

When your neighbour becomes a threat – how COVID-19 divided a community

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“Ultimately, violent epidemics are foreigners’ diseases. They embody ‘we’ versus ‘they’ distinctions in making sense of what has happened” (Aaltonen 2013, 57).

This paper will analyse a series of COVID-19 related discussions in a public Facebook group. The group is a general discussion forum aimed at the inhabitants of a relatively small Finnish municipality (ca. 6000 permanent inhabitants, ca. 5000 holiday cottages; this means that during the summer months, the population in the area is doubled, and the cottage owners and renters form a significant source of income). The discussions analysed here took place in March-April 2020, starting roughly at the time the Finnish Government declared a state of emergency due to the epidemic. The recurring topic was the potential danger posed by the cottage owners, who the permanent residents feared would bring the virus with them. The idea of a mass exodus to holiday homes was extensively fueled by the media (see Pitkänen *et al* 2020). The discussions in the group escalated quickly, and several threads went on simultaneously for some weeks.

In the discussions, an ingroup (permanent residents) and an outgroup (summer residents) were instantly formed. This kind of categorization is usually the result of “a change in the *status quo* between social groups”, which can be caused by e.g. a natural catastrophe (Tajfel 1981, 139). Such categorization generates simplified stereotypes, to which certain characteristics are subjectively associated (Tajfel 1981, 132-133). In my material, for example, the outgroup was described by the ingroup as *selfish* and *irresponsible*. The outgroup, in turn, tended to stress their financial input in the region.

I will analyse the COVID-19 –related Facebook discussions from the point of view of e.g. categorization analysis and hate speech (see e.g. Määttä *et al.*, 2021). I will examine the course of the discussions and topics such as *responsible behavior*, *health*, and *money*. In addition, I will also examine the metacommentary, which increased during the discussions and took a critical stance towards them. The research method employed will be qualitative content analysis.

References

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