



MIND AND THE OTHER – AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY ON THE INTERACTIONS OF MULTIPLE REALITIES



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The human mind has a tendency to believe in, and experience interaction with otherworldly agents, chiefly defined as supernatural in the contemporary West. Such experiences challenge the boundaries between mind and the world, emotions and rationality, the self and the other – as well as between life and death. These issues are central in the understanding of the human mind, its acts and modalities. Various cultures maintain very diverse theories about the human mind. This diversity and its relationship to the phenomenon of the otherworld are not sufficiently understood.

In this project we study the ways in which otherworldly beings appear to the mind. How are their agency, actions, and interaction perceived, experienced and made meaningful? Our ethnographically inspired approach avoids truth claims, viewing otherworldly agents as they appear to people. We study cultural and individual expectations as well as physiological experiences which are not offered accepted roles in our culture.

Through the following six sub-studies, the project will collect data sets that make it possible to grasp the various modes of agency, practices and interactions which take place at different

levels of social reality. Marja-Liisa Honkasalo’s study “Negotiating agency – ancestors and everyday concerns” will be based on her field work in West Africa and her expertise in medical anthropology. Kirsi Kanerva’s cultural historical study “Representation of the Non-verbal and the Abstract in Medieval Scandinavia” concerns the symbolic meanings of the living dead in Icelandic medieval literature. Kaarina Koski approaches social aspects of death from folkloristic point of view in her study “Death and agency in comparative perspective”. Marjaana Lindeman and Annika Svedholm are cognitive psychologists and use experimental methods to explore “Conceptions of the brain, mind and soul in this life and in the afterlife” in contemporary Finland. Susanne Ådahl’s anthropological study “Voice hearing: lived realities and meaning making” deals with the phenomenon of voice hearing as a subjective, lived experience. Jyrki Korkeila’s research on “Auditory hallucinations: features and correlates” represents clinical psychiatry.

This project will establish an interdisciplinary understanding about the human mind and its interaction with the perceivable environment and beyond. Our results will strengthen the agency

and self-identity of stigmatized people and provide important information for multicultural encounters. Our results will illuminate how our culture shapes normative conceptions of ageing and death. Consequently, they give important information for the ethical discussions of good ageing, death and euthanasia. More generally, our results support taking seriously the subjugated knowledge in the domain of the Other, and question its underrated role in scientific study.



Project members Annika Svedholm, Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, Varpu Alasuutari, Kaarina Koski, Marjaana Lindeman and Kirsi Kanerva. Two members of the project, Jyrki Korkeila and Susanne Ådahl, are absent.

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