

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Navigating precarity in everyday (sub)urban space in Helsinki, Finland

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Abstract

This article addresses the everyday forms of urban precarity, which is under-studied in the context of Finnish cities. We examine how urban precarity becomes lived, practiced, and resisted in the case of a suburban open-air shopping center in Helsinki, Finland. Referring to precarity as a socio-spatial condition that reveals the precariousness of urban people and places, this study discovered everyday forms of urban precarity in detailed materialities and tactics; in housing, food, and addiction struggles; and in movements and networks. These mundane manifestations revealed that precarity could be approached in more relative terms that are not linked with certain neighborhoods but that emerge as spaces with intersecting nodes of services, networks, mobilities, and sociality. We conclude that particular places across urban spaces, where these aspects intersect, can be central to the ways precarity is navigated in the city and to increasing understandings of the mechanisms through which spaces of precarity are constructed in the city. The methodological choices used in this article—volunteer ethnography and vignettes—present profound accounts of the microscale lived experience, and bring humanness to a context that often exhibits stereotypes and marginality.

KEYWORDS

coping, precarity, public space, tactics, volunteer ethnography

INTRODUCTION

"If there is anything I have learned on the street, it is to always act fast," Jaakko says after calling an ambulance due to an overdose incident of two youngsters. The street is still bustling, and people are restless. "Now you see how this place is really like!" an elderly woman shouts, wanting to make a point. "That I know..." Jaakko sighs. "I've been using stuff since I was a kid." Jaakko explains that he knows this place well because he is often here to socialize, to receive food and health aid, and to buy and sell underground. "Sometimes incidents like this happen," he says, "but I always try to help, in any way that I can."

(Jaatsi fieldnotes, May 2021)

Jaakko lives a precarious everyday life in the suburban neighborhood of Kontula, in Helsinki, Finland. He navigates the "microspaces of everyday life" (Ettlinger, 2007, 319) characterized by uncertainty, instability, and vulnerability. Amid his itinerant and erratic life, Jaakko regularly visits a mobile outreach station—a project by a nonprofit organization that is operated from a camper van and that provides social work on the street. Parked weekly at a local open-air shopping center, the outreach station contributes to the many services available in the neighborhood for individuals like Jaakko, who manage precarious life situations related to, for instance, unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, health problems, or crime. We encountered Jaakko and our other informants while volunteering at the outreach station during the spring and summer of 2021. Our aim was to explore (1) how urban precarity is lived, practiced, and resisted in the everyday spaces of Kontula's open-air shopping center; and (2) how spaces of precarity

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emerge and work through the everyday actions of people experiencing precarity.

The suburb of Kontula is a high-rise housing estate similar to many others constructed in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s to house a rapidly growing urban population. In contrast to cities in North America, Nordic cities consist of lively and livable inner cities surrounded by suburban neighborhoods with affordable high-rise housing, basic services, and good public transportation. Building shopping centers in the heart of suburbs was a common way of organizing the services local residents needed daily. However, since the 1990s, changes in labor demand and migration have caused many suburban housing estates to decline, fueling their socioeconomic and ethnic segregation, and lowering their reputation (Junnilainen, 2020; Saikkonen et al., 2018; Stjernberg, 2022; Tuominen, 2020). Kontula has been no exception: often perceived as a “problem area,” it is a place where “its towering blocks of flats and busy but run-down shopping centre... signifies urban marginality, distanced from the exemplary urbanity of the city center” (Tuominen, 2020, 35).

Kontula's open-air shopping center provides an interesting case of urban precarity. Inaugurated in 1967, the center has been the locus of social, cultural, and commercial life in the neighborhood for decades. Today, it consists of a myriad of private, public, and third-sector services, including grocery stores, restaurants, bars, barbers, a library, a swimming pool, a youth center, and a municipal day center for people with substance abuse and mental health problems. The shopping center is well known for its vividness and ethnic diversity, but it has a troubled reputation for alcohol and substance abuse (Hewidy and Lilius, 2022; Kuoppa and Kymäläinen, 2022; Tuominen, 2020). While the local services provide an important social infrastructure for vulnerable individuals (Kuoppa and Kymäläinen, 2022), they also make precarity visible to others. The shopping center is currently in the midst of urban renewal plans that aim “to find a new direction for the Kontula shopping center area” (City of Helsinki, 2022). The plans have created uncertainty for the future of existing services and have been regarded as a threat to local social life and to the affordable business premises that are essential to the livelihoods of many retailers from diverse backgrounds (Hewidy and Lilius, 2021).

Precarity, generally understood as the “generic instability of urban lives in current times” (Schilling et al., 2019, 1345), encompasses uncertainties in various aspects of urban life, including labor, housing, politics, environment, and health. Although late capitalism and the resulting labor conditions have been identified as key drivers of precarity in cities (e.g., Harvey, 2003; Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011), this study employs a more comprehensive perspective that incorporates sources of precarity from a broad spectrum of human life (Butler, 2004, 2012; Campbell and Laheij, 2021; Ettlinger, 2007; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Philo et al., 2019). Following this approach, we consider precarity to be a socio-spatial condition that reveals the precariousness of urban people and places in ways that are unequally distributed, lived, and experienced. Kontula's shopping center is one such place where “precarious urbanisms” (Philo et al., 2019) concentrate and become visible through

everyday actions. Our focus is on Kontula's shopping center as a place where urban precarity exists both as a condition and as a lived experience. By a condition, we refer to the general instability and insecurity characterizing contemporary urban life, with their many aspects. A lived experience, however, is about instability and insecurity as felt, managed, and resisted by people in their everyday lives and in different urban spaces.

