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Paper abstract:

A life of her own. Meanings of paid work in the life stories of unmarried women in latter half of the 20th century

This paper will present preliminary ideas of a new research project concerning life stories of single persons. In the family-centred society of Finland, family is often one of the key elements of especially women's life stories. In this paper I ask what kind of key elements unmarried women, who have not participated on the traditional family-building in their adulthood, build their life story upon? I am especially interested on meanings of work: how do unmarried persons define the role of work in their everyday life and life course? The life stories of unmarried persons shed light on the multiple ways in which they define themselves when looking back and making interpretations concerning their own life course, choices and decisions.

As an ethnologist I scrutinise social topics connected to people's everyday experiences. Instead of only societal structures or politics, ethnologists study the mundane everyday life of 'ordinary' people and those left in marginal groups, and thus reveal agents and meanings behind the everyday structures. Previously, I have studied women's memories of work during the Second World War. In this project, I focus on life stories, and aim to produce new information and definitions of intersections of the three basic concepts of the society: family, work and marital status.

The material of the paper consists of written life stories collected by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in 1990–91. From the large collection of women's life stories collected through a writing competition by the archive, I have read and analysed life stories of unmarried women. They are placed to the latter half of the 20th century in Finland.

The life stories of unmarried women shed light on the multiple ways in which they define themselves throughout their life when looking back and making interpretations in a form of a life story. Despite living alone, unmarried persons have several options to build their life stories upon, not only the development of their family. Life stories of single persons are constructed on versatile ways, e.g. through work, religious experiences, studies, traveling or other significant experiences – or the pursuit of a relationship. The focus of the analysis is on the meanings of work in the life stories of unmarried women. In Finland life is often narrated through the so-called 'ethos of work', which can be defined as a way of constructing one's identity through work. Previous research has mainly focused on narratives of work of married persons, or has not examined the effect of marital status on relation to narratives of work. This paper looks into the life stories of unmarried women to find out what kinds of shades the ethos of work has in their life stories, or can it be seen there at all.