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'We hugged each other during the cold nights': the role of affect in an anti-deportation protest network in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the role of affect and emotions in Finland's first large-scale anti-deportation protest, the 2017 Right to Live protest in Helsinki. Despite deportation protests having recently gained scholarly attention, their emotional dimensions have not been sufficiently studied, especially as concerns the emotions of protesters with vulnerable legal status. This article is based on in-depth interviews with key activists in the anti-deportation protest network in Finland, including asylum seekers, refugees and Finnish citizens. The article argues that in order for the protest of asylum seekers facing the threat of deportation to become public and visible, it was important that citizens who supported the cause not only offered material assistance but also shared their emotions. The article applies Margaret Wetherell's theoretical concept of affective practices to analyse interactions between asylum seekers and their supporters, and Sara Ahmed's circulation of affect and affective economies to explain how affect and emotions played a role in mobilizing protesters and sustaining the protest. The article concludes that the circulation of affect within the network of asylum seekers and supporters produced lasting affective value during the protest and after the protest ended. Strong affective ties enabled the protesters' network to function effectively in a challenging political climate and despite the network's lack of formal organization, leadership and shared ideological premises.

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Introduction

In Finland, as in other European countries, the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 has led to additional restrictions in asylum laws and policies and an increase in the number of deportations of asylum seekers. When carried out as forced removals, deportations are often met with feelings of moral outrage, injustice and general unease among the citizens of deporting countries (Anderson et al., 2011; Bader & Probst, 2018; Ellermann, 2009; Freedman, 2011; Gibney & Hansen, 2003; Nyers, 2003). In the case of Finland, which is often referred to as a trust-based society, the restrictions in asylum policies have affected some citizens' trust towards immigration authorities. The issue of deportation has become more widely contested in Finland, leading to the 2017 anti-deportation protest that came to be known as 'Right to Live' after expanding its demands to cover asylum-seeker rights more broadly.

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Despite the emotional nature of the issue, the growing scholarly attention to protests against deportations (Freedman, 2009; McGregor, 2011; Patler & Gonzales, 2015; Rosenberger et al., 2018; Van Haperen et al., 2018) has not paid sufficient attention to the emotional dimensions of such protests (for exceptions, see Freedman, 2011; Rosenberger & Winkler, 2014). The role of emotions and affect in activism in general is a wide research field, but to date has mostly focused on activists with secure legal status, such as citizenship. This article seeks to understand the role of affect and emotions in a protest by asylum seekers, whose position while under the threat of deportation is very vulnerable. The organizers who initiated the Right to Live protest were among the 32,476 asylum seekers who arrived in Finland in 2015. Most had had their asylum applications rejected by the Finnish state and were therefore deportable. People who are deportable (De Genova & Peutz, 2010) generally have considerably fewer possibilities to organize compared to people with secure legal status in the country of protest (Chimienti, 2011; Freedman, 2009).

By focusing on this vulnerable group of protesters and combining the work of affect theorists Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) and Wetherell (2012, 2015), this article contributes to a growing body of affect research on social movements by bringing in unexplored views of power, grassroots-level interaction and the circulation of affect. I analyse how the circulation of emotions and affect (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b) helped the formation and sustainment of the first large public protest against deportations in Finland. More specifically, I use the concept of affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) to explore the interactions between rejected asylum seekers and their supporters and explain how these practices provided essential support for asylum seekers.

I begin the article with a section introducing past research on social movements, affect and emotions, after which I explain my theoretical framework. After introducing my data and methods, I present my analysis, which illustrates the affective practices that took place within the network of asylum seekers and their supporters, and explains how these interactions enabled the mobilization and sustainment of the protest.