It is important to note that while this study examines precarity in a particular place, the informants are not representative of Kontula's population, nor is the shopping center characteristic of the neighborhood. Rather, we understand the concept of precarity to be urban in more general terms, in that it becomes manifested in various locations of the city and is not limited to “suburbia.” The informants of this study convey a better understanding of how precarity is navigated in the city, how particular places can be significant for such navigation, and how spaces of precarity emerge and work on the level of everyday life. This is important because understanding the microgeographies of precarity can reveal aspects of precarity on other scales (Ettlinger, 2007) and processes that can lead to acceptance, compromise, and hope—to “feeling otherwise” (Archambault, 2021; see also Campbell and Laheij, 2021).

The first part of this article presents the analytical framework for everyday forms of urban precarity and its key aspects. This is followed by the introduction of methods, with a particular focus on volunteer ethnography. The third part consists of a discussion of the ethnographic findings, presented as vignettes. In the fourth section, we conclude by arguing for the importance of understanding the lived spaces of precarity, as they reveal an alternative perspective of precarity and the processes of urban inequality in the Finnish welfare context.

EVERYDAY FORMS OF URBAN PRECARIETY

The concept of precarity has been constituted in multiple ways and on many scales (for an overview, see Millar, 2017). Central to the concept are the insecure and unstable conditions that expose individuals to socioeconomic disadvantage, vulnerability, and fragility, which has caught the attention of scholars in the twenty-first century (Waite, 2009). The works of Judith Butler (2004) and Nancy Ettlinger (2007) have been influential in directing the concept toward more mundane, relational, and ethical interpretations. Butler (2004), for instance, differentiates precariousness as a general but unevenly distributed vulnerability of human existence that exposes some individuals to inequalities and violence. This is in contrast to precarity as a social, political, or spatial predicament, and calls for taking seriously the power that emerges as a response to such vulnerability (Joronen and Rose, 2020, 1403–04).

Ettlinger (2007), on her part, examines precarity through the “untidy geographies of precarity” that occupy the microspaces of everyday life. She insists that precarity is “unbound” from essentialist (e.g., classifying) practices imposed by macrostructural processes and instead conceptualizes precarity from the bottom up in “spaces in which individuals think and feel and interact” (324).

Ettlinger is interested in how strategies determined by certainty amid uncertainty can lead to homogenization, or “efforts to eliminate difference because difference is messy, difficult, and can disrupt normalizing schemes” (326). This is a useful concept for understanding precarity in the context of negotiating urban space, including claiming rights to the city (Harvey, 2003; Mitchell, 2003, 2020; Rannila, 2019), which is a task our informants are regularly confronted with.

This article focuses on precarity as an urban concept characteristic of contemporary cities as “both product and producer of urban life” (Lancione, 2019, 182), although we acknowledge that precarity can also take rural forms (e.g., Bowers, 2021; Hougaard, 2022). Recent studies on urban precarity (Campbell and Laheij, 2021; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Philo et al., 2019) have explored precarity multifacetedly and not only as a structural condition but as one that is lived, sensed, and experienced. Research topics have included, for example, struggles related to poverty and housing rights (Lancione, 2019; Muñoz, 2018b; Nichols and Braimoh, 2018; Teodorescu and Molina, 2021); psychological and ontological security (Johnson-Schlee, 2019; Lowe, 2018; Philo et al., 2019; Söderström, 2019); and the mechanisms through which precarity is “done or experienced” in “material and practical ways... within the specific spaces where these experiences occur” (Muñoz, 2018a, 413, emphasis in original). Ethnographic research in particular has been influential in studying precarity not as something external but through the way people actually internalize and live precarity in local settings (e.g., Millar, 2018).

This urban ethnographic study demonstrates the idea that unevenly distributed precarity can drive particular people and places “on the edge” in the city (Philo et al., 2019), even if such a view includes normative assumptions over a prescribed security and centrality, and representations of those in the margins (Campbell and Laheij, 2021; Das and Randeria, 2015; Thieme, 2018). Although the Nordic welfare context puts precarity into a relative perspective, it is worth noting that the outreach customers of this study correspond to the tens of thousands of people in Finland who resort to charitable food aid, of which a notable number—including those who are unemployed, unhoused, dealing with substance abuse problems, and using last-resort social support—suffer from accumulative economic, social, and health disadvantages (Salonen et al., 2018). Prolonged poverty in Finland has been found to have many social and psychological consequences, including a reduction in public participation and sense of belonging and the identification of oneself as a “second-class citizen” or a “social welfare case” (Isola et al., 2021). Therefore, living in precarity also has political and social interdependencies (Butler, 2012) and alters individuals' political agency and ability to influence societal matters (Kallio and Häkli, 2017).

THREE ASPECTS OF PRECARITY

There are three aspects of precarity that we want to highlight as particularly relevant to this study. First, *labor precarity* has been the

prominent perspective on precarity in scholarship, characterizing neoliberal employment relations as flexible, nonstandard, contingent, or even exploitative (e.g., Harvey, 2012; Kalleberg, 2009; Lewis et al., 2015; Ross, 2008; Standing, 2011). Labor precarity, however, also includes aspects outside of formal employment, such as informal and unpaid work, and multiple socioeconomic domains and other aspects of life (Han, 2018; Millar, 2018; Strauss, 2018). Labor precarity has been experienced in many Finnish suburbs that were heavily impacted by structural changes in the labor markets and the recession of the 1990s, which gave rise to comparatively high unemployment rates (Stjernberg, 2022). This is visible today in the lives of many of our informants, who deal with socioeconomic disadvantages, are unemployed, or engage in informal acts of labor.

