IN-BETWEEN SPACE/TIME:
Affective Exceptionality during the 'Refugee Crisis' in Northern Finland

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Abstract

This article analyses the 'European refugee crisis' in the context of Northern Finland, building on the concepts of *exceptionality* and *affect*. Conventionally, exceptionality is conceptualised from the perspective of the state that does not enable analysing exceptional situations in their broader social context. A shift in focus is required to understand how people perceive and experience exceptionality and what kinds of affects this involves. Based on participatory engagement and in-depth interviews with asylum-seekers living in reception centres in Northern Finland and local residents in their neighbourhood, our analysis demonstrates that exceptionality gains diverse meanings in different contexts. We propose *affective exceptionality* as a conceptual tool for analysing affects in transformational situations in which people's sense of the 'normal' becomes disrupted and illustrate how placing emphasis on subjects who experience and embody exceptionality in their everyday lives enables a more nuanced understanding of exceptionality, centralising the people instead of the state.

Introduction

During the intensive phase of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 when 1.3 million refugees arrived in Europe, over 32,000 people sought asylum in Finland. As the number was manifold compared to previous years, accommodating even hundreds of newcomers daily was a big challenge. During late 2015 and early 2016, new reception centres were established all over Finland, including its northern parts, small towns and villages with very little experience of

asylum-seekers. In the media parlance, this period was characterised by a strong reference to its *exceptionality*. It was framed as a watershed moment not only for the state but also for municipalities, towns and villages. Although local and national discussions were linked to narratives of exceptionality at the EU level, the uniqueness of the situation in Finland was highlighted, especially in Northern Finland which, during the first phases, received the highest number of asylum-seekers.

Even though the number of refugees and even immigrants living in Northern Finland is remarkably low[1], the strong emphasis placed on the exceptionality of the situation must be viewed from a broader perspective – as a social construction and *political* by its very nature. Defining what is 'normal' or 'abnormal' are political acts that frame people's choices and actions (Foucault 2007). Any kind of 'normal' social order is constructed in a specific spatial framework – things are considered 'normal' or 'exceptional' in a given territory or space (Ó Tuathail & Agnew 1992). In Northern Finland, the 'normal' order was undoubtedly different before the arrival of hundreds of asylum-seekers who came to live in towns and villages, most of which had been suffering from decades of out-migration and population decline. Yet, it is a matter of perspective *how* exceptional the situation was considered and what it actually meant for different people.

This article explores the 'refugee crisis' in Northern Finland and the ways in which the exceptionality of the situation was constructed, especially from the perspective of affects it raised and produced. Our focus is on the first phase of the events in autumn 2015 and spring 2016. In seeking to challenge conventional, state-centric conceptualisations of exceptionality, we are critical of the word 'refugee crisis', commonly used in the media, as it already frames the situation in negative terms, as a state of emergency – something to overcome before a return to the 'ordinary' is possible. As Triandafyllidou (2017: 3) shows in her analysis of 'the "real" events and their interpretation in media and political debates', there were in fact many 'crises' taking place simultaneously: a crisis in terms of the volume and pace of refugee and migrant flows; a crisis in terms of the receiving countries' and EU policies; and a positive 'crisis' of a wave of solidarity by citizens and NGOs and also one characterised by a dramatic rise of suspicion and 'asylum panic' (also Crawley *et al.* 2017). Alternatively, the situation could be described as a 'refugee management crisis' as it demonstrated the inability of national reception and registration systems to keep up with the arrivals, casting doubt on the sustainability of the Common European Asylum System (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz & Crawley 2018; Brekke & Staver 2018).

We are critical of the Euro-centric 'crisis' rhetoric also because it made evident the striking obliviousness to forced migration taking place outside the borders of Europe. The number of uprooted people continues to increase globally due to conflicts and human rights violations (UNHCR 2019) but does not make similar news headlines as the arrival of a small fraction of the world's refugees in Europe. Forced migration is an ongoing global phenomenon with historical and colonial roots – not a temporary crisis that concerns only Europe. The situation in Northern Finland also resonates with history and place. Most asylum-seekers crossed the state's border from Haparanda (Sweden) to Tornio (Finland) in autumn 2015. In this location, another historically exceptional situation took place during

the World War II, when all inhabitants of Finnish Lapland were evacuated and people journeyed in the opposite direction: 56,000 Finnish refugees fled to Sweden in September 1944.[2]

