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Achieving the goals – an analysis of irregular migrants' possibilities to transform their space-times in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates the usefulness of time-geographic approach in research with irregular migrants. Time-geographic approach acknowledges individual space-times as being assembled of multiple elements (e.g. housing, the Internet, friend, fear, legal status). Through an ethnographic research with 50 irregular migrants in Finland, I demonstrate how these irregular migrants try to transform their space-times in order to overcome the adversities in their lives. To transform one's space-times, it is necessary to intervene on the elements that affect it. Irregular migrants in this research transform their space-times, by trying to withdraw from constraining elements (e.g. unpleasant places, dangerous people, fears) and approaching inciting elements (e.g. safe place, friend, knowledge). In this article, I suggest this theoretical-methodological framework to investigate the interlinkages of these multiple elements in the lives of irregular migrants.

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1. Introduction

In this article, I introduce time-geographic approach to study the lives of irregular migrants by elucidating the lives of 50 irregular migrants in Finland. During one-year intensive ethnographic fieldwork, I paid attention to the elements in the irregular migrants' lives as suggested in time-geography. According to the premise of the approach, I interpret each irregular migrants' personal living environment, or *space-time*, as it is called in time-geography, as being assembled of physical/virtual *elements* (e.g. darkness or the low temperature of the Finnish winter, the Internet), social relations and traditions, but also mental elements (e.g. memories, hopes and fears, anxiety, trauma). I reveal the *goals* of the irregular migrants of this research (e.g. finding a place to sleep, work, legalize a stay, to feel security) and illustrate how they try to reach their goals within their space-times. To transform personal space-times, it is necessary to intervene on the elements that influence it. Consequences of intervening are potentially essential. For instance, being able to take care of oneself physically and mentally might incite person to approach right kind of knowledge and people and finally legalize her stay. However, the interlinkages among elements are not always explicit for the persons themselves and thus, the interconnections are not necessarily consciously produced. With this research, my aim is to contribute to the current, extensive discussion regarding irregular migration by analysing the *interlinkages* among various elements in the lives of these people and by demonstrating how the participants of this research try to transform their space-times in order to overcome the adversities in their lives. Consequently, this article illustrates how multiple, often conflicting spatio-temporal elements coincide inseparably in migrants' various relationships and

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everyday experiences, and how the transformation of these space-times, materially transform the actions of the migrants (see also, Tedeschi and Gadd 2021).

Scholars have uncovered topics such as policy effects on irregular migration (Van der Leun 2006; Jorgensen 2012; Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014; Czaika and Hobolt 2016), citizenship (Squire 2009; Nordling, Sager, and Söderman 2017) and agency (Hellgren 2014; Mainwaring 2016; Schweitzer 2017; Strange, Squire, and Lundberg 2017; Triandafyllidou 2018) to mention but a few. Moreover, large empirical research scrutinizes irregular migrants' living conditions showing elements such as vulnerability, exploitation and practice of agency (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2009; Sigona 2012; Janmyr 2016; Schweitzer 2017). Additionally, academics have shown the importance of the social relations in the everyday lives of irregular migrants (Hellgren 2014; Picozza 2017; Ambrosini 2018) and how laws and regulations, gatekeepers and negative discourses constructing irregular migrants as 'illegals' shape their lives (e.g. Bendixen 2018a).

Irregular migrants have often crossed an international border illegally either clandestinely or with forged identity documents or refused to leave when their visas have expired, or an asylum claim has been rejected (Leekers, Engbersen, and van San 2007; Düvell 2011; Orrenius and Zavodny 2016; Ambrosini 2017). Since 2016, the largest reason for irregular stay in Finland has been rejected asylum claim. This stems from the situation in 2015, when nearly 33,000 people came to Finland to seek asylum (Migri 2018). Finnish authorities were not well prepared to such an increase in the amount of asylum seekers (the normal annual amount of new asylum seekers in Finland varies from 3000 to 4000). Moreover, in 2016, the conditions for obtaining asylum and other residence permits in Finland were tightened resulting relatively more negative decisions to asylum claims compared with the previous year (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018).

Being irregular migrant is contingent on specific legal and policy arrangements, technologies of control and processes of 'illegalisation' as well as the broader social, political and geographic contexts (Sigona 2012; De Genova 2017; Bendixen 2018a). They often have limited access to rights and services afforded to others with a range of different but visible statuses (e.g. asylum seekers, temporary residents) (Bloch 2014; Lundberg and Strange 2017). In Finland, irregular migrants are entitled to have urgent health care and short-term financial support for food, emergency shelter and indispensable medication. However, there are differences between the services municipalities offer. For example, Helsinki, the capital of Finland, made a decision in 2017 to offer extended social and health care services (meaning preventive health care instead of only urgent health care) whereas some other municipalities criticized even the mandatory services guaranteed by the Finnish Constitution (Jauhiainen, Gadd, and Jokela 2018). There is no right to work. However, sometimes, irregular migrants are even unaware of their own legal status making the possibility to claim the rights jeopardized.