Second, *housing precarity* is a source of everyday exclusion, insecurity, and crisis (Harris et al., 2019; Lancione, 2019; Listerborn, 2021; Muñoz, 2018a, 2018b; Nichols and Braimoh, 2018; Teodorescu and Molina, 2021). Housing precarity often involves an unstable living situation characterized by insufficient conditions or dependence on others for temporary opportunities. Homelessness is a severe form of housing precarity that subjects individuals to various spatial injustices and struggles over fundamental rights in the city (Gowan, 2010; Mitchell, 2003, 2020; Muñoz, 2018b; Ranta and Juhila, 2020; Sheehan, 2010; Speer, 2017). There are about 1200 unhoused people in Helsinki (ARA, 2022), for whom the services at Kontula's shopping center provide important social infrastructure (Kuoppa and Kymäläinen, 2022). As studies by Nauomi Nichols and Jessica Braimoh (2018) and Michelle Lancione (2019) demonstrate, inadequate service systems can expose those in housing precarity to exclusionary conditions and interventions by authorities. Moreover, Rebecca Sheehan (2010) has shown that urban public spaces with a busy social, cultural, and economic life, similar to the streets and squares of Kontula's shopping center, can support the spatial claims of those who are unhoused while strengthening their attachment to place.

Third, *strategies of coping* are needed to manage precarious situations. Those experiencing precarity are not merely passive victims or recipients of aid; they work through the economic, political, and legal structures and constantly craft arrangements or tactics (De Certeau, 1984) to survive in everyday life (Campbell and Laheij, 2021; Dar and Randeria, 2015; Schilling et al., 2019; Söderström, 2019; Tervonen and Enache, 2017). Tactics can be regarded as individual strategies of coping, or micropractices, employed to manage and resist precarity (Rannila, 2019; Schilling et al., 2019; Stuart, 2016;). They involve “an ongoing, exhausting exercise in anticipating, recognizing, identifying, evaluating, preparing for, and—most importantly—knowing when best to shift... attention to a different threat” (Campbell and Laheij, 2021, 295). This highlights that the agency of individuals can be rational and goal-oriented but also very “small”, or “humble” and “minimal”, in the context of everyday life (Honkasalo, 2009, 62; see also Jokinen, 2016). Tactics can be connected to mundane acts such as eating, sleeping, and showering (Muñoz, 2018a); “being at the right place at the right time” (Schilling et al., 2019, 1339); having a “feel for the situation”

(Jokinen, 2016, 91); or "hustling" in the underground economy (Nichols and Braimoh, 2018, 163). This study demonstrates a variety of tactics and everyday agency that are present when people are coping with precarious situations at Kontula's shopping center.

These three aspects of precarity—labor, housing, and strategies of coping—illustrate that urban precarity is not only a spatial but also a temporal phenomenon. Precarity is "always in the making" (Lancione, 2019, 183), a dynamic process that is lived unpredictably in uncertain rhythms, involving short-term goals and temporalities of waiting (Das and Randeria, 2015; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Isola et al., 2021; Jokinen, 2016; Muñoz, 2018a; Thieme, 2018). In the Finnish context, this might mean, for instance, restricted access to welfare institutions (Tervonen and Enache, 2017; Vuolajärvi, 2019), exclusion from the public sphere (Isola et al., 2021), or reduced agency and personhood (Häkli and Kallio, 2021; Jokinen, 2016). The present is a dominating temporality in precarious everyday agency (Jokinen, 2016). As Hannah Schilling et al. (2019, 1345) state, precarity "is found in practices and processes that maintain inequalities which are formed not by fixity of structures but appear in fleetingness."

VOLUNTEER ETHNOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

The methods adopted in this research included participant observation, interviews, and volunteer ethnography (e.g., Garthwaite, 2016; Rannila and Jaatsi, 2021). Volunteer ethnography was the main method, and 15 interviews conducted with local actors and active residents served as background data. During the volunteering period in 2021, about 80 informal conversations were recorded in a field diary, along with general observations by the first author.

Volunteer ethnography refers to research in which the researcher takes on the dual role of both an ethnographer and a volunteer worker (Garthwaite, 2016; Hill et al., 2017; Johnson-Schlee, 2019; Rannila and Jaatsi, 2021; Tinney, 2008). Through volunteering, the researcher gains an intimate learning experience of everyday realities and creates "a space in which to form relationships that are not solely focused on the researcher's needs and objectives" (Garthwaite, 2016, 5). In addition to gathering data, ethics and reciprocity are important aspects of conducting volunteer ethnography (Hill O'Connor and Baker, 2017; Tinney, 2008). Throughout our research, we followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

To practice volunteering, we partnered with a nonprofit organization based in Helsinki. Every Monday between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m., the organization parks a van at Kontula's open-air shopping center and sets up a mobile outreach station center. It places tables and chairs on the street and offers warm drinks, food items, and clothing. The outreach station constructs a temporary space in which people can encounter others, converse, and receive information about social and healthcare services. Although the outreach station is

open to everyone, its target group is people with needs related to substance abuse, homelessness, and crime. The organization chose Kontula as its location due to the presence in this area of its target group. By establishing a presence in areas where people already were, the organization aimed to bridge the gap between the street and institutional support. The outreach station is generally visited by 80–160 people, of which about 20 engage in in-depth conversations with the workers.

