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ATTACHMENT TO PLACE AND COMMUNITY TIES IN TWO SUBURBS OF  
JYVÄSKYLÄ, CENTRAL FINLAND

Abstract

The article describes varied place attachments manifested in public (communal) places in the two socio-economically weakest suburbs of the city of Jyväskylä in Central Finland. We conducted ethnographic research and observations, interviewed local experts on their views of the suburbs, and analyzed discourses from various places where residents' experiences of identity and social relations are connected to residential and community attachment. Our results show a strong connection to place evolving in both suburbs through bonds to the physical and the social environment. The local experts reported social connectedness and sense of belonging among the residents of both suburbs. The strength of the suburbs was community spirit manifesting in public places (community centers, local natural beauty spots, and recreational spaces). Residents are attached to their nearby natural environment and specific places in both suburbs; attachment to place is undermined by negative media influence and by public discourse highlighting social segregation and insecurity.

Keywords: Community ties, ethnography, suburb, place attachment, place experiences.

**Introduction**

Place attachment is a key dimension in understanding individuals' connection to places. Place attachment is defined as an affective bond between an individual and a place formed with a specific place where a person wants to stay and feels safe and comfortable

(Altman and Low 1992; Hidalgo and Hernandez 2001; Clark and others 2017). In this article, we study place attachment through a community-oriented approach in the context of residential segregation and the development of suburbs in Finland. Our goal is to shed light on how residents become emotionally connected to their neighborhoods in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. We maintain that place attachment consists of different elements: the materiality of place (nature), performance (social relations), and meaning of place (narration/memory) (Diener and Hagen 2022, 175). We understand place as dynamic and changing because places are fundamentally relational (Malpas 2009). As Doreen Massey (2005, 119, 140) states, the analysis through relationality in social space shows the momentariness of the places and the meaning of social relationships in places.

We assume that in social space, place attachment is connected to emotional bonds between people and their physical surroundings and to community attachment in the community context, both of which shape people-place relationships in suburbs. We also concede that place attachment with socio-political underpinnings is complex and ambivalent (Manzo 2014), especially in suburbs where social problems may result in weakening place attachment and social stigmatization (Stjernberg 2019). Therefore, in this study, we want to scrutinize how active residents and local experts perceive and view the suburbs of Huhtasuo and Keltimäki-Myllyjärvi and how they describe the community context and residents' activities and social relations in the communal places of the suburbs. We also scrutinize what elements local experts perceive as major challenges likely to reinforce or undermine place attachment in suburbs.

We also maintain that place attachment should be studied through the concept of community attachment, which considers collective connections (Tomaney 2015) between residents and their communities (Trentelmann 2009) important. Guizhen Ma (2021)

claims that community attachment, as a concept, is not well comprehended in studies on communities' place-making and individuals' perceptions of the community because many studies have focused on measuring community attachment instead of defining it (Ma 2021, 78). Ma's (2020) research showed how the community context is vitally important in community attachment and her findings from the survey data suggest that positive perceptions of community social and physical environments significantly encourage community attachment. Our goal is to enhance the concept of community attachment by studying community context via local experts' views and their perceptions of the specific characteristics of suburbs which include place narratives with community aspects but also problems (emotions, power, and stigma) in suburbs.

In our study, we focused on communal cultural activities and conducted ethnographic observations at suburban sites [1]. The research data includes 14 thematic interviews of 22 interviewees, participant observation of the community activities in the suburbs, and field diaries in which we reflect on the encounters in the field. Our analysis is based on ethnographic methods and aims to understand the relational spatiality of places and place attachment, emphasizing the different ways in which the places are viewed and experienced and where researchers and research participants have been entangled and co-implicated in place-making processes (Pain and Kindon 2007).

