Ambiguity of action 10.-11.6.2014, University of Helsinki

**ABSTRACTS**

**Tuesday 10.6.**

**Sanna Rikala**, University of Tampere,

*‘Quiet agency’ in women’s burnout processes*

My paper presents and develops a concept of ‘quiet agency’, which has been on my mind ever since I completed my doctoral thesis on women’s work-related burnout and depression (2013). The main interest of the study was to explore the formations of agency in burnout processes. I situated the question of agency in the context of contemporary work, where the individualization of economy-related problems has been going on since the 1990s. Drawing from interviews with women who have experienced burnout and taken sickness leave for depression, the empirical analysis described in detail what happens in the processes in which the problems in work circumstances slowly turn into an individual state of exhaustion that is often diagnosed as depression.

In the initial stage of burnout processes, women resisted the situation and tried to influence the changes that took place in their work circumstances, thus improving their chances of continuing to work. The social framework, however, limited the chances of resistance, slowly changing women from taking active measures into simply holding on in order to cope with the symptoms of exhaustion. At this stage, women were outwardly passive but fought an inner battle in the cross-pressure of opposite normative expectations. In the end, the women broke away from their unbearable situation and quit work, either temporarily or permanently.

In this paper, I will specifically focus on the outwardly passive, ‘quiet’ forms of agency. I tentatively understand quiet agency as individual’s negotiatory relationship with the social orders under which she lives and operates. According to my interpretation, quiet agency is a manifestation of contradictory social orders, under which taking any kind of action doesn’t seem possible. In order to develop this idea further, I will re-evaluate and extend my empirical analysis of ‘inner struggle’ as a form of agency. What is going on, from the perspective of agency, when an individual is going through an ‘inner struggle’ over something? Even though nothing seems to be happening, a lot of subversive potential is indeed present in this very form of agency. Therefore, the possibility to inquire forms of discursive power by exploring quiet agency, is also worth considering.

**Leena Åkerblad,** University of Eastern Finland

*Beyond insecurity. Unstable labor market position and precarious agency*

In this paper I ask what kinds of ways of action emerge in an unstable labor market situation, and what are the processes that form these particular ways of action? What are the ways and possibilities that make the insecurity tied to precarious situations tolerable? Precarious workers do not merely “experience” the insecurity “produced” by the labor market; instead, they are interactive agents in this process. The research data consists of 58 interviews with people living in precarious labor market situation. The results of the analysis can be described through entities that stress different ways of action. The ways of action are constructed in relation to time, motion, control and human relations. The insecurity of labor market situation strengthens one’s need to predict and secure future. This makes it difficult to focus on the present, and the way of action becomes that of restlessness. The present is protected by shorten­ing the time perspective, and by giving up the attempt to control one’s own life. The vulnerability of one’s ties to the labor market also means remain­ing in the reflective motion. The way of action becomes that of searching. If the norms guiding one’s action are contradictory, one’s agency becomes obstructed, and the way of action becomes that of getting lost. Agency is executed by ways of trying, tolerating and enduring. One’s distance to working life’s forces and the search for autonomy are regulated by various strategies of management. However, the precarious work may be organized in ways that increase dependency. One such way is chaining consecutive fixed-term contracts, which makes one question the value of one’s own work. The way of action becomes that of observing and modifying oneself.

**Annalisa Sannino,** University of Helsinki

*On the agency of seemingly passive modes of action: The example of Vygotsky’s waiting experiment*

