

# ”I just want to be seen for who I am”

Selfies of stigma and the struggle for recognition

Taina Meriluoto  
[taina.meriluoto@helsinki.fi](mailto:taina.meriluoto@helsinki.fi)  
@MeriTaina



# Experience-based activism

- Two Finnish groups of experience-based activists:
  - "homelessness activists"
  - "mental health activists"

"Our goal is to dissolve the stigma associated with mental health problems, decrease the feeling of otherness, get people out from the margins, to tackle the feeling of being worth less than others, to give an experience of being heard, of belonging."  
(Fieldnotes 19.2.2020)

- Offline and online ethnography, incl. 2–3 interviews with 14 key informants



# How experience-based activists fight stigmatisation online?

- Stigma and recognition are the result of culturally patterned (e)valuative practices that lead to some voices being highlighted and valued while leaving some silenced or disregarded (Lamont 2011; 2012; 2018, Lamont et al. 2016).
- How people who experience stigma ***navigate and challenge these devaluing and discrediting patterns?***
- Selfies on social media as self-representations → as tools to deal with stigma



Taina: What is the main thing you would like to have an impact on in our society?

Loviisa: Well generally, be it related to mental ill-health or anything else, really, I would like to change and widen the representations. To find the people and themes who are not seen right now. [---] Now, in particular, **it's about broadening the imagery related to mental ill-health. And through that, challenging what kind of work is important, what kind of activities are important. In general, what is seen as valuable in this society. I want to broaden that.**

Interview with Loviisa 4.9.2020



# Political selfies?

- ‘selfie citizenship’: claims made by ordinary citizens via the use of their own networked self-portraits (Kuntsman 2017)
- Moving beyond the simple conception of “a face and a sign” (e.g. Ferreday 2017)
- *“If you’re in a marginalised position, the very act of being visible in public discussion as yourself is political.”*  
(Fieldnotes 7.8.2020)
- “The presence of the body as a political claim” (Asenbaum 2019), “selfies embody difference that needs to be acknowledged, accepted, and seen” (Nikunen 2019)
- **How does “being visible” work as a tool to fight stigma? What is specific about participating “with and through your own face”?**



# Three strategies

- Testifying normality
- Claiming recognition for "who I am", free from any collective identifiers of group membership
- Contesting what counts as normal and valuable

# Images that testify normality



Photo by [Gursimrat Ganda](#) on [Unsplash](#)

“On my Instagram account, I’m showing my life as quite an ordinary young person’s life. And by showing that **I want to say that my life is pretty ordinary despite the stigma and all.** That yeah, I have this mental health diagnosis, but so what. Like, fuck the diagnosis! That it doesn’t need to mean anything.”

Lilja 7.11.2019



# Images that highlight individual uniqueness



"I wanted to break the stereotypical image of a homeless person. That not all homeless people are middle-aged men with substance abuse issues. And homelessness isn't that person's only feature. What defines me much more, for example, is that I love animals, dogs in particular."

Helmi 30.4.2020





# Images that contest what counts as valuable



"It's nice to show those sides of life that don't usually count as displayable."

Silja 4.5.2020



# Moving forward

- **Representation:**  
Accentuated individuality or the unique self as a tool to "broaden the imagery" of a stigmatised group?
- **Recognition, identity and performativity:**  
The self as "performative act of becoming"  
(Mansbridge 2005, Butler 2015; Asenbaum 2020) –  
How to claim recognition for "a fluid self"?
- **Online embodiment**  
Visual presence as activism