



PhD Dissertation Projects

## The Retrospective Methods Network

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### Newsletter

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### Early Modern Finno-Karelian Healing Practices in the Light of Cognitive Science and Ritual Theories

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A human being is a complex creature. Humans are social and cultural beings, but they are biological beings as well – with all different kinds of cognitive processes and neural structures developed by, for instance, evolutionary processes. In my dissertation project, I am studying one kind of cultural and traditional behaviour, but I am interested in considering all of the aspects of being a human being.

— In my dissertation, I argue that the human cognition system has affected the forms of the early modern Finno-Karelian healing tradition and especially the ways of narrating about it. The research project concentrates on analysing the illness-concepts, ritualistic aspects of the healing practices and the ritual profiles of the healers in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Finland and Karelia. As research material, I am relying on archived folklore materials on the healing tradition: memorized narratives about healers and healing processes, healing instructions and incantations, and folk narratives on the past healers and ritual specialists (*tietäjäs*). The materials are deposited to the folklore archive of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki, Finland.

My perspective aims to analyse how humans generally behave in ritual situations, especially when encountering illnesses, dangers and other life-threatening, stress-

causing phenomena, and how this affects the research materials and the healing tradition behind them. Certainly, there are culturally variable ways of dealing with these kinds of situations, but, in this project, I am interested in the general similarities in human behaviours that may be due to aspects of human cognition. I propose that this kind of approach to the study of Finno-Karelian traditional healing can also provide new information about the tradition.

In the research field on Finno-Karelian vernacular healing, the healing tradition has been considered as a form of ritual drama (e.g. Honko 1960) and as a particular kind of interaction between the healer and the patient (e.g. Piela 2010). Additionally, previous studies on traditions of Finno-Karelian magic have touched on the subject of healing, especially in cases where the healer performs incantations and magical rituals (e.g. Siikala 2002; Stark 2006). In her studies, Finnish folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala connects these to the paradigm of cognitive anthropology, considering cognitive memory processes in her analyses (e.g. 2002). Following her efforts, however, the cognitive perspective has been largely forgotten in Finnish folkloristics, although it continued in the neighbouring field of religious studies, where it developed into the paradigm of the cognitive science of religion (CSR). Thus, my research project is rooted in

the works of Siikala as well as the CSR paradigm, especially the ritual theories developed within CSR.

The main research question of my dissertation is: *How have the cognitive processes of the human mind affected the early modern Finno-Karelian healing tradition, especially in its ritualized forms and the cultural representations surrounding the tradition?* I approach this question in three research articles. The first article was published in 2018, the second in 2020, and third is currently in process.

In my first research article (Kohonen 2018), I apply of the ritual competence theory (Lawson & McCauley 1990) in order to study two Karelian healers who lived in the same area at approximately the same time. My analysis proposes that these two healers and their performances were encountered quite differently although they both performed similar healing practices within the same tradition.

The next two articles consider an illness concept called wraths (*vihat*), especially the wraths of fire (*tulen vihat* in Finnish), and how to heal them. This illness concept is widely represented in the folklore materials on healing skin burns. Previous studies on the subject have proposed that the wraths are an illness that contaminates a person via damaged skin, and that they are caused by the origin of the wound or burn (Stark 2006: 275–277).

In the article published in 2020, I consider how the research materials present the illness concept and what kind of features it involves. I propose that the illness concept is highly influenced by some basic cognitive biases that are common in assisting the human mind to process everyday information smoothly without causing cognitive overload.

In the second article on this subject, and the third article of the dissertation, I consider how the concept of wrath-illness is related to the actual healing processes behind the folklore materials. In this article, my preliminary plan is to consider the relationship between the illness concept and the healing practices from the perspective of placebo and performance

studies. I suggest that the folklore on illnesses and their curing processes affect the cognitive scripts and schemas of these that people have in their minds. I suggest that the scripts and schemas affect people's expectations of the healing process in real-life contexts. The expectations of healing processes affect the evaluations of healing performances as well as the placebo effect, which can increase the possibilities for successful healing.

All the research articles of this dissertation project will consider the early modern Finno-Karelian healing tradition from the perspective of the human mind, but, additionally, all of the articles will also test the validity of these cognitive theories. These theories have mostly been tested for modern, Western people, which means that the research field needs other kinds of test environments as well. In my dissertation, I bring these theories into historical context and into non-urbanized and non-industrialized environment.

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