The first author signed a volunteer work contract with the organization and participated in the weekly outreach in the spring and summer of 2021. It was clarified that the objective was to observe not the internal relations or activities of the organization but the space and life around the outreach. This created a trusting relationship between the outreach workers and the researcher. The workers considered the collaboration "a win-win situation," as the researcher was working toward goals similar to their own. It was agreed that the researcher's task would be to listen to and converse with the customers, whereas long-term volunteers were responsible for distributing food, drinks, and clothing. This helped avoid unethical dependence between research participation and receipt of aid. The presence of the researcher did not cause any known conflict or resistance at the outreach station, and the researcher refrained from providing false expectations, although there was hope that the research would bring change in the area. To make some difference, the study remains transparent about its location.

Informed consent was received from participants, in collaboration with the outreach workers. Individuals who could not give informed consent due to, for example, intoxication were omitted from the study. The informants were mostly white Finns, which reflects the general underrepresentation of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds among food aid recipients in Finland (Salonen et al., 2018). Conversations were marked on a log, and the researcher systematically withdrew to the van to write detailed fieldnotes. All informants were anonymized or pseudonymized, and some details were changed to protect their privacy. To protect all parties from COVID-19, facial masks were worn and close contact minimized.

The dual role of being both a volunteer and an ethnographer requires active decision-making in the field. It is often unclear which role comes first (Garthwaite, 2016; Johnson-Schlee, 2019). The first author gave primacy to volunteering, which provided space for people to talk about the aspects of life they wanted to. Informal discussions created trust, which has been considered one benefit of volunteer ethnography (Hill O'Connor and Baker, 2017). Sustaining an open dialogue is, however, demanding for a researcher and requires patience, adaptation, and social skills. Moreover, the dual role raises classic questions about the researcher's insider–outsider status (e.g., Adler and Adler, 1987; Goffman, 1989), as maintaining distance as an observer may be challenging due to poignant encounters and feelings of empathy and care.

We present our data as vignettes to provide vivid accounts of the interactions on the field. Like stories, vignettes are useful to "show, instead of tell" (Diversi, 1998, 132) the lived experiences of

informants while also allowing transmission of the researcher's field experiences (Hitchings and Latham, 2020). Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman (1994, 81) define a vignette as:

a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical, or emblematic in the case you are doing. It has a narrative story-like structure that preserves chronological flow and that normally is limited to a brief time span, to one or a few key actors, to a bounded space, or to all three.

We regard vignettes as mediators between the reader and the field, allowing the “empirical work to speak in some sense for itself” (Johnson-Schlee, 2019, 176). Despite critical debates around volunteering and the aid provided by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g., Garthwaite, 2016; Salonen et al., 2018; Tervonen and Enache, 2017; Williams et al., 2016), we find our methods suitable for studying the precarious everyday lives of individuals who are otherwise difficult to reach. They also allow us to conduct research beyond predefined categorizations and bring humanness into a context often characterized by stereotypes and marginality.

STABILITY AMID INSTABILITY

Kontula's shopping center is a lively place. It is the largest open-air shopping center in Finland, with a cluster of about 80 shops and services. A 20-minute metro ride connects the shopping center to Helsinki's city center. Kontula metro station is busy, with 15,000–20,000 passengers moving through daily (City Transport Ltd., 2022). The shopping center has an outdoor structure that consists of a series of pedestrian streets and squares on two levels, with many opportunities to socialize, including a children's playground and terraces of bars. With a central location and a vivid atmosphere, the shopping center is an important locus for social life in the neighborhood (Figure 1).

But the shopping center is also a messy place. It has a run-down appearance, and a significant part of its social life is related to the sale and consumption of alcohol or drugs. Our informants reported that there is *a lot going on* in the shopping center. The atmosphere is considered disorderly, which is echoed in the language our informants used: *confusing, restless, troubled, unclear, dubious, fussy, hullabaloo, rumpus, circus, hassle, hustle and bustle*. The outreach workers depicted the shopping center's disorderly atmosphere as a reflection of the heterogeneity of the entire neighborhood. They found the shopping center to be a diverse place and “nothing that can be described with only one word.” Views about everyday life in Kontula are divided, and so are those of the shopping center. This became evident in the opinions of two local men we encountered:

“Hey, you!” Miroslav turns his head as he hears a smiling man approaching us on a bicycle. The man presents himself as Raino, and he joins our company. The



FIGURE 1 The main square of Kontula open-air shopping center. The photo has been taken apart from volunteer work and thus is unconnected to our informants. Source: Mia Jaatsi.

two men begin to explain how they know each other through Miroslav's profession, which is to collect bottles. “Miroslav is a very good friend of mine,” Raino says. “I would not enjoy living in Kontula as much without its people—good people like Miroslav.”

Raino seems very eager to talk about his neighborhood. He leans forward on his bicycle and states: “I am no doubt a Kontula person. Kontula is the best place to be! It's so great in here. I always hang around at the shopping center. I visit the bars to see my friends. The bars here really are a social community. They're like living rooms for the locals.”

Meanwhile, Miroslav stays oddly quiet. He gives a skeptical look, which Raino notes and quickly continues: “Unlike what they say, I have never been scared at the shopping center. Once I got my ass kicked there, but that can happen just anywhere.”

Later, I have a chance to talk with Miroslav privately. He is ready to burst out: “I just despise this shopping center! Look at this. It's restless and people are just crazy. They are all over the place because of alcohol and drugs. And nobody cares. The only thing the shopping center is good for is for collecting bottles. For me, it is just a source of income.”

