

The Bench: An open drug scene and its people

TROND ERIK GRØNNESTAD & PHILIP LALANDER

ABSTRACT

AIMS – This article describes life in an open illicit drug milieu in a Norwegian city. This site, called “the Bench”, is a stigmatised place, and if one sits there, one is marked with the stigma of the place. Our aim is to gain insights into what stigmatised people gain from frequently visiting and staying in a public place that in itself is stigmatised. **METHOD** – One of the authors spent a year of participant observation, studying what went on at the Bench. He managed to build rapport in a gradual process of inclusion. The theoretical perspective rests on classic ethnography, symbolic interactionism and sociology on labelling and purity and dirt. **RESULTS** – “The Bench” is not only a local drug market, but also a social meeting place in which one can feel dignity, and where a certain humanisation process takes place through the rituals of everyday life. On “the Bench” it is possible to tell stories of decay, failures and shortcomings in life, stories that in other social arenas would be interpreted as symbols of stigma and degradation. “The Bench” is also a place in which different established power relations may be turned around through storytelling and jokes. This provides the bench-sitters with a sense of mutual control and agency. **CONCLUSION** – Socialising at “the Bench” is an expression of the need among social human beings to have their existences confirmed, in a society where they have been marginalised and looked upon as second-class citizens, as urban outcasts.

KEYWORDS – ethnography, urban outcasts, open drug scene, symbolic interactionism, urban spaces

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Introduction

In a corner, at a bus station in a Norwegian city, next to the railway station, there are two benches located under the roof of a bicycle shelter. It is a busy area with many people passing by. These benches are special in the sense that they have been a meeting point for several years for people who are part of the city’s illegal drug scene. The site is widely known to be the local marketplace for illegal substances and the meeting point for those using them. It is used only by them. People who walk by these benches keep a safe distance, in all likelihood to avoid the uncomfortable pres-

ence of the people sitting there. The police have carried out several raids to confiscate substances and to show that the people there are being watched, but the goal has not been to drive them away. The site has almost become an institution and has been given the name “the Bench”. Everyone in the drug scene knows the name, and so do most of the city’s inhabitants. The group of people associated with the Bench, the Bench-sitters, is quite large, somewhere between 70 and 85 people. Among them are only adults, with an average age of 40 years.

Most European cities have places where people using illegal substances gather in what is known as open drug scenes, which also function as marketplaces for selling and buying illegal drugs (Nafstad, 2012). There used to be an open drug scene in Oslo called Plata, but it was shut down by the police in 2004. As a result, it moved a short 200 metres to Skippergata (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2008). The authorities' reasons for shutting down the spot were that it constituted an unacceptable public nuisance, that the amount of substances and criminality around the scene was increasing, and that the open drug scene constituted a risk of more people being recruited into the illegal drug scene (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2008). The risk of young people being recruited was elevated as a particularly important argument during the close-down. However, Sveinung Sandberg and Willy Pedersen (2008) found that Plata did not constitute a threat of young people being recruited. The young people they interviewed explained that the interaction with people at Plata was connected with fear, disgust and shame. The few youngsters who spent time there had established a relationship with illegal substances long before they came to Plata (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2008).

Ida Nafstad (2012) argues that one of the reasons for the persecution and closedown of open drug scenes is that people use a spot for other things than was intended for and thereby break the rules and expectations tied to the place, which causes reactions. When applying Mary Douglas's (1966/2011) theories of the unclean and the clean, the open drug scenes appear unclean, polluting the city and the order one tries to generate. However, from a

functionalist perspective, people taking drugs in public could also be regarded as living warning signs – a signal of what will happen if you do not look after yourself (Lalander 2003). In an individualised society drug abuse is often blamed on the individual (see, e.g. Bourgois, 2009). In this context, the drug user becomes a living illustration of an individual who has failed, is mentally weak or in other ways unstable and incomplete.

Through the perspective of Erving Goffman (1963/1990) we can view sitting on the bench as a double stigma. Those who frequent the Bench are already stigmatised, and sitting on the bench is a stigmatising activity in itself. The Bench symbolises the ultimate degradation. If someone without any form of drug problem is seated on the bench, it is likely that he or she will still be regarded as a dubious and problematic individual carrying a stigma. In this case, it is not only the evaluation of the individual's character that causes the stigma, but also the place in itself. Theoretically people should avoid being seen in such places, as it implies an amplified stigmatisation compared to "normal" people, but we assume that the people frequenting the bench gain something from visiting it.

The main question discussed in this article is:

- What can stigmatised people gain from frequenting and staying in a public place that in itself is stigmatised?