Debates concerning exceptionality typically reflect the perspective of the nation-state, the highest authority in deciding whether a person seeking asylum will be granted a legal status to stay within its territory. This perspective is predominant in almost all official statements and common also in political analyses, and thus, usually reflected in the mainstream media as well. The state-centric perspective becomes reproduced also in research, particularly in the disciplines of political science, political history and international relations. This is problematic as it, first, reflects the conventional perception of asylum-seekers as an issue to be addressed at the level of state, not something that could be negotiated and decided upon at the local level. Second, it reinforces the dominant understanding of political agency, both with regard to the citizens of the state as obedient subjects sharing its state-centric and nationalistic perspectives, and the understanding of asylum-seekers as non-subjects in terms of political subjectivity.[3] Third, the state-centric approach contributes to a totalising perception of people in presuming that individuals constitute a homogenous group with similar experiences and unified views.

Our article questions the state-centric 'top-down' perspective by approaching exceptionality from a different angle, prioritising the grassroots 'bottom-up' level, and proposing that in contexts such as the 'refugee crisis', exceptionality should not be analysed only from the perspective of the sovereign but also from that of people, including those seeking asylum and populations in countries of arrival. This kind of *human-centred* approach makes visible the perspectives of people who concretely experience exceptionality both in their bodies and minds, and pays attention to affects that these experiences involve. It also enables analysing the ways in which these experiences differ and what kinds of implications this might have. These are the key aspects we focus on in this article while exploring how the so-called refugee crisis was experienced by different groups of people and what kinds of affective atmospheres were created inside and outside of the walls of reception centres in Northern Finland.

Research materials and methods

Empirically, we draw on two main sets of material collected during our research project that examined the events and impacts related to the arrival of a large number of asylum-seekers in Northern Finland. Our study was fundamentally qualitative in nature. The primary data was collected in 2016–2017 through thematic interviews, group discussions and participant observation conducted in three small municipalities in Northern Finland. In one of them, a reception centre had existed before and several new units were established in 2015.[4] We engaged with asylum-seekers arriving from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, as well as local people living in the neighbourhood of reception centres. These groups are not only different in terms of their background, social status and position in

the Finnish society but also diverse internally, which makes analysing their experiences together challenging. However, the data is suitable for the kind of analysis where the aim is not to produce broad generalisations but to explore different meanings given to the exceptionality of the situation by different actors, and the ways in which the events were seen to deviate from the 'normal' everyday life.

The primary material consists of 25 semi-structured thematic interviews with Iraqi asylum-seekers living in three municipalities in Northern Finland (24 men, 1 woman, aged 18–45 years) and 13 local people living in the neighbourhood of reception centres (7 men, 6 women, aged 33–58 years).[5] The asylum-seekers were interviewed at the reception centres and interviewees' homes in May–June 2016. The interviews, conducted in English, were based on a list of questions that roughly followed the interviewees' migration journey. They were recorded and transcribed into text (~280 pages). The interviews in the reception centres' neighbourhood were conducted at the interviewees' homes in autumn 2016. This material is supplemented by data collected through participant observation and informal discussions with 20 asylum-seekers in the registration centre in Tornio and two Eastern border crossing stations in Salla and Raja-Jooseppi[6] in spring 2016. Each visit lasted for one day. We also utilise material collected during three collaborative and art-based projects implemented with asylum-seekers, in which data was collected through ethnographic methods, participatory observation and unstructured interviews. This data is complementary and diversifies our primary material methodologically and content wise, including more women and different nationalities. The *Teach and Learn* forum was a series of five meetings initiated by a group of asylum-seekers and co-organised with our research team together with social science students at the University of Lapland. At best, the forum hosted 30 participants, including male and female asylum-seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. The group discussed diverse issues, ranging from sports and music to culture, religion, society, gender issues, education and employment. The *Art Gear* project combined social work and art-based methods to develop participatory and interdisciplinary approaches for promoting bi-directional integration of the newcomers and local residents. Data was collected in a participatory theatre workshop for women mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (for more details, see Hiltunen *et al.* 2018). The *Women meet Women* discussion group organised meetings for female asylum-seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. For every meeting, local women with different professions were invited to talk about their work and education. The group met 15 times at a location provided by the Red Cross. The number of participants varied from 2 to 13.

When working with vulnerable groups or individuals such as asylum-seekers, careful attention must be paid to research ethics (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.* 2014; Schmidt 2007; Sigona 2014). We addressed the most important ethical issues – the research participants' right to self-determination, prevention of harm and protection of privacy – in the following manner. The asylum-seekers and local people interviewed were informed of the aims of our research project and their rights as participants. Participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the research at any point. Pseudonyms are used in all publications to ensure anonymity. In the collaborative and art-based projects, special attention was paid

to issues such as respect, sensitivity and the researchers' critical reflection on social, ethnic and gender hierarchies and their intersections.