(Jaatsi fieldnotes, April 2021)

This encounter demonstrates a dualism in the ways Kontula's shopping center is lived and experienced. On the one hand, it provides a trusted place for social interaction and maintaining meaningful relationships. It is a familiar everyday environment, particularly for those

socially vulnerable individuals whose social circles are local. People like Raino, who often spend time at the local bars, are referred to as “the shopping center people,” signifying an existing community. The bars’ affordability enables social relationships to be sustained for a versatile clientele with unstable financial situations, such as those who are unemployed or pensioners, to whom the bars provide social routine. The bars, which Raino refers to as “living rooms,” are thought to provide conviviality, as well as being the life and soul of the shopping center. These sentiments were communicated to us through various stories and memories, including one in which a little girl was named after a local bar because her parents had met there. Such public places with meaning can be important in alleviating feelings of insignificance and exclusion (Isola et al., 2021) and demonstrating that lived precarity can mediate experiences of place differently to different subjects (Harris and Nowicki, 2018).

Conversely, the shopping center creates discomfort and insecurity for residents like Miroslav. The open-air structure entails many small spaces and street corners, which are experienced as obscure or even unsafe, especially in front of some bars where groups of men gather. The restless bar life produces avoidance (see also Hewidy and Lilius, 2022, 1505–6) and publicly inebriated individuals are visible during the day, which makes the street’s atmosphere somewhat unstable. People whose “night became long” were often regarded as unpleasant or unaesthetic but not to be feared. The large number of bars was generally considered excessive, yet it was acknowledged that their disappearance would impact the social life and other public spaces of the neighborhood, as people would have to gather elsewhere. Such worries represent the precarious atmospheres that emerge at particular places that are under the processes of gentrification (Harris et al., 2019).

The instability of the streets was also depicted in conversations about the everyday encounters between children and adults with substance abuse problems. Routes to schools, the library, or the swimming pool that cross disorderly spaces at the shopping center were of concern, yet exposure to difference at a young age was also welcomed. One of our informants provided an example on how the space can be navigated by different groups:

One day, I saw a group of 7–8-year-old Scouts selling Christmas calendars at the metro exit, which is generally a gathering spot for substance abusers. But that day, there was none. Was it that they chose not to be there when children were around? So, with this kind of blended use... we are all human, anyway. (Interview, June 2021).

The social disorder, or “the breaching of norms regulating behavior in urban space” (Kemppainen and Saarsalmi, 2015, 49), at the shopping center has long been linked with inebriation but increasingly also with the use of drugs, following an increase in their use in Finland (Rönkä and Markkula, 2020). The shopping center is somewhat of a hub for drug users and dealers, who travel there from other neighborhoods and even municipalities. Some reasons include its accessibility by

metro, available social and healthcare services, existing networks, and tolerant atmosphere. Informants explained that Kontula provides shelter, particularly for those vulnerable individuals who face judgment in their home communities and cultures. Although the visibility of drugs raises concerns in the neighborhood, precarious life situations are also understood, much of which is due to the active work of third- and public-sector actors in the area. Drugs are mostly problematized due to their impact on the environment and the unpredictable behavior and distressing experience of users. A local man, Harri, introduced us to some material impacts of drug use:

“Come, I want to show you something,” Harri hints and directs me to the back corner of the shopping center. He picks up a small plastic object from the ground: “Do you know what this small thing is?” He twists the object in his hand. “Hmm....” I am not sure. “It looks like a piece of a drip.”

Harri nods. “You actually find a lot of them in here.”

I ask why drips end up here on the back street of the shopping center. Harri answers: “It’s because drug addicts are forced to go take regular tests at the health-care center. They don’t want to stay, so they just run away.”

I signal my understanding, and Harri continues: “The problem people are anyway directed to this corner to roam around. They receive breakfast bags from the day center next door. It’s all good, but it also means that this spot is full of all kinds of junk. You didn’t think the juice boxes are left by kids, did you?”

(Jaatsi fieldnotes, June 2021)

This vignette demonstrates how urban precarity becomes performed and materialized in the microgeographical context (Lancione, 2019; Muñoz, 2018a). Harri moves around the neighborhood daily collecting needles and other litter, which has raised his awareness of the specific corners, staircases, park patches, and other public spaces where underground life occurs. His material observations indicate that the shopping center is a place to which vulnerable individuals escape from uncomfortable situations, as they try to construct feelings of security amid precarity (Ettlinger, 2007). The amenities, including opportunities for needle exchange and regular food distribution, provide stability and routines for a life occupied with uncertain rhythms and instability—characteristics central to the experience of precarity (Schilling et al., 2019). Concurrently, the need for care reveals the vulnerability of individuals, which also exposes them to different functions of power (Joronen and Rose, 2020).

Actions by authorities is one example of power that can be used to impact the everyday environments of vulnerable individuals. These actions can cause the daily spaces of drug users to become

unstable or unsanitary, which concerned some of our informants and social workers in the area. In addition to the upcoming renewal of the shopping center, actions had been taken at a public park adjacent to the shopping center. It was renewed to “increase safety” (City of Helsinki, 2017), which displaced some users, yet the sale and use of alcohol and drugs continues. According to our informants, a neighboring housing cooperative is now planning to fence their side of the park to “keep problems away” from their yard. Meanwhile, actions are also taken by Harri, who claims the space by improving it; he cleans the park and clears its bushes so that people can use them as toilets. Harri's material insights and actions further point to the health-related uncertainties characteristic of contemporary “precarious urbanisms” (Philo et al., 2019).

The streets and squares of the shopping center are also being impacted by various forms of control, including security cameras, guards, and the police. As Harri mentioned, “problem people” are removed from the central square to “roam around” at the back of the shopping center. Moreover, the presence of street-level workers can be seen as one form of intervention to manage and direct action on the street (Lancione, 2019). While Ettlinger (2007, 310) might refer to such policing as the “reflexive denial of precarious life [that aims at] eliminating difference and possibilities for negotiation”, the established presence of social infrastructure for the vulnerable (Kuoppa and Kymäläinen, 2022) suggests that different groups are invited to the premises. Further, there was mutuality between the authorities and the locals: we witnessed guards mingling with users, and many informants considered the presence of the police to be comforting. This reflects the general trust of Finns toward authorities, which is in contrast to some other studies of precarity conducted in different societal contexts (e.g., Nichols and Braimoh, 2018).