The everyday of irregular migrants is greatly shaped by the inclusion or the exclusion from the societies where they live (Khosravi 2010b), yet they are often connected to social spheres in the 'host' society (Schweitzer 2017) either legally or illegally through the labour market, for instance (Coutin 2005; Hellgren 2014). However, the status of irregular migrants and the status of their practices as legal/illegal have connections to their self-esteem and thus, to their social relations and their physical use of space. Moreover, their everyday livelihoods are affected by structural frameworks, welfare and migration regimes, and formality/informality in the labour market (Coutin 2005; Hellgren 2014; Triandafyllidou 2018) as well as the institutional/political and discursive opportunity structures in different national contexts (Koopmans et al. 2005).

This article is structured around three research questions; first, what are the most meaningful elements in the lives of irregular migrants of this research, and what are their life goals? Second, how their activities are constrained and incited, and third, how these irregular migrants transform their environments to reach their life goals? The objective of this article is not to produce any causal explanations, but rather to illustrate how the elements intertwine and how the elements together relentlessly transform these people's lives. With this spatio-temporal approach, we can elucidate how irregular migrants navigate the disparate and often conflicting elements in their lives.

2. Material and methods

This research is mainly ethnographic including interviews and informal conversations (individually and in small groups lasting from 30 minutes to two hours), and participant observations carried out during one year (March 2018–March 2019). The participant group consists of 50 people (9 females and 41 males, between 23 and 51 of age) with whom I spent time intensively (mainly in Southern Finland). The migrants were not pre-selected. Potential participants were challenging to find, as the majority of gatekeepers feared lacked confidence. Nevertheless, some gatekeepers facilitated initial communication with irregular migrants, for instance, by informing them about my research. There were gatekeepers with and without migrant backgrounds, some of whom were former asylum seekers. The trust some gatekeepers showed us facilitated the initiation of the fieldwork. Interpreters were present in the conversations if necessary; otherwise, I used either Finnish or English. The participants were mainly migrants who had arrived in Finland between 2015 and 2016 and had received negative decisions on their asylum applications from the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) and the courts. During the fieldwork, I spent time, for instance, in their homes, work places, on the streets and forests or cafeterias, which they frequent. The participants chose the places. I explored also participants' activities and the locations of those activities.

The qualitative data were analysed by using the theory-oriented content analysis. Time-geography orienting the analysis suggested concentrating on the goals of the participants. I obtained an understanding of what is important to these individuals and what they do and why. This analysis answered the first and the second research questions as I discovered how the space-times form the possibilities to act. This first part of the analysis also revealed the experienced constraints and incentives the participants encounter when they try to achieve their goals. Moreover, I used empirically oriented content analysis to discover the methods whereby the participants transform their space-times to reach goals. This meant that I did not have any ready planned methods I would look for in the ethnographic material. The empirical material was thus orienting the analysis.

I conducted thematic content analysis for coding the elements of the participants' lives according to their belonging to a specific spatio-temporal group or *dimension* of elements as it is called in time-geography (i.e. physical/virtual, socio-cultural and mental. *cf.* Chapter 3.). Such codings were, for instance, physical places combined with the physical spatio-temporal dimension, friends with the social dimension, and violence and memories with the mental dimension. I coded the material in this way to highlight the interconnectedness of the dimensions as violence as an act could be related to the social dimension but also to the mental dimension due to the marks, it had probably left on a person's self-esteem or feelings of fear resulting a certain behaviour in the physical space. The research ethics have been negotiated constantly during the fieldwork but also during the writing process. For instance, I decided not to mention the ethnic origins of the participants to avoid the possibility that others might relate their opinions and thoughts to specific ethnic groups. Moreover, the majority of the participants did not want me to describe too closely the places where they met (and where I also went) to avoid recognizing the places. In general, it is essential that the participants are not identified. However, for the purpose of this article, nationalities and specific locations are irrelevant. The ethical aspect in the project were evaluated prior the positive funding decision.

3. Time-geography in a study of irregular migrants

The time-geography provides a useful theoretical-methodological approach to investigate intertwined *elements* in individuals' *space-times* (Schwanen 2007; Friberg, Scholten, and Sandén 2009; Hägerstrand 2009; Shaw 2012; Gadd 2016a, 2017). This relational approach enhances understanding of how the multiple, often conflicting, interconnections coming from disparate space-times transform the geographies of irregular migrants (see Tedeschi and Gadd 2021). Moreover, the time-geographic framework includes the analysis of one's personal *goals*, *projects* to reach them,

