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Striving for normality: Agency, citizen participation and intergroup belonging on the urban periphery of Helsinki

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This article examines how the inhabitants of a culturally diverse suburban estate in Finland strive for meaningful encounters in their lives. The focus is on Kontula, a residential working-class district on the eastern periphery of Helsinki, which has become a powerful symbol of the ills of contemporary urbanity—poverty and social problems, as well as rootlessness and the failed integration of the immigrant populations—in the vernacular geography and media representations of the city. I studied how everyday mobility in an increasingly segregated city is related to a range of qualities of sociocultural encounters, both within the immediate neighbourhood and across other urban areas. I argue that for many marginalised inhabitants, agency predominantly emphasises striving for normality, not a challenge to the system. This is why it is so rarely recognised. Themes such as common decency, meaningful activity and equal encounter are much more typical aims of everyday practises than those focussing on changing the conditions. The contexts explored range from the familiar and neighbourly surroundings characterised by high degree of cultural intimacy and effortlessness to spaces with unfamiliar expectations and very different cultural codes. How do people living on the stigmatised periphery establish sense of belonging in a segregated city? How is it possible retain a sense of decency and dignity in unpredictable circumstances? During my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the area, I concentrated on the qualities of encounters and senses of agency. These are interweaved with the inhabitants' everyday life, realised in their movement across the city and vary considerably in different contexts, reproducing the quotidian urbanity of Helsinki.

KEYWORDS

urban anthropology, ethnography, research methodology, social inclusion, stigma, agency

Introduction

It is early morning in January and the open-air shopping centre of the urban periphery of Kontula is mostly asleep. Only the large supermarkets are open and there is a steady stream of people walking towards the metro station platforms, on their way to work in the central districts of Helsinki. At the same time, there is another, more unpretentious sense of movement towards Kontula and its outpatient care facility for

people with mental health and substance abuse issues. It is my first day of ethnographic fieldwork in the area and I have not visited the centre before.

There is a modest sign on top of the door but a large group of people smoking cigarettes outside is a better indicator of the location. I met one of the employees, Harri,[1] the day before and he has invited me to visit the place. The atmosphere outside is quiet and sleepy: there are casual greetings for the people arriving and a constant motion in and out of the door. I enter and almost collide with someone with excited gesticulations rushing out. Everyone else is relaxed and casual. A game of pool has just begun, the TV is on but there is no sound and most of the people are either eating porridge and drinking coffee or queuing for their plateful. I cannot see Harri so I ask a person wearing a shirt with the centre's logo for him. I notice immediately that he is under the influence and has difficulties understanding my question. The encounter feels surprising, even surreal, because of the uniform he is wearing.

I spot Harri and he tells me to fetch a cup of coffee and to sit down by the TV. All the large armchairs are occupied but one of the regulars is preparing to leave: "It is already ten o'clock and the bars have been open for an hour. My shift here is over. I will go for a pint." He leaves and I sit down to chat with the others. The discussion revolves around the charities hosting food banks in Helsinki. This is a popular topic among the regulars: the quality of food, the (nominal) prices of different items and changes in the atmosphere are deliberated upon meticulously in a routine that is repeated every day. Yet some complain that things change too often and that it is hard to keep up with all the unpredictability.

Our discussion is interrupted by two young men who want to borrow Harri's mobile phone for their "business". I later learn that this is a common practise and an important reason to visit the centre. These two are referred to as "nine-euro-men" because they are receiving nine euros of daily support from the state for assisting in the everyday chores of the centre. Even on the first visit it becomes obvious that porous boundaries distinguish various groups of visitors from one another. In addition to full-time employees and customers there are in-between categories of volunteers, interns, experts by experience (paid and non-paid), people supported by pay subsidies and variable categories of customers. Together they have established a sense of a workplace hierarchy and participate in running the place in both formal and informal ways. What struck me was the extensive range metaphors related to employment and responsibilities: shifts, businesses and wages. This was a place where it was possible to achieve a sense of normality—to work, to do housekeeping and to socialise—a rare case in a society that looks down people with mental health and substance abuse issues.

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1   The names of my informants and some other identifiable details have been changed to protect their privacy.