The area studied consists of two suburbs, Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi in Jyväskylä, a city in Central Finland. Jyväskylä is the seventh largest city in Finland and in 2021 had 144,473 inhabitants (City of Jyväskylä 2022). These suburbs have similar histories and were built in the 1970s, when similar new housing estates were built around the largest cities in Finland (Kokkonen and others 2009). In urbanizing Finland in the 1950s, suburbs were established in peripheral surroundings on urban fringes and based on

the model of a forest city and later, in the late 1960s, on the ideal of the grid layout of so-called compact estates (Kemppainen 2017). At the time, these suburbs exemplified progressive urban planning, and the houses provided the very latest modern commodities to tens of thousands of new urban citizens and their families [2]. Later, the image of these urban suburbs changed. Due to the recession of the 1990s, high unemployment and poverty emerged in many Finnish suburbs. The 1990s also witnessed growth in immigrant populations and the construction of social housing. By 2010, suburbs became disadvantaged in socio-economic terms and underwent demographic changes (Stjernberg 2019) which in many Finnish suburbs have led to residential segregation by income or ethnicity (Kortteinen and Vaattovaara 2015; Hyötyläinen 2019). [3]

The public image of all Finnish suburbs has not changed in the same way. Many suburbs from the 1950s have been valued quite highly, whereas the suburbs of the 1960s and 1970s have had a worse reputation and are associated with poverty, insecurity, and disorder (Kemppainen 2017). This is also the case in our study areas, in the suburbs of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi, where various policy measures and public development projects have been implemented to promote residents' vitality and well-being.

In this article, place attachment is viewed by key informants who are local experts representing NGOs and public sector workers providing the community with various social services. Many of these local experts are current or former municipal councillors, members of local housing boards, and local immigrant activists. We chose these individuals for the study due to their special knowledge of the socio-cultural elements of

the suburbs studied and hence their familiarity with the challenges of residential areas, all of which affect the place attachment in these suburbs.

### **Approaches to place attachment and community ties in suburbs**

According to Williams and Miller (2021), there have been various interdisciplinary perspectives on place attachment where researchers across disciplines have aimed to develop different approaches to place attachment research. Some scholars have emphasized individual-level attachment, examining its emotional and cognitive components while others have focused on community-level attachments (see Manzo & Devine Wright 2021).

Earlier research on the emotional dimensions of place attachment has shown that most people develop emotional ties to places that are valued and taken care of, like natural surroundings (see Jorgensen & Stedman 2001; Eisenhauer and others 2000, Mesch and Manor 1998). These positive affective bonds contribute to the individual's will to maintain closeness to the residence place (Cross 2003). Thus, when scrutinizing place attachment on the individual level, it is important to note the meaning of long-term spatial relationships and continuities in different periods of residents' lives (see also Rishbeth and Powell 2013) and the meaning of positive memories for place attachment (see Lewicka 2014; also Diener and Hagen 2022). Duration of residence also increases community attachment. Hidalgo and others (2021) showed how the duration of residence and strong community ties affect place attachment positively and increase residents' activities and local participation (Toruńczyk-Ruiz and Martinović, 2020). Social activities are an important factor for community attachment, but they can also be studied at the level of discourses (see e.g., Di Masso and others 2021).

Discourses of social experts reflect on the shared values of the community and bring to the fore the clashes between the values of the communities that differ from those represented in the public discourse.

As in this article, we focus on social experts who, due to their active role in the communities, speak not only for themselves but for the groups that they interact with, our approach emphasizes the community-oriented and both an ethnographic and discursive approach to place attachment. We believe that each of them reveals different aspects relevant to place attachment. Discourse analysis enables us to scrutinize socio-politically significant issues such as the public image of the suburbs while the ethnographic approach focuses more on social activities and the subjective meanings of places represented by social experts.

In an urban setting, studying place attachment can help us to understand the affective and political dimensions connected to everyday life in diverse urban residential areas (Clark and others 2017), i.e., in places where discourses of place can establish sectional interests related to social groups in public places, and social ties, which are often defined in spatial practices (Cresswell 1996), and with emotional and affective exclusions (Sibley 1995).

When studying place attachment in socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs, it is important to acknowledge that socio-spatial relationships produce societal attitudes and prejudices and maintain normative and ascriptive power between people and places.

