
What do Finnish coastguards think of their professionalism? Thoughts about professionalism in the Finnish coastguard

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Miia-Leena Tiili from the Department of European
Ethnology at the University of Helsinki defended
her doctoral thesis on military personnel working
in the Finnish Coastal Guard at a time when the
subject is quite topical. Last year, the borders of
Europe were crossed by different immigrants and
refugees. Finnish coast guards were on duty and
tasked with the job of responding to calls for help
from those refugees who crossed the borders by
sea. The flow of refugees during the last couple of
years has had an impact on the work of the coast
guard units, but such changes are not discussed in
this study; they are only discussed in the epilogue
of the thesis (pp. 245–248).

Tiili's study discusses the professionalism of the
people working in the coast guard units patrolling
the Gulf of Finland from their point of view. One
interesting issue is clarifying just who these peo-
ple are. They are military personnel working in the
Gulf of Finland Coast Guard District, which is an
administrative unit of the Finnish Border Guard
operating under the Ministry of the Interior. The
main point of the study is what coast guard work-
ers (officers) themselves think, understand, pro-
duce and discuss with respect to professionalism
and how it is taken into account as the organisa-
tion changes. Tiili's thesis is a fresh and an inter-
esting contribution to studies concerning changes in
several professions and work communities, which
has been a very important theme of late in ethno-
logical studies. Her study will certainly not be the
last one of its kind, but definitely it is among the
most interesting and important of such studies,

not least because of its topicality, but also because
of its theoretical concepts. Tiili herself said that
when she started her fieldwork among the coast
guard units, she did not think about the timeliness
of her theme. This topicality is in fact a good part
of ethnology; we study what we think interests us,
but often when the study has been concluded, it
has become very real and timely.

The target of the study is interesting in many
ways. Coast guard units are an example of a closed
work community, and there are quite few studies
concerning them – so Tiili's contribution is also
in this sense very important. She is quite familiar
with studies concerning work communities and
other types of closed societies. Tiili has carefully
read Swedish ethnological literature in particu-
lar, which becomes clear precisely because this is
a phenomenological and cultural-analytical study.
In addition to phenomenological-cultural analyses,
different aspects of place and space and profession
(e.g. Doreen Massey and Tim Ingold) and sensory
ethnography (e.g. Sarah Pink) are also important.
In particular, Tiili has made use of participant ob-
servation in ethnographic fieldwork to flesh out
her discussion of sensory ethnography. A phenom-
enological understanding has served as a basis for
interpretations, which has brought forth the rel-
evance of things in the relation between human
beings and the world. Although it is a good choice
to include phenomenological and cultural analyses,
sometimes the material could have been explained
better for readers. Also, Tiili uses quite many – I
became confused when counting them – theoret-
ical concepts, which are scattered in several places
throughout the study. Some concepts, such as eve-
ryday life, racism and borders, could have been dis-
cussed better. Perhaps because of the chosen frame-
work, the timeframe sometimes become confused
when describing the changes affecting coast guards.
The book is thematic, not chronological, which is
a good choice and makes the study more inter-
esting for readers. It might also be the reason why the
chronology is not always clear in the study.

Tiili did her ethnographic fieldwork during sev-
eral periods and some of it even for her master's
thesis. She participated in several working periods
and events, conducted interviews and participants

observations – also interviewed family members – and spent time with coast guard units in their work and free time. She has chosen to call her method (according to Ulla Vuorela) ‘deep hanging around’, and the usefulness of this method appears in the many fieldwork material quotations in the thesis. The meaning of even the first trip into the field must also have been quite important for this thesis, and this should have been explained more to readers. She discusses ethical questions carefully enough. Tiili reflects on her own position (e.g. age, gender, social class and social situations) quite well, although I think that the gender issues could have been discussed a little more. What is the meaning and importance of gender in the work and community of coast guards? Social gender is visible in the text, but the meaning of it in this kind of work cannot be overemphasised. She did her fieldwork over a long period of time, the benefits of which are clear in the strong analyses provided in the study. All in all, there is some ‘richness’ in the chosen theoretical concepts and they are well suited to a study of this nature and especially to the fieldwork material.

The study is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction and the second chapter describes the spaces and working phases, both helping to frame the everyday life of marital border guard units. Chapter three describes officer and his/her equipment, including also the different aspects of professionalism. Chapter four, which assesses the coast guard as a functioning unit, discusses, e.g. different aspects of work. Chapter five, which is on community ties, discusses the work community and its different spheres, e.g. hierarchy and equality. Chapter seven, on the move, includes a discussion of different movements. The concluding chapter, chapter eight, focuses on the kinaesthetic dispositions of the coast guard. In conclusion, Tiili has also written a brief afterwords, which focuses on topical and current aspects of border security from the Gulf of Finland to the Mediterranean Sea, in which the Finnish coast guard plays an important role.

Two concepts, cultural knowledge and bodily knowledge, serve as the main concepts and an important part of the study. They also form the subtitle of the study. Tiili understands cultural knowledge as a verbalised and non-verbalised shared

understanding constructed in everyday practices and experiences. That is why it is ‘grounded in an officer’s interaction with his physical and social environment while working, using equipment, and encountering colleagues and clients’ (p. 263). According to Tiili, the other chosen concept, bodily knowledge, comes out in embodied aspects of professionalism. So gestures, facial expressions and postures are seen as nodal points for collecting cultural influences and expressing both formal and informal content. When we see a coast guard, we see in his/her bodily movements that both cultural and kinaesthetic knowledge overlap and are intertwined. Loyalty and border security are also sub-concepts that inform the main concepts.

According to this study, cultural knowledge cannot be divided into categories, such as formal and informal, but should instead be understood as an intermingling of influences and knowledge formation in, through and between working bodies. Movement is seen as very important, even an essential aspect informing different cultural assumptions. Movement is key, for example, in an officer’s apprehension of trust, discipline and different functions. But in addition to loyalty, there is also friction. The trajectories and collective choreographies of working bodies explicate the cultural friction between the functions at sea and border control, which comes out in the concluding chapters.

The kinaesthetic perspective used in the concluding chapters fits extremely well with the interpretations and results of the study. It adds value to Tiili’s work because it allows her to discuss such a perspective in relation to other studies done on work communities and other closed communities.

The thesis is a well-written study on one particular closed working community, which has experienced several changes during the last few decades. The changes in the work and also the changed working environment have impacted both cultural and kinaesthetic knowledge in Finnish coast guard units. Anchoring professionalism is a good example of studies concerning a current work community. The book has no photos, but it includes several short or long quotations from Tiili’s fieldwork. They make the study even more vivid.

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