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# Recognitional Relations and Autonomy-Related Vulnerabilities in a Temporary Accommodation Service for Homeless People

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines a temporary accommodation service for homeless people in Finland. By building on institutional ethnography, it aims to map the relations that coordinate the everyday work and to analyse the potential consequences of these relations for clients' vulnerability and autonomy. By applying recognition theory, autonomy is considered to be dependent on mutual relations of recognition. The data are based on 8 group and 5 individual interviews with the workers ( $N=20$ ) as well as observations. The results show that 1) everyday activities and recognitional relations are tied to the spatiality of the service, 2) the translocal coordination of work tend to produce a *not-worth-the-effort* mode of action towards clients, and 3) the aims and recognitional responsibilities are mobilized by an *accommodating discourse*, which partly limits the workers' professional space. This can potentially leave the clients highly vulnerable in terms of their autonomy.

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## Introduction

Political language produces categories of groups of people in order to govern and set imperatives for policy. "The vulnerable" is one of these categories, but it is often also used as a "stand-alone term", utilizing common ideas about who the vulnerable are and what properties they hold (Brown 2011, 314). People living without a permanent home are commonly considered as one of these vulnerable groups. The vulnerability of homeless people is often described by listing various characteristics, such as substance use, poor physical and mental health, poverty, and traumatic background, or by categorizing these characteristics into groups, such as personal, lifestyle, social and managerial factors (see e.g. Nouri, Ostadtaghizadeh, and Akbari Sari 2022; Scholes 2020). Yet, understanding and defining vulnerability is difficult because the concept captures diverse theoretical elements, multiple meanings, and associations that are not always deliberately considered (Zhu et al., this issue). It is used to refer to a universal condition of human beings, a phenomenon of risk and harm, a policy imperative or a psychoemotional trait (Honkasalo 2018). It may also refer to an experience of social

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suffering at an individual, intersubjective or population level or a political ontology involving threat, endangerment, and insecurity (ibid.).

Brown (2011, 314) criticizes how the concept of vulnerability lacks clarity while at the same time being “loaded with political, moral and practical implications”. Brown argues that in contemporary politics, vulnerability is often used as a synonym for “risk” in order to classify people and justify widening social control over their lives. Although the use of this term has potential benefits in terms of making claims for policy imperatives and thus fostering autonomy, it carries the danger of strengthening paternalistic, oppressive, controlling and exclusive practices (ibid.). Huth (2020) points out that vulnerability is often understood as individual or “natural” characteristics that should be rehabilitated to make the vulnerable individual “normal”. While warning of these dialectical shifts that loom in the concept, he argues that the category is *necessary* for ethical responsiveness and justice. According to Huth, to hold on to the normative significance of the concept, vulnerability must be seen as part of the social context and not be used as a device for emphasizing neediness and dependency.

Huth (2020, 564) leans on Gilson (2014, 11, 73), who emphasizes the importance of a kind of methodology that takes lived experience as a starting point when analysing vulnerability. Only from these experiences can injustices be articulated and existing institutional responses to vulnerability be criticized (ibid.). In adopting this approach, I explore a temporary accommodation service (TAS) for homeless people in Finland. It’s a statutory service aiming to ensure that people’s basic needs are met while they are waiting for permanent housing. The TAS is a central context for investigating vulnerability due to its location at “the margins of welfare services”, which Juhila, Raitakari, and Hall (2017, 3–4) define as *last-resort* places for help and control. According to the authors, these services are targeted at socially excluded people with scarce resources and limited choices. The marginal services bear the mark of deviancy, resulting in stigmatized clienthood (ibid.).

Even though Finland has succeeded in reducing long-term homelessness by one-third since 2008, homelessness is still not resolved (ARA 2021). Since that year, the Finnish homelessness policy has been based on the *Housing First* approach, which emphasizes the right to permanent housing without any prerequisites, such as of abstinence or adherence (Y-Foundation 2017, 15–21). Support for independent living in one’s own home is ensured by the Social Welfare Act (2014/1301). Nevertheless, many people must wait for permanent housing even for years and there is a continuing demand for temporary accommodation (Juhila, Raitakari, and Ranta 2022). This is also the case in the TAS. Even though the service is designed and intended as a temporary solution, it becomes permanent for many. It then turns to a site of *permanent temporariness* (Picker and Pasquetti 2015, 683–684), functioning as a practice of exclusion.