Research has shown that social ties and ethno-racial heterogeneity can explain variations in place attachment and affect social cohesion, such as ethno-racial minorities and socio-economic disadvantage, which can lead to lower place attachment in more deprived suburbs (Bailey and others 2012). In his study on a Finnish suburb, Teemu Kemppainen (2017) discovered that when insecurity and social disorder (e.g., alcohol-related unrest

and public drunkenness) occur, these can lead to deterioration in the quality of life and may result in weakening place attachment. In some cases, however, the bad reputation and image imposed from outside do not correspond with the residents' experiences of place attachment. The sociologist Lotta Junnilainen (2019) conducted five years of ethnographic fieldwork in two Finnish suburbs, analyzing the ways in which outsiders' negative views of the area affected the residents' lives. Her study highlights residents' strong emotional and spatial attachment to their living environment and the importance of communality and social relations. Junnilainen claims that the residents' experiences are not recognized outside the community due to prevailing middle-class ideals.

### **The Suburbs of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi as examples of Finnish Suburbs**

The suburbs of Huhtasuo and the Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi were home to approximately 16,000 inhabitants in 2020 (City of Jyväskylä 2022) and are located 3-8 kilometers from the city center. They have good infrastructure and public services. What these suburbs have in common is high unemployment, low levels of education, and high levels of single mother-headed families living in certain residential areas. At their centers these suburbs have shopping areas (like the Huhtasuo Shopping Center) with grocery stores, few public services provided by the City of Jyväskylä, and some private and third-sector services. Other public places in the suburbs are food shops, restaurants, libraries, Evangelical Lutheran Church premises [4], and primary and comprehensive schools. In addition, the public transport connections are good, providing easy access from there to the city center. Regionally there are some major differences between the two suburbs. Both Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi are ethnically and socially diverse, but the population of



Huhtasuo is currently on the increase. In recent decades Huhtasuo's population growth has been driven by considerable investment in developing the area with new housing constructions, including detached houses. The City of Jyväskylä has also implemented several urban development planning projects in the area. Nonetheless, the proportion of unemployed people is higher there than in the whole city of Jyväskylä (City of Jyväskylä 2022). In Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi, the population is diminishing (City of Jyväskylä 2022), and no major investments in building new houses have emerged. The area is strictly divided between old Keltinmäki with the apartment blocks from the 1970s and 1980s housing working-class people and the later middle-class Myllyjärvi area with terraced houses and detached houses.

In both suburbs, Huhtasuo's and Keltinmäki's long suburban history is important, especially for local elderly residents, who have lived in these suburbs since the 1970s. Since the early 2000s several immigrant people with various ethnic backgrounds (i.e., Russian, African, Arabic, and Kurd-speaking people) have moved to both suburbs. The suburbs' natural environment and well-maintained outdoor areas (sports fields, parks, recreation areas etc.) offer communal social activities for residents. In both suburbs, other important semi-public places with community participation include the residents' association's community facilities (Kylätoimisto/Kylätalo) maintained by third-sector organizations, or the City of Jyväskylä's, Huhtasuo public community center.

< Here: Figure 1. Map. Caption: Map of the suburbs of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi outside the city of Jyväskylä, Finland. (Photo by the City of Jyväskylä)

Huhtasuo is a large, diverse, and multicultural community located northeast of Jyväskylä. The population of Huhtasuo was 9,327 in 2020 (City of Jyväskylä 2022). Huhtasuo currently consists largely of multistorey apartment blocks built in the 1970s and 1980s. The suburb's public services include two supermarkets at the Huhtakeskus Shopping Center and the nearby Seppälä Shopping Center, a public health center, a library, a service center for senior citizens, an Evangelical Lutheran community center, and a recently built comprehensive school. Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi is one of the oldest suburbs in Jyväskylä, where construction began in 1975, and the majority of the original residents worked in primary industry. The population was 6,887 in 2020 (City of Jyväskylä 2022). Myllyjärvi is located between Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi and the main Keljo shopping area. The suburb's public services include convenience stores, a library, a primary school, daycare centers, and Evangelical Lutheran services. The larger Keljo Shopping Center is also located nearby. >

<Here Figure 2. Image. Caption. In the Huhtasuo suburb, the Huhtasuo Shopping Center is an important public place for social gatherings, where residents spend their leisure time. (Photo by author 1)>

<Here: Figure 3 and 4. Images. Community facilities of the Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi housing association and the Huhtasuo housing association (Photo by author 1) >

## **Methods and research data**

This empirical research takes an ethnographic approach focusing on social activities and communal places of two suburbs. The ethnographic methods applied include thematic interviews, field diaries, and participant observation. We observed everyday life in the areas, joined residents' social events, and walked around the outdoor recreation areas. We also conducted participant observation and interviewed local experts at the residents' associations' facilities and other public venues such as the Youth Center and libraries and wrote field diaries during fieldwork in suburbs.