The different actions taken to respond to the “messiness” of Kontula's shopping center demonstrate that in spaces of precarity, feelings of stability, security, and routine can emerge in various ways. Kontula's shopping center provides a particularly intricate environment for the construction of such feelings, as informants report that tolerance for disorder is generally higher in Kontula than in many other areas of the city (also Tuominen, 2020). The shabby shopping center suits the unrefined social life and provides space and normative safety for individuals to manage precarity. The presence of services and other people in similar life situations also offers opportunities for building networks of support and routine sociality, even if perceived as causing social or aesthetic disorder. Despite being messy and unstable, the everyday reality at the shopping center is treated by many with acceptance and compromise (Archambault, 2021; Campbell and Laheij, 2021). Difference was normalized in comments such as, “it is what it is,” “people need to be somewhere anyway,” or “let all flowers blossom.”

TACTICS ON THE STREET

Substance abuse at the shopping center is recognized by many as a problem that spreads to the surrounding neighborhood. Some insist

on drawing a line between the shopping center and the rest of the neighborhood, which is described as green, calm, and friendly. The shopping center is seen as a symbol of decadence and decay, where “rough life” is lived and children should not “end up” if they are to have a proper future (see also Junnilainen, 2019; Tuominen, 2020). Jaakko was among those who saw the shopping center as a particularly visionless place:

Jaakko grabs my arm and pulls me further toward the central square of the shopping center. “Look, do you see what I see? It's just madness. Would you like your children to walk through that? Wouldn't you feel intimidated by that noise and those people?” He points to a robust man who has tattoos on his neck. I see that the square is bustling, and the police are patrolling.

Jaakko explains that he is worried for the local youth because they are exposed to bad influences too early in life. He knows that substances are being sold to the underaged, even if it is despised by most sellers in the underground economy.

Jaakko also knows the dangers of being exposed to drugs at a young age. It wasn't long before he became “part of the business” himself. Jaakko tells: “I am not proud of anything I have done, but I find it somehow ironic. All the smaller crimes I have done I have myself confessed the next day. I did them on drugs and my guilt was too strong the next day. I couldn't deal with it, so I confessed.”

Now Jaakko would like to do something to prevent others from following his path. He would like to become an expert by experience. “But I don't know how to begin,” Jaakko says. “I don't have a formal job at the moment.” I ask how he earns money to live. “It's the hustling you see in here,” Jaakko answers. “You just always come up with something that makes money. It's how you survive.”

(Jaatsi fieldnotes, May 2021)

Jaakko presents hustling (Chulek, 2020; Gowan, 2010; Thieme, 2018; Wacquant, 1998), or in Finnish *hustlaus*, as a visible practice that provides opportunities to survive precarity on the street. For him, being on the move and taking action are important components of being a hustler, although it can cause moral dilemmas. Hustling was also recognized by the outreach workers as an integral part of street culture in Kontula and other parts of the city. In their experience, hustling is a mobile practice enacted by deals and exchange, which involves distrust and the search for ways to benefit from other people and situations. Despite being a context-specific practice, hustling connects to multiple scales—from a performed identity to a global process—and to various places

where precarity is managed (Nichols and Braimoh, 2018, 163; Thieme, 2018). According to the outreach workers, the development of global markets has transformed the streets of Helsinki by making them even more difficult to navigate, and by decreasing trust among individuals.

Various tactics are needed to “get by” in this precarious hustle economy (Thieme, 2018). As a strategy of coping, it is an aspect of precarity that can take many forms on the street. Another informant, Lina, practiced different money-making tactics to get by:

Lina arrives with a few bags in her hands, as usual. She is often around the outreach, but busy coming and going, organizing things, running among people and having street chats. She rarely stays to have long conversations with the workers, but they seem to know her well. Lina lowers her bags on the ground.

“Hey Lina! What have you got there today?” the worker asks while pointing to Lina’s bags.

“Just some crafts I made,” Lina answers and pulls the items out.

“Wow, these are really amazing!” the worker exclaims. “Did you make them yourself?”

“I did,” Lina smiles proudly. “On the floor of the shelter I’m staying. I plan to sell them.”

“I’m very impressed. They’re really cool. Can I buy one?” the worker asks and continues excitedly: “We should find you a real studio to work in!”

Lina’s face turns. “Maybe we’ll just find that apartment first....”

“Gosh, yes!” the worker reacts strongly but with empathy. “Where on earth could we find you one? Should we call the housing organization again to inquire?”

Lina nods to agree. “Yeah, let’s do that. But now it’s too late in the evening. They’re already closed.”

“That is true,” the worker says. “Let’s do it another day this week. Can I call you so we can work it out?”

Lina begins to swing her white smartphone up in the air: “You can’t call! I have to go sell this phone right now.”

“What? No, don’t do that!” The worker looks worried. “I would like to be able to reach you.”

Lina sighs. “I know. But I have no choice. It’s either this or not eating the rest of the week.” She lifts her hands up. “I choose eating.”

With a blink of an eye, Lina is gone again.