These aspects of social life are closely related to questions of agency, intergroup belonging and participation. They are crucial for practises of social inclusion and exclusion in a stigmatised suburban housing estate in the margins of Helsinki. My ethnographic approach examines how qualities of urban space, shaped through diverse historical trajectories, have significant consequences for how the potential outcomes of encounters and interactions are realised and imagined. I argue that for many marginalised inhabitants, agency predominantly emphasises striving for normality, not a challenge to the system. This is why it is so rarely recognised. Themes such as common decency, meaningful activity and equal encounter are much more typical aims of everyday practises than those focussing on changing the societal conditions. Inhabitants' spatially ordered notions of sociality—their embodied knowledge of different spaces and contexts—shape agency and belonging through quotidian practises (Taylor, 1992, p. 217–218). In addition, the encounters are also carefully analysed regarding Kontula's shifting relative location (Green, 2012a,b, 2013): a complex understanding of the value and hierarchical order of places, arising historically from their relations and separations from other places within a particular value system (Green, 2012a, p. 6). A brief look into Kontula's history and urban transformation will provide an understanding of its relative location in comparison to other spaces.

Context: Suburban housing estate as a liminal form of urbanity

Until the rapid expansion of Helsinki, beginning in 1950s, its marginalised districts were located in the inner city, in close proximity to the urban core (e.g., Kokkonen, 2002; Kemppainen, 2017). At first, construction of the suburban estates on the urban fringes represented modernisation and a promise of a new way of life, especially for the working classes living in cramped conditions. The newly built suburban housing estates provided spacious flats, balconies, fridges, central heating and an environment close to nature (Kokkonen, 2002; Karjalainen et al., 2021). The residential quarters were built first and the infrastructure followed with a delay—the difference and distance of suburban life in the 1950s and 1960s was characterised by inadequate public transport and lack of shops and services (Kokkonen, 2002). In Kontula, opening the open-air-shopping centre in 1967 and extension of the metro line in 1986 were cornerstones in connecting the district with the urban sphere of Helsinki.

In this sense, urban transformation in Helsinki is an example of a shift from "donut"-shaped cities with the disadvantaged groups living in the derelict cores to "saucer" cities where the urban poor and the immigrants are marooned on the urban outskirts (see Davis, 2006, p. 31). Nowadays, the central working-class districts in Helsinki have undergone a thorough

process of gentrification with only the remains of their previous inhabitants left (Tuominen, 2020). While the inner cities have been associated with a distinctive proletarian urban culture portrayed in literature and cinema, the suburban housing estates in the fringes have been artistically underrepresented until recent years. They have been considered to be liminal zones, somewhere between the urban and rural, human containers that are noted in the media almost exclusively only with regard to social problems (Roivainen, 1999; Kokkonen, 2002; Karjalainen et al., 2021). Despite their fluid connections to the city centre and their culturally diverse population, they have not been included in the narrative of a global city (see Hall, 2012 for an almost identical narrative in London). At the same time, peripheral suburban housing estates share many of the global struggles regarding affordable housing, gentrification and segregation.

The dominant narratives of poverty and social problems, so prevalent in the image of Kontula, are not supported by the statistics. Helsinki has followed the policy of mixed housing for decades, applying quotas for free-market and subsidised housing throughout the city. This has made the reputably disadvantaged areas resemble a fragmented mosaic of poverty, with only small pockets plagued with social problems, not the whole districts (Kortteinen et al., 2006). In the case of Kontula, this has resulted in an intricate classification shared by the residents, often extending to the scale of a single apartment blocks, but virtually unknown for people not familiar with the area. However, the socioeconomic differences between Helsinki's urban districts expose significant patterns. The differences generally levelled down until 1990 (Lankinen, 1997) but have been growing since then (Kortteinen and Vaattovaara, 2000; Stjernberg, 2017). The early 1990s was a time of severe economic depression for the whole country that, among other developments, resulted in a shift from almost full employment to significant differences between districts (Kemppainen, 2017).

In contemporary social sciences, these dynamics of urban transformation are often understood through the concept of segregation—separation or isolation of marginalised urban areas from the other parts of the city. The municipal strategy of Helsinki continues to have strong emphasis on work against segregation (see Vilkama and Hirvonen, 2018) even though segregation development is not as aggressive in Finland as in many other countries (see Hirvonen and Puustinen, 2016; van Ham and Tammaru, 2016; Saikkonen et al., 2018; Kauppinen and van Ham, 2019). The reputation of marginalised districts ruled by criminal gangs, vandalism and explosive rioting is enforced by the sensationalist press and social media representations and there are dire warnings, mostly by the populist right-wing parties, of Helsinki going down the road of the cities plagued by no-go zones, drug wars and extremist movements (Tuominen, 2020; Juntunen, 2021). For the residents of Kontula, these representations feel out of place. Its neighbourhoods have their fair share of problems but everyday life is characterised much more by boredom and sense of peripherality. The sense of

insecurity experienced by the inhabitants is not markedly higher than in some central districts of Helsinki and has remained roughly the same in the recent years. The figures are nevertheless higher than in most of the more socially advantaged areas (Hirvonen, 2022; Keskinen and Kainulainen-d'Ambrosio, 2022).