Thematic interviews were conducted between May and December 2021 with altogether 22 local experts, 16 women and six men experts from Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi. Local experts had organizational experience and extensive knowledge of the residents, which in the context of their lives, enabled them to discuss the positive and negative experiences of residents and how inequality and poverty emerged in the suburbs. Among the interviewees, eight local experts were residents of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi. The local expert interviews usually lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Ten interviews were conducted in Huhtasuo and four in Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi. One interview was conducted remotely in January 2022. Experts interviewed were selected from Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi civil society organizations (CSO) such as residents' housing associations (chairpersons/vice-chairpersons and project workers) and experts from local civil society organizations (CSO) working in both areas at the community college or residents' housing associations (chairpersons, vice-chairpersons) or in local non-governmental organizations (NGO) (youth theater / pensioners' association's chairpersons) or for the City of Jyväskylä (in education, culture, inclusion service) and at an Evangelical-

Lutheran church facility. We supplemented these interviews with entries in our fieldwork diaries.

The interviews were conducted in an ethically responsible manner, where participation was voluntary, and the interviewees provided written informed consent. All interviews were conducted at local community facilities or at the offices of the local associations to make the interviewees' participation easy and convenient. They were recorded and transcribed. In the text, the identities of the interviewees are anonymized.

In the analysis of the expert interview material, we investigated how the local experts characterized the areas and their strengths and challenges. The interviewees' responses were categorized and divided into three specific themes: 1) suburb characteristics and strengths, 2) individual/collective ties and emotions, 3) challenges related to reputation.

Applying discourse analysis, we identified both positive and negative perceptions of the neighborhoods. Positive discourses include affective expressions such as civic pride, sense of community and adjectives such as nice, beautiful, wonderful. Negative perceptions were often related to characterizing certain places as old, rusty or ugly and/or pointing out groups of people who are regarded as unwanted or disruptive.

During the ethnographic fieldwork, we visited Huhtasuo and Keltimäki-Myllyjärvi physical environments, various residential areas, shopping centers/areas, and recreational areas (activity parks, playgrounds, and sports areas). We (two researchers) conducted ethnographic participatory observation and sensory ethnography observation and witnessed cultural activities in various public places such as the residents' associations' premises and the City of Jyväskylä Service Center and Huhtakeskus Shopping Center. We also kept field diaries in 2021 after visiting the recreational parks and local public

places or when we joined local CSO/NGO activities in both suburbs. We photographed and read digital materials (mostly internet pages and social media sites) and local newspapers to obtain local perspectives related to the themes of our study. We assume that the Covid-19 pandemic may have had an impact on our research results, especially where we conducted fieldwork, namely in the suburbs' residents' associations' facilities, where in 2021 the number of visitors was less than usual, especially during the winter months.

We concede that in our study of place experiences and attachments, our data may be limited but we stress that our data reflect both resident and non-resident experts' views and thus highlight varied perspectives of those who have an important active role in the communities. In both suburbs, residents actively visit and utilize the local community facilities that the experts represent. Non-resident experts are either workers in NGO/CSO organizations or the City of Jyväskylä's education, culture, and inclusion service sections, and therefore have information about the public and third sector actors of the whole city.

## **Results: Place attachment and social bonds in the interviews with local experts**

### *Physical places, aesthetics, and nature*

The properties of places may imply strong place attachment and often include esthetic appreciation, senses, and emotions (Lewicka 2011). As Eisenhauer and others (2000, 432) state, natural environmental factors such as landscape, natural integrity, or wildlife can make a place special for a resident. The meaning of the everyday local environment became evident in the descriptions of social experts, who often mentioned how unique the natural beauty spots and outdoor recreation areas were. According to them, these areas

were also important places for outdoor communal activities and gatherings, as well as mingling with friends.

