

Opponent's Review of Bachelor Dissertation

Anna Caterina Vaccari: The body in the palliative care context: an ethnographic study. Prague: Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, 2019.

Anna Vaccari's bachelor thesis introduces a highly empirically and scholarly relevant topic. This dissertation successfully presents a very sensitive ethnographic account of palliative care in the Czech Republic. Anna examines how does the body of patients become a central focal point of the daily routines in selected palliative care ward, how is handled in this specific context and what kind of meanings does this practice convey. In relation to the primarily medical anthropology literature, she follows the relationship between the individual body and social body, emphasising the power relations within. She shows, how the person is unmade due to the "unbounded character" of her/his body, how the individual autonomy of the patient can be exercised in the environment where the medical gaze works as an organizing principle and how the death becomes enacted not as an one-shot event, but a process of multiple body-related negotiations, and finally, how fast and silently can the death be cleared away in respect to the long-lasting social death.

The dissertation has a traditional structure. In the introduction, the author presents the research-, scholarly- and local empirical context of the phenomenon under the study. In the theoretical part the concept of palliative care is explained and introduced also in its historical and scholarly context. Moreover, the theoretical framework, comprises mainly of theories as Foucauldian medical gaze (interpreted by Lupton), Mary Douglas' symbolic body and Julia Lawton's un/bounded body, which is placed in the historically specific Western context of individualism. In methodological part, research strategy, sample and analysis are discussed while more space is dedicated to the research ethics and reflexivity. In the empirical part, the ward, actors as well as daily routine taking place in the setting are introduced through the sensitive ethnographic writing. Similarly, the analysed aspects of palliative care: hygiene, nutrition, medication and dying are presented with very nicely selected data quotations, which always follows with a fitting interpretation reflecting the theoretical background.

Anna indeed managed to negotiate an entrance and conduct a research in undeniably difficult field-site. Moreover, she proved to be a good ethnographer, a sensitively and ethically working participant observer. In the final dissertation, she demonstrated her ability, to skilfully and reflexively work with ethnographic data which she surrounded by interpretations resulting in the form of a text, which is very evocative and reader friendly. She successfully contextualizes the phenomenon under the research in contemporary local, but even historical local and global context. Finally, she has done an extensive recherche of medical anthropology literature relating to the topic of palliation and body, in relation to which, she proved to be able to think and present own findings.

Nevertheless, the dissertations suffer a few minor (mostly formal) weaknesses.

The introduction slightly lacks its fluency, the paragraphs could be better connected.

In the theoretical part we can find occasional terminological misunderstandings: author mistakes disease for illness, but more importantly analytical concepts for theoretical framework. I assume this to be rather mistakes from the lack of time, considering, these misunderstanding emerge together in two paragraphs. Still, I believe, that, for example, the distinction for: paradigm, theoretical framework and essential analytical concepts would be useful here. Moreover, the author' ambitious recherche sometimes lacks more detailed explanations of the theoretical concepts. I assume this to be connected to the issue of, for this level of study, too extensive framework. Therefore, for example, in the introduction, the critical-interpretive perspective is introduced as a main general theoretical approach to be later, in the theoretical part almost omitted. Also, in result of the wide of the recherche, some concepts are introduced in rather simplistic and a bit reductionist way, e.g. "body politic",

“medical gaze” or “social body”. I suggest author to attempt to comprehensively connect the main analytical concepts during the defence. Finally, the theoretical part lacks the interpretation of author’s approach to the main phenomena under the research – i.e. body. I suggest this to be also clarified during the defence. In this part, the reflection of the Czech studies on similar topic is missing.

Author sometimes seems to assume the audience is well oriented in medical anthropological literature, therefore, there are some cases of automatic usage of some terminology lacking a proper definition in the footnote (e.g. medicalization pg. 8).

In the methodological part, “data collection methods” subchapter is missing. Instead, the author defines these methods partly in the subchapters dedicated to the “reflection of the research position” and “analysis”. The sample description should include, apart of its age and gender profile also further specifications as education or its specifics given in relation to the affiliation to the church congregation.

In the empirical part, the justification of the author’s concentration on the hygiene in comparison to the medication is given. Unfortunately, the same thing is not discussed for the case of nutrition. Moreover, these two chapters (nutrition and medication) are lacking more explicit interpretations in relation to the theories.

In conclusions, the layer of nutrition practices is missing completely.

I believe, that due to the lack of the time in the process of finalizing the dissertation, there are more formal mistakes, that it is usual. The footnote apparatus is completely disorganized in terms of correct numbers and pages. The author is sufficiently following rules related to the publication ethics, nevertheless, there are several places where the explicit reference is missing (although the author states which scholar she follows). I am not sure, why the in-text literature references are in a different format than the references of the data which are placed to the footnotes. Unified spaces between paragraphs make the text sometimes less fluent. There are mistakes in punctuations, several misspellings as well as grammar and stylistic mistakes.

To conclude, I consider bachelor dissertation of Anna Caterina Vaccari to be a great example of a reflexive and data-sensitive piece of ethnography. Even the thesis suffers from minor weaknesses given above, I believe it presents Anna’s unusual dedication, mastering of anthropological methods, cultivated academic language and good work with scholarly literature. In case of adding some Czech scholarly account on this topic, I would suggest the text to be published in form of an article. To sum it up, the text fulfils all the requirements for the bachelor dissertation, I recommend it for the defence and recommend grading it as “excellent”. In case of successful defence, I suggest a version with corrected footnotes should be uploaded in SIS.

Prague, 23.9.2019.

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