We used qualitative content analysis as the main method of analysis. It proceeded through three phases. First, we went systematically through the whole material, our fieldwork notes, transcribed and other textual material, and divided it into different categories on the basis of the main themes of their content. Second, we categorised them into smaller, more detailed groups on the basis of their relevance to our research aims, and third, we went through the material through specific analytical lenses determined by our theoretical framework (exceptionality and affects) that can be referred to as the main 'units of analysis', namely, the ways in which the participants talked about their *experiences* and *reactions*, including *feelings* and *emotions* related to the events and changing circumstances.

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the main theoretical concepts of our analysis – exceptionality and affects. After this, the empirical analysis first presents the viewpoints of the asylum-seekers living in reception centres and then views expressed by the people living in their neighbourhood. We conclude with a discussion on the concept of affective exceptionality, considering also its potential for other studies.

Exceptionality and affects

States of exception in refugee camps have been studied, among others, by Agamben (2001) and Khosravi (2013). Camps are often described as spaces where the temporary becomes permanent – they do not refer only to physical refugee camps but also to other spaces that delineate an area that is outside the normal order (Brun & Fabos 2015; Gill 2009; Holtzman 2004; Malkki 2002). Building on Agamben and Khosravi's work in her analysis, Rainio (2015: 122-123) has described Finnish reception centres as spaces/places of exception where residents cannot get their voices heard, where they become silenced and are considered passive objects of various procedures rather than active subjects (also Väyrynen *et al.* 2017). Reception centres are thus spaces/places of *in-between* where people are on a journey towards their goal of gaining a permanent residence permit, and in some cases, becoming eventually even a citizen with full citizenship rights (BenEzer & Zetter 2014; Kaukko & Wernesjö 2017; Pentikäinen 2005; Suoranta 2011; Yijälä & Nyman 2017).

In cultural history, 'exceptional times' during wars and conflicts have been studied from the perspective of individual experiences and collective, societal narratives (Kivimäki 2013; Loshitzky 2000; Tilli 2012). During times of peace, societies are based on a collective conception of time, drawing on a linear conception of history and progress in which rituals and leisure time give rhythm to daily life and its routines (Edkins 2003). In contrast, crises result in significant ruptures in everyday experiences of time, making it necessary to understand time from a different perspective. This concerns especially times of war that are always conceptualised as exceptional. At the level of societal, collective narratives, 'times of exception' may signify different things simultaneously: a progressing linear time or a standstill at a certain moment of time that often contains nationalistic meanings. Typically,

these moments are characterised by narratives that emphasise the mythical past of the nation-state and define its future as something that has to pay the dues of the ongoing conflict. The moment of war is thus *historical* – it is a temporary space in-between the past and future (Dudziak 2012: 21-26; Kivimäki 2013: 194).

Our research originated from the empirical observation that the period of intense migration in 2015 generated narratives of exceptionality that resemble the above-mentioned contexts. Hence, in this article, we suggest that also broad and rapid migratory movements can give birth to experiences of 'exceptional times' to those personally involved in these processes. On the one hand, refugees and displaced people experience a lot of anxiety and stress during their journeys and this can influence how they cope in the new environment. On the other hand, experiences of local people in receiving countries are also relevant as they, too, have to adapt to changing circumstances, interact with new people from different cultures, experiencing thus the uncertainty of the global situation in a new way in their daily lives.

Methodologically, we approach experiences of exceptionality from the perspective of *affects*. The concept of affect is an umbrella term used in various ways in different disciplines. In psychology, affects often refer to sensations or experiences prior to cognition (Damasio 1994). As such, affects are separate from emotions or feelings that are produced in cognitive processes and are more or less conscious and articulated. Yet, some scholars argue that affectivity relates to cognitive knowledge through, for example, a traumatic memory (Dragojlovic 2015: 316). Sometimes affects are tied with mental processes such as planning and decision-making, helping to determine which path to take and predict how one's future self would feel in a given situation (Dunn, Forrin & Ashton-James 2009; Loewenstein & Lerner 2009). Affects are also considered corporeal and material. They do not reside 'inside' or 'outside' of the body (Ahmed 2004; Knudsen & Stage 2015) but are tied both to body and mind.