I seek to address vulnerability connected to homelessness by leaning on institutional ethnography, which aims to map the relations that coordinate people’s everyday activities and investigates how their lives are organized (Smith 1987, 2005). In my attempt to pursue the normative significance of the concept of vulnerability, I build on Anderson and Honneth (2005), who consider mutual recognition as an essential human need; hence, violations of recognition are a matter of injustice. Through mutual relationships of *respect*, *love* and *esteem*,

people learn to sense themselves as individuated and autonomous persons, while if these relationships are neglected, people can be left vulnerable in terms of their autonomy (ibid.). Thus, the focus is on the institutional conditions that enable or diminish these relations – an empirical approach that is scarce in homelessness and housing studies in general.

In this article, I inquire into how the everyday work of the TAS is coordinated in various interconnecting institutional domains and what implications this has for clients' autonomy and vulnerability in terms of recognition. I start with a theoretical discussion of the recognitional understanding of autonomy-related vulnerability. I then introduce institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry and describe the context of the study. I proceed by presenting the main findings. In conclusion, I argue that to respond to and theorize the vulnerabilities connected to homelessness, the institutional relations of ruling and their consequences for recognition need to be further critically examined.

### Recognitional Autonomy and Vulnerability

Anderson and Honneth (2005) propose that the liberal conceptions of justice, with their commitment to protect the vulnerable in an individualistic fashion, have underestimated the importance of recognition – the very fact that autonomy is dependent on recognitional relations to others. According to Honneth (1995), people have the capacity and aspiration to take part in authorizing social norms, see themselves as intrinsically (instead of mere instrumentally) valuable, and contribute to social cooperation (Ikäheimo 2009). To be a person in a full-fledged sense requires that people relate to one another in accordance with these capacities and expectations, which Honneth (1995) calls *recognition*. Full autonomy presupposes that through relations of recognition, one learns to realize oneself with a status of equal standing, individually meaningful to others, and as a valuable member of a community (Anderson and Honneth 2005). These positive self-relations, *self-respect*, *self-trust*, and *self-esteem*, form the basis for agentic competencies (ibid.).

According to Anderson and Honneth (2005, 131, 138), recognition, and hence full autonomy, is an “ongoing intersubjective process” whose achievement is always more or less vulnerable. Self-respect is impaired if one is denied the status of an equal standing and cannot think of oneself as a competent deliberator and legitimate co-author of norms and decisions. Actions that degrade intrinsic worth, such as mistreatment in trusting relationships or violence, impair self-trust, that is, the capability to trust one's own feelings and desires. Barriers in the ability to grasp the culturally valued ways of being impair self-esteem and hence diminish the ability to determine one's own aspirations and projects (ibid.). In this way, people are essentially vulnerable through their interdependence with other people; thus, autonomy – or the “capacity to develop and pursue one's own conception of a worthwhile life” – can be both achieved and diminished through social relations (130).

But not only is recognition essential psychologically, it is also so “social-ontologically”: recognition is the very social infrastructure that keeps societies and communities together (Ikäheimo 2009). Ikäheimo (32–33) points out, that Honneth's intention is to outline a “formal concept of ethical life”, something that is not tied to culturally specific ideas of a good life, but that still makes claims for some social perquisites that are essential for a good life universally. Honneth (1995) aims to offer a normative tool for evaluating the

goodness of society, through the extent to which it enables mutual recognition and self-actualization. In this sense, the account of recognition addresses both interpersonal relations in everyday encounters and “impersonal” relations that are embedded in institutions, such as in procedural practices, norms and laws (see Ikäheimo and Laitinen 2011, 9–10).

Feldman (2002, 422–423) takes homelessness and the shelter system as an example of institutional (mis)recognition. He considers the shelter system as a matter of injustice because by neglecting the importance of mutual relationships and the sense of self, shelters have the tendency to reduce their clients to biological necessity, seeing them “as beings stripped of human personhood and individual identity to be kept alive”. According to Feldman, shelters – with their degrading conditions, extensive rules, lack of privacy, and surveillance – express and embody certain cultural meanings and values towards homeless people. Even though this is not the full picture in the context of this article, I come to argue that this tendency is still there.

## Research Design

### *Institutional Ethnography as a Method of Inquiry*

Social life is deeply embedded in institutions and their practices. Take, for example, a school, religion or markets. Institutions shape and constitute people’s everyday lives (Hirvonen 2022, 229.) As mentioned above, recognition is not only *interpersonal* but also *institutional*. Institutions must be taken into consideration since they can leave individuals vulnerable in terms of their autonomy (Anderson and Honneth 2005, 142).