This question can only be answered by visiting the Bench and talking to the people there. To achieve this, it is necessary to apply an ethnographic approach where the researcher sits down on the bench with

the aim of becoming accepted by its people and learn about life on the Bench. This approach is closely tied to the sociological tradition called the *Chicago School*, where researchers are encouraged to visit marginalised communities to take part in life as it unfolds there (Fangen, 2005; Lalander, 2011). One of the authors (Trond Grønnestad) has visited the Bench during the course of 12 months and has been accepted by those who frequent it. From now on we will refer to Grønnestad as the Researcher.¹

Previous studies and theoretical perspectives

Throughout the last 20 years, several ethnographic studies of drug scenes have been carried out in the Nordic countries. Bengt Svensson's book *Pundare, jonkare och andra* (1996, Speed freaks, junkies and others) is one such study. It shows that the drug scenes offer something that drug users cannot get from the society at large: identity, self-respect and practice of competency. This offer is opposed to the alternative life as a non-user, which to them implies poverty, unemployment, loneliness and a feeling of being redundant / a feeling of redundancy. It also implies that the attractive side of life on drugs is that something is always going on: the swift life where everything will be alright, which also involves a kind of freedom (Svensson, 1996).

In his book *Hooked on heroin*, which is based on ethnographic studies and interviews with people who are part of local drug scenes, Philip Lalander (2003, see also Lalander, 2009) describes the daily life of youngsters using heroin in the Swedish city of Norrköping at the start

of the new millennium. Lalander stresses the importance of understanding the rituals that arise and occur collectively, which further entail that young people are welded together in a secret microcosm. As opposed to those operating in a public space, for instance on the bench, this behaviour revolves around finding hidden spots. The individuals Lalander accompanied through 18 months wanted to conceal their involvement in the heroin market from the surroundings and developed a secret language that they used, for instance, when talking to each other on the phone. The attempt to conceal their connection to heroin was a big part of their daily lives, partly due to the illegality of the substance, partly because they feared the shame connected to having their involvement with this socially humiliating substance discovered. They could never imagine sitting on a bench in the middle of the city with older, shabby and heavily stigmatised drug users.

The studies by Svensson (1996) and Lalander (2003, 2009) both underline the importance of using social dimensions to understand why some people continue abusing drugs. The individual becomes part of a social context where everyday rituals confirm the unity, further contributing to a feeling of self-worth. This point is also made in Philippe Bourgois's study *Righteous dopefiend* (2009), which deals with marginalised drug users in San Francisco, and furthermore in the study *Street capital* by Sandberg and Pedersen (2009), which examines the sale of drugs along the river Akerselva in Oslo. While these authors describe the social advantages that people in the margins may experience when they meet each other in the drug economy, they

also address issues of stress and frustration as well as feelings of failure in connection to the drug user's experiences of not living life the "normal" way. Lalander (2003) and Svensson (2007) discuss this as an inner ambivalence, a feeling of both wanting and not wanting to change one's life, to live the life of the Joneses.

This article builds, like the studies by Lalander (2003) and Svensson (2007), on theoretical perspectives inspired mainly by symbolic interactionism, where the focus is on what happens when people meet (see, e.g. Charon, 1995). One starting point is that people's self-image and perspective on their own existence expand when meeting others, according to how one thinks one is perceived when interacting with others. Charles Horton Cooley (1967), a pioneer in the field of interactionism, wrote about the looking-glass self, referring to the tendency people have to assess themselves through a quick analysis of how they believe to be perceived by others. This phenomenon can be linked to Howard Becker's (1963/1997) labelling theory on how an outsider identity is established by meeting others. It is people's reactions to a norm-violating behaviour that result in the individual being regarded and treated as an outsider – somebody who is not like "us" but one of the "others" – rather than some essential quality of the acting individual. Therefore, having contact with the social services, the world of narcotics or the correctional facilities may entail that a person confirms his or her identity as a strange person who has not succeeded in society.

What Becker describes is a gradual process in which the outsider identity becomes manifested in the person. When a

person who is labelled as outsider, for example a narcotic user, meets people who are "normal", he or she may try to hide the stigma in order to "pass" (Garfinkel 1967) as a normal person. The objective is then to avoid being labelled and seen as inferior in the encounter and in the gaze of the other. If that is difficult, if the stigma is easily discovered, for example, through a worn appearance, an individual may experience the encounter as uncomfortable, an occasion of inferiority. This experience is likely to reduce the willingness to repeat an encounter with the person that gave rise to feelings of oddity and inferiority. This situation is reflected in Ida Nafstad's (2012) ethnographic study of experienced drug users' thoughts about frequenting public spaces in Oslo. She describes how they chose to stay away from certain places in order to avoid being regarded as inferior or as dehumanised in the gaze of the other. Such places include railway stations and certain shopping centres where the drug users may be looked upon as failures by others, treated with hostility by the public guards who want their area to be clean from disturbing and unwanted elements. Experiences of being regarded as public pollution are incorporated in the individual's self-concept and self-awareness, thus reinforcing their feeling of being sub-humans in the public space. The surroundings thus contribute greatly to generating and confirming the individual's image of him/herself as a human being with a lower value than is held by those that Goffman (1967) calls the "normals".

However, the labelling does not have to be permanent. One can be labelled as something inferior, but the other way is also possible. One can also be labelled as

normal. Such labelling is one of Astrid Skatvedt's (2008) theoretical starting points in her ethnographic study of people living in a treatment institution for drug addicts. She argues that through everyday rituals that take place in human encounters, people can counteract the kind of labelling described above. She discovers that there are particular situations where the people living in the treatment institution do not feel inferior to others, or like outsiders. She gives the example of one of the young women residents smoking a cigarette with one of the employees at the institution. They are not talking about drug abuse or problems, but about ordinary things. The conversation does not proceed from a discourse about treatment or therapy. In this situation, it is two normal persons communicating with each other, and not a drug addict and an employee.