Social movements, emotions and affect

In the past, emotions were largely absent from social movement research. Ruiz-Junco's (2013) description of the history of emotions in social movement research has pointed out that from the 1970s until the late 1990s, in particular, social movement studies have ignored emotions and focused on rationality, resource mobilization and political contexts as explanatory factors for movements. From the late 1990s onwards, however, emotions have made their way into the research field of social movements. Since then, the vast literature on emotions in social movements has considered such questions as which emotions mobilize people for activism and under what conditions, how solidarity within movements develops, and how emotions are used to gain outside support for movements (Ahmed et al., 2016; Flam, 2015; Flam & King, 2005; Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Goodwin et al., 2001; Gould, 2009; Jasper, 1998, 2011, 2018; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Rodgers, 2010; Woods et al., 2012). However, many empirical studies focus on 'reflex emotions' (such as fear, anger, surprise, joy and shock) and 'moral emotions' (such as guilt, pride, shame, outrage and compassion) (Jasper, 2011, p. 287). Less is known about 'affective commitments', which according to Jasper (2011, p. 287) are relatively stable feelings like

hate or love, like or dislike, contempt or respect, trust or mistrust. Flam (2015) has argued that the traditional approach to social movements and emotions tends to be polarized: some see movements as ‘instantly successful strategists of emotions’, while others stress ‘how hard it is to move away from debilitating emotions’, such as in the case of stigmatized minorities (p. 3). The way emotions turn into activism depends on the context and on individuals’ or groups’ position in society. However, empirical analyses of emotions and protests have so far tended to focus on activists who have citizenship status in the country in which they are protesting. The focus in this article is on the interaction and circulation of affect between asylum seekers and their supporters, which contributes to an understanding of the nuances between ‘mobilizing emotions’ and ‘debilitating emotions’. By considering both asylum seekers and solidarity actors, this article brings affect and emotions to the wider literature on migrant struggles and solidarity actors (see, for example, Ataç et al., 2016; Della Porta, 2018; Maestri & Monforte, 2020).

While theories of affect, including the concept of affective practices have been applied in previous research on protests (see, for example, Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Frenzel et al., 2014; Ransan-Cooper et al., 2018), there has yet to be an explicit focus on the circulation of affect between actors and on the question of power in terms of citizenship. The role of affect in solidarity movements is essential, however, because the altruistic features of social movements involve individuals who ‘defend the interests, rights and identities of others’ (Passy, 2001, p. 5).

In order to understand how emotions and affect helped the formation and sustainment of the Right to Live protest, I lean on a theoretical framework that combines theories of affect by Sara Ahmed and Margaret Wetherell. Ahmed’s affect theory (2004a, 2004b) helps by explaining how emotions circulate and in so doing produce affective value (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 11). Ahmed’s theory is used in this article to understand ‘how affective patterns intensify and sediment over time linked to power and privilege’, as Wetherell (2015, p. 156) has described Ahmed’s work. However, as Ahmed’s work on affect concerns mostly cultural analysis and texts, it lacks a focus on interpersonal relationships and interactions. Thus, in this article I amend Ahmed’s theory by incorporating Wetherell’s concept of affective practices in the empirical analysis of interactions between asylum seekers and their supporters. This view takes into account relationships and context in explaining how emotions and affect circulate and produce affective value. Affective practices in interactions will serve as my unit of analysis. According to Wetherell (2012, p. 4), ‘affect is embedded in situated practices’, and it is therefore important ‘to follow what participants do’. Affective practices, which can be any action, refer to ‘shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations’ rather than neatly categorized emotions or simple lines of causation (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4).¹

Data and methods

This article is based on qualitative interview data with the activists who organized the Right to Live protest in Helsinki in 2017. The interviews were conducted in the Helsinki metropolitan area and in central Finland between December 2017 and January 2019. The interview data consists of ten interviews conducted in English with eight asylum-seeker or refugee activists from Iraq and Afghanistan, and eleven interviews conducted in Finnish with ten Finnish citizens who supported the protest. The themes discussed in

the interviews included experiences in deportation activism and times that preceded it, emotions, encounters with the media, police and authorities, networks and Finnish asylum policies. Three of the activists were interviewed twice and functioned as gatekeepers, suggesting additional interviewees and providing considerable help in forming trust relationships with them. All twenty-one interviews, totalling about thirty hours, were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and later transcribed.