In cultural studies and sociology, affect often refers to a *relation* between a social structure and an individual's experience. Affects are transferred both among human subjects and between humans and their environments (Dragojlovic 2015: 322). Hence, affect is not situated only in-between one's body and mind but also in-between a subject and the surrounding socio-political conditions. Some scholars are interested especially in socio-political structures that construct and frame affects, and consequently, influence the subjectivity of individuals (Mannevuo 2015: 18-21), whereas others have, for example, explored asylum-seekers' protests as 'affective infrastructures' (Näre 2018). In this article, we discuss socio-political structures of physical reception centres and discourses that shape people's experiences and also look into the affects or 'affective atmospheres' themselves.

As affects are partly non-verbal, we are aware that they escape exact definitions. Sometimes it is difficult to draw a direct line between affect and an emotion or, say, between affect and prejudice. Despite these challenges, the concept is useful for describing relations between an individual's mind and body and those socio-political relations that one is thrown into. For us, affects are relations between corporeal human beings and their environments, which means that affects are not only pre-subjective relations or 'situations' that precede

more precise and articulated feelings, but are also constructed through people's actions. This approach allows us to understand exceptionality as a relational concept and helps us to see how exceptionality is produced in-between people's experiences and socio-political processes.

Living in a reception centre

There are nearly 26 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum-seekers in the world (UNHCR 2019). Additionally, 41.3 million people have fled persecution or insecurity internally within the borders of their own country. Globally, most refugees live in cities and their daily lives are relatively independent. Yet, refugee camps, detention and reception centres have received considerable attention as spaces related to experiences of exceptionality and feelings of detachment and estrangement (e.g. Bigo 2007; Biswas & Nair 2009; Diken & Laustsen 2005; Johnson 2014; Rainio 2015). The findings of our study also reflect this phenomenon. The analysis of the research material demonstrates three main categories in experiences of exceptionality in relation to *living conditions*, *social relationships* and *daily routines*.[7]

Asylum-seekers' experiences of living conditions and daily practices may vary considerably depending on the type of reception centre they live in. There are basically two types of reception centres in Finland. First, there are reception centres where all asylum-seekers live in the same building, often located in an old school, hotel or former institution that can house a large number of occupants and offices for the reception centre employees. Some centres offer meals as a part of their service, whereas in other places asylum-seekers can cook their own meals in their rooms or communal kitchens. These centres have a ready daily routine that the asylum-seekers have to follow. Second, there are reception centres with an office that deals with all official matters, but instead of living in the same location, the asylum-seekers live independently in rented flats. Also in Northern Finland, residents in some centres have more freedom and are more independent when they can, e.g. cook their own food and make decisions over their living arrangements. Experiences of living conditions are usually more positive when people have more control over their own lives. In contrast, asylum-seekers with less control over their daily routines told us that they feel as if they were living in a permanent space/time of exception. Lack of independence often results in feelings of powerlessness, which can also lead to passivity (Rainio 2015: 122). Hence, the psychical space of a reception centre can be considered an affective structure as such because it creates different kinds of corporeal experiences and enhances the level of activity or passivity among the residents.

For many asylum-seekers, the natural environment of Northern Finland, as a sparsely populated area with its long, cold and dark winter, is extraordinary. It differs very much, for example, from Baghdad, the hot and crowded capital city of Iraq with a population of over eight million people. Some asylum-seekers told that the darkness of winter in the North is 'very depressing' and makes them feel tired. The participatory art-based workshops also revealed embodied and non-verbal memories triggered by the darkness, some of

them traumatic, such as having to stay inside bomb shelters. Asylum-seekers often live on the borders of different kinds of realities: while physically they travel through spaces of exception and live in temporary shelters and places; psychologically, they are caught in-between two or more different cultures, identities, languages and nationalities, and sometimes the new environment can result in feelings of being different, manifesting embodied 'otherness' (Rainio 2015: 109; cf. Ahmed 1999). Living conditions that create feelings of otherness or powerlessness mirror the corporeality of affects, which is intimately connected to the lived environment and position of the individual in the current socio-political context (Mannevuo 2015).

