
Worker Identities in Transition

Väänänen, Ari & Turtiainen, Jussi (eds.) 2014. *Suomalainen työntekijäisyys 1945–2013*. Tampere: Vastapaino. 359 pp. Ill. ISBN 978-951-768-444-6.

The editors of the book have taken up the challenge of trying to explain a group of quite challenging concepts. The title of the book includes the most important concept, *työntekijäisyys*, which is also the most difficult to define. ‘*Työntekijäisyys*’ cannot be translated straightforwardly into English, but its meaning is not explicit in Finnish either. It could be understood through one of its opposite concepts, *leadership*. On the other hand, in some cases *workership* might be close enough to worker identity (*työläisyys*). The editors use concepts like *image of a worker* or *ideal worker* as close synonyms. In the book’s introduction, the editors say they want to use ‘*workership*’ as a methodological tool to understand the expecta-

tions for workers as set both by themselves as well as surrounding society, including management. The task is ambitious, especially because worker identity is so difficult to define and is dependent on profession, time, place, gender, age and other factors. In addition, as the book is the result of several different research projects, its time scale is rather long, ranging from Finnish post-war society of 1945 to the present.

However, in my opinion the editors manage their task quite well. Despite the difficulties, the book succeeds in drawing a general view of the changes in images of workers or ideal workers. To accomplish such a task demands making some rather broad generalisations; on the other hand, the book also offers case studies of particular professions. The chapters dealing with the case studies give a more detailed picture of the topic. It would be impossible to write about worker identity with respect to every possible profession or trade. Therefore, generalisations

are welcome so long as they are made carefully with good reasoning.

Following the short introduction, but the second chapter provides a more in-depth discussion of the contents of the book; it was also written by the editors, Väänänen and Turtiainen. For example, they discuss the historialisation of a worker (*työntekijän historiallistaminen*). In this context, it becomes clear that the aim of the book is not only to focus on present worker ideals, but also to look at their origins, development and backgrounds. Therefore, as the editors write, the sources used in the various articles included in the book are not quantitative data from the present, but rather, qualitative texts and other sources mainly from the past.

Väänänen and Turtiainen explain the ways in which they balance between using the voices of individuals (everyday life) and focusing on the meanings of societal structures. Their claim is that without understanding the structures of a society, e.g. changes in the population growth, in migration and in the labour market and occupations, the contexts of an ideal worker or worker identities cannot be properly understood. Both the macro and micro levels are therefore needed. It is easy to agree with the editors on this point.

As both the editors and several of the writers work in the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (*Työterveyslaitos*), the viewpoints in the articles often assume the perspective of occupational health and safety. Even though other aspects are considered as well, I have the impression that the historialisation of an ideal worker, or 'workership', is strongly connected to the history of and changes in welfare at the job. The conclusion is that in the post-war society, occupational health focused on safety at work and workers' ability to work hard and manage their tasks. During the following decades, the ideals changed and health was defined more broadly. An ideal worker was no longer only hard working and skilled in his/her task, but also psychologically tolerant, flexible, ambitious and willing to achieve better results all the time. This change in the discourses about occupational health is sometimes seen as contributing to the wave of burnout witnessed at the end of 1980s and in the 1990s. However, book

makes the point that the psychological 'turn' in occupational health only gave words to symptoms already evident in society.

Next, I will look more closely at two of the articles. First, I focus on the article by Ari Väänänen and Pekka Varje, which analyses discussions about occupational health and risks in the pages of two publications between the years 1960 and 2010: the largest daily newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat* and one of the main women's magazines, *Me Naiset*. Altogether, the authors evaluated 172 texts. They analysed the topics of the articles both chronologically, on a decade-by-decade basis, and thematically. The result is that the main changes in the discussion occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. The context of the discussion changed, as industrial work was slowly replaced by service work and office work. At the same time, the physical attributes connected to workers were replaced by workers' possibilities to have an influence on the contents of their jobs as well as to be active in defining their tasks and duties. In the 1990s and 2000s the self (*minä*) of the worker became more and more problematic. The psycho-social features of the working environment became a crucial theme in discussions of occupational health, experiences of work stress and burnout.

The article by Väänänen and Varje is quite interesting. Whereas the method of reading the publications is well described, the main arguments behind the data are left out. I would have liked to know why the authors chose *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Me Naiset*, and not, for example, some other magazines or newspapers? The role of *Me Naiset* as a so-called women's magazine should have been discussed with constructive criticism. Likewise, the choice of *Helsingin Sanomat* should have been justified. Is the main newspaper presented as the 'masculine' opposite to *Me Naiset*? This is how it appears, even though to me it seems that this kind of phrasing of a question is not very fruitful. However, the differences and similarities between the two could have been analysed in more detail.

The article by Jussi Turtiainen considers the embodied memories of metal industrial workers in post-war Finland, and it is also very interest-

ing and raises new questions – which I find to be a feature of good research. Turtiainen has read autobiographical texts written by metal workers collected in the archives. He analyses the texts by focusing on three different turning points in the career of a metal worker. The first turning point was the transition from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’, i.e. the process of becoming a metal worker. The second turning point, which followed soon after starting work at the factory, occurred when a young metal workers had to meet the masculine expectations of the profession and claim his place in the social hierarchy of the work place. With respect to the third turning point, Turtiainen analyses the ways men managed difficult working conditions and occasionally even a dangerous working environment. Altogether, Turtiainen finds a tough and honest sense of masculinity in the autobiographies. His conclusion is that honesty, dignity and respectability are all part of a worker’s honour, which is the most common ideal found in the autobiographies of metal workers. One claims his place in the world through hard work and honesty. Interestingly Turtiainen makes reference to the ‘narrative of a strong Finnish man’. Whereas the master narrative of the strength of Finnish women has been widely analysed, discussed and criticised by historians, ethnologists and folkloristics, among others, the narrative of strong

men (where strength is connected to the ethos of work) is not as familiar. I sincerely hope this concept will be discussed more deeply in the future.

Suomalainen työntekijyys is an interesting compilation of the history of Finnish labour and work and the ideals placed on workers. In the final chapter, the editors present some strong conclusions and summarise the most significant changes in worker identities since 1945. They also provide a periodisation for such changes, which seems fruitful. I am convinced this periodisation will be used later by other scholars, discussed and criticised by them, and thereby become a fruitful part of academic discussion. I would have wished for even more analysis on the effects of gender, age and place of living on worker identities, but as the book aims to make generalisations, a more nuanced picture of such identities is left for future studies.

Lastly, I would like to express my disappointment in the layout of the compilation. I find it much easier to read footnotes than endnotes, and if endnotes are used, they could be placed after each article and not at the end of the whole book. Despite this detail, I found the book *Suomalainen työntekijyys* clear and pleasant to read.

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