but also the analysis of the elements constraining and inciting the projects. The key of time-geographic approach is that space and time are dyadic. Space is assessed as part of individuals' lives jostling multiple elements (see e.g. Anderson and Wylie 2009; Buchanan and Lambert 2005; Hägerstrand 2009; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015; Shubin 2015). Hence, elements such as past social relationships, memories, physical and digital spaces, laws, and future uncertainties in past–present–future space-times, all are present in an endless circle constituting spatio-temporal *dimensions* as both the same and different (see Tedeschi and Gadd 2021; Deleuze 1994). Furthermore, time cannot be conceptualized only as absolute or linear, beginning in the past and moving from the present to the future (Tedeschi and Gadd 2021). Actually, 'a number of heterogeneous elements thrive together and constitute a multiplicity of relations that give rise to the moments of becoming that we perceive as the present' (Blazek, Esson, and Smith 2019, 66). The temporal dimensions – past, present and future – overlap and amalgamate in the multiple relationships and activities that construct a space (Tedeschi and Gadd 2021, 129). To facilitate the research of individuals' spatio-temporal experiences, the elements can be (artificially) divided into three interlinked groups or *dimensions*, i.e. physical/virtual, socio-cultural and mental. The physical dimension comprises all physical elements around us. The socio-cultural dimension includes cultural products, norms, legislation and art works, whereas the mental dimension refers to knowledge, thought, perception, memory and emotion, for instance (Kranz 2006).

To identify and engage with a complete set of relevant elements is impossible, as developed by many new materialist researchers and scholars using non-representational theories (see Ruming 2009). Thus, I concentrated on the most important elements for the research participants and the interlinkages among them (see Murdoch 1997; Ruming 2009; Gadd 2016b). The most essential, the most important linkages (revealed by the research participants) are called first-order approximations (Murdoch 1997), which often become visible through the everyday activities of the person. Those most important linkages are, in this case, related to the goals in the participants' lives and the elements either inciting or constraining the achievement of the goals. Thus, the time-geographic idea of goals and projects is a useful starting point for studying important elements in irregular migrants' lives. Accordingly, I first concentrated on irregular migrants' goals in the everyday. These goals were, for instance, eating a meal or arranging oneself an employment. The things people aim at often tell something about their current circumstances and vulnerabilities; does one aim at getting a higher salary, having a healthy child or merely surviving to the following day. Hence, even achieving a basic need can become a goal for someone.

After distinguishing the goals people have, an important part of time-geographic approach is to explore the *projects* individuals create to reach their own goals, i.e. how they transform their space-times to achieve set goals (Hägerstrand 2009). This is what I explored also. Some may lack possibilities to affect the qualities of the physical environment but they may transform their social and mental surroundings by approaching certain beneficial elements and withdrawing from others. This is one form of practicing agency (Hellgren 2014; Mainwaring 2016; Schweitzer 2017; Strange, Squire, and Lundberg 2017; Triandafyllidou 2018). Consequently, in this research, agency is understood as an ability to act (considering also merely thinking or not acting as action). This is not, however, an exceptional way to conceptualize agency in migration studies. Sigona (2012, 51), for example, understands agency as 'the ways in which migrants shape and adapt daily routines and mundane social interactions to changing circumstances, precarious livelihoods and the concrete possibility to become deported'.

Nevertheless, according to the time-geographic approach, all actions are *constrained* and *incited* by individual capacities, law, knowledge and mental loads to mention but a few (Friberg, Scholten, and Sandén 2009; Gadd 2017). As people have different goals and aspirations in life, different elements constrain and incite their activities. In time-geography, the constraints and incentives have been grouped into four interlinked groups (i.e. capability-, coupling-, authority- and mental constraints and incentives). They refer to the need to have nutrition and rest (capability constraint), to meet people and resources (coupling constraint), to obey rules and traditions (authority

constraint), but also to the impact of fear and good state of mind (mental constraint), for example (Gadd 2016a). These elements affect whether the environment is experienced as hostile or offering possibilities to govern one's life. Moreover, people can *be* mentally and spiritually elsewhere (Shubin 2012) and bring strength and motivation (or apathy) from the past or future space-times, for instance, by mentally going through positive (or negative) experiences from the past as if living then anew, as if being mentally in another space-time. Additionally, information technology has enabled people to interact with each other virtually without physical contact (Bendixen 2018a). Hence, in the fieldwork, I explored the elements in participants' everyday and the interlinkages among the elements, and their effects on migrants' activities and mental states. Different spatio-temporal dimensions were identified in the participants' narratives, and the multiple interlinkages between those dimensions were detected through participants' embodied spatio-temporal practices (see Tedeschi and Gadd 2021).

4. Goals and aspirations of irregular migrants within relentlessly evolving circumstances

People have different goals or aspirations, strong desire to achieve something and towards which they direct effort. Personal goals influence the experienced situations. Majority of the research participants mentioned that their main goal was to feel long-term safety and to live a normal life (see also Sager 2018). Following these main goals, participants set goals such as to legalize their stay in Finland and tried to figure out how. By legalizing the stay, they would feel more connected with the society within in which they already are, without being afraid of deportation. Picozza's (2017) research revealed same aspirations and she illustrated how irregular migrants move to find a place to live normally. Hence, legalizing the stay was a wish for the participants in Picozza's research. The participants of my research considered the legalizing as something more than a hope. It was a goal they actively tried to reach. However, some of the research participants did not have any long-term goals. Their goal was often to feel secure now and find a place to stay each night. One man had both:

I want to find a job as I cannot get asylum. I chase any opportunity to legalise my being, mostly failing. That's why I needed a place in the nature, which calms me. If I don't have anywhere else to go, I go and sleep there.