The above-mentioned space-related experiences of exceptionality can also influence social relationships, especially when asylum-seekers live together in a small room or apartment with strangers who do not necessarily even have a common language. These cramped living conditions result in feelings of frustration. Usually, 8–10 asylum-seekers had to share a small two-room apartment in Northern Finland in 2015–2016. Although living together does not necessarily result in conflicts and may offer positive experiences, often the lack of space was considered distressing. The experience of exceptionality was intensified whenever the living arrangements had to be re-organised, e.g. when residents were relocated because new centres were opened or temporary ones were closed down. Uncertainty and re-organisation of social relationships of everyday life were caused by external factors, as socio-political structures affected the number and pace of incoming and leaving asylum-seekers in the centres. Social relationships were regarded mainly as temporary and the feeling of affective exceptionality was fuelled by the relation between social structures and individual experiences.

It is not uncommon that tensions arise in the reception centres' daily life as the residents' backgrounds and practical skills differ considerably from one another (also Jauhiainen 2017b: 6; Marucco 2017: 99). For many, the clash between the expectations of a new life in Europe and the reality of life as an asylum-seeker was difficult to accept: the loss of status from a self-sustaining individual in charge of one's own destiny to a passive recipient of services and object of control was a source of anxiety and stress. Also, some male residents experienced difficulties with daily activities such as cooking, cleaning and washing clothes as they were not accustomed to household duties. Some tensions surfaced due to different gender norms as well, especially in cases in which two families had to live in a shared apartment.

Social relationships within reception centres are often based on the logic of exceptionality. For asylum-seekers who arrived alone in Finland, contacts with families and loved ones are mainly virtual (via Skype, Messenger and WhatsApp), whereas people they encounter in everyday life may be total strangers. Not many have significant contacts with local people or communities outside the reception centres. Typically, the asylum-seekers' local social networks consist of reception centre employees and some volunteer workers (also Pöyhönen, Kokkonen & Tarnanen 2019). Both groups are considered 'officials' as they represent the institution. Many asylum-seekers, especially those who arrived in Finland alone, consider Red Cross employees positively as helpers, peers, and even friends.

However, for some others, the employees appear as authorities who control daily life, refuse simple requests or even call the police when there are conflicts between the residents.

Many asylum-seekers' experiences of daily routines reflect the view of reception centres as a no man's land and its residents as people who have left their countries but not yet really arrived at the destination (Suoranta 2011: 42-43). This space/time of exception is characterised by the act of waiting: first, for the interviews by the police and immigration officials; then, for the asylum decision and a possible residence permit. Many consider waiting frustrating and agonising – as Schwarz (2016: 131, 140) puts it, something of a 'lost time' where the overlapping lack of self-determination, idleness and temporality create a specific situation of entrapment. Most our interviewees would rather do something, work or make themselves useful in other ways (also Jauhiainen 2017a; Koistinen 2017; Marucco 2017; Suoranta 2011). As Tariq, a 24-year-old engineer from Baghdad describes his situation:

> 'Same routines: sleep, eat, sleep, eat. I don't go out, except to school for a couple of hours, two or four times a week. This is very difficult for all of us, so difficult for me'.

Many spend their time playing football, cycling around the city and keeping contact with families and friends. Forty-year-old Ali explains his routines:

> 'Well, I go to the gym, shopping. Today football, tomorrow Finnish language but all the time the problem is... [shows photos of his children on mobile phone] . . . I cannot sleep.'

Especially for male asylum-seekers, having nothing to do is very difficult. Most had permanent jobs in their home countries where, in the words of Hadi, a 30-year-old business student from Iraq,

> 'it is shameful in our culture for a man to sit at home not doing anything [...] A man cannot stay at home, he should work at least twelve hours a day.'

Also, many others told that they are disappointed because they cannot work in Finland, despite the fact that it would be legally possible 3–6 months after their arrival. Many regarded economic dependency on society as frustrating and embarrassing. This can be interpreted as affective exceptionality where circumstances restrict culturally dominant masculine expectations (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014: 403). Exceptionality thus modifies cultural and gendered expectations that are concretised in daily routines, and some of which cause frustration and tensions.

Data from two participatory projects with women demonstrated also the dynamics of affective exceptionality in the intersections of gender, culture and ethnicity. Some women described how afraid or uncomfortable they were to encounter people in public spaces or in their work. For example, Alisha, a 24-year-old hairdresser from Syria said:

> 'I work in a shop and I don't really want to interact with people. I avoid to be in the cashier [...] I am afraid that people see that I'm a foreigner and they don't like me'.

While many women had experienced 'otherisation' in other contexts, for some being categorised on the basis of their ethnicity was a new experience, which highlighted, again, the exceptionality of the situation.