However, institutions are not always clear-cut formal organizations or easy-to-define conceptualizations. *Institutional* is understood here as a *complex of relations* – how people coordinate their everyday activities in one locality and how this is connected to the activities of others elsewhere and at different times (Smith and Griffith 2022, 9). Institutional ethnography (IE), originating from Dorothy Smith (1987, 2005; Smith and Griffith 2022), is a “method of inquiry aiming to discover just how our everyday worlds are being put together within social relations beyond the scope of our experience” (Smith 2005, 32). In IE, the object of research is to learn from what people do in a particular locality and how they describe their everyday activities, and then to map the social relations that coordinate, regulate, and organize everyday life (Smith and Griffith 2022, 13–14).

Smith calls these relations as *relations of ruling*. IE places an emphasis on how the relations of ruling are largely mediated by and objectified in text, as in easily replicable material media that carry messages, sounds and images (Smith and Griffith 2022, 31). These can be newspapers, digital client records, podcasts, or legislative texts. This text-mediated territory connects people and builds the social context that is shared across space and time (Smith 2005, 10; Smith and Griffith 2022, 34). IE leans on Foucault’s concept of *discourse* as “standardized, generalized, and generalizing forms of making statements” (Smith and Griffith 2022, 33). However, discourse is not seen as a matter of statements alone but as translocal social relations in which people participate in their everyday activities (Satka and Skehill 2011, 196–198). People use discourses and take up the conceptual frames they circulate in what they are doing, but they also produce,

change, and resist them (DeVault and McCoy 2001, 772; Smith 2005, 127, 227; Smith and Griffith 2022, 33–34).

Nichols and Braimoh (2018) give the example of how relations of ruling can operate in the context of housing. They make visible how young people's housing insecurity, homelessness and sense of exclusion were produced through the translocal coordination of public sector interventions and how this coordination was built on efforts to ensure "community safety" in "unsafe" neighbourhoods. The shared strategies for ensuring safety, constructed and objectified discursively in policy, legislative and institutional texts, functioned as a nexus of coordination for social housing and policing work in a way that enabled the targeting, surveillance and regulation of people who depended on access to subsidized housing. In similar vein, in the context of this study, the workers' aims and responsibilities were coordinated in relation to the work of others elsewhere through a particular *accommodating discourse*.

### **Data Generation**

The research was conducted in a temporary accommodation service for homeless people in Finland between August 2021 and May 2022. Such services are publicly funded, ensured by the Social Welfare Act (2014/1301) and intended to secure basic human needs in acute situations when living in one's own apartment is not possible for one reason or another. They are meant as a short-time and the last solution for homelessness because the *Housing First* policy – emphasizing the right to permanent housing without any prerequisites – has been prevalent in Finnish homelessness policy for the last 15 years (Y-Foundation 2017, 15–21). However, there seems to be a disparity between the policy and the practice, since many people end up living in such services even for years (Juhila, Raitakari, and Ranta 2022). Furthermore, prerequisites for abstinence, adherence, and cooperation are still sometimes set before a client is granted permanent housing, and due to a scarcity of supported, affordable housing in which abstinence is not required, getting a permanent tenancy is difficult for many (*ibid.*).

In the TAS, clients are offered a place to sleep, food, clothing and opportunities to take care of their hygiene. This service, available 24/7, is provided by the municipality. The workers assist clients in applying for independent or supported housing and accessing social and health care services. The staff consists of one head nurse, one nurse in charge, a social worker, a social advisor and 20 practical nurses. The service is divided into two parts: in one part, intoxication is allowed, but possessing substances is prohibited, while in the other part, both are prohibited. There are 18 rooms in total. In each room, there are two beds, although the service is often overfull, and sometimes there may be up to five persons accommodated in the same room.

The data are drawn from the researcher's observation diary (60 pages) and eight group interviews and five individual interviews (in total of 20 workers, anonymized in the analysed data). The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 120 minutes.

The data were generated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the effects of the pandemic were not analysed as such in this article, the pandemic was considered as a disruption to the accustomed "everyday flow", challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions and routines and thus providing a unique opportunity for social research. The semi-structured interviews focused on 1) how the pandemic affected the TAS, its

clients and more generally, people experiencing homelessness and 2) the everyday activities of the service (what people do, what resources and skills they have or need, what kind of frictions come up, how the work is connected to other services; and what kind of emotions, intentions and values emerge during their work).

After being told the aim of the research, how the interview data would be used and handled, and about the right to withdraw from the research, the interviewees were asked to give their formal consent. The research received a positive statement from the Ethics Committee in the field of human sciences. Permission for the research was also granted by the municipality.