Ambiguous modes of action reveal aspects of the cultural and historical nature of agency which are still largely underscrutinized. The classic waiting experiment discussed in Vygotsky’s works provides a useful framework for reflecting on how ambiguous actions can inform today’s discussions of agency. The paper presents an empirical analysis of data collected in similar experiments carried out after Vygotsky’s descriptions. Videotaped, annotated and transcribed experiments with 25 individuals and 30 groups, are analyzed, together with participants’ stimulated recall interviews, also recorded and transcribed. A subject escorted to a room is told that the experiment will start soon, but the experimenter does not return. Vygotsky’s accounts of these experiments primarily emphasize the seemingly unabiguous action of closure that participants undertake by “leaving” this situation. Instead, the analysis presented here illustrates how the seemingly passive action of “staying” equally manifests strong agency. By diggining into the ambiguity of this action of staying, the analysis shows how participants build on material and social resources and bring in contents from their lives which transform the experiment into something else. This way participants who stayed, far from manifesting passivity and lack of agency, deliberately “took over” the situation beyond the participation in the experiment in which they remained only peripherally involved.

**Robert P. Fairbanks II**, University of Pennsylvania and Bryn Mawr College, US

*How it Works: Recovering Citizens in Post-Welfare Philadelphia*

There are some 30,000 abandoned row houses in the city of Philadelphia. In the neighborhood of Kensington, recovery house operators have reconfigured hundreds of row homes as strategic sites of survival. Taken collectively, the efforts of these operators have produced the Philadelphia *recovery house movement*, an extra-legal poverty survival strategy for addicts and alcoholics located in the city’s poorest and most heavily blighted zones. The purpose of this keynote is to explore, ethnographically, the ways in which street-level survival mechanisms articulate with the restructuring of the contemporary welfare state and the broader political economy of Philadelphia. I explore the intersections between social policy and informal recovery houses, paying particular attention to the uneven and increasingly complex terrain of welfare state regulation in the postindustrial city. Recovery house networks accommodate an interrelated set of political rationalities characterized by the ratcheting down of social protections and the churning of welfare bodies. I use ethnographic data to reveal how the recovery house, as a predatory “subsistence niche,” operates in concert with the workfare state, the informal/deregulated low wage service sector, and the criminal justice system. The first part of my analysis explores how operators move to stabilize the conditions of subsistence through the accumulation and retention of welfare bodies. The second part analyzes the relationship between recovery houses, low wage work, street hustling, and “relapse.” My purpose throughout is to map the interconnections between market discipline, informal welfare administration, predatory subsistence, and the regulatory logics of the post-welfare state.

**Anna Leppo & Riikka Perälä,** University of Helsinki

*Agency in the context of**pharmaceutical treatment of drug problems in post-welfare Finland*

This paper explores what the provision of *care* means in opioid substitution treatment (OST) within the current trends of pharmaseuticalization and austerity politics. Critics of pharmaceutical governance have argued that as more and more of the public resources are spent on pharmacotherapies this results in less resources for other forms of treatment and also changes the way in which we understand the concept and practices of care. In this paper we examine how pharmaseuticalization shapes the everyday realization of care. The ethnographic data used in the paper is gathered from one OST clinic that dispenses methadone to people suffering from severe opiate dependency. The clinic is situated in southern Finland. The ethnographic method provides a detailed, in-depth analysis of the different actors and relationships (both human and non-human) which characterize the everyday realization of pharmaceutical treatment of drug dependency. We focus on the agency of the pharmaceutical substance itself and argue that its effects are essentially ambiguous: on the one hand the synthetic opioid improves the patients’ quality of life thanks to its physiological effects on the body (and the social consequences of these physiological effects) but on the other hand its’ handling, dosing etc. require a lot of professional attention, which has an impoverishing effect on patient-staff interactions and the realization of care. The paper concludes by noting that pharmaceutical treatment of drug problems may result in the increasing abandonment of people suffering from drug problems, especially in the neoliberal context with a focus on cutting the costs of public services.

**Eeva Luhtakallio,** University of Helsinki

*What counts as politics and by whom? Reflections on the ambiguities emerging from the polarizing Finnish civil society*  
This paper addresses the ambiguities around the concept of politics among civil society actors. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in two very different settings: cycling activists, promoting bicycling as a mode of transportation and sustainable living, and inhabitants of a neighborhood characterized by new urban poverty, social marginalization, and populist vote.  
  