Methodological difficulties when dealing with emotions have been discussed previously, especially in precarious situations where not talking about emotions may be a coping mechanism (Wettergren, 2015). I believe such challenges can be overcome by approaching interviews as encounters in which mutual interaction takes place and in which trust is an essential element of the interaction (Puumala & Kynsilehto, 2017, p. 367–8). However, in the course of this study, I kept in mind that encounters between a Western researcher and a deportable asylum seeker can never be fully equal because of the structural inequality in our positions (Ahmed, 2000, p. 63). I also recognized that discussing emotions can be a privilege that deportable migrants might not have if they are coping with strong emotions (Wettergren, 2015, p. 119). Thus, in all encounters, and especially in those with asylum seekers lacking formal status, I took ethical precepts such as ‘do no harm’ seriously and was sensitive in asking questions making sure that this research would not cause them stress.

Trust relationships began to be formed already before the interviews, as the interviewees were recruited through the snowball method via a person they trusted. Trust allowed interviewees to express their emotions, and interviewees often talked about their emotions spontaneously, without any specific questions about emotions. When approaching an interview as an encounter, it is essential that the researcher also open up and share emotions, making the encounter emphatic and trustworthy (Puumala & Kynsilehto, 2017; Wettergren, 2015). Thus, as a researcher I expressed and shared emotions: If I heard joyful things, I smiled and laughed. When hearing something sad, I sometimes cried.

In analysing the interviews, I first constructed a timeline of the protest and the periods preceding and following it based on the information provided by interviewees. I then analysed phases in which interaction involving affective practices between asylum seekers and their supporters took place. Using the method of narrative analysis, I further analysed these affective practices to determine what emotions were expressed and how these emotions were dealt with. I searched the transcribed interviews not only for emotions that were expressed explicitly (such as ‘I was afraid’), but also for ‘emotion expressing words’ (Kleres, 2010, p. 194) (such as ‘finally’, ‘hell no’) and hyperboles (such as ‘the hardest part of my life’). In addition to reading the transcribed interviews, I listened to the interview recordings and paid attention to prosody, which refers to intonation, rhythm and stress in speech (Kleres, 2010, p. 195).

For this article I have chosen those interview excerpts that best reflect the most prominent emotions and expressions of affect during particular periods on the protest timeline. For all direct quotations I have changed the names of interviewees to ensure that they can not be recognised. I do, however, indicate their citizenship, as citizenship is relevant in anti-deportation protests and the emotions related to them because according to the Finnish Nationality Act, only citizens of Finland are safe from deportation

(Kansalaisuuslaki [Nationality Act], 2003). It is important to note that at the time of the protest, all but one of the activists who were not Finnish citizens were asylum seekers facing the threat of deportation.

Ethical guidelines were closely followed in this research. Ethics committee approval was not required because the study design met the criteria established by the University of Jyväskylä's Ethics Committee for proceeding without approval. Namely, each participant gave informed written consent to take part in the research; the research did not involve physical intervention; the research did not give exceptionally strong incentives to participants; there was no risk that the research would cause mental damage or stress that would go beyond the boundaries of normal, everyday life; and the research did not pose security threats to participants or their loved ones.

Analysis: interaction and affective practices between asylum seekers and their supporters

The years 2015–16: sharing negative asylum decisions and the fear of deportation

Many of the Finnish citizens I interviewed for this research were involved in voluntary work in reception centres in 2015. At that time they were optimistic about how asylum seekers would be treated in Finland. They explained that they had the aim of helping asylum seekers to get started in a new country, paving the way for their smooth integration. According to interviewees, in 2015 not only did hope prevail, but there was also a strong feeling of trust in state authorities' ability to deal with the situation in a way that respected human rights and the other principles of a constitutional state. Due to this strong hope and trust, interviewees did not foresee the need to protest.

Political trust in Finland has traditionally been among the highest in the world in international comparative surveys (Söderlund, 2019). Finland has in fact been an example of a political system in which protests are tamped down due to a generalized trust in the ability of the political system to 'fix things without public pressure' (Jasper, 1998, p. 402). Before 2017 there had been only a few small-scale protests against deportations in Finland (see Horsti, 2013; Pellander & Horsti, 2018). In this context, the affective and emotional reactions that followed on from the changing political context and led to the Right to Live protest are particularly important, as they mobilized people with no prior background in protesting.