Most experiences of exceptionality with regard to living conditions, social relationships and daily routines in reception centres are related to mundane and simple issues. If asylum-seekers were able to do things they consider meaningful and useful – particularly, to work and interact with others – they would feel that they are worth something and needed, that they are not only objects of different procedures and actions (Rainio 2015: 122-123) or governance (Koistinen & Jauhiainen 2017: 31). Lack of meaningful action and interaction pulls them deeper into a limbo in which the connection to normal, everyday human practices and social activities becomes ever thinner. Although asylum-seekers are physically safe (generally) when living in reception centres, the experience of endless waiting makes everyday life hard to bear, resembling what has been called *the politics of exhaustion* (de Vries & Guild 2018). During their journeys, asylum-seekers encounter

> 'structural violence that impacts and intensifies over time as people continue to be pushed across and held up in a range of institutionalised and informal spaces of transit' (ibid.: 8)

When this limbo, i.e. the exceptionality of the situation becomes permanent, people can no longer attach themselves emotionally to anything that would be considered 'normal' in the context of at least partly predictable society (Brun & Fabos 2015; Holtzman 2004; Malkki 2002). For these people, the reception centre becomes an increasingly disconnected and estranged waiting space (Marucco 2017: 93; also Gothóni & Siirto 2016).

Experiences of exceptionality are most clearly manifested in the narratives of the asylum-seekers in that their personal, established, normal ways of life have been radically transformed. They have left their homes behind to start a new life in a safe country. Typically, people are inclined to handle difficult events and traumas by giving them meanings that are easy to understand. This can take place, for example, through a historical narrative (Kivimäki 2013: 195-234). Interestingly, neither did national or religious narratives surface among our interviewees nor did they give their experiences of exceptionality any collective meaning. Most saw themselves being on their journey alone as individuals and did not describe their experiences as a part of any larger movement or historical event. While some collective aspects became evident, especially in the narratives of people belonging to the same religious or ethnic groups, their stories did not form a shared collective narrative. Any collectivity seemed to be conditional, which is understandable as trusting relationships do not form automatically among people, whether asylum-seekers or members of any other group (Lyytinen 2017).

Even though the narratives did not entail a collective meaning for the experiences of exceptionality, they were bounded by the same socio-political structures. These structures determined the particular space/time that created the framework for affective exceptionality, and which was concretised in the living conditions, social relationships and daily routines of the reception centres. This framework also involved the element of change. For example,

while many were quite positive about their future after their arrival, later this optimism was hampered by the tightening asylum policies and continuously increasing number of negative decisions. This gradual loss of future prospects then led to feelings of frustration, despair and hopelessness becoming more common.

Living in the neighbourhood of a reception centre

We conducted 13 interviews with local people living in the neighbourhood of two reception centres in autumn 2016. By that time, the peak of the 'crisis' was over as the route through Europe had begun to close up. Temporary border controls were introduced between Sweden and Denmark in November 2015 as more than 39,000 asylum-seekers arrived in Sweden in October 2015 alone (Peterson 2017: 3-4). The Balkan countries and Hungary also began to limit the number of asylum-seekers in early 2016, and Austria set an overall cap to the number of asylum applications it would accept. Finally, the EU-Turkey agreement, which came into force in March 2016, blocked the arrival of asylum-seekers at the Turkish coast (Triandafyllidou 2017: 6-9). The reception centres in Northern Finland were still actively in use at the time of the interviews conducted in their vicinity. Since then, one of the centres has been closed, while the other still operates.

The interviewees described their experiences of exceptionality of the situation mostly with a reference to the fact that both reception centres had been established without proper prior notice to the residents of the area. The centres were located in rather homogeneous Finnish neighbourhoods, quite different from, e.g. Finland's most multicultural suburb Varissuo in Turku, where more than 40% of the residents have a migrant-background (Huttunen & Juntunen 2018). Our interviewees maintained that local people had not been given enough information either through the official channels or news media. As one of the interviewees pointed out: 'There are approximately one thousand inhabitants in the village. When [...] two hundred and fifty newcomers arrive without any notice, and you don't know who they are, it feels kind of frantic'. He went on to explain that they had heard about the reception centre from their children, who had played football with its residents: 'There were something like fifty of them and it was quite scary in the beginning. I said that you cannot go with them yet, as there may be, I was afraid, sicknesses and diseases they may have'.