Circumstances of irregular migrants evolve constantly. Moreover, different geographic locations offer irregular migrants diverse possibilities shaping the circumstances of these people (Fontanari 2017; Picozza 2017). The wider health care provision of Helsinki (*cf. introduction*) has triggered mobility of irregular migrants towards the capital area making Helsinki to limit the service provision only for those former asylum seekers, whose reception services Helsinki used to provide, again transforming the circumstances of many. The lack of services gives foothold to informal employment networks creating local possibilities to make ones ends meet (Ambrosini 2018; Triandafyllidou 2018). When there is shortage of services, the importance of co-ethnic networks gets pronounced (Sigona 2012; Bendixen 2018a). These networks are important especially when person lacks extensive English (or Finnish) language skills creating improved possibilities to work (Leekers, Engbersen, and Van der Leun 2012; Wessendorf 2018; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). Conversely, the networks can also lead to abusive working conditions. Trying to reach their goals irregular migrants are amalgamated into some spheres of society, whether formally or informally, but simultaneously excluded from others (Khosravi 2010a). This creates local contexts of constraining and inciting elements within which irregular migrants ought to learn to navigate to reach their goals (Schweitzer 2017; Triandafyllidou 2017). For instance, one participant had received a job and planned to apply residence permit based on work. He learned that he could not, as the company *he thought he was working for*, only bought services from him. The company had encouraged him to make a user account in an online system through which he could employ himself. He continued working and discovered that the company could not (they claimed) pay him via this system,

because his bank account did not have the same functions than the one owned by someone with residence permit. Often approaching inciting elements requires overcoming certain constraints, like in this example. The man said he really should overcome his insomnia to be able to manage the adversities related to the work.

4.1. Challenges encountered – constraining elements in the lives of irregular migrants

Constraints are dependent to some extent on individual goals. For example, if a person is trying to find a job, the cold weather is not necessarily a constraint for him/her, whereas it really is a constraint for a family without any place to stay in the Finnish cold winter. Finnish climate and the darkness of the winter are special elements in this geographic location, which greatly influence the experienced possibilities (compared, for instance, warmer temperatures in Southern Europe) and may even worsen the mental condition (Hansen, Lund, and Smith-Sivertsen 1998). As one man said: *‘I don’t feel like getting up from the bed in this darkness’*. However, the man needed to leave the emergency shelter at 6:30am.

According to time-geography, there are capability constraints affecting individual activities despite the goals of these individuals (Hägerstrand 2009; Gadd 2016a). People need to sleep and have nutrition in regular intervals. Participants of this research revealed difficulties to sleep. Moreover, many told to have lost their appetite as one man said:

I feel physically a burden on my chest. It is like a pressure, which leaves me unable to eat. I cannot swallow. That same pressure don’t let me breath, so I cannot sleep. I feel how fatigue takes over my body.

Capability constraints, such as sleeping difficulties, affect profoundly the wellbeing of these individuals and are tightly interconnected with their other actions. Sometimes, the difficulties to eat and sleep jeopardize their ability to govern their own lives, e.g. to find somewhere to go or to decide whether to remain in Finland or to leave. As in other research (e.g. Picozza 2017; Schweitzer 2017), the participants concluded that the anxiety, greatly caused by fears either as nightmares of the events from the past or the uncertainties of the future, especially deportation resulted the eating and sleeping difficulties. In this way, the elements, such as fears take on an embodied form constraining the individual action such as sleeping illustrating the interconnections among elements. The aspiration of living a secure normal life activates the fear of deportation, which is common among the irregular migrants. The possibility to be deported affects greatly their activities (Khosravi 2010a; Triandafyllidou 2018) and the decision making regarding the use of public space, travel, work and social interaction (Sigona 2012). For instance, one woman told me how she had seen ‘skinhead-looking individuals’ frequenting a specific place: *‘I have often seen them here. I don’t come here at lunchtime, when they are here. I don’t want any troubles as someone could call the police’*. The people the woman described as ‘skinhead-looking’, arouse fear with their appearance, which reminded her of people with anti-immigrant sentiments. Any (verbal) disagreement with them could attract attention in other people and someone might call the police, who could initiate the deportation process as the women described. This is an example of the amalgamation of the physical space with social relations and mental states conceptualizing how mental elements transform the perceived possibilities in the physical space ending up influencing the usage of the public space of the woman.