"The residents stressed how the proximity of local nature was important for them and encouraged people to move about in natural surroundings and meet their friends there". (Local CSO experts, May 18, 2021).

In the interviews, the local experts, who had lived decades in the suburbs, were active in the local CSO/NGO community associations' activities described the feeling of their neighborhoods and the originality of places with awe, emphasizing the aesthetics of the local natural surroundings close to physical residential housing areas (Field diary Keltinmäki, October 20, 2021, first author).

"I am very content with this area. This is a wonderful place, I am a Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi resident, and I am proud of being a resident of this place. It is a good place; it is beautiful, and we have stunning natural surroundings here" (Local NGO expert, June 9, 2021)

"For a long time, I lived in a detached house in the countryside and now I live in an apartment building, but nowhere else have I had such a wonderful apartment building environment as here. Well-maintained courtyards and streets. Environment, wherever you go, there is a forest where you can go to see beautiful trees and stones. This is my dream." (Local NGO expert June 9, 2021)

The local experts also added that local natural surroundings and recreation sites encourage residents to engage in outdoor activities on jogging trails or walking paths around the local ponds or in the local nature parks. Specific places highlighted were the rhododendron/alpine rose park at Keltinmäki and an activity park at Kangaslampi in Huhtasuo. One of the experts reported that the suburb's outdoor areas are popular venues for social gatherings of immigrant groups, like when the Bangladeshi immigrants play

cricket matches at Huhtasuo's sports park or how, at an activity park, the Russian-speaking community has traditionally had picnics/parties with families (unfortunately Covid restrictions had stopped these social events).

As these examples show, in both suburbs the neighboring natural environment and recreational areas offer the residents everyday esthetic experiences, creating satisfaction but also encouraging residents to be active in the Huhtasuo and Keltimäki-Myllyjärvi environments. The parks and walking paths are sites for recreational activities where the residents can meet their friends and organize informal social gatherings.

*Sense of community and memories connected to shared places*

Ma (2021,77) explains how social bonds form an important part of understanding community attachment and play a key role in the sense of community and community development. In community attachment, the place is enhanced by specific social factors, like social ties, interaction with people (friends, acquaintances, family activities), and cultural aspects (i.e., memories of the place). The main places for community activities of the suburbs studied include residents' associations' facilities (referred to literally as “village houses” – in Finnish *Kylätoimisto/Kylätalo*) established in the areas in the 1970s, and the City of Jyväskylä community activity center (*yhteistoimintapiste*) [5]. Other facilities are branch libraries, local shopping centers, hobby and recreational facilities, Evangelical-Lutheran facilities, school facilities, youth centers, and a local theater space, which are also important gathering places offering residents various free time activities.

The local (CSO/NGO) experts interviewed stated that public community facilities offer everyday social interaction and organized residents' activities promote residents' social collaboration and well-being in Huhtasuo and Keltimäki-Myllyjärvi. They bring together

people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the experts stressed how local community centers offer active social connectedness and day-time activities, i.e., residents can read magazines, see art exhibits, play bingo, sing karaoke, or have community singsongs, do handicrafts, and engage in sports activities together with other residents. These shared places offer activities specially targeted at elderly, lonely, and unemployed residents. The local community centers also conduct community development projects, which empower and inspire residents with specific project activities and public lectures and promote employment i.e., via voluntary work. In the interviews, the social (CSO/NGO) experts stressed that community attachment appears at different phases of a resident's life while promoting togetherness, social well-being, and resident satisfaction in suburbs.