(Jaatsi fieldnotes, March 2021)

This vignette demonstrates how different tactics can be used to manage, or *cope* (Campbell and Laheij 2021) with precarity on the street. Lina’s restless way of being and acting exemplifies how precarious everyday agency (Jokinen, 2016) operates in urgency, under compulsion, and involves constant seeking for opportunities to survive, as was also expressed by Jaakko. Further, Lina’s intention to organize housing and income prove that coping with precarity is not only an economically but also a mentally exhausting practice that can put people on-edge (Harris et al., 2019; Philo et al., 2019; Söderström, 2019). In the context of hustling, such acts have been referred to as extensive “emotion work” (Gowan, 2010, 159), “life-work” (Thieme, 2018), or “brain-work” that can provide a distinct legitimization for those in the margins to be and act in public spaces (Chulek, 2020). Therefore, what might be construed as deliberate loitering or disorder at the shopping center can actually involve many decisive acts to self-organize one’s life, including making and realizing plans, or engaging with informal networks. While such work highlights the agency of individuals to manage their own lives, resolving instabilities with temporary solutions might only steer the person from one form of precarity to another, and expose them to other risks (Campbell and Laheij, 2021; Muñoz, 2018a).

So far, the vignettes have suggested that coping with precarity requires informal acts of labor, another key aspect of precarity that emerges on the street. The income-generating practices of Lina (who sells items), Jaakko (who hustles), and Miroslav (who collects bottles) transform the shopping center’s streets also into spaces of precarious work (Millar, 2018; Perelman, 2018; Sheehan, 2010; Thieme, 2018). These money-making tactics, and the local knowledge about the underground drug trade, further imply that the shopping center provides a space for an informal economy in which income and labor insecurity blend into other aspects of precarious life (Han, 2018; Strauss, 2018). Informal labor unfolds as a way of resisting precarity, as a side effect of which precarity becomes visible to others.

Movement from place to place was another essential strategy of coping that connected individuals’ labor and life. Like Lina, Jaakko, and Miroslav, many informants moved regularly to and from the shopping center along with their duties, needs, networks, and the provided services, even if they did not reside in the neighborhood. The metro provides easy access into the suburb and also out to other parts of the city. Some explained that they routinely traveled by metro either because they had to or because they wanted to, using this “human voyage” (Augé, 2002, 71) to connect themselves to other places and people in the city. Further, movement reveals the temporal dynamics of precarity in the Finnish welfare context,

which somewhat follows the schedules of welfare payments: the outreach workers, security guards, and liquor store salespeople recognized the monthly “social allowance day” as a particularly restless day when movement intensifies.

Continuous movement of individuals can also be recognized as a symptom of housing precarity, an aspect of precarity that Lina's situation further exemplifies. In particular, walking is a practice that can unravel alarming urban conditions, such as homelessness (Casey et al., 2008; Gowan, 2010; Mitchell, 2003, 2020; Sheehan, 2010). For many of our informants, walking was not only about lacking a place (DeCerteau, 1984, 103) but about finding a place, acting purposefully, increasing safety, and reaching vital destinations. The routes of unhoused people crossed the shopping center decisively because there they could find others and their networks, as well as social and healthcare services, regular meals, and opportunities to socialize. Sheehan (2010) refers to such places as a “home base” for unhoused people, which can be powerful in supporting the spatial claiming of those otherwise excluded. Kari was an informant who visited the shopping center regularly amid a mobile life:

“I often come to Kontula on Mondays,” Kari tells me. It is a freezing spring day but the outreach is again parked on the street. I talk with Kari while he enjoys a warm cup of coffee and sweet buns.

Kari is a tall man with a robust appearance. He wears combat trousers and state-of-the-art headphones on his neck. He has no gloves; his hands are blue and swollen. “But Kontula is not my home now,” Kari continues. “I'm always on the move, at a different place every day.”

I met Kari for the first time a week ago, when he was at the outreach with his friend. I remember the encounter well because his friend was very worried about the current situation of the unhoused in the city. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, public facilities were closed and the unhoused had to stay outdoors in the cold winter days. That day, Kari's friend pointed at an empty retail space where Burger King used to be. Frustrated, he manifested: “Why can't the city just open the doors to that empty space and let people sleep on the floor? Who could possibly suffer from this?”

Back on the street, Kari takes a bite of his sweet bun. He says: “I'm on outdoor feeding now,” and laughs slightly. It is meant to be a joke, but resonates in me differently, as outdoor feeding is what one would normally refer to animals. But what Kari means is that he is at the mercy of others now. The shelters are full, too far, or too dangerous to enter due to robbery or exposure to COVID-19. Many unhoused on the east

side of the city prefer to stay outdoors for the night. Kari explains that walking for kilometers is a good coping strategy for both night and day.

Suddenly someone shouts behind us, but Kari ignores it. He continues: “I have children, you know. They don't live in Kontula either. But I would definitely bring them here. There is nothing in Kontula to be ashamed of.”

(Jaatsi fieldnotes, March 2021)

Besides demonstrating the vulnerability of life on the street, Kari's story echoes the understanding of safety as a relative concept. Feeling secure can be ambiguous when it comes to private and public space (Casey et al., 2008) and tied to “who you know and the neighbourhood you belong to” (Nichols and Braimoh, 2018, 168). For some informants, entering the shopping center's bustling atmosphere was a tactic used to withstand feelings of insecurity, particularly when a person is fragile, lonely, or in poor health. Choosing the urban disorder of the shopping center, instead of withdrawing to the surrounding forests, means choosing visibility over invisibility (Casey et al., 2008; Lancione, 2019; Sheehan, 2010). This somewhat contrasts with the presumed withdrawal from public spaces in Finland by those afflicted by poverty (Isola et al., 2021). Further, safety was connected to the shopping center's outdoor structure due to its accessibility and because it could be used as a tactic: the street provides easier and faster escape if conflict arises.