Central feelings that the interviewees felt during the quickly changing situation were insecurity, fear and suspicion. All these were explicitly linked to the fact that people felt they were not informed about the events. The lack of publicity in arranging the functioning of the centres created an 'affectual atmosphere' (Berlant 2011) that was very different from the previous experiences of the inhabitants. Before the 'crisis', the 'normal' had included somewhat predictable and relatively small changes in the neighbourhood, based on the assumption that the officials would inform the inhabitants about significant exceptions in the social order. When this did not happen, people felt they were losing control over their daily lives and routines, and their trust in public authorities was eroding (cf. Crawford & Hutchinson 2016).

The interviewees told that their insecurity in the early phase of the events was intensified by media reporting with frequent stories about 'uncontrollable flows' of refugees, and particularly the threat of terrorism. Almost all interviewees argued that they viewed critically any scandalous articles published in the news and/or social media. Even those who had a negative stance towards asylum-seekers pointed out that certain stories, especially news related to crime, have a tendency to stigmatise innocent people and groups of people. Yet, the news images of large numbers of people on the move had created a strong impression among some interviewees that a new period of intense migration had started. Many questions surfaced among them: Will the group of newly arrived asylum-seekers standing outside the police station every morning become the new norm? Will these young men stay and become a permanent part of the town? Many of these mundane questions reflected the wider question of whether the exceptional situation was becoming permanent.

Moreover, the frequent use of terms such as 'asylum-seeker wave' or 'flow of refugees' to describe the situation in the media strengthened a discursive reality where things were not 'in control'. In the news and social media, the impression was created that refugees are 'invading' Europe, resembling something of a force of nature (Fargues 2015). The interpretations of many media outlets shifted from initial humanitarian and emphatic framing towards hostile or suspicious one (EU 2017). As in other countries affected by the 'crisis', the media created an influential affective structure that offered people an emotional vocabulary and interpretational lense to make sense of the events (Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou & Wodak 2018). Even those of our interviewees critical of the media were affected by how the situation was framed. The narratives and commonly used terms created an atmosphere of suspicion, where it was not possible to *really know* what was happening.

Some interviewees mentioned having felt that the war and suffering of the world was entering their backyard as the reality of global refugee movements, previously witnessed only through the media, was suddenly there. As not enough information was provided on the background of the newcomers, there was a concern that some might represent opposite parties of long-term conflicts in their home countries and would continue to fight each other in Finland. While many fears were quite specific (such as terrorism, diseases or armed conflict in the neighbourhood) and different from each other, they often had a common nominator. It was an affect related to uncertainty looming behind the articulated feelings. Even those who were not afraid told they could not be *sure* of what would happen next. When the interviewees were specifically asked about the exceptionality of the situation, all of them told that the particular time period was globally exceptional due to the high numbers of asylum-seekers in Europe. Yet, interestingly, most did not consider their *own* situation locally as anything drastically exceptional, although some emphasised that the situation is dynamic rather than static: 'Millions of people strive for Europe and I think we haven't seen the peak yet. The whole world is in an exceptional state. You really cannot see it here. We have this little village bubble of our own.'

Often, experiences of the exceptionality of the situation were furthermore mitigated through straightforward and easy-going co-existence with the newcomers. Most

interviewees said that initially they had been afraid of especially young men walking around in the area in big groups. Some told they had been concerned about their children, but this fear had been alleviated as nothing bad had happened and the encounters with the asylum-seekers had turned out to be mostly positive. First meetings had typically taken place via the asylum-seekers' and local residents' children who played together and visited each other's homes. Even a couple that expressed the most critical views towards asylum-seekers had donated some of their children's old toys to their new neighbours' children. Similarly, a study concerning the multicultural suburb Varissuo found that while Finns living in the area may use highly derogatory language when referring to asylum-seekers, migrants and Muslims, at the same time they have sustained social relations with neighbours with migrant backgrounds (Huttunen & Juntunen 2018: 9).

The experiences of exceptionality by the neighbours of the reception centres can be described as quite pragmatic. In the beginning, their experiences were strongly connected to the surprising and rapid escalation of the situation and the perceived changes in the neighbourhood. Although certain types of experiences of uncertainty were provoked by the media representing world events as uncontrollable and threatening, many locals had soon adapted to the new situation. The affective structure that was first connected to the feelings of fear and suspicion was quite soon replaced by a new and somewhat more optimistic structure in which events that were originally interpreted as highly exceptional started to represent a temporary divergence in the established and ordinary daily life.