Theory: Unrecognised agency

The principal approach in this article was to study the senses of agency and participation in differently defined and experienced spaces, both real and imagined. Sometimes they were distinguished from one another in gradual and flexible ways but at others by more fundamental divisions of inside and outside, inclusive and exclusive. The everyday life in Kontula consists of dealing with the contradictions associated with urban space and movement situated in it. Didier Fassin's depiction of representation and lived reality in a Parisian banlieue, resembles closely the situation in Kontula:

> The hardship of life in these disadvantaged neighbourhoods stems mainly not from problems of insecurity, although these do exist, mainly in the subjective form of concern and fear: they are, above all, issues of unemployment and poverty, quality of housing and the environment, reputation of the area and discrimination against their residents (Fassin and Gomme, 2013, p. 58).

There is a rich literature on territorial stigmatisation in urban settings (see Horgan, 2020 for an overview). Since the pioneering work of Goffman (1963), stigmatisation has been developed theoretically in social sciences with various views on the role of agency of the residents. The influential work of Bourdieu (1991, 1999) emphasises the role of state-led campaigns and media in the formation and perpetuation of stigma. He argues that they condition the subjection of the residents to the dominant frameworks in a way that is impossible to escape, except by moving out of the area (if possible). Some other authors allow more flexibility. In his work, Loïc Wacquant has tied together Goffman's foundational work with Bourdieu's notions of symbolic power (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1272). His views, based on ethnographic fieldwork in several marginalised areas, have shifted from the earlier accounts that stressed the hopelessness of residents (Wacquant, 2007, 2008, 2010) into theoretical considerations that permit room to challenge the stigma, ranging from recalcitrance to resistance (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1276). Following this view, there have been ethnographic descriptions of attempts to challenge territorial stigmatisation in creative ways (see August, 2014; Kallin and Slater, 2014; Kirkness, 2014; Smets and Kusenbach, 2020; Tuominen, 2020). These studies, based on long-term participant observation, locate cracks in societal hierarchies and

problematise reductive views designating lack of agency among the residents.

In an impoverished and stigmatised setting, the formal and informal understandings of the area clash frequently. Often, the value of quotidian activities is in stark contrast with the official policies of citizen participation. The latter focus increasingly on measuring the impact and efficiency of innovations and solutions that can be scaled to other contexts. There is also increasing competition over project funding, often highly dependent on progress reports documenting predominantly quantitative data about the participants and results of the participatory activities.

On a more holistic level, participatory acts relate to "right to the city" (Lefebvre et al., 1996), a possibility to reclaim the city and to combat against the spatial inequalities in urban contexts. The emphasis is on renewal and regeneration, "The right to change and to reinvent the city more after our heart's desire" (Harvey, 2012, p. 4). Lefebvre's formulation has acted as an relatively open-ended idea and slogan for various social justice movements in their struggles for affordable housing, against gentrification and to fight againts other injustices in urban contexts. This approach does not deliever straighforward solutions in the quest to create an alternative urban life less alienated, more meaningful and playful but draws attention to encounters and "perpetual pursuit of unknown novelty" (Harvey, 2012, p. x). While writings of Lefebvre and scholars influenced by his work have been enomously influential for both scholarly and activist initiatives for over 50 years, their conceptions of agency and resistance differ considerably from the everyday realities I encountered in Kontula. Throughout my fieldwork, agency in everyday life was not seen through its potential to resistance but through striving to normality. This focus on agency and ordanariness has been explored in the recent work of several anthropologists and philosophers.

What has been widely heralded "ethical turn" in recent anthropological discussions focusses on the ordinariness and abundance of ethical considerations in daily life, phenomenology of moral experience, as well as Foucauldian and neo-Aristotelian traditions of virtue ethics (see Fassin, 2014; Mattingly and Throop, 2018 for overviews of the central debates). Several authors associated with these debates see it as a response to approaches that reduce ethical considerations to deliberate strategies, ideology or calculation (Das, 2007, 2012, 2015; Lambek, 2010; Fassin, 2014; Mattingly and Throop, 2018; Dürr et al., 2020).