The cigarette is important here: doing something unhealthy together creates social bonds and feelings of being similar. Using Goffman (1971: 232), the cigarette becomes a "tie sign" uniting the participants in the encounter. Skatvedt depicts these situations as social magic and further makes use of Randal Collins's (2004) theories about everyday rituals and emotional energy. The energy implies feeling strong and content with oneself and feeling respected and worthy in a social context. The feeling of solidarity is evident. Thus, the theories we use focus on human beings as highly social and willing to create a social microcosm together with others in order to feel fully human. It is also obvious that people are sensitive in social encounters and want to recreate social situations and encounters which make them feel competent and valuable. Prominent

in both Skatvedt's (2008) and Nafstad's (2012) ethnographies are the ways marginalised human beings navigate in everyday life and in urban spaces to find places and social encounters in which they can pass as good people with value and meaning for others.

Methodology

This study is based on an ethnographic study of people in the illegal drug scene in a medium-sized Norwegian city. The study was carried out between May 2012 and May 2013. It was not possible to utilise a recorder at the Bench as people were constantly coming and going, and because the demand for informed consent would have disturbed the interaction. Besides, a recorder would also have disturbed the process of creating trust among the Bench-sitters. The data was written down immediately after the observations. Particular stories were memorised and retold over the phone immediately after the incident. Some of the conversations were recorded at meetings scheduled outside of the Bench.

All of the persons included in the study are people who frequent this spot. During the 12 months of observation, 70–80 people visited the Bench. Most of the stories in this article are about men. While some women were present at the Bench when situations occurred and when stories were told, they were in a minority, with approximately one in eight Bench-sitters being female. Most likely, due to his gender and age similarities with the male majority of Bench-sitters, the researcher found it easier to establish rapport with the men. A closer study of female participation at the Bench could have provided additional

perspectives. This awareness stresses the need for more research on female positions and experiences in places such as the Bench and other stigmatised urban spaces.

These people and others frequenting the spot in the period of observation form the basis of the data collection. The texts were read repeatedly and thoroughly, and were then categorised into units of meaning with different subthemes (Kvale, 2006). The units of meaning were further categorised into subthemes and themes/codes. The codes were fed into the computer program Nvivo 10 to obtain an overview of the data. The text is the result of a verbal and written dialogue between the researchers discussing how one can understand and conceptualise what takes place on the Bench.

The study is carried out according to the principles of ethical research in the Declaration of Helsinki (2000). The observations were undertaken in a public space, and technical remedies were not utilised. To act honestly and gain familiarity with the community, the Researcher introduced himself to everyone as he met them. The Researcher's position was clarified, and the individuals were given the opportunity to protect themselves. The study has been approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

Entering the field

A condition for a study being ethnographic is that one attempts to view a situation from the perspective of others (Lalander, 2011). The Researcher therefore spent two to four days a week with the people on the Bench throughout a period of one year. One of the challenges of conducting research in marginalised communities is

to become accepted and not associated with the authorities and the power and control they possess. Becker (1963/1997) describes the challenges posed in observation of communities that can be regarded as aberrant:

The researcher, therefore, must participate intensively and continuously with the deviants he wants to study so that they will get to know him well enough to be able to make some assessment of whether his activities will adversely affect theirs. (Becker 1963/1997, p. 168)

To gain access to the Bench and to be able to establish rapport with the Bench-sitters, the Researcher sought out an intercommunal meeting point for people using illegal substances, where hired personnel were present. He spent three consecutive weeks there. The employees at the meeting point had privileged access to the drug milieus. Here the Researcher met several of the individuals who frequented the Bench. The Researcher observed the interaction between people at the meeting point and made sure to get to know those with a certain authority in the community, people who can be seen as regulars in that they often spend time there, in addition to having reached a high competence level in Bench-sitting. When he later visited the Bench, these people functioned as gatekeepers who would vouch for him. In the beginning, it was difficult to know how to behave and what to talk about. The Researcher therefore felt unease and, with a Goffman (1967) concept, "alienated from interaction", which describes the feeling of not being connected to the social flow

of interaction, a feeling of being in the wrong place. Many of the people on the Bench had a can of beer in their hands, and the Researcher thought that he too should carry something in his hand to appear to be more included in the encounters. Since he wanted to be perfectly sober during research in addition to avoiding that the people at the bench might see him as a strange researcher, he did not think he could have a can of beer in his hand like some of the Bench-sitters. Instead, he decided to bring with him a cup of coffee. It made him feel engaged with something besides just sitting at the bench. Lalander (1998) makes a point of the importance of having something in the hand in the meetings with people who also carry something in their hands. However, unlike the researcher in this article, he could have a beer in his hand while studying young people's actions in party situations, in order to create a relaxed social atmosphere.