As 2016 approached, the interviewees' high expectations were dashed as they faced the hard reality of tightened asylum policies and procedures and changes in the Finnish Aliens Act. The newly (2015) established Finnish government – a coalition government that included the nationalist Finns Party – started implementing several restrictions in asylum law and policies, including the abolition of humanitarian grounds for asylum and limiting asylum seekers' access to legal advice. In addition, the country information provided by the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) was updated to redefine several areas in conflict-ridden countries as safe destinations for internal displacement. Moreover, the sudden increase in asylum applications caused problems at Migri, including low-quality language interpretation in asylum interviews and a push to make decisions on asylum cases quickly, leading to mistakes in asylum decisions. Migri's interpretation of asylum cases became tighter as well; for example, asylum seekers' fear

of violence in their home country was rarely accepted as justifiable (Saarikkomäki et al., 2018). These restrictions led to many negative asylum decisions and an increase in the number of deportations.

During this period, many asylum seekers who had received negative decisions from Migri made appeals to the administrative court. They then often endured a long waiting period before receiving decisions on their appeals. Negative decisions from the court caused immediate fear and insecurity in asylum seekers because they could then be deported by the police.² Sakhi, who arrived in Finland in 2015 from Afghanistan, described his initial feelings about deportability (De Genova & Peutz, 2010) as follows:

I had my first interview with Migri – they rejected me. Then I made an appeal to the administrative court and it took nine months and they rejected me. The hardest part of my life in Finland was when I was rejected by the administrative court. It means that if you are rejected, police can deport you at any moment, even if you are working or studying. After that I cried a lot. What would I do if police come and deport me? Because I knew there is no possibility for me to live in Afghanistan. I cried and cried and I knew there is no way . . . I had these bad moments. (Interviewed in December 2017)

As Sakhi describes above with his ‘bad moments’ when he would cry and cry, many asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016 felt fear and sadness. De Genova and Peutz (2010) have argued that deportation ‘tends to operate as a radically individualizing and thus also [. . .] isolating event’ (p. 23). People under threat of deportation are in an extremely vulnerable situation and are therefore often publicly invisible. Deportable people lack the resources and networks to be able to protest publicly against deportations (see, for example, Chimienti, 2011; Freedman, 2009). According to interviewees, asylum seekers at first feared going public with their cases while legally deportable. Thus, in the case of many asylum seekers, their immediate reactions and emotional responses to deportability, such as fear and sadness, led to apathy, passivity and mental health problems, rather than to public protests.

In 2016, rejected asylum seekers started sharing news of their negative asylum decisions among their networks, which included Finnish volunteers who had worked in reception centres and other asylum seekers. Messages about the decisions and emotions relating to them were shared using social media and reached asylum seekers in different parts of Finland, including those in reception centres in remote areas of the country. The sharing of official documents related to negative asylum decisions gave people wider access to Migri’s justifications, which are otherwise not publicly available. This allowed asylum seekers and their supporters to notice injustices and even mistakes in the decisions. Many Finnish friends of asylum seekers started witnessing at close quarters how authorities had made mistakes with asylum cases that eventually lead to deportations. They also started witnessing how the police dealt with deportation cases and felt that the treatment of asylum seekers was unjust.

This sharing of decisions, experiences and the emotions related to them can be seen as an affective practice that caused ‘moral shocks’ for many of my interviewees. According to Jasper (1998), ‘moral shocks are often the first step towards recruitment into social movements occurring when an unexpected event raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action’ (p. 409). (For more on moral shocks in the context of asylum policies, see Hinger et al., 2018; Kleres, 2018;

Milan, 2018) Saara, a Finnish citizen interviewee, described her mobilizing moment as anger or even rage after seeing the changes in Finnish policies and law in 2016, which she perceived as being in stark contradiction to previous policies. She was also shocked that the changes directly affected the rights of the most vulnerable. (See also Polletta & Amenta, 2001, p. 308). Many interviewees were mobilized through similar moral shocks while witnessing the mistreatment of vulnerable asylum seekers and governmental restrictions on asylum. As Saara explained:

We started getting to know asylum seekers, and then they became our friends. What wouldn't you do for your friends? So, it started from there, so that you can't stop anymore. Then those changes in law came, there was an election, and all kinds of restrictions in law and policies followed. Those changes that were directed at the most vulnerable asylum seekers. So, this evoked rage, that 'hell no, you just can't do this, this isn't possible.' (Interviewed in September 2018)