Here, I explore how focus on the ordinary can help us to question the dominant Western conceptions of agency, participation and ethical life. I follow Veena Das in her powerful critique, demanding the study of ethics "through the cultivation of sensibilities *within* the everyday", rather than "orienting oneself to transcendental, agreed-upon values" (Das, 2012; emphasis in the original). Ordinary ethics have been studied in diverse contexts, from the everyday acts of forgiveness during

the village resettlement in postwar Uganda (Meinert, 2018) to ethical alterities in experimental family therapies in China (Stafford, 2013). Many of the studies in this field concentrate on violence, mourning and trauma, following Das's (2007) influential study of legacy of violence in South Asia. However, after an extensive literature review, I have not come across ethnographic studies that question widely held Western notions of agency among the marginalised in European urban contexts. Dürr et al. (2020) provide an overview of how the ethical turn has influenced study of cities and normativity but focus on agency in the sense successful citizen participation, protest and urban activism.

In the course of my fieldwork, I noticed that the notions of agency and participation meant very different things for the parties involved. Didier Fassin has pointed out that the sociologically mainstream senses of agency, strongly influenced by the work of Anthony Giddens, consider the concept pointing at the "margin of liberty individuals dispose of, even when structures overwhelmingly tend to reproduce the unequal social order" (Fassin, 2014, p. 431). For Fassin, this reflects the view of the observers at the outside, who recognise agency "only when the practises meet their expectations of openly manifested resistance" (p. 431). Veena Das summarises the same tendency by pointing out that "our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it" (Das, 2007, p. 6–7).

My ethnographic findings are in line with these views. With my informants, their aim was generally to strive for a meaningful life in its ordinariness: the grand pursuits might be brought up occasionally but they felt distant and somehow the territory of the others—they were often elusive and implied risking the relative stability of life around the familiar surroundings of the shopping centre. At the same time, my focus was on a particular variety of ethics of the everyday that Michael Lambek describes through polar opposites: "relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practise rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself" (Lambek, 2010, p. 2). It is from this perspective that I examined the agency in relation to inclusion, group formation and urban space.

Striving towards normality in a spatially narrow lifeworld is intimately linked with an intricate awareness of the people frequenting the centre of Kontula and even the slightest transformations in the area. At the level of the ordinary, this means the skill to recognise identities within the crowd very accurately—to distinguish ethnicity, economic status and the time lived in the area in a glance (see Elyachar, 2011). However, the process does not depend on navigating within clear and predefined groups but of examining "social contact sustained through regular practises and familiar spaces [that] ultimately constitutes crucial, but often unrecognised, forms of belonging" (Hall, 2012, p. 11). In the more official realms, the hierarchy is reversed, resulting in what Michael Herzfeld defines as skilful literacy: the ability of marginalised populations to develop the

capacity to decode the rhetoric of those in power (Herzfeld, 2000, p. 33, see also Graeber, 2007, p. 305). Sometimes the significant groupings are ephemeral or even reduced to a single glance, a bare acknowledgement of meaningfully occupying the same space (Hall, 2012, p. 20). The busy but by measurement small space of Kontula makes it possible to stay on track of different changes in the area: who are the newcomers: which bars, shops and services have new owners: and how is the housing stock being developed. These are important ways to redefine the boundaries between various groups and to establish local sense of belonging. The expectations and limits of agency vary significantly according to groups.

Method: Ethnographic engagement

The study is a result of 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kontula (12 months in 2017 and 3 in 2018), followed by on-going dialogue with the informants about the findings and how they should be presented. While the fieldwork was based on the participant observation of the everyday lives of the residents, the findings are a result of establishing connections to macro-forces and trying to negotiate a balanced view of their complexities and contradictions. I acknowledge that there are several occasions of uncertainty between these connections, for they do not follow straightforward laws of cause and effect (see Duneier, 1999). At the same time, it is often through this confusion that many of the crucial issues are exposed. Suzanne Hall describes the dynamic aptly, as studying "the unanticipated (and often inconsistent) expressions of human frailty and ingenuity, and how these intersect with the economic forces and political frameworks of our time." (Hall, 2012, p. 14). My ethnographic examples bring forward patterns of thought and practise that arise in a variety of contexts but nevertheless portray identifiable sociocultural patterns.