## Data Analysis

Utilizing pre-given theoretical concepts is difficult for IE because this might set aside the project of inquiring from the standpoints of people into how they are participating and embedded in the ruling relations. According to Smith (2005, 38), IE should not have a pre-given theoretical destination; instead, the direction of the inquiry should be set by the people's situated knowledge.

I follow Smith (2005, 54–57) regarding the need to avoid imposing preconceptions about what people are doing and then abstracting these into theoretical categories in which the subject and activity disappear without reference to local actualities. Nevertheless, to investigate how the everyday world is put together within translocal relations, we need analytical tools that explicate the nature and quality of these relations. Recognition theory provides tools that explicate the actual interpersonal and institutional social relations. In addition, it offers a normative ground for social critique, based on relational understanding of what is needed to flourish as a human being. Recognition theory is also a way to connect the empirical findings of this study to the ongoing theoretical discussion on vulnerability and autonomy.

Therefore, my analysis is two-fold. First, I focus on *mapping the relations of ruling that organize the work in the TAS*. I pay attention to everyday work, in the sense of everything that people do that requires effort, time, and intention when they participate in institutional processes (Smith 2005, 151–155, 229). By learning from what people say about their everyday work as it is coordinated with the work of others, the connections to social relations beyond the participants' immediate experiential knowledge can be mapped (Smith and Griffith 2022, 49–50).

Second, I interpret these relations in the light of recognition theory, examining *to what extent they enable mutual recognition and can thus potentially support or diminish autonomy*. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to investigate the clients' experiences, I base my interpretations on the workers' interviews and my observations during the fieldwork. Accordingly, my aim is not to study how the self-relations (self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem) of the clients come to be but rather the *possibilities* for positive self-relations when they participate in these ruling relations.

Using Atlas.ti I coded the data into the following themes: the everyday work, references to other services, texts, clear references to vulnerability and autonomy, and attitudes and discourses towards the TAS, the clients and other workers. I did not use coding in a mechanistic manner but as an index to move back and forth across the data and as a practice to discover the translocal relations and institutional processes.

I soon became aware of the complex nature of the TAS. On the one hand the workers' objective is described as to help the clients access their housing promptly, in which the workers feel that they sometimes succeed. They describe how "little by little, they put their life together again" and can start "sort of a new life along with help and assistance". On the other hand, the workers express how this "new life" is not likely for many. Instead, there is something that keeps clients in the service for months or even for years, which sets another imperative: "Then our job is just to take care of these people, probably until the grave, to do what we can and hope that they have a good enough life." This is what Smith (2005, 21–22, 187) would call a disjuncture in people's experiences – an unsettling mismatch between what ought to be and what turns out to be. Taking this disjuncture as the problematic of my research, I start by focusing on the locality of the service and describing how the relations of ruling manifest in people's everyday lives as material and spatial recognitional relations.

## Findings

### *Recognitional Relations as Material and Spatial*

The TAS makes evident a particular kind of coordination that is built around a strategy of leaning on congregate services to mitigate homelessness. This has many practical consequences for the clients' safety and privacy; moreover, the physical environment has an actual part to play in how the clients and workers come to coordinate their activities and relations with one another.

Lodging in the TAS means being forced to be in the involuntary company of others. Shared rooms, small common areas and narrow corridors place people physically close to one another. It is a matter of whether one feels safe or is in actual danger in the presence of others. Other clients' intoxication, high emotions and mental health issues can seem, and be, threatening. There is noise and restlessness when clients are packed together in a small space, especially if they are intoxicated: "It's common sense", a worker says, "that there will be some conflicts. No doubt there will."

Violations of recognition among the clients seems frequent. Indeed, the service seems rather a hostile environment where one must vigilantly look over one's shoulders. Lack of privacy makes it a challenge to maintain personal safety: "we always say [to the new clients] that really, it isn't very nice to say this, but this is the kind of a place where you shouldn't leave anything anywhere". Many of those who need a place to sleep choose to stay outside instead of coming to the TAS.

The tight facilities challenge the workers' capability to ensure clients' safety in the service: "it's not possible with these resources and in these facilities that we could guarantee that no one wouldn't become a target of sexual harassment or violence." For the clients, it is not easy to report on threats or abuse because the office does not provide privacy and would expose – as one worker calls it – "snitching": "the others [clients] would know right away if [a victim] comes into the box [the office]: it's like an aquarium". There is a constant flow of people and their activities in the small office, which makes working difficult: "it's impossible to talk with anyone."



All of this constitute a kind of *milieu of misrecognition*. Nevertheless, the physical facilities are not only a container of people interacting with one another; the material environment also has an actual part to play in how people come to coordinate their activities and their relations with one another. Various spatial practices in the TAS create hierarchical relations, strengthening the workers' authority and placing the clients in a subordinated position. This can be seen as a violation of recognition in terms of not having equal standing. I illustrate this with an example of opening doors for the clients.