In these interactions between asylum seekers and their supporters, affect was passed back and forth, forming 'pulses of energetic relations' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 141). However, in line with the idea of affective practices, these were not neat emotional categories with simple lines of causation (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4). Different emotions coexisted, and some of the emotions interviewees described and named were related to citizenship status and the political context. As seen in Saara's account, supporters felt not only afraid and sad on behalf of asylum seekers, but also that the state had failed them as Finnish citizens by not protecting human rights and the principles of a constitutional state. Thus, the state became an object of anger towards which activism was directed. The process of 'fear transforming into anger through the ascription of guilt' (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017, p. 509) was taking place among the supporters of rejected asylum seekers.

With the practical help of supporters, asylum seekers under the threat of deportation were better able to deal with the negative, potentially debilitating emotions of fear and hopelessness so that they were not merely 'sitting and being sad', in the words of Aran, an interviewee. According to Aran, who is from Iraq and was one of the main organizers of the protest, negative feelings such as sadness prevailed, but the asylum seekers nonetheless mustered the energy to take action:

In 2016 a lot of my friends got in the detention centre, a lot of my friends got deported already, I got many negative decisions – there were just bad feelings all the time. Thinking about deportation, thinking about old people who go to detention. A lot of families, they got separated – they deported the parents and they left the kids here. It was a really horrible time because all the time we were just listening and hearing really bad news. But we were kind of used to this bad news, so we started to gather more and more energy. We did not consider them depressing news – no, we know it's bad, but we have to do more. We have to release more people, we have to find more lawyers for them. So, if we hear just bad news, we are not sitting and being sad. No. Okay, we are sad, but we do more. We just try to help them and try to help ourselves. (Interviewed in December 2018)

February 2017: mobilizing for the right to live protest

In 2017 asylum seekers felt frustrated by Migri policies and decisions that claimed certain areas of Iraq and Afghanistan were safe. Deportations to these conflict areas evoked anger towards the policies of the state, and asylum seekers reached the point of wanting to make

their cases public. As has been the case in other countries (Hinger et al., 2018; Mokre, 2018; Steinhilper, 2018), asylum seekers in Finland received practical and material support for their protest from other established activists – in this case, the Finnish Free Movement network in particular. As Mikko, an activist from the Free Movement network, recalled:

It was a protest by asylum seekers, but we Finns, we were the support group to make sure they were able to protest. The idea was that they would make all the decisions – it's about their right to live – and if something goes wrong, we Finns, we all have passports and we can go home when we are tired or whatever. (Interviewed in December 2018)

Supporters' material help, such as providing a tent and megaphone and making arrangements with Finnish authorities, functioned as affective practices. This material help was essential for the asylum seekers not only in concrete terms, but also emotionally. Non-citizen involvement in protests can be risky and may increase the chance of arrest and deportation (Monforte & Dufour, 2013; Rygiel, 2011). Thus, the concrete support of Finnish citizens was essential to asylum seekers who were in a vulnerable position as deportable. They were afraid, but at the same time, support from citizens enabled them to step out from the margins into public space with their worries and demands.

With the strong base of affect that had been circulating between the asylum seekers and their supporters, the Right to Live demonstration was set up on 10 February 2017 in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki. Soon afterwards, the police ordered the demonstration to be moved to the Railway Square. The demands of the protesters quickly expanded from the issue of deportations to asylum-seeker rights more broadly, and coalesced around the claim to the right to live in Finland, as the name of the protest suggests. With their claims, the protesters criticized the 'bureaucratic violence' they had experienced in Finland (Näre, 2020). According to the Right to Live protest leaflet, protesters demanded legal assistance for asylum seekers, the reprocessing of incorrect asylum decisions, the suspension of deportations until the validity of asylum decisions can be ensured, and that rejected asylum seekers should not be removed from reception centres until they have secured shelter and sufficient livelihood.