Here, my ethnographic focus was on loosely defined and contextually shifting groups of people, most of them unemployed and suffering from health problems and stigmatisation, spending most of their time in the vicinity of Kontula and actively engaging with services and projects facilitating "participation". This micro-level forms the basis for the analysis, reflected against the notions of the "inside" and the "outside" in the wider lifeworlds and the macro-level of the society-wide developments.

To bring these scales together, I see ethnography not simply as excavation of "data", but fieldwork as a practise and acquiring understanding through the processes of lived engagement (Hall, 2012, p. 15). With my research assistant Taina Petrell, I conducted over 30 semi-structured interviews on a range of topics (varying from half an hour to several hours). They acted mostly as support for participant observation with a focus on humanisation of the subjects instead of their depiction in abstract terms (cf. Duneier, 2002, p. 1575). The core

of my argument is mostly based on following the rhythms of everyday life, balancing between the ordinary and extraordinary, contradictions and paradoxes that are specific to contexts, rather than to stable opinions and identities. Issues dealing with agency and participation rarely fall within the confines of simple definitions in which the experienced and measurable meet univocally. My background as a white male with university education certainly had an impact on the social dynamics I encountered. However, my own background as a resident in a suburban housing estate with a bad reputation helped me considerably to overcome many of the obstacles. In addition, the privilege to devote a full year into ethnographic fieldwork enabled cultivation of close relationships based on mutual trust with the residents in the area.

Everyday life in Kontula: Agency towards normality

The open-air shopping centre of Kontula, covering the area around the metro station, has become a widespread symbol for the whole area. Always busy, with over 30.000 people crossing it daily on their way to and from the metro, it is also a centre for local services, largely absent from the other parts of the district. The public library and the swimming pool as well as the health and youth centres cater for a more general needs; a growing concentration of Middle Eastern and Asian restaurants increasingly gathers customers from all around the city—for many this is their only reason to visit Kontula. In addition, there are three supermarkets and several other shops, but the shopping centre is most famous for its dense concentration of notorious pubs. Furthermore, there are several NGOs with state- and church-run organisations working with the disadvantaged, often with an emphasis on health care and the special needs of the immigrants in the area.

From the beginning of my fieldwork, I quickly became aware of the distinction between people frequenting the shopping centre daily and the ones who were seen, and saw themselves, as mere passers-by, living in Kontula but usually limiting their interactions in the centre to a quick visit to a supermarket. There is no particular name for the loosely connected group of regulars or the passers-by but there are several linguistic conventions to establish the difference. My introduction to the daily life in the centre of Kontula began with a plethora of the names of the usual suspects that I was supposed to recognise. Usually these are first names or nicknames—in the case of a possible mix-up, there is an epithet associated with a character trait, profession or some other attribute. They form a significant part of the vernacular history—some of the people were no longer present but their names were nevertheless soon acknowledged by the newcomers. I quickly became known as Doctor, in addition to my first name.

While the regulars move between locations and establish various temporal patterns, the focus is on the immediate

surroundings of the centre of Kontula. They repeatedly pointed out that the shopping-centre area was the only place where they feel like they are part of something. In their very ordinariness, these significant actions give structure to daily life and a sense of belonging. Jukka, a former bus driver who had to retire because of mental health problems, reflected on his situation in very practical terms, recognising the perception from the world that he considered to be far away and outside his reach: "This is a centre for the marginalised. The goal of my life is to fill my days with something meaningful—it is much better than being home alone. I know that I will never be able to go back to work, I don't even want to talk to people who are suggesting that. I couldn't do that and, besides, I am already an old man, there just isn't a chance of anyone hiring me. I have got used to the idea that this is all I need." He was an insider to Kontula with a limited interest to what was happening outside.

In addition to those living in the area, the people working in the NGOs had become a crucial part of the everyday community. The arrival of each new employee into the area was an especially significant event and discussed thoroughly. Terhi, who had worked in one of the community centres for several years, felt that she had to deal with the contradictions between intimacy and estrangement, the inside and the outside:

> "It happened very quickly after I started, I became so close to people attending our functions. The weeks in here follow the same rhythm, starting with an open meeting for everyone, although it is mostly pensioners who come then. I know this sounds like a cliché, but I have not encountered a similar sense of community in Helsinki. If some of regulars are missing, people go to check that they are ok. If someone is having hard time, the others provide consolation. These places offer so much support. It came to me as a surprise. We might be here giving more formal advice on how to deal with social services, but as awful it feels to say this, these people have become experts on many of the issues concerning the disadvantaged because they have had to endure these situations for such a long time. The roles become blended. However, it is difficult when the roles clash. We concentrate on bringing down the hierarchies in our work but if someone asks for my private phone number, I just cannot give it to them. I need to have a separate life when I am not working here."