This juxtaposition is based on an observation of two trends in the Finnish civil society. On the one hand, civil society organizations and movements that gain the most visibility in the public sphere are characteristically non-nationalistic, ecological, and/or liberal. On the other hand, the opposite kind of political thoughts and ideology join important masses of people in the voting booths, but less so in the field of civic activities. In the Finnish context of deepening societal divides, these trends, and the ways in which people engage in their respective dynamics, need to be analyzed in parallel.  
  
In my fieldwork, one direction I have followed are the defitinitions and negotiations concerning the meanings given to politics, political action, and speech. What kind of understandings of politics these different groups yield, and what kind of processes of politicization emerge, and how, from these two extremes? What kind of styles of action predominate, and what kind of engagements do the followers of opposite political ideologies rely on in political action and talk? This presentation is a first attempt to understand the different meanings to politics emerging in the settings described above.

**Elina Paju,** University of Helsinki

*Methods for Mess: How to relate to the wildness in social scientific data*

My presentation addresses the problem of social scientific knowledge production as a means for stabilizing the world. Research that discusses the ambiguities of the social world, the fluid borders of individuals and things explore these issues in a theoretically manifold and sensitive fashion. Problems arise, however, when these theoretically sensitive conceptions are combined with empirical data produced by methods that do not take this messiness, fluidity or ambiguity into account.

In my paper I take as a starting point the now widely accepted notion of social scientific methods as performative of the social reality they seek to explain. I specifically address the problems of analytical praxis that employ methods that freeze the social world into distinctive and clear-cut categories and that operate on a logic that disregards the excess of the social. In ethnographic research this excess can consist of the vague emotions and physical memories of the researcher or unexplained incidents, as well as data that cannot be analysed into any of the categories employed in the research.

I argue that conceptualizing theoretically the messiness or ambiguity of the social is not enough. We need to scrutinize the methods we use in producing the data, in performing the world. Recently, the social scientific methodological discussion and development have moved into this direction. This can be seen in the contemporary confessional tales of the researchers testifying to awkward feelings in the field or situations in the research process gone wrong, or deliberately taking into account the behaviors, situations or speech-acts that refuse to be categorized into pre-existing categories of the research. The pursuit of accounting to the wildness in data is also demonstrated in the academically not-so-traditional ways of communicating the research results. In my presentation I will discuss these alternative ways of understanding social scientific methods, an understanding that is ultimately tied to the understanding of the world as messy and ambiguous.

**Olli Pyyhtinen**, Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS), University of Turku

*Making Art. From Possession of Agency to Being Possessed by and Immersed in Action*

In a recent book of his, *Making* (2013), anthropologist Tim Ingold claims that ‘the entire question of agency rests on a false premise’. According to Ingold, it is perverse to attribute action to an ‘agency’, of which the action would be the effect. By contrast, he suggests that anything can act (and exist) only provided by their interchange of materials with their surroundings. The paper returns to a case I did a few years back on the making of art and tries to blow new life into it by drawing on some of the insights by Ingold. Art makes an interesting case in point because the artist is traditionally regarded as the autonomous and independent source of one’s works. The Romantic myth of the artist as an individual genius persistently frames our ways of thinking art and the practices of making art. The paper examines making art as a process or flow of activity in which both the work of art and the artist take form. Empirically the paper draws primarily on an interview I did with Finni sh sculptor Pekka Jylhä. Jylhä’s manner of speaking of the unfolding of his artworks decentres the notion of an autonomous, sovereign artist in a fascinating way. He not only works *with* various kinds of materials (from bronze and steel to fabric, stuffed animals, motors, and liquid elements which), but also in collaboration with and relying on the work of several other people (e.g. metal workshops, lightning designers, painters, seamstresses). What is more, the fact that he constantly reworks several of his pieces over and over again points out to the processuality of artworks. They are not stable and ever truly ‘finished’, but they ‘leak’ and remain in a state of becoming. The assumedly finished work of art is only a more or less arbitrary end point in the process. Ultimately, it is argued in the paper that agency – such as that of the allegedly individualist artist – is produced only retroactively by ‘cutting the network’ (Strathern) involved in the action, that is, by the privatization or appropriation (Serres) of what is in common and collectively produced.