March–June 2017: sustaining the protest

Initially, the protest was not intended to be long-term, as the main aim of the asylum-seeker organizers was to draw attention to their demands in the media and among politicians. However, the organizers felt that the attention they received in the first days of the protest was insufficient and decided to continue protesting. When the protest did start receiving attention and solidarity from Finnish people, the organizers were energized to continue even longer. In addition to the initial support provided by the Free Movement network, a variety of other people joined and supported the protest. Expressions of solidarity such as bringing food and drinks to the protest tent were examples of affective practices that created bonds between asylum seekers and their supporters. The protest also became a 'safe space' (Hinger et al., 2018) for rejected asylum seekers who had been kicked out of reception centres. The demonstration in Helsinki's Railway Square became a large protest camp where food was cooked and shared, and

advice and other support was given to rejected asylum seekers. Though Finnish citizens joined the demonstration, asylum seekers continued to be the protagonists of the protest, which made them visible in the public sphere.

While the emotion of anger was often shared within the protest network, the protest actions were peaceful and non-violent. Affective practices between asylum seekers and their supporters, such as talking about negative events and emotions, helped individuals manage their anger, allowing rational decisions to be made about protest strategies. The decision to keep the protest peaceful and non-violent was informed both by a general understanding of the protest culture in Finland and by the fact that for people who are deportable, even minor infractions would have harsh consequences.

In the context of their peaceful and non-violent protest, the counterprotest organized in the same square by Suomi Ensinnä (Finland First) was shocking to asylum seekers. Asylum seekers encountered a number of threats and even violent attacks by the opposition protesters, causing them fear. This experience was coupled with the feeling that the police were neglectful in dealing with the harassment. These encounters were deeply affectual, especially for rejected asylum seekers who had experienced violence and mistrust of authorities in their country of origin. Omar said he felt like he was in Iraq, not Finland, because of the threats and fear he encountered during the protest:

But at the same time, after this long journey, with Suomi Ensinnä, with the police, with the shouting, these cold days – and what we gained in the end, we gained just troubles and troubles. I remember some days I was ready to burn out, and I was really afraid to walk in the street and thinking always there's some people behind me. Because of the hate messages, because the threats I got, I started to think I'm living in Iraq, not in Finland. (Interviewed in December 2018)

Similarly, many Finnish supporters of the protest had unpleasant experiences with the police, which eventually, after witnessing injustices and hearing of similar experiences from other people, affected their trust towards the police. Siiri, a Finnish citizen who joined the protest a few days after it began, described her experience as follows:

The Suomi Ensinnä protest against our protest was challenging, but it was more challenging to witness how passive the police were. Someone from the opposition protest came to threaten us with a broken glass bottle and the police just watched from inside their car and didn't intervene. So, this is how I began to see that there is structural racism within the police, and I lost my trust towards the police. (Interviewed in September 2018)

These shared experiences and encounters with the counterprotest and the police made relations between asylum-seeker protesters and their supporters even closer. When the activists of the Right to Live protest witnessed injustice by the police and other asylum authorities, they experienced 'transformative affect' (Feigenbaum et al., 2013, p. 23, 34). Especially for Finnish citizens, these encounters led to reshaping their relationships to the police and to the state more broadly. Interviewees said they had previously felt Finland to be a country that respects and protects human rights and that they used to be proud of the nation. After witnessing the treatment of asylum seekers starting in 2016, their pride turned to shame, which partly motivated them to continue their activism. (See Kleres, 2018, p. 223, on a similar case in Germany). The motivation to continue their activism derived partly from the realization that asylum-seeker rights were not being protected by the authorities.

From the asylum seekers' point of view, the affective ties and affective practices between supporters and asylum seekers were important for the continuation of activism because they created hope. According to Wetherell (2015, p. 145), 'how the energy of affect is parsed is key to investigating the relations between affect, power and privilege.' As Kleres and Wettergren (2017) write, 'where hope is precarious, social processes function to enable and sustain feelings of hope' (p. 509). For asylum seekers, the mobilizing force of anger was not alone enough to maintain the protest, and pre-existing emotions of fear and hopelessness were easily awakened. In the account of Raheem from Afghanistan, the precariousness of hope is clear as he describes the ease of contemplating 'the end' before new Finnish supporters gave activists hope in the challenging Finnish winter environment:

People joined us, and that made us continue. If you are alone there in the cold weather, you easily think 'this is the end'. But Finnish people came and supported us. If you have bad feelings, then you see people come and support you, it is a big thing. (Interviewed in December 2018)

July–September 2017 and onwards: the protest network as a community

The interviewed activists were able to persevere in harsh conditions because of the community that formed during the protest, giving them strength and meaning. Following Ahmed's (2004a) idea of the circulation of affect, affect and emotions brought individuals into alignment (p. 119). The circulation of affect, in which different emotions such as fear, sadness, anxiety and hope existed simultaneously, built strong bonds between activists, to the extent that some interviewees described the network as a family. They felt they were surrounded by people who shared the same values. The sense of security and protection created by the feeling of belonging was particularly important because the asylum seekers were constantly harassed and threatened by Finland First protesters and because of the vulnerability of being deportable. Arif from Iraq described the protest and activist network as like a home and a family to him, where protestors had persevered together through many problems and challenges:

We started to feel this [protest] is like home for us. We got more friends – for me as a person and newcomer here, I have a lot of Finnish friends now. We are like a family. We spent a long time together, we were eating together, speaking together about personal issues. We became more and more connected. So, it's not like a network or a work group or a voluntary group, it was like home, like a family. We hugged each other during the cold nights. We tried to fix a lot of problems. (Interviewed in December 2018)

The affective practices that Arif experienced, such as hugging and working together to fix problems, were experienced by the Finnish activists as well. The meaning of these practices was also shared. Many Finnish activists spoke warmly about the network, referring to it as a community, like Suvi does

This [activism] is very rough and crazy, but at the same time the rewards are many. We have this community feeling here that I have not found elsewhere. We live in this network and I keep getting to know other people and we know what brings us together and we share the same values. This idea of extended family that I have learnt here has been a big thing for me. (Interviewed in September 2018)

Like Suvi, many other activists described their activism as difficult but rewarding because of the sense of community they experienced. The accumulation of affect and emotions within the protester network over time created what Ahmed (2004b) calls affective value (p. 11): it made the continuation of the protest in harsh conditions for more than seven months possible (see also Näre, 2018). The protest continued around the clock in the Railway Square in the centre of Helsinki from February until the end of June 2017, when the police ordered the protest to leave the Railway Square because of safety risks related to the Helsinki Pride March. After a break of about one week, the demonstration resumed in front of the Kiasma art museum during the day. Finally, the protest was briefly reformulated in the beginning of September 2017 when the Right to Live House was built as part of Helsinki Design Week. After this installation, the physical protest came to an end, but the network remained active.

According to Jasper (1998, p. 405), affective ties among people within a protest network define whether a movement continues or declines. Friendship and family-like relations built on affective emotions towards fellow activists help sustain social movements (Jasper, 1998, 2011; see also Della Porta, 1995; Taylor & Rupp, 2002). According to interviewees, affective ties with fellow activists helped to relieve burnout, which was common among the activists of the Right to Live protest, as Omar recalled above. (For other cases, see Milan, 2018, p. 198; Ransan-Cooper et al., 2018, p. 647).

Affective value was also concretized in the continuation of the activist network after the Right to Live protest ended. As of 2021, the loosely organized but lively Stop Deportation network continues to arrange anti-deportation protests on a smaller scale, publicizes deportation cases in social media, and helps people in detention centres or under threat of deportation. The network has no formal structure or central leader and is flexible in its operations. Although the network supports people under the threat of deportation, it has no strong political agenda on the topic of deportations in general; for example, activists in the network may have differing views on the deportation of people who have committed crimes. Instead, the network is mostly concerned with the deportation of rejected asylum seekers to certain conflict-ridden countries. This flexibility in formal organizing and ideological premise allows support – which is often based on strong emotions – from a wider spectrum of society. (See Freedman, 2011, for a similar case in France). Though the network has been successful in stopping the deportation of some individuals, activists felt that authorities and politicians have in general not heard their demands. However, despite their distrust in asylum authorities, many Finnish citizen activists in particular continue to be hopeful that their activism will eventually bend Finnish policies in a direction more respecting of human rights. (For more on this issue, see Pirkkalainen et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In recent years, Western countries have turned to more restrictive immigration policies, with deportation a widely used 'tool' in immigration and border control. At the same time, deportation has given rise to strong emotions, and protests against deportations have taken place in many Western countries. Nevertheless, research on anti-deportation activism lacks an in-depth analysis of the emotional dimensions of protests.