Conclusions

In this article, we have examined a particular place and time during the 'European refugee crisis' through the prism of exceptionality. Our analysis of the experiences of asylum-seekers and local people shows that exceptionality gains diverse meanings in different contexts. Within and outside the walls of reception centres, people lived through different kinds of times of exception. In the narratives of the asylum-seekers, experiences of exceptionality are manifested in many different ways. After having lived in prolonged instability and insecurity in their home countries, a manifestation of a state of exception as such (Juntunen 2016), they gave up everything that was ordinary or normal in their lives and made the dangerous journey from conflict zones of the Middle East and Africa to Europe. After arriving in Northern Finland, they faced new experiences of exceptionality that were related to, e.g. their living conditions, social relationships and daily routines.

During the same period, the neighbours of the reception centres had different kinds of experiences of exceptionality. They referred to surprising and rapid changes in their daily lives and in the world situation, which they tried to make sense of through information gained from the news media. The media added to the level of public insecurity and anxiety in describing 'the flow of refugees' as chaotic and uncontrollable, and reporting heavily on crimes conducted by foreigners and refugees. These media narratives clearly influenced local people's perceptions and expectations. However, some of their fears were at least

partly alleviated through their concrete, physical and daily interaction and somewhat peaceful co-existence with the newcomers.

It has become clear that the so-called refugee crisis signifies substantial ruptures in the lives of many people. However, these ruptures become scaled in diverse ways within different groups. While for some, they can be of existential nature as being truly faced with issues of life and death, for others exceptionality has more to do with ruptures in experiences related to basic forms of stability and predictability in their everyday lives. Our analysis serves to remind that different experiences and life-worlds co-exist simultaneously even during a 'crisis'.

Hence, we propose the concept of *affective exceptionality* as a tool for analysing the kinds of affects that are experienced in transformational situations in which people's sense of the 'normal' and everyday life becomes severely disrupted. By placing the emphasis on people who embody and experience exceptionality in their daily lives in multiple and diverse ways, it is possible to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of exceptional situations in their broader social context. When viewed through the perspective of affective exceptionality, people's experiences are not unitary, homogenous, static or fixed but rather diverse, dynamic and constantly transforming. This kind of knowledge can be useful for policy-making, e.g. in supporting the integration of asylum-seekers and helping local communities to adapt to changing circumstances. Moreover, the concept of affective exceptionality enables moving beyond conventional, state-centric ways of understanding exceptionality 'top-down' – it invites us to analyse experiences of exceptionality through a 'bottom-up' approach that allows for a variety of human-centred perspectives to emerge, thus prioritising the people instead of the state.

What do these different experiences of exceptionality mean from the perspective of the future? We argue that where the aim is to create a society where different groups of people can live together and trust each other, it must be ensured that certain (negative) experiences of exceptionality do not become permanent parts of the social fabric. The society needs to take into account people's diverse experiences, traumas, hopes and desires in a way that makes space for new, shared and positive narratives (Ashplant, Dawson & Roper 2000). These narratives should be based on a sufficiently linear, stable and collective conception of time, so that people who do not know each other are able to share the same collective moment (Edkins 2003; Kivimäki 2013: 192), and start constructing an inclusive future together.

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Notes

1. Immigrants constitute only 2.2% of the population in Northern Finland, and the number of refugees is very low compared to other parts of the country (Centre of Expertise in Immigrant Integration 2017).
2. This historical analogy is addressed in the short film They Came in Crowded Boats and Trains by Rainio & Roberts (2017). It interweaves the stories of Finnish refugees during the World War II with the journeys of Iraqi asylum-seekers to Finland in the present day. It brings historical context to the contemporary situation and presents a different perspective of Finnish history, making Northern Finland visible as a place that people have both escaped from and sought shelter in. Thus, the division between us and them, the past and present, becomes blurred.
3. Moreover, the usual categories of 'deserving refugees' and 'economic migrants' are 'based on binary, static and linear understandings of migration processes and experiences' (Crawley & Skleparis 2018: 59).
4. All reception centres in Finnish Lapland are maintained by the Finnish Red Cross. Elsewhere also municipalities and private for-profit actors provide similar services with funding from Finnish authorities.
5. We also interviewed Finnish Red Cross reception centre employees, but do not analyse that material here (see Nykänen et al. 2019).
6. Opened in September 2015, the Tornio registration centre was a hub of the 'flow' of asylum-seekers, where all arrivals in Lapland were registered before they were transported to reception centres around the country. Salla and Raja-Jooseppi were the borders' crossing points used by asylum-seekers arriving from Russia.
7. While the life of asylum-seekers was radically transformed already during their dangerous journey to Europe, it is beyond the scope of this article to focus on these journeys (see Koikkalainen & Nykänen 2019).

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