To create social contacts in the field, a researcher needs a capacity for small talk. The Researcher in this ethnography soon discovered that the local football team was a common topic in conversations. During the research period, he started to read the sports pages in local newspapers in order to be better equipped in the daily conversations, thus creating tie signs, symbols of social togetherness. This approach resembles Skatvedt's (2008) findings, suggesting that a common discussion topic may create feelings of solidarity and equality (cf. Collins 2005), through which the Researcher may subsequently pass as a person who likes to talk about football and not as an alien from an abstract university.

The Researcher also made sure to shake hands with people he met for the first

time. He then described the research topic, and many of the Bench-sitters thought the project seemed very important and started to tell their life stories. Other researchers, such as Bourgois (1996/2003 and 2009), Lalander (2003 and 2009), Nafstad (2012), Skatvedt (2008) and Svensson (1997) have experienced that people in highly marginalised positions and environments are willing to tell their stories to the ethnographer. In Lalander's (2003) study on young heroin dealers and users, some of them said that they missed the meetings and interviews when Lalander had a field break, and they wanted to know when he was coming back. Thus, meeting with a researcher who you trust and like may be an important occasion of speaking out in front of somebody who does not pass it on to other people. It may be an opportunity to think out loud about one's life situation. Through a big number of social encounters, the Researcher gradually became more accepted among the Bench-sitters. Step by step he could understand what Bench-sitting meant for its population and what types of situations might evolve at the Bench. After a few months, the Researcher felt that he was accepted by most of the people frequenting the milieu.

Nevertheless, the first months he could experience irritation, scepticism and sometimes hostility directed toward him. This experience is not strange, as the Researcher is intruding in "their" social space and this space involves illegal affairs. The Bench-sitters could probably feel that he was different and that they did not feel comfortable with the Researcher, since they could not decide who he was. A man at the Bench once asked the Researcher: "What do you want? You want

us to kick your balls?" Two others were sitting at the bench when this happened. The situation was tense, but the Researcher tried to ignore the threat in the second question, and instead answered the first question in a calm manner, saying that he was a researcher who tried to understand why people frequently visit a place such as the Bench. The man smiled and said: "Well, it's easy to answer. It is because all your friends are here." The tension in the encounter diminished and the interaction continued. Like many other researchers in illegal street economies (see Jacobs 1999), the Researcher understood that there were rumours suggesting that he was an undercover police agent. Sometimes when he approached the bench he could hear the phrase "Here comes the undercover agent" and although humoristic in a way, it was at the same time a marker expressing that "if you are an undercover, we have outsmarted you". After six months, these types of expressions ceased. At that time, one of the regular Bench-sitters told the researcher that the others at the Bench now trusted him and felt comfortable in his company.

At other times, when the Researcher declared his aim of being at the bench, he noticed that the tension dropped when he told them that he hoped to visit the bench for several months. The Bench-sitters then reacted warmly. It is plausible that their response was an indication that they interpreted the Researcher as fully serious and that the Researcher shows no fear for the bench and its Visitors. The Researcher comes to them, the outsiders, with the intention of spending time with them. They may interpret this as a sign that he sees them as full human beings worth spending time with, listening to their stories.

Frequenting the Bench

The Bench is known to be a marketplace for illegal drugs. However, what happens if an ethnographer stays there for a year? Is it merely a marketplace or does something else happen? If you throw a quick glance at the Bench, it appears as though the Bench-sitters are waiting. When one observes them a little longer, it is apparent that they are talking among themselves and that people constantly come and go. In this context, the Bench becomes a place where people meet, stay for a while, leave and meet again, a place for social encounters. It is an open scene in the sense that there are no admission fees and no walls surrounding it. The barriers around the Bench are invisible and founded on the impression of what the Bench represents. Many people avoid sitting there as they may be mistaken for being part of the drug scene, for being public outcasts. The Bench constitutes a "no-go area" in the middle of the city. A spot colonised by outsiders, the infelicitous individuals who do not abide by the normality otherwise upheld.

In the following sections, we will describe different situations taking place on the Bench. The situations illustrate different themes in the understanding of what happens on the Bench and what people gain from frequenting it.

Eric, the newcomer, and the Bench-sitters

There is no one at the Bench when the Researcher arrives, but he buys a cup of coffee and sits down, waiting. He has now been at the Bench for several months, and most of the people there know him, so he concludes that someone will turn up soon. After two minutes John cycles to the bus station, a man the Researcher has

met a few times before. John sees the Researcher, nods in recognition and takes a seat next to him. He picks up his tobacco pouch and rolls a cigarette. No one says anything. Shortly after this, three other men come by the bench, but do not sit down. They are on their way to pick up their social welfare money and say that they will be back soon.

A little later, a person arrives whom no one knows, but we will call him Erik. He has a clear gaze and seems friendly. Erik explains that he is new to the city and has only been there for a month. He says that he is from the south of Norway and that he has been sober for seven years. He has only slipped up a few times on amphetamine and alcohol. Erik explains how a treatment centre for drug addicts, owned by a religious organisation, saved him, and that he now has a girlfriend in a city nearby. He comes to the Bench because he does not know anyone in the city, but he is familiar with this type of marginalised community. He says to the Researcher that he can control his addiction and that the Bench poses no risk to him. It is, thus, quite clear that he is aware of the character of the Bench, with non-sober drug users present, as a potentially risky place.