Establishing the shared boundaries of intimacy and belonging is hard work. Likewise, it is not easy to find the balance between informal and formal registers: an old man who comes to the community centre meeting promptly every Monday, greets people before making coffee for everyone and leaves soon after. He does not fit into the formal criteria to evaluate agency and participation but is performing a meaningful routine to battle his loneliness; the daily discussions about the food served by the charities, with recurring comments on price, quality and attendance are extremely significant for the participants but, likewise, their significance is difficult to assess and to compare with other functions.

The services aim at increasing agency and participation of their users, especially by including diverse and mostly unheard voices at the local level, but these notions are understood very differently by the inside and outside actors. The guidelines of what counts officially as participation are deeply ingrained into the policies that designate these activities. The view of citizen participation as a ladder, proposed by Arnstein (1969) over 50 years ago, distinguishes between the levels of participation, from "non-participation" and "tokenistic" participation into the highest degrees of "delegated power" and "citizen control". The informal tactics of resistance might be acknowledged by the researchers (see Berger, 2015) but they are discussed and measured mostly by their effectiveness and impact. Engin Isin takes this approach even further in his portrayal of the "the activist citizen," an actor who make a difference by introducing a break or a rupture (Isin, 2009, p. 379–380). Isin defines "*acts of citizenship as those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (that is, claimants of rights) through creating or transforming sites and stretching scales.*" (Isin, 2009, p. 383, emphasis in the original). Agency becomes indistinguishable from the struggle for rights.

Of course, the agency to influence policies, increase social justice and empower citizens is extremely important, but, as I argue here, it is not the whole picture. The lack of affordable housing and increasing segregation are severe problems in Kontula and there are formal and informal groupings actively fighting for social justice. In social sciences, informal agency is often recognised, but the focus is on the results that are evaluated within formal and normative frameworks. According to these views, agency escapes the ordinary and has powerful impact on reality. Agency that is striving for normality lies outside these considerations.

Overwhelmingly, for the resident taking part in participatory activities, the issue is not just about "spending time," however modest the objectives are. Among those designated as marginalised, there is a strong emphasis on having "things to do" and of being an independent individual who makes his/her own decisions when and how to participate (see Duneier, 1992, p. 34 for similar dynamics in Chicago). The episodes of participation often resemble modest rituals. They are strictly scheduled and changes in routines, for example, the times when establishments were open, are met with group opposition. These are the occasions when individuals who would otherwise emphasise a highly individualistic determination congregate under a common cause. The emergence of these informal groups demonstrates the everyday experience of "the multiple allegiances and visceral forms of mixing that spontaneously occur in urban life" (Hall, 2012, p. 3).

The tension between the strict order and unexpected spontaneity of significant encounters brings us back to the day centre. For a casual observer, it is a place to read newspapers, charge mobile phones, acquire clean needles and receive health consultations. Its stated aim is to minimise the complications of the drug use rather than to facilitate the users quitting completely. Most of the residents of Kontula tend to avoid the place and there have been incentives to move it to another location, usually on a pretext that "Kontula has more than its fair share of problems". However, a group of pensioners, actively participating on other functions in the area had begun to occupy their own table in the daycentre, reading the newspapers and drinking coffee. This quickly developed into a problem, for the centre had an officially defined policy of its target group: people suffering from mental health and substance abuse issues. The pensioners were seen as enjoying services not meant for them and coming to the place out of curiosity, to "spy" and see who the drug users were.

This was met with strong opposition on their side. Martti, a 70-year-old man, who differentiated himself vocally from the socially disadvantaged and told me repeatedly that he participated in the functions because he wanted to continue "an active social life," could not understand why his group was "chased out" from the day-centre: "The authorities want us to stay at home. What is the problem? We all live here in the same area. Should I start to use drugs to be accepted into this place? It is just beneficial for everyone that there are different kinds of people visiting the centre, not just the junkies—there are no places for people without money here and we can all fit in here."