The clients do not have their own keys to their rooms and cannot access them as they please. Instead, they must ask and wait for the workers to open the doors every time they wish to go in. The act of opening doors is an ongoing everyday routine, which the workers do not seem to question. Although this custom may seem trivial at first, it is important to bring out, as it constitutes a hierarchical relation between the workers and the clients. The clients must ask for access to their room several times a day, which creates a neediness towards the workers. This repeated sequence of opening doors signals that the clients do not have much ownership of the space; instead, it is the workers who have the authority. This insight guided me to look more closely at how the relations are built around spatiality.

First, the clients can use a worker's phone to make calls, but they must ask to borrow the phone and make the call in the worker's presence or in visual sight, as there is no private room for this. Second, keys to the lockers, where the clients can store their valuable items, are controlled by the workers, and the clients must ask them to open these lockers. Third, the social worker's and the nurse manager's offices are located on a different corridor, behind two locked doors so that the clients cannot have direct access to them but must first approach a practical nurse, which places the clients both physically and symbolically at a distance from the two key decision makers. Fourth, the cameras on the ceiling are visual reminders of monitoring, strengthening the idea of who is watching and who is being watched.

The reasons for these practices are sincere and well-meaning. They are a means of enhancing safety and, as such, can be interpreted as practices of recognition. For example, that the clients do not have their own keys is explained by saying that the clients could lose the keys, and opening doors is a way of keeping track of "who is where and what is going on". Nevertheless, these are mundane, routinely repeated practices that diminish the clients' status as equals and place them in subordinated positions. Exercising power is tied to these spatial practices. The place plays an active role in recognitional relations; in other words, the relations *are* spatial. Even though the workers aim to deconstruct the hierarchy through various interactional means (e.g. by having a smoke or spending time together with the clients), the way that the place and the people in it are put together makes building recognitional relations hard. These kinds of everyday activities can potentially diminish the clients' self-relations, particularly in terms of their self-respect, and hence produce vulnerability.

### ***Translocal Coordination and Inconsistency of Recognition***

When a client walks through the doors into the service, the first thing that the workers do, according to their description, is "just calm the situation down and take care of the basic needs" because the clients "are totally in crisis and there's no need taking care of some

housing business right away". This is an example of how the workers give recognition to the clients – by being responsive to their needs and emotions. Later, the workers investigate how the client has ended up in their current situation and note this in the client's records. This information is important because it is considered when making decisions about the next possible housing service.

At some point the client meets the social worker of the service, who goes into their situation in more detail. The social worker gains more information through interviewing, but what is essential is that there is usually previous information, "the history", in the client records which was written earlier in other services and in the TAS during previous visits. The interpretation of both the present and the previous situation is translated into a text, known as "a service request". This is sent to a unit that coordinates housing services and aims to find (supported) housing for clients. If a place is granted by the coordinating unit, the social worker is allowed to make an administrative decision on the granted service. So, even though the social worker writes and signs the official decision, the actual decision-making stays in the unit that coordinates these services, and it is based on what housing services are available and how the client is considered to match the criteria of these services. A worker summarizes this tension by saying that "if the client isn't taken anywhere, the social worker can't do anything about it".

Furthermore, in practice, the TAS operates for many clients as an assisted living facility, meaning that the workers provide very intensive care, such as making sure that the clients take a shower and their medicine, waking them up for breakfast, changing their diapers and reminding them of social or health care appointments. Some clients need assistance around the clock, but the support does not always stay at the same level if they move to supported housing. It might be a "big drop", as one worker describes it, to move to more independent living without adequate support. The workers put a lot of effort into giving recognition to the clients by helping them with moving: "We have supported them to be like, full of self-confidence so that they would cope", a worker says. "We encourage, trust, believe, and then goes a week, . . . and the client comes back." The workers know that moving to one's own housing often goes "sideways". Independent living without support is not enough for many, and many of the housing units are not only inappropriate in terms of the support needed, but also unsafe. The workers express how housing units should be more adaptive to the clients' needs. Sometimes the responses of the housing units can be quite straightforward: "If one shakes a fist even a little, one is checked out right away and sent back to the TAS. And they don't necessarily give a new chance."

The consequence of this process is that when a client has "gone through all the supported housing units", a particular category of clients is constituted. The workers describe how there are "clients that nobody wants". Being placed in this category means that there are no alternative options other than the TAS. After "trying out" all the limited number of housing units and finding that "one can't get by in any of them", the possibility of accessing a housing unit becomes smaller and smaller. Let us now look more closely at how this kind of coordination is operated textually.