Erik also talks about having tried to rent a flat, but it is impossible with the money he receives from the state. He is now staying at a shelter for homeless people, and he does not feel very safe there. He tells his story to the Researcher, but the others are listening in, making short comments about the poor housing conditions for people with drug issues. This topic of tough living conditions seems to unite them in a common understanding about living a life in the margins of society. During the

conversation, the Researcher experiences a relaxed social atmosphere.

The event described above took place within a period of 25 minutes, which may seem like a short time. Everyone who comes to the Bench is in a socially exposed position. They are unemployed and have or have had serious issues with substance abuse. All of them have experienced difficulties in finding a safe place to live or spend the night. They view the bench as a social place where they can be physically close to others and talk about their lives without the presence of actors from public authorities. Erik did, after all, share parts of his life story. It is likely that he speaks so easily about private things because he has been a patient or client for a long time, and because he has become used to telling stories about himself to the authorities or to people from the treatment systems (cf. Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003). It is also possible that when he meets people he views as experienced outsiders, people like himself, he can talk about his life without feeling ashamed, knowing that the other bench-sitters have similar stories about a life with many problems and failures when it comes to accommodating the norms defining proper ways to behave (Becker 1963/1997). In this case, we are dealing with a social arena where one can sit without talking, but also share stories without feeling ashamed and having to deal with the stigmatising looks from the surrounding people (cf. Nafstad, 2012).

A month later the Researcher meets Erik again. He is pushing a shopping trolley full of clothes, most of which belong to him. Others he has found, he says. Now he wants to sell some of the clothes since his economic situation is getting worse. He

seems to be in a bad shape. The clear gaze has vanished, and he looks very tired. The week before, he earned some money by selling the street magazine *Asfalt* in public places. However, toward the end of the week he experienced strong anxiety. He went into a pub and spent all the money he had earned on alcohol. The day after, he woke up in the drunk cell at the police station, without remembering much about the previous night. He tells the Researcher and other Bench-sitters that he has a new room to live in since he did not feel safe in the shelter for homeless people. However, the rent is more than he can afford.

Two days later Erik shows up again. The Researcher can see that he is even more worn out. He looks dirty, and his messy hair shows that it is a long time since he last had a shower. His clothes are dirty, and they appear to be too big for him. He tells the Researcher that he is terribly tired and hungry and that he has not eaten in the last 48 hours. He has sold his clothes and is now wearing some clothes he found. While Erik and the Researcher speak to each other, one of the other Bench-sitters, Anders, who is an opiate user, falls down from the bench. His intoxication makes it impossible for him to remain sitting. Erik helps him to sit up. He says that Anders' situation was the same yesterday and that he had helped him to lie down on the Bench. The Researcher and Erik help Anders to lie down and be calm, but he cannot keep his body still and is about to fall off again. Anders starts to breathe in a forced way. Some of the others at the Bench say that he is turning blue, a sign of an overdose, and one of them takes up his phone and calls for an ambulance. For the Researcher, this situation was scary,

but it did not appear to have the same effect on other Bench-sitters. They were not very upset and said that Anders had experienced many overdoses before in his life.

When the ambulance has left with Anders, the Researcher asks Erik if he could treat him to a hamburger. The researcher had thought about the fact that Erik had not eaten for 48 hours. Erik becomes very happy. While Erik and the Researcher eat their hamburgers, Erik continues to describe his life situation to the Researcher. He says that he does not like to steal. The only thing he steals now is beer in the supermarkets. However, now he is suspended from his local supermarket since he tried to steal a few packs of beer. In the conversation with the Researcher, it is as if he tries to maintain a sense of dignity, as somebody who is not really a thief, despite a severely tough life situation involving increased marginalisation. The Researcher reflects back on the meetings with Erik a few months earlier. Then he had clean clothes, was happier and more optimistic. Now he is torn and hungry. There is worry in his eyes, and he is so dirty that it might have been difficult for him to be allowed into the food place if he had come without the company of the Researcher. After having finished the meal, Erik wants to go home to rest. He takes the empty bottles at the table and gives the Researcher a hug, saying that he will invite the Researcher for a cup of coffee when his situation is more stable.

The social dimensions of Bench-sitting

The story told in the section above, about the newcomer Erik becoming gradually more and more involved and accepted in the community of the Bench-sitters,

while also slipping into increased addiction, shows that for many of its visitors, the Bench represents a place where they are welcome no matter how they look and what situation they are in. One can sit on the Bench sober, abstinent and heavily intoxicated. What otherwise is seen as inferior and strange is in this context seen as relatively normal. When Bench-sitters are asked why they like to spend time there, the answers indicate that they value the social dimensions of the Bench and not the possibility to buy illegal drugs. Geir, for example, had been using heroin for more than 20 years. When the Researcher asked him why he liked to spend time at the Bench he answered:

It is the feeling of security and the understanding one gets from the others that make me stay there. They understand what it is about. Many of us have experienced bad things. I, as a hardcore heroin user, and the others, we support each other, but still we don't trust each other completely. I trust those who are more experienced since I have known them for a long time.