"The resident's housing association's facility ("Village House") has made a huge difference and they have done their best, and it is such a little well-attended community facility that you could go there to print out, there are computers, and you can drink coffee, which is cheap, and the employees are really friendly. Such community facilities as the village offices in Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi are an oasis here." (Local youth service expert 28.7.2021)

In the interviews, the local experts from Huhtasuo or Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi emphasized how communal social practices promote suburb cohesion and thus strengthen residents' suburb ties. Despite the low socio-economic status of Keltinmäki, a strong sense of community with ties to the suburb may foster community identity and social solidarity among residents. This can be seen in a comment from one resident social expert:

"There are many poor, unemployed, old and deprived people in this place but perhaps for this very reason, these two areas have very strong residents and the residents who take



care of themselves and each other, which I think is a pretty valuable thing" (Local NGO expert June 9, 2021)

One non-resident expert reported how in Huhtasuo the community spirit is very strong among elderly long-term residents. This becomes apparent in a local expert's comment describing how community attachment in Huhtasuo is a result of neighborhood solidarity, where residents support each other and the suburb transforms into a place where sense of community manifests itself, as in Doreen Massey's (2005, 119) 'thrown-together-ness' meeting place:

"It is like a village, where residents act together for common purposes... And there is a strong sense of community in the area and a "help-each-other" mentality...and people have been living here since the 1970s, so they know each other for good and bad (Local CSO expert May 18, 2021)

While communal places strengthen residents' sense of belonging to their residential areas, the question emerges as to whether the poor socio-economic status of the population in the suburbs can even result in positive social practices and togetherness, and high resilience among residents. This is revealed by an elderly community expert from the suburb of Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi:

"Many poor, unemployed, old and deprived people live here... but perhaps for this very reason, these two areas have very strong residents and residents who take care of themselves and each other, which, I think, is a valuable thing" (NGO expert, September 6, 2021)

Communality and a sense of community are often experienced in places which connect people with interactions and with memories (Manzo 2005). The Perttula youth facility established in 1979 has been maintained by the City of Jyväskylä. According to the local

social, youth, and parish experts from the Huhtasuo area, a multicultural youth center called Perttula is a place of social interaction at the Huhtasuo shopping center. In youth facilities, young people can meet friends, play games, listen to, and play music on various instruments, do their homework, or just stay in the café spaces. In the suburb, the place is a historically significant and highly functional communal place that attracts young people (including local Roma youth) from Huhtasuo and elsewhere in the city. The place is also remembered by generations of youth from the 1970s until today as their special place (Field diary, Huhtasuo May 27, 2021, second author). This became evident from one youth expert's description of how the place attaches young people to the suburb and connects their histories through memories of creativity:

"Over the years, many young people who leave the nest, some tend to come back, and a few will return. Like adult returnees who come to see if Perttula (a physical building) is still here... and their paintings on the walls, which they painted... as some former visitor sees her painting and says, 'is there still that painting which we painted on the wall?', which tells about the importance of the place... how you have lived elsewhere for a long time and you still remember Perttula and come to see the place" (youth service expert, May 27, 2021).

Perttula youth center has functioned in the same place for six decades. Thus, the place ties generations of people to the suburb and reinforces residents' emotional attachment to Huhtasuo. The youth center also has an important meaning for former residents who have moved elsewhere and left the suburb. Physical traces of these former residents remain in this specific place as its walls features with paintings and graffiti from different decades. These artwork by different generations serve as something to remember them by (see e.g., Lems 2016).

<Here: Figures 5, 6 and 7. Images. Painting in the Perttula Youth Center: "South Park" (drawn by a group of girls in 2000) and graffiti in the common room at Perttula Youth Center. (Photos by author 1)>

*Challenges: Safety and the reputation of suburbs*

A sense of security is often an indicator of good place attachment and usually shows a good relationship with the place (Mesch and Manor 1998). In both suburbs, place attachment is tied to aspects of the place (geographical and cultural dimensions) and individual and common emotional ties, values, and culture, which differ according to individuals and social contexts. In disadvantaged suburbs, a place can be described through exclusion, where places and residential areas are imbued with power, and certain individuals or groups of people may be excluded (Sibley 1995).

