviews and several diaries written by the informants. These however, seem not to have played a large role in the study, though they might have been more central in the interviews. In addition to this material, she also uses interviews from another project in which she interviewed seven social leaders in municipalities. Hämeenaho discusses quite clearly the positive and negative aspects of her material, but she might have still paid more attention to how the material has – or could have – directed the study. Would it have been better to write two separate publications; one for the project and a second one as a dissertation? The ethnology is barely visible in this book, although it is a dissertation done in the field of ethnology.

The choice of informants is very important in these kinds of studies, and Hämeenaho pays a great deal of attention to it. The focused interviews might have been good choices for this study, but the number of them is still quite small. The reader also needs to bear in mind the choice of municipalities and villages. The author has used the so-called snowball method, which is very often used in ethnological studies. In this study, however, it might have had its own particular effect on the results, which Hämeenaho describes well. The informants and the material seem to be quite homogenous and unchanging. Is the area in which the study was conducted so homogenous that no religious differences, families with a large number of children or families experiencing some problems could have been included in the material? To my knowledge, there are families in the area who might belong to different religious minorities or have a large number of children, for instance. In that sense, the overly homogenous picture given by the study seems at odds with reality. The author has, however, reflected on her own point of view quite carefully and describes her role at the border of what is common and unfamiliar. Thus, the study describes Hämeenaho herself at the same time that it describes the informants.

As the basis for the whole study, Hämeenaho uses critical theory and phenomenology. She also uses an ethnological 'from below' aspect or point of view, which is very suitable to the study. One good point of the study is how carefully Hämeenaho reads and introduces her material together with the questions. Ethnological knowledge shows its relevance and importance in her analyses, even in spheres other than where we ethnologists are used to using such knowledge. In that sense, this book can serve as a good example of how ethnological tools and material (ethnographical fieldwork) can be used by ethnologists to answer questions in other fields of the study.

After the two introductory chapters, the two main chapters discuss the everyday life of families in rural areas (Chapter 3) and the networks and agents responsible for wellbeing (Chapter 4). In these chapters, Hämeenaho discusses how difficulties with accessing services and the problems surrounding their use reduce locals' trust in the

social service system and at the same time also weakens their feelings of security. She also shows how public welfare services are very important to mothers, who are in desperate need of services on a daily basis. A day care is a good example of the type of service that mothers desperately need.

In Chapter 4, the author discusses the networks and agents responsible for wellbeing. She discusses how the services are changing and why they are important both from the point of view of the informants and current developments in the municipalities. We can read about positive and negative examples and about the local practices that help users manage in the face of weakening networks. Social networks are also important for maintaining or obtaining wellbeing services in rural areas. The local community is quite important in terms of both giving and receiving help and care. As Hämeenaho writes, nevertheless the local informal networks cannot replace the public services needed by people on a daily basis. The hard and difficult role of mothers in participating in and contributing to local activities is described well. However, the author should also have included more about the role of other members of the extended family. For instance, she could have interviewed fathers on this question. They might have provided a slightly different picture – or perhaps not. Then, the name and the perspective of the study would have needed to be different.

In the final chapter, Hämeenaho discusses what constitutes a good and safe everyday life in rural areas and the role of networks in wellbeing. The results of the study show that public services

play an important role in constructing the subjective sense of wellbeing of mothers. As the author writes, the importance of services is twofold: they are an important system of support for everyday life and at the same time they are the basis for feelings of basic security. The study calls attention to the fact that mobility and multi-sited spaces of living in the countryside are current and relevant topics with respect to the realities of everyday life in the countryside.

This study also reflects current ethnological knowledge about everyday life in rural areas and the services provided to families in such areas. Both are very important issues, and in the next years they will undoubtedly undergo many changes, which will have even more of an impact on the everyday lives of families living in the countryside. The Finnish countryside is undergoing big changes and this fact is also in the background of Hämeenaho's study. It would be interesting to read more about everyday life in rural areas after several years and maybe get a more heterogeneous picture of the families.

This publication is also an example of the increasing co-operation and joint-projects being conducted between ethnology and other disciplines, where publications also serve as applied studies. It is a good and desirable trend because we ethnologists are experts in everyday life and ethnographic fieldwork. However, the results must not be obtained and presented in such a way that the original discipline, ethnology, occupies only a minor role in the study.

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