The quote indicates that Geir feels secure because he experiences that other Bench-sitters understand him. Still he cannot fully trust some of the others. Thus, the environment is not understood as a pure social paradise, but as a place where one also needs to be on guard. After all, he is spending time as part of an illegal economy where one has to avoid being "hustled" by others. Svensson (1997) writes that the urban drug milieu involves a sociality without solidarity. However, we have found it to be an arena that sometimes in-

volves solidarity and care for the other, as well as situations of distrustfulness.

Geir wishes to leave the drug milieu. He wants to be sober and live a more stable life. He is waiting for a treatment offer. He says that he would miss the Bench and the people there. Thus, what Geir and others express is ambivalence; the experience of both wanting and not wanting to leave the illegal drug economy and the social networks and contacts that it involves (Lalander, 2003 and Svensson, 1996). The Bench is always open, and it is much easier for the Bench-sitters to gain access to the Bench than to other social arenas, such as the labour market. Besides, as we wrote before, people are very social, and this can make them stay in certain milieus, even if they are aware of the risks it implies. Many of these middle-aged drug users said that they had tried different treatment facilities, but that they had nevertheless continued their outsider lives at the Bench and in other marginalised settings.

Roger, for example, a regular amphetamine user, had tried to kick the habit several times. Once he stayed sober for a long time and even started to study at university. However, he experienced problems with his studies and started to take some amphetamine in order to increase the efficiency while reading. The situation escalated and after some time he had to quit his studies due to increased intake of amphetamine. He later tried to commit suicide. He explained that, after the suicide attempt, he thought that he would not try any more treatments and that he would continue living in the illegal economy. He says: "You must understand that for me to stop with drugs and adapt to the normal society can be compared with immigrants

coming to Norway. I do not know the society, but here I'm fine". It is obvious that he feels both more competent and more at home on the bench together with other marginalised Bench-sitters than in the established society.

We believe that many of the regular Bench-sitters feel that other Bench-sitters are friends and that they care about them as human beings, and not as the authorities see them, as patients or clients. This view was proved to us after Anders died from an overdose and was about to be buried. Many of the Bench-sitters arrived at the funeral, including the Researcher and Erik, whom we have already mentioned. Many arrived in good time before the ceremony began. The Researcher counted the guests briefly and got to the number eighty, a majority of them from the Bench. The Bench-sitters were dressed as they normally dress, some with dirty clothes. A minister said some words in memory of Anders and a woman from the Bench began to sing. Several people from the Bench started to cry. A woman cried so much that she had to leave her seat and go outside to calm down.

Even if some of the Bench-sitters who knew Anders did not show up since they did not feel well, many came to show Anders the respect that he deserved. It was clearly an act of solidarity.

In the larger society people in the open drug scene are seen as problems, as outcasts, like drug addicts (Nafstad, 2012). However, here they become something else. Judith Butler (2009) describes how one can renegotiate and protect one's value and recognisability through the microsocial context. To be regarded as fully human, one also has to be perceived as "grievable". Butler argues that certain

groups of people are perceived as "ungrievable", which implies that they are no longer regarded as fully human. On the Bench one can grieve the loss of friends who have passed away, whereas the people passing by are unlikely to care. The example with Anders' funeral indicates that clearly. By grieving, one views the other as a full human being worthy of the pain. Thus, it is a matter of humanisation.

Elusive glances and keeping a safe distance produce invisibility and a "we"

In the section above, we have described the social dimensions of sitting at the Bench and the feeling of being seen as odd failures and urban outcasts. This dimension can be more fully understood by relating it to the urban space outside of the Bench and the people passing by. One morning the Researcher met three men from the drug scene outside the bus terminal. They were highly noticeable, and people had to walk close to pass them. People looked at them sceptically and automatically walked in a circle around them, as though they were contagious. The following was written in the field notes:

I now feel like one of them. At this point, it is less uncomfortable that people avoid us or look down on us. When someone walks by the Bench, it is always at a safe distance from the people sitting there. If anyone looks over at all, it is only with an elusive glance, as if a look could be contagious. It feels as though the people sitting on the bench are invisible.

At this stage, the Researcher had participated at the Bench for four months and

had gotten to know and like the people frequenting it. Thus, he had internalised some of their experiences of everyday life. He describes the Bench as a spot that most people avoid, and even avoid looking at for too long. Even though the Bench is set in a central spot of the city, it appears as though it represents something other than the city itself, a separate zone that should be avoided if one wishes to retain one's honour. On several occasions, the Researcher experienced that people he knew passed by the bench without looking at him or saying hello. He experienced this as strange and started to pay attention to the people he knew, but they did not look in his direction. He later asked them why they did not react to his presence at the Bench, and they often answered that they had not seen him. When encountering stigmatised individuals, people want to avoid feeling uncomfortable. People, therefore, try to avoid showing that they are aware of them. This insecurity makes people treat them as non-persons, as though they are not present, as objects which should not be given any attention (Goffman, 1963/1990). Through glances, the absence of glances and patterns of movement, a person is made invisible and becomes excluded from ordinary society. The patterns of movement include creating physical distance so that passers-by do not come close to the Bench and the Bench-sitters, as they do not want to associate themselves with them. Thus, the quick glance is not just what Goffman (1967) describes as civil inattention, a practice where people in urban public areas navigate through a quick glance at each other followed by looking in another direction. In the case of the Bench and the Bench-sitters, the quick glances

are accompanied by keeping a few metres' distance.