His friend Sanna, a very talkative woman of the same age, whom everyone in the area knew, interrupted: "They say that we like to spy on people with problems. That is ridiculous. I know all of them already, I talk with them, and I have never had any problems with them." Martti continued with a smile: "There is even a doctor around here on some days and you get to see her immediately. In the public health centre, it can easily take months to book an appointment." This vignette refers to a common dynamic: it reflects the preference for a spontaneous sense of sociality, opposition towards a bureaucratic system that feels very distant and is better to be avoided. The claim about belonging is based on routine visits to a shared space, by contextually specific grouping of people who are sustaining meaningful senses of belonging within a system they feel they cannot challenge in formal terms.

The claim for belonging also reflects acknowledgement of shared marginality. In this case, the series of negotiations resulted in a defeat for the pensioners. The orders from the upper echelons had to be obeyed and the group was banned from the premises. As a compromise, some new projects were established by the other NGOs to provide meaningful activities in the daytime, but the episode was remembered as arbitrary bullying by outsiders who had never set foot in Kontula.

The group of pensioners felt that their extremely modest pleasures were being prohibited by the authorities. One of them specifically mentioned that all they wanted was to be treated as "normal people".

Stuck inside: Skilful literacy of Kontula

The presuppositions of agency and spontaneously emerging groupings are intimately linked to the specific qualities of lived space in Kontula. What is the role of the qualities of urban space in creating groups and connections? How is the awareness of connection and separation reflected in the everyday lives of its residents? I argue that the experience of living in a district with a notorious reputation, together with the shrinking of one's lifeworld, has resulted in an understanding of rigid boundaries separating the inside from the outside. While the identity as a resident of Kontula might be a source of pride and belonging locally, in many contexts it becomes subordinate within the wider hierarchy of urban locations—something that rarely happens the other way around (Tuominen, 2020). Alternating between the real and imaginary, embodied and reflective, the differences in the immediate environment become routine and rarely questioned and define the everyday experience of the city. In the case of Kontula, the reputation of the district is constantly enforced from the outside and the stereotypes are in a constant relationship with the personal experiences, often with conflicting ideological inflections (cf. Green, 2012b, p. 111).

The narrowing of the lifeworld can amplify an awareness of urban space. Among my informants, the lack of money for the public transport, with the cost of over five euros for a two-way trip, turned into powerful justifications for staying in the familiar surroundings. They claimed to have been in the city centre more than enough when they were younger, everything was more expensive there and could be also found in Kontula, and most importantly, people in the centre were seen as unauthentic and looking down at them. If there was something that could not be found locally, the most common choice was Itäkeskus, a large shopping mall, a 45-min walk or two metro stops from Kontula, still within the confines of Eastern Helsinki. This preference extended to the youths who described the city centre in very similar terms and the immigrants who found the area as safe and welcoming despite its bad reputation in the mainstream representations. However, in these narratives the relationship to Kontula is ambivalent: in the more official contexts—visits of politicians before the elections, ubiquitous media appearances of reporters who want to portray the "voice of the marginalised" in a disadvantaged area (there were surprisingly many recollections of their visits) and the researchers with their questionnaires, the opinions of the residents follow the mainstream rhetoric, concentrating

on demolishing the old-fashioned shopping centre with its "drunks and junkies," as well as calls to restrict the "uncontrolled immigration" into the area (Tuominen, 2020).

The residents have a sophisticated and detailed knowledge of the official rhetoric concerning their home and they often take pride of their ability to shift between the registers of formal and informal. Tarja, a 30-year-old woman with a long history of substance abuse and presently, after a better period in her life, an energetic figure in the voluntary organisations, summed this up:

> "After dealing with so many authorities in my life, always on the subordinate side, I have become very good in understanding their ways of thinking. For some, you just have to agree on everything and play the role of the victim. With others, you have to insist on your rights and really try to influence their decisions. The whole thing is exhausting, it feels that you are playing this awful game all the time. Many of them are not human beings—they have absolutely no idea what my life is like."

In this case, the boundaries between the inside and the outside are clear and cannot be challenged—it is possible to influence the outcomes but not the positions of the interlocutors. However, there are exceptions when the local and the ordinary actions extend across both the real and imaginary boundaries. These instances might not qualify as powerful acts of resistance against unjust urban conditions, nor empower the residents to reinvent their city thoroughly, but they are extremely significant for sustaining a sense of dignity. In the concluding part of the article, through two occasions I wish to propose how the agency striving towards normality relates to participation recognised outside the ordinary.