Nevertheless, in order to run errands, such as creating ways to legalize the stay, irregular migrants need to couple with certain people; intermediaries (Triandafyllidou 2017; Ambrosini 2018; Bendixen 2018a) and resources, such as knowledge (Wessendorf 2018; Triandafyllidou 2018). This brings us to the coupling constraints conceptualized in time-geography. The coupling, being in connection with, e.g. people, resources, knowledge, requires either physical movement, use of communication devices or telling one’s location in order to manage to meet people, talk with them or otherwise couple with people or information. Travelling in the city to meet people or

visit certain locations may cause anxiety to some irregular migrants due to the fear to be detected by the authorities (Khosravi 2010b; Snider 2017; Sager 2018). This was illustrated by one participant describing his fear of using public spaces and transportation:

Once I was travelling with a bus. The tyre broke and I was so afraid that they would call the police. I don't mind myself, but I'll be killed in my country and I cannot let my children live without father. So, I only go out to go to the church where I can go by foot.

This kind of an avoidance of social interaction, potential for crowd trouble and large police presence is usual among irregular migrants (Bloch 2014; Bendixen 2018b). Another man described his feelings about going out:

I'd like to meet people to hear advice. I'm not afraid of going out as I haven't done any bad things to anybody. But then again, I start being afraid that a hassle begins and police appears, so I don't really even try to meet people.

Decreasing social networks is rather normal yet problematic as these individuals are highly dependent on the social contacts for support and knowledge (Khosravi 2010a; Picozza 2017). Twenty people explicitly told to feel better if they could be with other people. Many of the participants frequented places they consider safe and where they can talk with people. Such places can be specific neighbourhoods, cafeterias or day centres for irregular migrants as is the case in some larger cities in Finland. However, while a person should be able to couple with right people, doing so, s/he risks unintentionally coupling with other people such as police. The same fear of authorities is the motive of not using traceable communication devices for some research participants.

Legislation poses great authority constraints for irregular migrants. This is especially the case in Finland where the legislation is rather strict considering people either to 'be in the system' or concretely out of the country's territory. Those irregular migrants who are known by the Finnish authorities should go to police in regular intervals and report themselves. This makes the 'invisible individuals' actually 'hypervisible' as Coutin (2005) stresses (see also Sager 2018). Authority constraints, especially the lack of legal entitlement to residence or work, access to welfare and deportability can force irregular migrants into dependence and unequal relationships, destitution or precarious work in the informal economy (Mohn and Ellingsen 2016). Authority constraints related to work and housing, indeed, represent two of the main and intersecting sites where illegality is produced and the effects are acutely felt (Bloch 2014) as one man illustrated: *'I rent this madras place for a couple of hundreds [euros], but I can be kicked out at any time. I'm not allowed working so what they [authorities] want me to do?'* The Nordic welfare states are characterized by highly digitalized administrative routines and thus, living irregularly in the Nordic countries (referring to Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark) is challenging (Bendixen 2018a). Housing and work are examples of the spheres in which capacity constraints (e.g. being able to sleep) and coupling constraints (e.g. coupling with right people to get a place to stay or offering employment) intertwine with the authority constraints. One woman illustrated concretely how these constraints intertwine:

I'm dependent on the good will of others as I cannot hire my own place. I can stay here [a house of one couple] three weeks. Then I have to find a new place and learn the ways of being in that particular place with the people of that place. I wake up at night screaming and wonder if they [the owner couple of the house] heard me. It is impossible to plan anything when I cannot even know where I'll be

Perhaps, the most important group of constraining elements in time-geographic approach is the mental one referring to the fears, depression, anxiety, sadness and trauma, for example. These elements influence how individuals experience their space-times (Davidson and Milligan 2004; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019) (e.g. is the space-time experienced as safe and welcoming or hostile) and how they interact with networks and landscapes (Conradson and McKay 2007; Pain 2009). Some people may prefer to stay under the radar and accept the exploitative working conditions, low wages, and excessive housing costs, as well as being denied all access to rights and services including those, like primary health care, that they are formally entitled to (Schweitzer 2017) because of the

afore mentioned mental elements. One woman, who is in Finland with her family said: *'I know I could go to the hospital if I needed. However, I wouldn't go there for a small reason ... I don't want to get caught! Only if my daughter was ill, I'd go'*. Once this woman was taken into the hospital with an ambulance, the four-year-old daughter reacted to the event very strongly, yet a co-ethnic woman consoled her. The situation could have been worse without the woman staying with the daughter, which underlines the importance of social ties. Not to use health care services is not exceptional among irregular migrants. Lack of social connections leaves person alone with his/her thoughts and reality may blur in some cases. One participant with traumatic war-like-experiences was hospitalized for one week. He said to have been in psychosis. He explained how his mental stage seemed to mix the space-times in his head. He had images from his home country mixing with the space where he was bodily present leaving him confused of what was real and unreal.

All constraints affected the participants differently, because they are results of the coming together, e.g. the lack of status and the country of origin, place of residence, gender, and previous and current experiences (Shubin 2012; Sigona 2012). A man in a little municipality exemplified the interlinkage among some of them:

It is challenging. I would need 80% of my capacity to figure out how to legalise my stay, but all my energy goes to being afraid and anxious. I should sleep and eat to build up my energy, but I cannot do either of those things because of my anxiety. It leads to a situation where I don't meet people I should meet and I'm not in the places where I should be. All this causes even greater anxiety. What a vicious circle.