In public spaces with a diversity of users and passer-by, such as the shopping area, the atmosphere may change when different groups of people are present. A local expert described the Huhtasuo shopping center as a contradictory space:

"Now that there have been summer days after the corona situation has eased, beggars and local people are moving around the Huhtakeskus shopping area. Someone is playing the guitar, and the situation can rapidly change from one atmosphere to another, as someone sits around and requests money, a little vague-looking, I feel a little nervous about passing by, and on the second day, in the same place, the atmosphere is like being in a carnival" (Local CSO expert May 18, 2021)

Sometimes descriptions by local experts showed how places do not produce attachment, especially if the perception or value of the place is based on safety and attractiveness. This became clear when, in the interviews, local experts (housing associations, social, NGO art, parish and education, and culture sector) described factors like social disorder, crime, and feelings of insecurity that reinforce or weaken attachment to specific public places, like the shopping areas, in both suburbs. For example, the representatives of the local Evangelical Lutheran Church stated that the Huhtasuo shopping mall should be demolished due to the insecurity it causes for children, and to the decayed condition of the place (see Saarivirta and others 2020). Place, according to local experts, disturbing activities of marginalized groups of people (substance abusers/unemployed people/immigrants) may affect attachment and decrease residential attachment to Huhtasuo. One non-resident educational expert's description shows concern filled with suburb-with-problem rhetoric, which relates to marginalized groups of people whose activities contest local everyday life:

"And that mall is the kind of area that probably brings people together as well. I am not saying that the problems come only from those of immigrant background. There are also problems and challenges in a wide range of families. Perhaps you can see the consumption of alcohol, especially in that nearby park, where some people may already start drinking alcohol in the morning." (Education expert, May 18, 2021)

In place attachment, according to Lewicka (2011, 210), it seems that "suburb diversity does not seem to foster place attachment" especially in places where people's values and different ways of life may impair mutual tolerance and intermittently render places dangerous, especially for elderly people and children (see Saarivirta and others 2020). In our case this seems to be true to some extent. In our analysis we have shown how the shared public spaces where communal activities take place seem to foster a sense of

community and community attachment which challenge the negative public image. These insider views of the suburban residents are often underestimated and ignored in public discussions (see also Junnilainen 2019).

In our analysis, we have shown how there are competing narratives and practices connected to specific spaces in the suburbs of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki that reveal place attachment and the diverse socio-cultural basis in both suburbs. This gives rise to different types of place attachment and qualitative differences or identities in specific places (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001; Di Masso and others 2021).

## **Discussion**

In this article we provided a contextual understanding of how place attachment appears in local experts' descriptions of the suburbs of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi just outside the Finnish city of Jyväskylä. In so doing, they characterized specific places and evaluated residential and community attachment to places in terms of their strengths and challenges. We want to illustrate how both suburbs are ethnically and socio-culturally diverse and have witnessed segregation and decline in socio-spatial level, which have temporally affected place attachment in various ways. We emphasize that the value of this study lies in describing everyday suburban life with context-specific features of a Nordic welfare society. The ethnographic approach helped us to understand how the communities have evolved and how attachment is connected to residents' social ties that manifest in specific places. The residents' experiences of suburban places are connected to collective interaction, participation, and layers of memories and rootedness.

Place attachment is created through positively experienced bonds to specific places and to the community (see Matarrita-Cascante and others 2010, Mihaylov and Perkins 2014).

The characteristics of local natural surroundings also foster place attachment (see Koistinen and others). The community experts of Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi repeatedly emphasized how residents value the outdoor recreational areas and the presence of nature. In addition, local experts' descriptions of public places in Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi revealed the importance of community attachment for residents, which became evident through the local connections and social activities of local people and the enhanced sense of community and memories related to events in reinforcing community attachment.

During our field visits, we recognized how one of the most important places in residential areas was the residents' housing associations' premises (low-threshold venues open to all) where community attachment creates social and behavioral bonds, resilience, and social solidarity. We, as researchers, want to stress how the meaning of shared places in Huhtasuo and Keltinmäki-Myllyjärvi merits attention and concern at the policy level. We claim that, in suburban centers, public places open to all are important "sites of encounters", which serve to attach residents and maintain "a crucial filter of social practice and affect emotive (positive) responses towards others" (Amin 2008, 18).

From the Nordic perspective, we feel that it is important to give a more detailed understanding of attachment regarding how socio-economically disadvantaged areas in Finland have become stigmatized through a highly categorized concept of "problem suburb", which produces a reframed picture of suburbs.