The client work is recorded in the digital client record, and every encounter in each service is translated into a textual form in institutional language, usually without the client's involvement in the writing process. Writing is a necessary function because without it the coordination between different localities would be difficult. This, however, runs

the risk of creating a kind of institutional client who is very different from the actual person with their own intentions, desires, history, resources and capabilities. Based on the interviews, it becomes evident, that “the stigma” or “status” written in the client records affects how the clients are treated in different services. What follows, is that the client is not taken seriously, neither in health care nor in social services.

V1: If a client tells that they are homeless and here [in the TAS] . . . , it is enough, from certain social workers’ viewpoints, to give a label of a particular kind . . . that this is an individual who can’t do anything at all. I have seen this in a supported housing unit too, [workers] laughing at them . . . . And I have even heard of a social worker saying to a client, “Do you think that with these specs you could get a flat?” Prejudices.

V2: Yeah, indeed, it is often very stigmatizing.

The social worker mentioned in the extract refers to “these specs”, which implies that there is a bunch of attributes attached to the client that make getting a flat unlikely. These attributes are compared to the resident selection criteria, with which they do not match: there are many others who are a better fit and more likely to be selected for the services. Those who do not meet the criteria are left in the TAS.

Hence, the consequence of this text-mediated coordination is that lodging in the TAS is a marker that implies being hopeless and incapable. The ways in which the relations of ruling are constructed violate the recognition of those who are categorized as the *nobody-wants clients*, diminishing their rights, self-esteem and personal hope. There seems to be a particular kind of distribution of work among various social and health services, each having its own institutional purpose. The TAS seems to be given the task of sheltering those clients for whom it is “not worth even trying”:

Quite many [workers in other services] seem to instantly have this [idea] that okay, you are living in the TAS, okay. You are a drunk or a junky or otherwise the kind of person for whom it is not worth even trying because it will lead nowhere.

The distribution of work is not completely accepted by the workers. They do resist it, as can be seen in the advocacy that they do for the clients, such as demanding services for the clients that they are entitled to. This can be seen as a crucial act of recognition. Nevertheless, the distribution seems to create also in the TAS a particular *not-worth-the-effort* mode of action. It is considered to be more fruitful to simply concentrate on certain clients and leave the others be. As one worker reflects, “sometimes we have so many clients that perhaps we too, as workers, tend to help those who haven’t tried yet, let’s say, some particular living arrangement”. This illustrates how despite the intention of giving recognition to the clients, the translocal coordination can sometimes make the recognitional relations thinner. By strengthening the exclusion of clients and diminishing their sense of self, this can produce severe vulnerability.

### ***Accommodating Discourse: Mobilizing Aims and Responsibilities***

When other services have, as one worker phrases it, “outsourced themselves from a case”, and as the TAS has been given the task of accommodating the “not-worth-the-effort” clients, the workers have a rather broad professional space in terms of how to solve the everyday work and thus engage in recognitional relations with the clients. As a worker

describes it, “it frees us here.” Nevertheless, this space is broad only within the institutional context, as it is limited by the accommodating discourse that organizes the relations of ruling. To shed light on this matter, I use an example of the outcomes that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the TAS.

The pandemic had been going on in Finland for a year when the virus started to spread in the TAS. The workers tried to prevent the virus from spreading with all the practical means that they had, but it was well known that eventually it would “spread like a wildfire” in the tight facilities. Still, this spreading was not prepared for, even though “there would have been months to prepare for it”. After the first infections, the unit was closed for quarantine for two “chaotic” weeks, and the workers had to improvise regarding many practical problems without preparation. This unpreparedness even led to life-threatening situations.

The organization aimed at taking the crisis under control mainly through texts, which highlights how the ruling relations are organized. Instructions from the health care district and municipality were sent daily via email and the intranet. Yet, the workers express how the instructions were too broad and not fully applicable in a place like the TAS. Decisions concerning the service “came from somewhere else”, and the workers did not have any say in them. The TAS did not seem to get much attention during the pandemic: “So, the concerns have been heard [in the managers’ meetings], but nothing was done about them.” Their wish was to be listened to, instead of having people “spouting out regulations” one-directionally at them: “They have never [even been here]; they probably don’t even know what this place is or what is done here.”