This quote illustrates how mental constraints (fear and anxiety) may lead to physical sensations (difficulties to sleep and eat) and inability to create social networks or obtain needed information. Hence, this is a great example how constraints pile up with varying consequences and even co-constitute one another. It is interesting, also from the policies' viewpoint, to investigate not only what *there is* in the environment, but also what is experienced as affordable and how different elements come together transforming the experienced possibilities (see Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019) either constraining or inciting the activities.

4.2. Inciting elements in the lives of irregular migrants

The research participants experienced also elements that incited reaching their goals. The incentives were less often related to physical qualities of a person or his/her formal education, but rather to the ability to obtain knowledge about how to live in irregular situation, to form social networks and mental strength (see also Picozza 2017).

Nonetheless, in municipalities with less inhabitants of foreign background an appearance similar to the majority population was seen as capability incentive enabling the use of public space without a direct recognition as migrant. The desire of making oneself *invisible* was one motive to move to larger cities, such as Helsinki, with larger immigrant population enabling invisibilization of oneself (see e.g. Brighenti 2007; Leinonen and Toivanen 2014; Sager 2018). Moreover, one man who was living with a friend and hoped to be reunited with his family explained how good physical condition incited overcoming the mental adversities: *'If my body is strong, I feel that my mind is stronger too. When I increase the capacity of my body, I also increase the capacity of my mind'*.

Despite of being a constraint, legislation actually also incite some activities of irregular migrants. The international agreements oblige Finland to guarantee migrants certain rights, such as basic human rights and the right to request asylum. However, many of the research participants were unaware of their rights. Consequently, the rights somewhat lose their meaning for that individual showing the interlinkage of elements as a right and knowledge of the right. *'I don't know what I could do next. In fact I don't know if my process has ended or not. I just know that I was kicked out from the reception centre'*, said one man who had gotten a fine for unlawful stay in the country. Most participants had friends or family members in other European countries where different legal practices prevail. Thus, when the person is unfamiliar with the law or even with his/her own legal status, the rights and the possibilities to claim specific rights are jeopardized. According to the Finnish

Constitution, the state should offer the basic services like shelter, primary health care and nutrition to inciting the activities of irregular migrants. This is an authority incentive in the municipalities where the services are accessible (i.e. the municipality offers services and the firewall enabling the anonymity). On the other hand, particularly if the access to formal employment, health care services and other rights is made strictly contingent on legal residence status, arranging false identity documents becomes an alternative route to agency (Schweitzer 2017). Sometimes the attitude of a person who meets an irregular migrant becomes crucial for the migrant transforming the course of events, especially if the person is a police officer. I interviewed a police officer in a mid-sized city who said:

deporting people in this situation is not ok [referring to the shift in legal practice since 2016 resulting greater difficulties to get asylum in Finland]. I cannot be responsible for their deportation. I just tell them to try to manage [instead of taking them into custody and start the deportation].

For some, status mobility, i.e. planning if and when to start a new process to legalize the stay and based on what, is an act of individual agency and part of the migration strategy while for others it is a consequence of structural barriers, changing relations or a lack of information and/or knowledge (Koser 2010; Triandafyllidou 2017). This shows that the same elements can be incentives for one and a constraint for the other depending on various other interlinked elements.

Connections with right people and/or knowledge create coupling incentives to irregular migrants (see Triandafyllidou 2017) underlining the importance of several intermediaries linking migrants with opportunities for work, accommodation (Ambrosini 2017) and other resources such as information about basic services. Nearly a half of the research participants told to have Finnish or co-ethnic acquaintances helping them. In some smaller municipalities, local residents had decided to help the irregular migrants in the municipality by sponsoring, for example, rental housing as one participant stated. He was in Finland with his brother and sister and nearly all in that small village knew them. He said he knew an old woman in the municipality, who fundraized money and rented an apartment to him. *'Later she even recommended me to a job, which I got. Now we just need to find something to my sister'*. Furthermore, the church in Finland and elsewhere (Ambrosini 2017) and co-ethnics have been inciting the arrangements of housing and responding other social needs (Portes 2010; Shubin 2012; Van Meeteren, Mascini, and Van der Berg 2015).

As most of the participants experienced the capability and authority incentives as rare or absent in their lives, the importance of mental incentives became more emphasized. For instance, the fact of simply being alive after a dangerous journey, the gratitude of it and being able to concentrate on it brings strength to many as one guy said: *'The best source of strength is the fact that I'm alive. Sometimes I think I've lost everything but then I remember that I still have the most important thing; my life'*. One woman felt also that she could influence only the mental elements:

I feel that I cannot affect my own process or my life. It's in the hands of my lawyer and the Immigration Service. I avoid meeting people ... Because of my traumas perhaps. The only thing I can do is to think positively. My only strength is to believe that everything will be ok.