Currently, our study findings are congruent with those of Junnilainen (2019, 288), who claims that middle-class aspirations are present in place narratives about the public image of Finnish suburbs. These views disregard residents' own communal activities. Our study of social experts' discourses also shows how the outsiders' views often emphasize

negative issues such as social segregation and insecurity whereas the experts and residents themselves highlight social activities, sense of community and attachment to place.

Our study also has similarities with Ma's (2020) study of community attachment, which stresses the valued meaning of perceptions of communities' social and physical environments in promoting community attachment. In our study, the experts' narratives emphasize the meaning of local social activities and communal places for the suburban residents and their communities.

Nonetheless, what surprised us was that up to today, both suburbs have suffered from prejudice and territorial stigma, which is greatly exacerbated by negative public discourse. According to our interviewees, social segregation in both suburbs is emphasized mostly by non-resident local experts who defined them as "problem suburbs" due to economic deprivation and lack of safety. In their views, this can be seen in commercial public places where the social quality of places results from restlessness and negative feelings like insecurity (see similar results from Saarivirta and others 2020, Stjernberg 2019; Junnilainen 2019). This discourse reflects territorial feelings and exclusion that shape people's behavior, thoughts, and language (Diener and Hagen 2022; Di Masso and others 2021) and affect place attachment.

### *Contested Space*

Our research also shows that attachment to place is apt to change. In both suburbs, attachment to places differs, and much of it depends on who is speaking, when, and

where. The situated and momentary understanding of place gives rise to different types of place attachment (Di Masso and others 2014).

The socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs with working-class origins that we studied are burdened by a bad reputation, which is also connected to negative public narratives and media reports. Local experts' narratives of places have shown how stigma affects not only ethnic minorities but also mainstream Finnish residents in the suburbs. When addressing the negative public image of the suburbs, the experts refer to the presence of certain groups of people (lower income/unemployed/substance abusers) in public places. Due to this, we believe that it is important to study further the contradictions between the community's and residents' insights, as well as issues of stigma and stigmatization appearing in the local discourses, public discussions, and media.

## Endnotes

[1] The research is part of the University of Jyväskylä research project "Forms and meanings of culture in the 2020's suburbs: two case studies from Jyväskylä" (University of Jyväskylä 2022), which started in 2021. (See <https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/yfi/en/research/projects/kulttuuritoiminnan-muodot-ja-merkitykset-2020-luvun-lahiossa>)

[2] Urbanization began in Finland relatively late by comparison with other European countries, as modernizing agriculture no longer needed a manual workforce. As industry flourished and offered employment, many former rural citizens moved to cities and became part of the urban working class. However, by the 1970s, the manufacturing sector



was already in decline and the service sector increased, providing more and more managerial, professional, secretarial, and service work. Class divisions in this so-called post-industrial society were diversified, and the residents of urban suburbs were no longer solely working class.

[3] In Finnish society, which typifies a Nordic welfare state, inequalities within communities are currently relatively low (Stjernberg 2019, 547). In international comparison, the level of social segregation in Finnish suburbs has not been high (Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016). In the 2000s, residential segregation increased significantly, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016). Hence, the present Finnish government has a strong political will to prevent and reduce residential segregation in Finland, implemented in policy programs and financial investments in the largest cities (Ministry of the Environment 2022). The situation is still different from that in Sweden, where the residential segregation of suburbs has led to polarization and large-scale unrest in bigger cities (e.g., Dahlstedt & Ekholm 2018).

[4] The role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) remains important in the public sphere and among local communities in Finnish suburbs. In the suburbs, the church provides diaconal services, which are closely integrated with the other parish activities, but also holds religious services, and engages in social work as an aid to families, elderly people, and disadvantaged people. The Church also provides various services and civic activities in the local parishes (Pessi and Grönlund 2012)

[5] In Finland, public service points known as "low threshold meeting places" (in Finnish "*matalan kynnyksen kohtaamispaikat*"), offer social connections and interaction and promote community ties and social inclusivity for residents of many urban housing estates in Finland. The places are semi-public places maintained by various civic actors.

The activities organized in these places are free, so a poor economic situation does not prevent people from joining in these activities (Seppälä and others 2020).

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