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Her fields of interest include sociology of religion and Russian studies. She is specifically interested in the role and position of religious and ethnic minorities. Penttilä has conducted empirical research on neo-charismatic movement in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church and the religiosity of Russian younger generation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her newest research concerns Russian-speaking worship communities in the Helsinki metropolitan area. She has a wide expertise on different research methods ranging from surveys to ethnography, being mainly an expert in qualitative research.

Penttilä has published actively in both international and national journals, for example in *Religion, State and Society* and *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*. She is also the author of *Faith in the Heart of Russia: The Religiosity of post-Soviet University Students* (Kikimora Publications). In 2010 she edited *Kirkot ja uskonnot itäisessä Euroopassa* (Edita) [Churches and Religions in Eastern Europe]. She often acts as a reviewer in various journals, for example *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Religion, State and Society* and *Idäntutkimus*.