Elements such as humour, thinking positive things and religion were mentioned to be giving some of the participants' mental strength inciting the activities. One woman described how the religion became more important for her after leaving her own country with her family consisting of her husband, two older children and twins who were born in Finland:

My faith really helps me to overcome the everyday adversities. It [the religion] enables me to think that all this has a meaning. Practicing religion here, which I do more here than back home, helps me to direct my energy to something else than to my anxiety. I cannot feel anxious all the time because my family needs me. I need to be strong.

Shubin (2012) also revealed the importance of religion for migrants dealing with traumas and stress of uprooting, migration and arriving in a new country. All these mentioned elements in the space-time affect the lives of irregular migrants and thus, their (non)activities. The perception these

individuals have of their lives, largely depends on their experienced ability to transform the space-times in their favour for example by approaching inciting elements and withdrawing from the constraining ones.

5. Practicing agency in the spaces-times

Even if people were extremely oppressed, their agency cannot be completely denied (Khosravi 2010a; Bendixen 2018b); they are not passive spectators, but actively evaluate and negotiate the elements surrounding them while making decisions about their own lives and those of their families. To *transform* one's space-times, it is necessary to intervene on the elements that affect it. Irregular migrants in this research actively transform their space-times, by trying to withdraw from constraining elements and approaching inciting elements. However, people have different possibilities to *transform* their space-times. The ways in which they can transform the space-times illustrate their situations, but also varying levels of practicing agency (Schweitzer 2017; Triandafyllidou 2017).

Irregular migrants are not always able to transform the physical elements in space-times, for example, by hiring own accommodation enabling privacy in a closed physical space (Bloch 2014). In order to have a place, they need to be able to transform their socio-cultural environment by approaching right people who can host them or introduce them to people who could offer them a place to stay (Picozza 2017; Ambrosini 2017). Contacting people, spreading the social space, requires mental strength, which is in turn increased in several ways.

Some of the participants who had managed to arrange an own spot, told to have decorated their spots to feel pleasure in that physical space. One such place was rough casted, tiny room with a toilet bowl in the corner and a washbowl next to it. The space was decorated with pieces of fabric to give a sense from home but also to decrease the humidity of the place. Personal belongings were on the floor. The family showed how they lifted up the bed towards the wall to get more space during the days. This is a very concrete example how these people, who may lack possibility to hire an own apartment may try to make their own space appealing and thus, strengthen the mind showing how a lack of possibility in one sphere of life might be compensated in another with the most innovative ways.

Managing everyday lives and the use of public spaces in ways that reduce visibility, risk and social interaction is something that most of these people are adept of doing (Bloch 2014; Sager 2018). 'Irregular migrants soon learn to be cautious, to navigate through the city invisibly, to be streetwise' as Sigona (2012, 56) put it (see also Triandafyllidou 2018). One woman told that she had noticed that the police frequent certain places at certain times. This made her to avoid those places as the presence of the police made her heart beat faster and anxiety rise. This same type of learned spatio-temporal analysis was detected by Sager (2018) in her research with irregular migrants in Sweden. These (im)mobilities of irregular migrants are often negotiated with their past experiences from different physical locations binding together the mental and social spatio-temporal elements with the physical surroundings (see also Picozza 2017; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). Consequently, the use of physical, often public space may be restricted due to social and mental elements transforming the image of the physical space. Alternatively, one man told that: *'I always visits the seaside when feeling sad. Seeing the water calms me'*. This example shows how specific physical space may have mental impacts on people and thus, approaching such places may become a mental incentive, as the places are psychologically relieving. This is a great example of what the time-geographic approach conceptualizes as transformation of one's mental space-time giving strength to the person.

Some participants, who did not have any place to stay or did not have the courage to stay in one place for long time, negotiated their social environments to be able to change the physical place of stay. They tried to meet trustworthy people who could host them for a while. One participant, who speaks fluent Finnish and who qualified in Finland as practical nurse, told to search helpful people online: *'I*

can communicate from my safe place via social media. Now I found someone who accepted me to live with him in case I work for him. So, I will move there. The trust related issues are specific to the condition of irregularity, although not affecting all irregular migrants similarly (Khosravi 2010a; Sigona 2012; Schweitzer 2017; Sager 2018). As the example of the man living in a small municipality showed, sometimes irregular migrants are integrated into the neighbourhood where they live and into social networks there (McIlwaine 2015) enabling them to find a place to stay and even work. Irregular migrants benefit from allying with native supporters providing not only solidarity, but also possessing the knowledge required (language and knowledge of legislation) to act and advance claims in a restricted political field (Hellgren 2014; Montagna 2018; Van der Leun and Harmen 2015). Some participants admitted to be trying to couple with a Finnish partner to get married and thus, legalize the stay even though the marriage as such was not something they hoped.