When the broad instructions did not quite work in the particular setting, the workers express that “then we had to solve things by ourselves” and “we didn’t much stop to think about the missing instructions”. Nevertheless, there was a tension between the textually given requirements and the actual capability to carry them out properly: “when the official regulations come . . . , it’s on our shoulders to comply with them, but that’s a challenge which we can’t necessarily respond to.”

This illustrates the dynamics of the relations of ruling. On the one hand, the workers do have rather a broad space within the institutional context; that is, they have the capability to solve issues arising in the everyday work and to decide how things are done. As one worker summarizes the situation, “we can do the job pretty much like we want”. On the other hand, the workers are assigned responsibility through texts, but their capability to fulfil it is tied up with the material resources, such as the physical facilities, the number of staff on a shift and the work of others elsewhere. But even though it is evident that the lack of resources leads to a tendency to focus on securing the clients’ basic needs here and now, this does not explain completely why the workers did not have an active role in the decision-making processes concerning how the translocal coordination of work should be reformed in exceptional times. Instead, they seem to have been waiting for instructions and solutions to come from “the higher level”, as they call it.

The marginal status of the service in the relations of ruling restricts the professional space of the workers; they have been given and have accepted the role of executing institutional orders and functions, while the power of making decisions remains somewhere else. This coordination, I argue, is built around an institutional discourse that I call

*the accommodating discourse*, which mobilizes the aims and responsibilities of the TAS. I illustrate this argument further with the following two extracts. When inquiring about the mission of the service, the workers express similar thoughts:

Q: What is the purpose of this place? ...

A1: Well—

A3: To guarantee a roof over one's head.

A1: Yes. To be the grassroots level, the lowest place, or that from which people can come to ask for help so that they get food and a roof over their heads and can take a shower. Of course, the purpose is to make rehousing plans, but we have little time for it nowadays – at least on the intoxication-allowing side. Like, when was the last time since you had much time to talk with ... about housing plans? It's quite a long time ago. Perhaps it's nowadays more just securing basic needs.

This extract illustrates the accommodating discourse in two ways: it mobilizes the workers 1) to provide shelter, food and care and 2) to make plans for “rehousing”. When the latter becomes difficult, the first remains: “Perhaps it's nowadays more just securing basic needs.” The workers' everyday activities are organized mainly around these two practical dimensions and not so much in engaging in the decision-making processes. Due to the many sudden events that the workers must react to, the temporal horizon does not reach very far.

In terms of making contingency plans for the expected spread of COVID-19, it seems that this was just not the task of the TAS. Instead, their work was coordinated around the accommodating discourse: to secure the clients' basic needs here and now. This had severe consequences in terms of recognition, as when planning and decision-making are coordinated away from those whom the decisions influence, it seems to carry the risk that *the responsibility for recognition is shifted elsewhere*. For instance, isolating clients in their rooms and using a padlock to prevent them from leaving quarantine was reflected on afterwards as not being a “very humane act. But at that time, it was what we were instructed to do”. Another worker, in a similar vein, reflects that “when it came from the higher level, this instruction ... it probably is illegal that we lock people up anywhere”.

The second extract illustrates how the tendency to focus mostly on securing basic needs is not only a matter of a lack of resources; it also reflects the accommodating discourse that organizes the everyday work in the TAS. In this extract, there is a stronger emphasis on the second dimension of the discourse, making plans for rehousing. The extract demonstrates how the discourse has become objectified and naturalized; thus, the worker seems to self-limit their professional space and discretionary power.

Q: But what did you mean by it? How can control be seen here, or what did you mean by it?

A: The kind of control, yeah, for example, that is in this structure; for example, if a client gets a place in a supported housing unit and they are in the intoxication-free side and then ... if one refuses to take it, then one is directed to the other [intoxication-allowing] side, even though it isn't necessarily the client's best interest, when you consider the bigger picture. It's a kind of a controlling leverage.

Q: What does it mean then? So, when a client refuses to take the offered ...

A: Yes. So, if one refuses to accept the supported [housing unit place], because after all, our task is to rehouse people forward . . . , [it's] not definitely my idea, but it has been done here before . . . . It isn't an option that one could just stay homeless here in the services. One must move on. And it sounds quite cruel too, but it has many sides. It sure isn't in the client's best interest and not necessarily society's interest, but in a way, we have the task here that one moves on.

