

Challenging Categorisation from an Adolescent Perspective**Lotta Kokkonen**

Pia Olsson 2018. *Kaikki vähän erilaisii: Yläkoulun sosiaaliset suhteet* [Everyone is a little different: Social relationships at secondary school.] Gaudeamus. 325 pp. ISBN 978-952-495-487-7.

Pia Olsson has conducted a three-year ethnographic study on differences and diversities in a school context. The book *Kaikki vähän erilaisii* [Everyone is a little different] is the result. The study aimed at understanding how lived experiences of differences are represented and manifested in the lives of adolescent pupils.

At the beginning of her book, Olsson presents a list of facts that serve as an argument for such a study. Due to low specialisation in the schooling system, Finnish schools are largely places where children from various backgrounds meet. Children from a range of socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic and other backgrounds are in the same classes and often, as in Olsson's study, children with special needs are also included as part of the school policy. Olsson suggests that this is why school is an excellent location to study differences and processes of differentiation.

The three-year study started in 2009 and took place at a secondary school in the capital area of Finland. Olsson wanted participants who would represent and/or be able to discuss the different categorisations that she had in mind when preparing for the study. In addition to categories related to gender and lifestyle, the categorisation of ethnicity and children with disabilities guided the study, especially at the outset. The researcher invited students from regular classes (*yleisopetus*), students from a preparatory class (mainly aimed at students with little or no previous schooling in Finnish) and students from a class for extended compulsory education (mainly aimed at students with disabilities) to participate in the study. The book introduces 21 participants, who are all pupils from various backgrounds between the ages of 13 and 17 and who wanted to participate in Olsson's study and were interested in discussing the research themes (p. 8). The data were collected through observations and interviews that took place within classrooms and at the school.

The book consists of six chapters as well as an appendix, in which the author discusses the ethical considerations of doing ethnographic research. The six chapters include a description of the research context, the theoretical foundations and definition of concepts, the results in three chapters divided

according to the theme (adolescents' social relationships as a process, multiculturalism as an experience and different learners) and a discussion entitled 'learning differences'.

Olsson discusses her approach on differences and diversities through the concept of intersectionality, meaning that the differences among the young people she is working with are not limited to the ones mentioned at the beginning of the book. Olsson states that her goal in applying the concept of intersectionality in her analysis (p. 13) is to make visible different historical and situational power relationships created through categories such as gender, class, sexuality, age and ethnicity. The diversities Olsson focused on at the beginning of her study were differences in ethnic and national backgrounds and students with disabilities. Eventually, the categories and differences that the young participants brought up were much more diverse. For example, differences in school success and classroom behaviour (e.g. being loud vs. quiet) are discussed in the book.

Throughout the book, it is evident that Olsson has a rich data set. She skilfully selects illustrative quotes from her interviews and field notes to bring her young participants to life. The large number of participants, however, sometimes makes it difficult to remember what kind of background each is from. Yet this omission is understandable, as repeating the background information would have hindered the flow of the text.

The book illustrates the complexities and multiple interpretations and representations of differences among the participants. Olsson meets the aim she sets at the beginning of the book: *to understand the lived experiences of differences*. Many of the discussions between the participants and the researcher described in the text sound familiar. These include how to address differences without being impolite and how to interpret humour that sounds insulting to an outsider but is actually used to enhance cohesion within a group. Such discussions are among those that adolescents and their teachers increasingly encounter during their everyday interactions.

Despite her use of intersectionality at the beginning of the book, Olsson chooses not to explicitly address it towards the end. Instead, she deals with related concepts such as conviviality (see, for example, p. 229) to connect her study with the existing literature and academic discourse. Issues of categorisation and differentiation should be viewed from various perspectives, and in this book the young participants' and researcher's perspectives are well presented. Yet, the reader would also have enjoyed reading something from the perspective of the teachers, especially when individual teachers' attitudes and behaviours were discussed in relation to the overall atmosphere of the school.

Olsson acknowledges that when she asks participants to choose a group they feel they belong to, she is forcing them to make a choice that does not necessarily include a flexible and fluid understanding of identity. Olsson observes that the categorisations offered to the participants are constantly being challenged. For example, in her discussion of the participants' communication, Olsson notes that issues an outside observer would see as differences seem to be irrelevant within the classroom. She is continuously critical of her own categorisations and discusses these problems well. Still, regardless of her evident ability for reflection and the critical view, she persists with assumes categorisation and, for example, insists on holding on to the category of disability even though the participants did not address it.

The book is an excellent illustration of how categorisations manifest in the modern world in interaction between different individuals as a complex phenomenon. Adolescents clearly use categorisations to negotiate and create their identities as well as a sense of belonging. However, categorising and addressing differences can also enhance boundaries through drawing attention to what is different and magnifying it. We know that similarities attract (e.g. Montoya et al. 2008), and categorisations are often based on the assumption of not only differences but also similarities.

In future research and discussions on diversity and how young people negotiate social relationships in modern schools, a concept of similarity might contribute to our understanding of categorisation, and particularly to that of social relationships. By focusing on differences, we also highlight those differences, whereas looking at similarities could help us to understand why people identify with, develop a sense of belonging to and create different groups and categories depending on the situation and context. Pupils might come from different ethnic, linguistic or socioeconomic backgrounds, but they have something in common, which is more relevant and more meaningful to them. In a Danish TV advertisement by TV2 Denmark, which is not an academic reference, but yet capturing, this is summarised by stating that 'maybe there is more that brings us together than we think'.

Olsson draws the reader into the world of young people who negotiate differences, categorisation, identities and their existence in a changing world and society. Her interpretation of her findings seems forced at times, but the overall discussions address important themes. Olsson also offers an insightful and critical consideration of the limitations of her study and of research ethics and the position of a researcher.

Kaikki vähän erilaisii is a multifaceted examination of more than only the situation in Finnish secondary school. It also looks at the more pernicious and complex consequences of attempts to negotiate categorisations and at differ-

entiation in a society that is learning to be multicultural. One clear achievement is the picture it draws not only of how differences are experienced and negotiated among the young participants, but also of the different paths and journeys taken by these young individuals during the three years that Olsson worked with them. The reader is left wanting to hear more about what has become of the participants and how their attitudes towards and experiences of differences have changed and developed over the years.

The book *Kaikki vähän erilaisii* may lack practical solutions on how to address diversities and guide negotiations on categorisation, but it offers something else: a deeper understanding of the phenomena, especially for those working with diverse youth populations and anyone who is willing to see the complexities and challenges of categorisation within a modern society.

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References

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