However, some irregular migrants also reduced the width of their social networks (McIlwaine 2015; Bendixen 2018b). As discussed above, the issue of trust is essential to the ways in which irregular migrants manage to transform their social networks (Sigona 2012). One woman, who had come to Finland with her family, explained this to me: *'I can only trust him [a person working in an organisation]. I know some people, but I don't trust them. At the moment he is all to me'*. Consequently, occasionally social networks are restricted mostly to family, church communities, trusted community organizations and few other individuals (Bloch 2014; Triandafyllidou 2018). One participant explained his social circles:

I fear meeting people, so I usually don't meet anyone. However, in Finland you have these wilderness huts free for all even near urban areas. I often sleep in those. At times, someone has left there some wood and I make fire. In a weird way, I feel connected with the society.

Especially the individuals unable to transform the physical or social elements, needed to rely on transforming the mental ones, for example, producing more knowledge by themselves. One woman showed me a large pile of papers written both sides saying:

This is my life. It is in these papers. There are my possibilities. I try to understand what I need to do. I have looked in the Internet from various forums. I get information there but not really any help to fill in the forms.

Those participants who did not have the strength and energy to produce knowledge or were not too keen on socializing and meeting people, tried to transform their mental dimension in other ways. Some tried to change their mental state or mood to be able to cope with adversities. One man told to be consciously deciding not be afraid: *'Sometimes I just decide that I cannot be afraid all the time. If I am, I cannot accomplish anything'*. For him not being afraid was not intuitive, but something he consciously decided. That decision, even if not changing anything in his situation per se, indeed enabled him to act, couple with right people and accomplish things. That decision changed his mental space-times and incited reaching his goals.

My data showed that careful negotiation of space-time to minimize risks coupled with constant anxiety and fear of being caught had psychological effects (see also Khosravi 2010a; Bloch 2014). One man explained how the denial of residence permit affects his self-esteem and how he tries to fight the negative self-image:

I keep wondering what is wrong with me. Doesn't anybody like me or accept me as I am? Would it be better if I was dead? Then I think that no, not yet. I still can help someone else. I consciously think that so I can carry on.

This man was living in a mid-sized municipality in Finland and did not have access to psychological health care services. All his relatives were killed. His own state of mind reminding him how he can help somebody had stopped him from committing a suicide. This highlights how being able to transform the mental elements have far-reaching impact on individual abilities to improve their own lives, i.e. by planning their geographic location in the future and establishing social ties.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article, I have given examples of how various elements jostle transforming the lives of irregular migrants highlighting the importance of assessing the *combined impact* of various elements for the individuals' lives. I have approached the lives of these individuals with time-geographic approach as theoretical-methodological tool first paying attention to the life goals these people actively try to reach and then by investigating what kinds of constraints and incentives they encounter in their projects to reach the goals. The last objective was to illustrate how these individuals practice their agency by transforming the space-times in order to be able to reach the goals. Hence, this spatio-temporal approach elucidates how irregular migrants navigate the disparate and often conflicting elements in their lives.

Most of the participants mentioned that they wanted to feel safe and actively practiced their agency in order to reach that safety. The smaller goals, such as finding a place to stay or work were set this larger goal in mind being in line with the findings from other research. I have shown in this article how the participants tried to reach their goals by withdrawing from *constraining elements* in their space-times such as dangerous places, hostile people or negative thoughts and by approaching *inciting elements*, such as housing, the Internet, trustworthy friends, positive state of mind and legal status. Changes in certain elements in life might have consequences in others due to the interlinkages of the elements. For instance, the most often mentioned incentive was the mental incentive of deciding to be strong enough to overcome all adversities, which appeared as a key to manage to take care of the body by sleeping and eating but also to succeed to establish beneficial connections in each situation. Moreover, the participants mentioned the importance of human connection for the overall wellbeing in this precarious life situation, yet mental constraints occasionally hindered them from approaching or being themselves approachable by other people. Participant lacking ability to sleep or eat had less strength to establish social connections. Moreover, if not having the connections and social support, a person may have difficulties overcoming the mental constraints leading even to psychosis: '*what a vicious cycle!*' as one participant described. So, a fear affected person's ability to find housing, which could help to restore energy to find a way to legalize the stay in a country. Depending on the personal situation, participants were able to transform their physical space by organizing themselves a place to stay, which they then tried to transform into a pleasant one. Finnish cold climate gave requirements for the physical transformation of the environment making it mandatory to find a place indoors. Those, who did not have possibility to have an own place, tried to transform their social spaces by approaching other people who could offer them a place to stay. Some did not have courage to stay in one place for long and for them, the width of the social network was essential. All this transformation required mental strength. People aimed at transforming and strengthening their mental capacity by practicing religion and trying to remain positive by thinking about positive future or nice memories. Some visited pleasant physical locations to increase the mental capacity. This relational approach, the modern reading of time-geography, enhances our understanding of how the multiple, often conflicting, interconnections coming from disparate space-times transform the geographies of irregular migrants.

In order to comprehend the phenomenon of irregular migration and to improve the situation of them, it is outmost essential to understand the combined impact of various constraints and incentives as it has a direct impact on the effect of the migration policies. One way for the future research could be to engage intersectional approach more broadly into the research on migration.

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