In this article, I have made use of Sara Ahmed's and Margaret Wetherell's theoretical views on affect to analyse the role of emotions and affect in a large anti-deportation protest that took place in Finland in 2017. I have argued that the interaction and affective practices between rejected asylum seekers living in a vulnerable situation and the Finnish citizens who supported them played an important role in mobilizing the protest. Moreover, I have argued that emotions and affect produced affective value that made the continuation of the protest and the formation of an ongoing protest network possible. The significance of affect and emotions in this case emerges in the following two ways.

First, rejected asylum seekers in Finland who were under threat of deportation needed support from Finnish citizens in order to protest publicly. Without support, deportability caused isolation, fear and hopelessness, leading in some cases to serious anxiety and depression. Support was realized in affective practices between asylum seekers and solidarity actors, which included practical help such as providing equipment for a protest. The sharing of negative asylum decisions and the emotions related to them within the network of rejected asylum seekers and their supporters resulted in shared emotions of fear and hopelessness. With the support of solidarity actors in the form of affective practices, asylum seekers' debilitating emotions of fear and hopelessness receded while anger towards the state started circulating among the network, enabling mobilization. Support from Finnish citizens was also important when activists faced threats from the nationalist Finland First counterdemonstration and felt the police failed to react. This created hope in a situation that was otherwise experienced as hopeless, and strong bonds emerged between citizens and non-citizens. During the many months of protest, affective practices between solidarity actors and asylum seekers produced affective value, and the protest eventually transformed into a lasting network with strong affective ties that is still functioning as of 2021.

Second, the article confirms the logic of how emotion-based solidarity emerges in a time of restrictive immigration policies. Finnish citizens' support for the protest emerged not only on the basis of personal relationships with rejected asylum seekers, but also because of the citizens' affective ties with the state. Citizens felt disappointed that the Finnish state had failed them in not being able to protect the human rights of asylum seekers. Activists felt that their demands for the rights of asylum seekers, which called for no radical changes such as open borders, were nonetheless largely not heard by politicians and authorities. In the case of Finland, a Northern welfare state where trust in authorities has traditionally been strong, this disappointment led citizens to lose trust in state actors, showing that restrictive immigration policies affect not only immigrants, but can also have broad and deep consequences for society at large. However, despite their distrust of asylum authorities and the politicians in power, Finnish citizen interviewees continued to trust the Finnish political system at large and that their activism would eventually lead to change.

The article's findings on the importance of affective practices and the circulation of affect between asylum seekers and solidarity actors contributes to our understanding of how marginalized and vulnerable people – especially those with precarious legal status – can become visible and go public with their worries and claims. This understanding is essential in envisioning the future of multicultural democracy in a time of restrictive immigration policies and contributes to the research on emotions and activism by showing how the 'debilitating emotions' of people in a vulnerable position in a society can transform into 'mobilizing emotions' through affective practices in which social, material and emotional mechanisms of support are intertwined.

Future research might consider how affect and emotions in solidarity movements and migrant struggles play out in countries with different political traditions. It would be interesting, for example, to compare Finland, known for a modest protest culture and consensus-oriented civic action, with a country with a strong protest culture, such as Germany or France, and to observe whether protest based on affective ties becomes more politicized in other contexts.

Notes

1. In this article, I follow Wetherell's view of affect, which combines sensations, bodily reactions, and cognitive and cultural processes (Wetherell, 2012, p. 39). From this perspective, emotions are expressions of affect. When my interviewees discuss past experiences in activism they have already processed and named their emotions. For this reason, I use both terms, *affect* and *emotion*, in this article.
2. An asylum seeker can at this point apply to the Supreme Administrative Court of Finland for leave to appeal, but this does not prevent the enforcement of a negative decision. An asylum seeker with a negative asylum decision is safe from deportation only if the Supreme Administrative Court orders that the decision cannot be enforced. (Finnish Immigration Service, n.d.).

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