**Katve-Kaisa Kontturi,** University of Turku

*Folds of Sustainability: Fabrics and Agency in Grey Gardens*

Abstract will be added here soon!

**Wednesday 11.6.**

**Mustafa Emirbayer**, University of Wisconsin at Madison (US)

*Relationality and Ambiguity*  
The “second modernity” that began in the 17th century replaced the “first,” 15th-16th century modernity’s openness to ambiguity with a stress on rationalism and rigor.  Much of classical sociological theory followed suit.  My talk will outline this historical process and assess its analytical costs.  It also will examine some of the positive implications of taking ambiguity seriously.  It will consider several theoretical aspects of ambiguity and draw empirical illustrations from my recent work on relationality and symbolic violence.

**Frank Martela**, Aalto University

*From individual to duovidual: care as a co-created from of action*

When a mother takes care of a small baby, or when a nurse takes care of a patient, we easily see one as the active agent, while the other is merely the passive recipient of actions initiated by the first-mentioned. However, a deeper analysis of the dynamics of the situation reveals a more ambiguous reality. For example, video analysis of infant-mother communication has shown how the infant from very early on is an active participant in the mutually co-constructed changing flow of gazes and gestures. In fact, the participants react to each other’s facial expressions so fast that it can’t be accounted by mere *re*-acting, but instead both parties are constantly anticipating each other’s moves in a reciprocal process in which the true agency of the situation lies more in the co-created system *in-between* the participants rather than within either of them taken separately. This “dance” of synchronous interaction challenges the idea of agency as residing primarily within individuals. Instead of individuals as the explanatory level, in many situations it makes more sense to look at the *duovidual* or the reciprocally generated system between the participants as the main determinant of the behaviors taking place in the situation. In this essay I explore this mutually co-constructed dance of co-created actions. In addition to infant research, I especially focus on the interaction of the nurses and residents in a nursing home, where I have identified attunement, being present, and opening up as key elements of what I call caring connections, in which both participants are open to engage with each other on an affectionate level.

**Riitta Högbacka,** University of Helsinki

*The agency of the disempowered*  
The background of this paper is in my on-going study of how families are made and un-made in inter-country adoption embedded in the unequal relations between the Global North and the Global South. I will draw on 39 thematic interviews with South African birth mothers to investigate their first-person accounts regarding the adoption of their children. Rather than view these women as an undifferentiated mass of passive victims, I will try to apply Margaret Archer’s concept of reflexivity arising out of the combination of social contexts and personal concerns. With the help of empirical examples I will show how the agency of these women is in many ways truncated or ambiguous. I will conclude with a critical discussion of the context-dependency of theories developed in the Global North.

**Kaisa Ketokivi,** University of Helsinki & New York University & **Atte Vieno**, University of Helsinki

*Belonging-work: On the ambiguity of making bonds in everyday life*

This paper launches and develops the notion of belonging-work to understand how crucial bonds and boundaries of belonging are made in ambiguous processes of action in which not only the active participants, but also other people, places, symbolic and social patterns of group formation matter. The notion of belonging-work addresses, in particular, the action and work that various actors do in the process of belonging – either for their own sake, or for others’. In the literature on belonging, belonging has been viewed as two-fold, firstly concerning how people feel sense of belonging, feel at home (or not) and secondly, how the politics of belonging produce inclusion and exclusion that structure people’s possibilities to belong. In this paper we suggest it as central to understand “the middle ground” of relations and processes of belonging.  
  