In the observation extract, it is apparent that the Researcher grows accustomed to being made invisible and to the elusive glances and the physical distance to the surroundings. The fact that people passing by only glance briefly toward the bench makes it a social zone of its own, a place where the boundary between "we" and "them" is distinct. "We" are the people referred to by the Researcher as "us"; "we" sit on the bench and engage in matters that from the outside look like nothing. We are the people who are not accepted by those passing by on their way to work or home to their families.

Decay stories and turning power relations around

The "we" that is created on the Bench becomes the base, framing the "culture on the Bench" (Goffman 1986). Within this frame, special kinds of stories are told that would appear odd in more "normal" settings. We call these types of Bench-sitter stories "decay stories" since they include central components of living on the edge, close to death and in misery. Such storytelling often contains black humour that includes topics and events otherwise regarded as taboo, such as death, serious illness and severe addiction.

It is midday early June, but still cold. Several people are sitting on the Bench, small-talking. A man approaches the Bench on a bicycle. He is wearing a large coat with big inner pockets. He stops by the Bench and pulls out two large bottles of liquor that he hands over to two of the people sitting there. One of the bottles is passed around. An elderly man says that

liquor is dangerous and that he normally drinks beer, but he takes a sip as well. The ritualised interaction of passing the bottle around creates a positive atmosphere on The Bench. This line of reasoning can be compared to Collins's (2004) theory of rituals where a joint action can contribute to creating feelings of solidarity. As a response to the comment about liquor being dangerous, two men in their late forties start talking about the highest blood alcohol content they have experienced. One of them once had a BAC of 0.4 mg/ml and the other a 0.5. Such levels would be fatal to the average alcohol consumer. The man with the highest level contacted a doctor because he felt a strange tingling in his legs. The other rode on the back of a moped to the emergency room. Both of them believed that they would have died had they not received help, but neither of them had felt particularly intoxicated. An older man laughs, unbuttons his shirt and shows off a scar above his heart where he has had a pacemaker implanted. He starts to talk to John, recalling memories from a time he fell head first on the bicycle rack, and John was the only one he would allow to help him. He was hospitalised with an overdose but got the pacemaker for a heart problem.

Many of the regular Bench-sitters have known each other for years and have shared many experiences. The stories told on the Bench connect them to a common past, while at the same time resembling the stories sailors tell each other about the storms they have experienced. Goffman (1971) utilises the term tie sign, and refers to symbols of similarity in a particular community. The types of stories we mention above deal with situations

where a person is in a bad state, having a low status compared to the majority society. Talking about blood alcohol content would not be appropriate at a job interview, but it is possible to talk about it on the Bench. It even becomes an element which ties the participants together in the common experience of having lived on the edge, at life's ending points, close to death. Such stories are examples of decay stories in the sense that they, sometimes in a humoristic way, refer to things that other people most likely would avoid talking about. These are stories of individual failures, unhealthiness and alcoholism. They are similar to the stories of misery and need told by the Finnish men in Pekka Sulkunen's et al. (1985) classic study *The urban pub*. The men talked about alcohol, divorce and unemployment when gathering in a suburban pub in Finland. These decay stories indicate where one belongs in the social hierarchy. In this way, the "we" that the individuals belong to is reconstructed. However, it is not a "we" that is looked down upon or made invisible. Rather, the stories make room for listening and for associations to similar stories. The outsider status becomes easier to live with. Many of the people at the Bench consume public services such as NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration), social care, health care, and food and clothes provided by non-profit organisations. Through interaction with these authorities, they receive the master status (Becker, 1963/1997) as "drug abusers", which easily overshadows other personal qualifications. The stories do not change the master status as a drug addict, but they can be told without feelings of shame. Following Douglas (1966/1993), what takes

place is a ritualised situational cleansing process where a matter that is otherwise considered unclean acquires a cleaner character. Through this cleansing process, it becomes possible to be proud of having had a BAC of more than 0.5 mg/ml. The stories fit into a ritual interaction rhythm (Collins, 2004). The theme is determined by the person telling the first story, and if it resonates, the others follow up with stories of their own.

The socialising among the Bench-sitters is not just a matter of being valued as human beings by other people who know what it is to live in the margins of society. It is also related to turning power positions around, whereby social reality is redefined. A lot of the social conversations at the Bench deal with people's experiences of having been treated badly and unfairly by the authorities. Examples follow below.