Conclusion: Fleeting moments of participation

Sometimes participation in the social activities, despite being restricted to the immediate vicinity and a familiar circle of locals, can successfully expand in surprising ways to dimensions that are normally experienced as being out of reach. In the rare case of local music festivals, especially the annual Kontula Electronic Festival (of electronic music), Kontula fills up with "outsiders" for a spring weekend. The event attracts chiefly people from the central districts who are looking for a party centred on music, performance arts, film, food and discussion events. Since its beginning in 2016 there has been a strong focus on collaborating with the local NGOs and other actors, in this case a voluntary group called Lämmin Itä (*Warm East*—referring to seeing the eastern peripheries of Helsinki as friendly and inviting locations) that has been responsible for the festival catering since 2017. Since the beginning of my fieldwork, I have taken an active part in both the festival

and this organisation. Lämmin Itä group consists of people, most of whom have a history of substance abuse and mental health problems, many of them also taking part in other NGO-coordinated activities.

After the extremely busy festival weekend in 2017 we gathered to talk about the experience. All of us were slightly surprised how the discussion revolved around the relative location of Kontula: "So many visitors said that they were surprised to find food that was both vegan and delicious, cooked by regular people here"; "The whole place felt different, much like in the city centre, but we were still in charge"; "this was something really big, I would not have believed that all these people find their way here." Tarja was (and is) a central member of the group, taking part in its weekly meetings, and in this case cooking and serving food to the festival artists, staff and guests. When her turn came, she was visibly moved:

> "This might be difficult to understand for many of you, but for me the biggest thing was the ease of talking with people, many visiting Kontula for the first time. I have my own group of friends, but we feel like outcasts whenever we are with other people. Then I try to interact with the authorities, but they rarely treat me with respect—I am asking for something from them and they are questioning whether I am allowed to have it. Over the course of the weekend, all the encounters have been equal—I serve people food, they thank me for that and ask for my advice about the festival and Kontula. It has been years since I last felt like this."

This fittingly summarises my argument for the striving to normalcy. The boundary between the inside and outside can be stretched on this special occasion and the practise of just acting in an ordinary manner is enough for effortless interaction to happen. It is impossible to assess the moral worth of these moments conclusively. A cynical view would regard presentation of these views as a shrewd tactic to downplay the effects of structural forces among the marginalised (see Wacquant, 2002). Rather, I consider my description of attempts to maintain ethical lives as acknowledgement of complexity of agency in the everyday. To explicate this further, I want to finish with a depiction of contrasting set of power dynamics occurring in the encounters with the outside—a kind of mirror image to Tarja's intimate experience of meaningful sense of agency.

While Lämmin Itä is an informally working charity initiative working on a volunteer basis, most of the NGOs have to report their activities to their funders and pay a lot of attention to the evaluation of the impact of their different operations. They have also developed various methods to ensure that the different voices are being heard. Sometimes the evaluation of citizen participation includes visits to various facilities and discussions with the "customers". I participated in one of the evaluation sessions in September 2017, already quite well acquainted with the people frequenting these services. The coordinators in

Kontula had asked many of the regulars to come to talk about the activities to the "NGO bosses" and we were waiting for the "delegation" to arrive. The visitors were five people in total, two of them from another NGO to "learn from one another." The beginning of the meeting established the sense of inequality: before any introductions, the visitors shook the coordinators' and my hand, leaving the others staring at them, although we were all scattered around the room. Straight after this there was ironic banter about the notoriety of Kontula, supposed to establish an informal atmosphere but in fact strengthening the divide between the inside and the outside.

When the more formal discussion began, I was surprised, for this was my first time to witness a situation of this kind. The regulars started talking about "empowerment," "flexibility," "agency" and "inclusion" in a knowledgeable manner, while the evaluators took notes. I had never heard any of these words from them before. We went through different themes, to be repeated with a slight variation in the future evaluations I attended. The feedback was exclusively positive, there were no deviations from the established structure and the session was over in 20 min. The delegation expressed thanks for the coffee and the "valuable time" of the participants and left quickly. For a little while there was an awkward silence in the room, as if everyone was waiting for them to come back. Suddenly everyone started to laugh at the sheer absurdity of what had just happened. Before leaving Minna, an elderly woman who looked like she was more serious about this exercise than the others, looked at the coordinators and asked: "Did we do well? I want this place to stay open in the future." The coordinators nodded their heads.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

PT conducted the research and wrote the article.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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