

# Interaction rituals in an open drug scene

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## Abstract

**Aims:** Open drug scenes can be found in most major cities in Europe. Despite often being closed down by the police, the drug community continues to exist, and the drug scenes reappear elsewhere. There seem to be forces that hold these communities together, regardless of the substances used. In this study we explore whether interaction rituals have an impact on the decision by people to stay in the drug scene or to return after quitting their drug use. **Method:** In this ethnographic study, one of the researchers spent time in an open drug scene in a Norwegian city over a one-year span and gathered data on the human interactions hosted by this scene. In addition, the researcher interviewed eight people from the scene to obtain greater insight into their lives and perceptions of the scene, drawing on Goffman's and Collins's theories about rituals. **Findings:** Three themes emerged. First, drug users bonded as a group and resisted what they called "normal people" passing by. Second, users demonstrated the importance of sharing drugs and services and adhering to the scene's rules of conduct. The third and final theme is the focus of attention and the production of emotional energy. **Conclusion:** The experience of being outsiders and the need to hide some of their activities seemed to make it necessary for persons in the drug scene to have their own rules and rituals. These rules and rituals can be regarded as "interaction rituals". They provide participants with the symbols of group membership, emotional energy, and group solidarity. This makes it hard to leave the scene and might explain why those who do often return.

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## Keywords

ethnography, illicit drug use, open drug scene, qualitative, rituals

## Introduction

“I dare not go near the Bench because then I will be hooked immediately. I cannot be around people who use dope; it triggers me too much”. Nils, a man in his late forties, expressed this view to a researcher during a conversation in an opiate maintenance therapy waiting room. The Bench that he refers to is a meeting place for people with severe drug problems. It is an open scene in the sense that it has no physical barriers, it is accessible to everybody, and passers-by can see who is there and that they have drug problems. Nils used heroin for many years, but he now lives in his own flat provided by the welfare state, away from the drug scene, and has not used any illegal substances for seven years. He is afraid that if he interacts with people on the Bench, he will start taking drugs again. His statement shows that he perceives the Bench as a social magnet that he needs to avoid. He seems to think of the Bench as an agency or “force” that can initiate processes that will “trigger” him to start using drugs again. Most likely, Nils harbours memories of things that took place on the Bench and wants to protect himself from re-enacting them. People who have no experience with heavy drug use and its related stigmatisation are unlikely to be familiar with the “pull factor” that the Bench represents (Bourdieu, 1989; Lalander, 2009). Therefore, in contrast to Nils, others are more likely to be disgusted by what they see there and are not at risk of becoming drawn to the place. Nils’s remarks underscore his relationship to drugs and to other drug users.

Open drug scenes are found in most European cities and can function as meeting places for those who do not fit into ordinary society (Nafstad, 2012). Such open drug scenes are undesired in the cityscape, and, in many European cities, the police have shut them down

and chased away users in order to “clean up the city” (Hartnoll, 1996; Waal, Clausen, Gjersing, & Gossop, 2014). Frequent arguments in favour of closing these areas include the assumption that they serve as a means to lure young people into the illegal drug scene, that people who frequent them litter, and that neighbourhoods that host them experience higher rates of crime (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2008). When such open drug scenes are closed down, they do not disappear; the occupants only tend to find new places (Bukten et al., 2012; Hartnoll, 1996; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2008).

These communities of drug users seem to have a certain robustness that helps sustain them irrespective of their being high-risk environments regularly characterised by violence, betrayal, communicable diseases, and death (McNeil, Shannon, Shaver, Kerr, & Small, 2014). In this article, we aim to examine the components of this robustness and investigate what makes these drug-using communities so hard to leave. We will develop an understanding of the social and bodily dimensions of the activities that unfold there and focus on the Bench as a place where people meet and where these meetings involve various types of rituals.

## Previous research and theoretical perspectives

Numerous studies have shown that people in marginalised drug scenes achieve status by having access to money, friends, and drug-related skills as well as possessing business acumen (Bourgois, 2003; Smith-Solbakken & Tungland, 1999; Svensson, 1996/2007). These qualities are important factors for remaining in the drug community or for returning to it after a period of abstinence in ordinary society, where such assets are not valued (Bourgois, 2003; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009; Lalander,

2001b; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2008; Smith-Solbakken & Tunland, 1999; Svensson, 1996/2007). Inspired by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Sandberg and Pedersen (2006/2009) referred to these resources as "street capital", a form of field-specific competence that cannot easily be transferred to other fields and therefore represents an obstacle when persons using drugs seek to move to another field (Smith-Solbakken & Tunland, 1999). People who attempted to kick the drug habit and stay away from the drug scene might have longed to return because the scene represents a setting in which their former skills were qualifications and where memories could be shared with others (Lalander, 2009, 2016; Smith-Solbakken & Tunland, 1999; Svensson, 1996/2007).