Yngve, John's younger brother, came by the Bench. He seemed upset and immediately began complaining about the municipal authorities. He had received a letter stating that he could no longer live in his council flat, due to complaints from the neighbours. He had not made a racket, played loud music or anything else that would upset the neighbours. The problem, according to them, was the racket made by all his drug addict friends who came to visit. The neighbours complained about stolen bicycles and believed Yngve's friends to be responsible for the thefts. He was in despair, not wanting to stay at a homeless shelter. The others understood his reaction and talked about similar experiences with the municipal authorities. For a while, everyone was angry, but eventually calmed down and started discussing what Yngve should do.

Yngve's despair was received by people who could identify with his story, since they had experienced similar encounters with the authorities. The other Bench-sitters functioned as a sounding board, and this seemed to reduce Yngve's distress. According to Becker (1963/1997), a person who is unable to follow the rules of the group is considered as an outsider or a deviant. Nevertheless, individuals defined as deviants by mainstream society can also feel that the judges (in this case the municipal authorities) are the outsiders. When Yngve expresses his problems to the people on the Bench, they draw on common experiences and label the municipal authorities and the neighbours as outsiders, who are being unreasonable, sometimes stupid, and do not understand. Becker (ibid.) sees this as a neutralisation technique, involving a condemnation of those who condemn. Yngve receives affirmation from the others. They create a microcosm where power relations are turned upside down.

What is described above is similar to how the Swedish punk icon Joakim Thåström puts it: "*You are the strange ones, I am the normal one*". A parallel can also be drawn to Paul Willis's (1977) classical study *Learning to labour*, where English working-class boys – the Lads – rebel against the school's middle-class ideology and create a cultural cosmos of their own, strongly influenced by working-class values. In this cosmos, the teachers and the middle class are the strange ones who do not know how to live. This is a matter of bending the perspective, of standing up against the official ideological definitions of what ought to be considered normal and abnormal/strange. It is also observed in

other studies, such as Svensson (1996) and Lalander (2003), where people involved in illegal and stigmatising networks create their own definitions of how the social reality is constructed. For instance, in Lalander's study *Hooked on heroin*, the selling of heroin is defined as a profession that requires both skills and watchfulness. This reconstruction creates feelings of self-respect for people who are officially condemned.

Conclusion

The main question posed in this article is what people gain from frequenting a public site that is stigmatised in itself. By visiting the Bench, we have attempted to answer this question by examining what goes on there, apart from drug dealing. The Bench is first and foremost a meeting point, and this is confirmed by the fact that people come back on a more regular basis and by the type of conversations and everyday rituals that take place there.

The site's public position and the elusive glances and distance-making efforts carried out by "normal people" contribute to the Bench becoming a "no-go area" in the middle of the city, but a magnet for the bench-sitters. To "normal people" the Bench is a sign of degradation, a place to avoid and a public reminder of what might happen if one is not careful. From this perspective, the people on the Bench become failures, some sort of urban outcasts and may be regarded as less human than "the normal ones", who conform to the legitimate patterns of movement, and pass as normal people in the urban Norwegian scenery.

Through the experience of belonging to a "we", an opportunity for attachment is

generated. Being at the Bench provides experiences of security and of being understood in a highly marginalised and stigmatised position. It is easier to trust people whom one experiences as close than distant others, who give rise to feelings of distrust. The desire to become socially included and not be seen as inferior human beings also represents a risk for Bench-sitters who would like to quit drugs.

We argue that through everyday interactions on the Bench, a process is implemented where participants in various ways form an image of themselves as more human. This includes a cleansing process (cf. Douglas, 1966/1993) where people's identities are cleaned and upgraded in relation to the more "normal" identities of others. In this process, using Butler's arguments, regular Bench-sitters become grievable. The funeral example illustrated this. Skatvedt (2008) writes that spending time with "the normal ones" under equal conditions is important in order to feel human and respected in society. However, similar experiences occur through being around "outsiders" and through the cleansing process that takes place in this microsocial context. The creation of a "we" includes a framework in which decay stories make difficult moments in life easier to deal with. The decay stories as well as the opportunity to turn around established power relations through conversations and stories make it relevant to consider the resistance and the redefinition of social reality provided by "the urban outcasts". They do not allow the official definitions of themselves to remain unchallenged.

The visibility of the Bench in the public space is significant in allowing it to function as an informal meeting point. At the

same time, the people on the Bench are perfectly exposed to the surroundings' critical eye and distance-making, but the weight of the exposure and objectification is reduced by the existence of a "we", the resistance, the cleansing process, and, thus, the humanisation that is made possible here. That is what the Bench-sitters gain by frequenting the Bench, despite the risk of relapses for the sober ones. Thus, socialising at the Bench is an expression of the need among social human beings to have their existences confirmed in a so-

ciety where they have been marginalised and looked upon as second-class citizens, as urban outcasts.

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Trond Erik Grønnestad, Doctoral student
Faculty of Social Science
University of Stavanger
E-mail: trond.gronnestad@uis.no

Philip Lalander, Professor
Department of Social Work
Malmö University
E-mail: philip.lalander@mah.se

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