Overall, the coping tactics presented in this article demonstrate how Kontula's shopping center is significant as a space that invites different groups of people to blend, act, and be recognized by others. Everyday participation in the shopping center has the potential to construct empathic, non-judgmental, and solution-seeking perspectives to precarious situations, while creating and maintaining hope. Affinity was present in the practices of Raino (forming a close-knit bar community), Harri (cleaning the environment voluntarily), Jaakko (wanting to guide the young), Kari's friend (demanding housing rights), and the mobile outreach station itself. Shared understandings of life's realities and hardships seemed to strengthen the sense of community among people “in the same boat” (Junnilainen, 2019). However, being exposed to precarity also created anxiety, resistance, and feelings of negligence. For Miroslav, the disorder signaled that “nobody cares” either about the people or the place. For Jaakko, risk was always present. It is notable that such perceptions result not from outsiders to the shopping center but from those insiders who experience and live in precarity themselves.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have demonstrated how urban precarity becomes lived, managed, and resisted in everyday suburban space. Following Ettlinger's (2007) approach to studying precarity from the bottom up, we discovered precarity in detailed materialities and tactics; in

housing, food, and addiction struggles; in movements and networks; and in their connections to broader urban processes. Along with other ethnographers (e.g., Lancione, 2019; Muñoz, 2018a, 2018b), we argue that precarity is a valuable concept in studying the everyday insecurities and instabilities of people and places pushed to the socio-spatial margins of the city. We present this argument despite the risk of losing precarity's analytical footing rooted in labor conditions (Millar, 2017).

At Kontula's shopping center, spaces of precarity are tied to the uncertainty of a place that is projected for urban renewal, but is vital for navigating the instabilities of everyday life. The spaces and places used by our informants are part of significant constructions of economic, cultural, and social life tied to the daily modes of coping with precarity. Just as the future remains vague for many of our informants, so does the continuity of their trusted place. As the shopping center unfolds as an important node of services, networks, sociality, and mobility, it produces constancy and opportunities to be, act, and belong. Such peculiarly central places can be found at various locations in the city. Therefore, our findings indicate more about how spaces of precarity emerge in the Finnish urban landscape than just being specific to "suburbia." The spaces across the urban, where these aspects overlap, can matter in the ways precarity is navigated in the city.

Our findings indicate that urban precarity is a relational concept that is unevenly distributed, lived, and experienced. Such relationality signifies that the places in which precarity does become manifested require complex negotiations of space. We learned that people are in the shopping center's streets both out of choice and out of necessity, which makes their spatial claiming an intricate process involving support and resistance, and feelings of security and insecurity. Precarity at the shopping center is both *made* and *un-made* (Lancione, 2019) through daily participation, action, and agency in space. Socio-spatial impacts were also a concern for those who live precariously, disrupting divisions that might exist between those who live in and those who suffer from spaces of precarity.

Such contested but central lived spaces might be powerful in reproducing precarious conditions and stereotypes, but also in undoing them, by becoming resisted through the everyday actions of people and by making vulnerabilities recognizable and understandable to a wider public. Although the shopping center is seen by many as a reflection of precarity, actors aim to find solutions for maintaining important services to the vulnerable, echoing the welfare context of this study. This is in contrast to the findings of some precarity studies made in contexts where individuals faced eviction and displacement instead of being helped (Lancione, 2019; Muñoz, 2018a, 2018b; Nichols and Braimoh, 2018). In Kontula, the municipal day activity center for people with mental health and substance abuse problems remains in the shopping center's redevelopment plans, although its specific location and opening hours are being negotiated. The future of other important social places, such as the affordable bars or third-sector facilities, remain less clear.

The mobile outreach station where the volunteer ethnography was conducted plays an important role in service directing and meaning

making, and as a stabilizing factor amid urban precarity. The presence of the outreach is particularly significant in creating an accessible and inclusive space that vulnerable individuals can encounter mundanely, without directly becoming "cases". The key to such accessibility is, besides the social practices of the workers, the location of the outreach station on the public street. While such aid work involves valuable opportunities to make a difference for those in precarious situations, the project is itself on a precarious basis due to temporary funding. This emphasizes the need to study how different dimensions of precarity interact in the city (Campbell and Laheij, 2021), including the impacts of volunteer-based aid provision to those who rely on it in a welfare context (e.g., Salonen et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2016).

The perspectives presented in this article suggest that urban precarity can result from various vulnerabilities including labor, homelessness, substance abuse, and fears of displacement. However, it must be noted that our data describes a relatively white, masculine space, which is in contrast to the understanding that young people, women, and immigrants are disproportionately represented in precarious situations (Ross, 2008). Nevertheless, there are women like Lina who navigate the precarious streets daily, and whose daily life has not been the focus of much research (e.g., Granfelt and Turunen, 2021), despite the fact that unhoused women account for approximately 23 percent of all unhoused people in Finland (ARA, 2022). Such precarious situations that are not publicly shown or recognized are worthy of further research.

Finally, more in-depth research is needed about the processes that give rise to urban precarity in varying societal contexts. This research touched upon some socio-spatial layers of precarious urban life in a welfare state, thus providing some new perspectives to the mechanisms through which precarity and processes of inequality can manifest in the city. The study suggests that urban precarity could be approached in more relative terms; that is, not linked to certain neighborhoods (like Kontula), but rather emerging as dynamic spaces in which services, networks, sociality, and mobility intersect. Researching the everyday practices of people experiencing precarity within these spaces can increase understandings of the complex social and spatial constructions of precarity in the contemporary city.

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We declare to have no conflicts of interest to disclose with this publication.

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