Engaging in belonging-work is an ambiguous process, since actively initiating something never automatically means certainty of its accomplishment as belonging always depends on others’ recognition as well. The ambiguity of belonging-work has to do with its relationality, involving as it does a plurality of actors and the ways in which they and the flow of social life more generally are entangled with place and its particular history and culture. Another layer of ambiguity often results from conditions of contemporary plurality and differentiated relations, in which belonging involves reconciling various belongings into a manageable whole. We develop the concept of belonging-work in light of the literature on belonging and in relation to the related concepts of emotion-work and boundary-work and Hannah Arendt's concept of the vita activa. Our theoretical motivation stems from on-going empirical studies on urban bonds and belonging in progressive gentrified neighborhoods of Helsinki, NYC (Brooklyn) and Madrid, and on the struggle of unemployed Finns to belong after displacement from long-term jobs no longer available in their industry.  
  
We suggest that the idea of belonging-work is especially valuable for efforts to theorize and recognize the ways in which belonging is about navigating a plurality of settings and identities. Belonging involves both making bonds and crossing boundaries. Some affiliations can be combined, while others cannot be reconciled. Some people belong almost automatically, while others have to work immensely in order to belong. For the purposes of the symposium, we will focus on the various factors and dynamics that make belonging-work ambiguous. Grasping this very ambiguity might best capture what we are seeking to do with the notion.Ambiguity of action – symposium 10.-11.6.2014 at the University of Helsinki  
  
**Kari Mikko Vesala,** University of Helsinki

*Serving somebody as a question of agency*

In a well-known song ‘Gotta serve somebody’ (1979) Bob Dylan claims that all humans eventually serve either the devil or the lord.  John Lennon responded to Dylan’s lyrics with a parody ‘Serve yourself’ (1980), in which he suggested that instead of relying on religious or other external authorities people should realize that they must serve themselves.  Besides opposing stances on religious faith, these lyrics help to illustrate the complexity of a question about social actors as serving something.  In the presentation I try to show how, by discussing principal-agent relation in multi-disciplinary applications of agency theory and in Meyer and Jepperson’s (2000) sociological theory on the cultural construction of modern social actors.  In agency theory, serving oneself is understood in terms of interests, and serving others in terms of official or implicit social contracts. This perspective seems congruent with Lennon’s song.  Meyer and Jepperson reframe the concept of interest and widen the scope of possible principals.  Although their theory does not agree with Dylan’s view on principals to be served, it shares a general point that principals can also be found beyond single social actors, and in different levels of abstraction. In their songs both Dylan and Lennon assume that people have agency over whom they serve, which leads us pondering on the tricky question concerning the relation between ‘agency over’ and ‘agency for’.

**Susanne Ådahl**, University of Helsinki, Finland

*Fragile dialogues: Negotiating agency with voices*

My paper explores how the experience of voice hearing, as a socially embedded form of agency is linked to the double subjectivity/intersubjectivity that characterises the everyday life of these individuals. I ask what this agency is about and what it demands of voice hearers. A vast number of people (2-4%) regularly hear voices or noises in their head that others cannot hear.  Only some of these individuals have received a diagnosis of mental illness and many live with the experience as part of everyday life without the use of psychopharmacology. Voice hearers use various strategies to deal with the experience such as using psychoactive medications, and various forms of therapy. In order to transform the voices and the actions they command the hearer to engage in, one needs to train the mind to change dissonant action into collaborative action. This mind training is intersubjective in two senses: the construction of self through the contact with others and the construction of the self with voice-selves in the mind. At the core of this is the construction of social relations to others and to the self. This endeavor is made more complex when the self has to negotiate with multiple selves within the skin bound self.  In order to understand and explain this double subjectivity I turn to Michael Jackson’s idea of the simultaneousness of being a part of the world and being apart from the world (sociocentric and egocentric consciousness).