The worker explains that if a client refuses the offered housing unit, they can be moved from the intoxication-free side to the intoxication-allowing side, which they describe as a “controlling leverage”. The aim is not necessarily to find proper *homes* for the clients; instead, the worker explains that the institutional task is to get clients to “move on” and to “rehouse people forward” because the service is intended only for temporary stays. Even though the worker later (subsequent to the extract) tells how they are aware of the client's reason for the refusal (having become previously intimidated in the offered housing unit) and that the client's condition might get worse by being ordered to move to the side that allows intoxication, the accommodating discourse seems to overrule what actually benefits the client: “It sure isn't in the client's best interest”, “but . . . we have the task here that one moves on.” The worker states that this “sounds quite cruel too” but shifts the responsibility from themselves to “the structure”: “[it's] definitely not my idea, but it has been done here before.” The client does not seem to have much room for negotiation.

This extract illustrates how the workers participate in the relations of ruling. The institutional discourse is pre-given; it has already *been there* before the individual worker and thus seems to have become objectified and naturalized. The preconditions for the work have been set earlier by someone else somewhere else. The worker complies with the given task and thus seems to self-limit their discretionary power. They do not seem to question the role the discourse assigns them, nor do they give much ethical consideration to decisions that can have adverse consequences for the client. In this sense, how the work is coordinated around the accommodating discourse diminishes the possibilities for clients to receive recognition. The discourse provides a pragmatic frame of action, and the workers coordinate their work in accordance with it.

The accommodating discourse gives a certain constancy to the relations and the workers. However, even though the institutional discourse is present in how the workers coordinate their work, it is not of a deterministic nature. As mentioned earlier, there are elements of counter-discourses and resistance. Indeed, the workers participate in the ruling relations, both producing and changing them.

## Conclusion

By departing from the standpoint of the workers in the TAS, I have mapped the relations of ruling that organize the translocal coordination of work around the service and analysed what potential implications these relations have for the clients' autonomy and vulnerability: that is, to what extent do they enable mutual recognition? The results indicate that although the workers are in many ways committed to strengthening the recognition of the clients, the institutional context sets various hindrances for this. This can be seen in how the strategy of congregating homeless people in a small accommodating facility disrupts their safety and privacy and particularly in the way in which the material environment plays an active role in

how the workers and clients come to be in relation to one another. Recognitional relations are spatial, and everyday spatial practices can heighten the clients' subordination.

I have shown how the translocal coordination is built around the *accommodating discourse*. Although this provides guidance for taking care of clients' basic needs and helping them move forward from the service, it tends to produce a particular kind of *not-worth-the-effort* mode of action towards those clients who have become categorized as "the clients that nobody wants". Despite the fact that the service's statutory purpose is to provide a short-term response to homelessness while seeking more permanent homes, the discourse produces the tendency to maintain a state of *permanent temporariness* (Picker and Pasquetti 2015). This runs the risk of reducing clients to biological necessity, misrecognizing them as beings to be kept alive (see Feldman 2002), which is against the core principles of the *Housing First* approach. If homelessness is to be tackled, then the relations of ruling and the discourses organizing them need to be further critically examined, made visible and deconstructed.

Furthermore, the discourse seems, in part, to limit the workers' professional space to concentrate on carrying out the sheltering and rehousing mission, thus leaving them out of the decision-making. In this sense, there is a hierarchy in the ruling relations, in which the TAS has a marginal position. The risk is that when the decision-making is coordinated at a distance from where those decisions have actual effects on actual people, the recognitional responsibility might also be shifted away. This can lead to abusive practices in the service, which can be seen as violations of recognition and can produce severe vulnerability.

In this way, the workers participate in the relations of ruling, although not in a deterministic manner. They reproduce the ruling relations, but they also work in such a manner that can potentially change them. Namely, there are elements of counter-discourses, which can be seen as resistance towards the accommodation discourse, e.g. in the social advocacy the workers do for the clients or in the attempts of deconstructing the clients' subordinated position by engaging in close reciprocal interaction with them. Further research is needed how ruling relations are resisted and what the possibilities for transforming these relations at "the margins of welfare services" (Juhila, Raitakari, and Hall 2017) are.

This research has illustrated how the concepts of "vulnerable individuals" and "vulnerable groups" are problematic if they do not address the translocal relations that create hierarchy and subordination and thus produce vulnerability. Indeed, vulnerability is a relational concept: it exists always in relation to the institutional context that sets the conditions for recognition. This way of seeing vulnerability shifts the focus from examining individuals and groups to mapping the complex of relations that regulate and organize people's everyday lives. Combined with the recognitional understanding of justice, the normative significance of vulnerability can be addressed.

This study is limited in that it focuses on a specific context. Furthermore, it does not consider the clients' standpoints. However, the study can be conceived as a first step that can guide further research in expanding the mapping of social relations and processes (see Smith 2005, 34–37). I believe that the approach employed in this study has value for examining the vulnerabilities associated with homelessness and that it holds promise for application in various contexts.

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