In a study of young heroin users in Sweden, Lalander (2001a) highlighted the importance of symbols and rituals among young heroin users in the early 2000s. Drug rituals assumed a special significance, uniting the young users in what he called a "hidden microcosm". By this, he meant that young people using heroin developed a shared competence with the substance and how to handle the various risks and challenges associated with the illegal drug economy. This incorporated qualification enabled them to interact in a manner available only to them. In another study from a street-based drug scene in Norway, Sandøy (2015) used the term "ritual" to describe how migrants who felt excluded from Norwegian society experienced affiliation and established a position for themselves in the drug economy. Drug transactions viewed as interaction rituals helped the migrants to create group solidarity. Sandøy further described how the drug scene was characterised by resource scarcity and that the migrants, despite that, shared drugs to prevent withdrawal symptoms (cf. Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). In an open drug scene in Norway, Grønnestad and Lalander (2015) found that in the marginalised position of the drug scene, there is a mutuality of the interaction pattern in which users' stories and narratives were of

key importance, creating a sense of dignity that they did not experience in ordinary society.

## **Interaction rituals**

In order to explore the social life of the scene, we will base our analysis mainly on Randall Collins's (1993) theories on interaction rituals. Interaction rituals represent collective actions performed in collective understandings, which is how cultures are constructed and expressed (Collins, 2004). Collins is strongly influenced not only by Goffman's (1967/1982) micro-description of ordinary patterns in everyday life and the production of rituals, but also by Durkheim's (1912/2012) studies of sacred objects and rituals. Rituals consist of specific actions, which might be regarded as types of ceremonies that produce emotional experiences or energy. Emotional energy is a kind of power source that can be expressed in joy, enthusiasm, contentment, and willpower. This emotional energy has a social impact. Collins argues that people continually search for this emotional energy and that it can be regarded as a common denominator of rational action (1993). Emotional energy is a product of "interaction rituals". Collins outlines four main ingredients of interaction rituals: (i) the physical density of social interactions, (ii) the boundedness of group interactions, (iii) the mutual focus of attention, and (iv) the commonality of the emotional mood (Collins, 1993, p. 206). A successful interaction ritual might produce emotional energy, group solidarity, and symbols of group membership (Collins, 2004, p. 7). The participants then experience themselves as part of a shared reality; the "glue" that holds society together is emotional energy (Collins, 2004).

Despite extensive research on drug use and rituals, there is a lack of knowledge about what holds open illegal drug communities together. In this article, we ask two questions:

1. How can we understand the value of interaction rituals in an open drug scene?
2. Do rituals have an impact on users' decisions to stay in or return to the scene?

## Method

To obtain insight into the interaction patterns of an (apparently) open drug scene, participant observation was considered a relevant method, and the researcher spent a sufficient amount of time in the subject setting. Adhering to the ethnographic and interactionist tradition, we focused our interest on the immediate: what is not obvious to external observers, but what ethnographic researchers are trained to see, document, and analyse. To obtain access to the research field, the first author spent a period of three weeks attending an inter-municipal programme and meeting place for people using illicit drugs. The programme's staff members enjoyed legitimacy in the overall drug scene and could thus provide the researcher with access to the open drug scene. The persons whom the researcher became acquainted with, in turn, served as ambassadors to those who frequented the Bench, and they further vouched for the researcher in his later contact with the drug scene. As expected in an ethnographic study of a marginalised community, the researcher was associated with the authorities and not immediately accepted (Becker, 1963/2004). The researcher thus stayed in this open drug scene for a few hours three days a week over a period of one year.

### *Participants and data collection*

The data are mainly from the open drug scene of the Bench. The Bench consists of two benches located under a bicycle shelter at the end of a transit station in the middle of a mid-sized Norwegian city. Approximately 70–85 persons, mostly men, are regular users of the Bench. They are aged 25–65 years, with an

average age of approximately 40 years. Historically, the Bench was frequented by people who mainly used alcohol. Today, the Bench hosts a mix of people using both alcohol and illicit drugs, mainly methamphetamine, heroin, cannabis, buprenorphine, alcohol, GHB, and pills. Most of the town's inhabitants know the Bench as a drug scene, and only people who use drugs visit it.

The data are based on field notes written immediately after the observations, including descriptions of the activities, the number of people present, what they did, what they talked about and, not least, the reactions to the activities and persons present. Special narratives were memorised and recounted on an audio device. In addition, five men and three women from the drug scene were interviewed to obtain greater insight into their lives and perceptions of the drug scene. The interviews were semi-structured, and participants were asked to tell their stories, talk about their ideas about the future, and to describe their affiliation with the drug scene. The interviews lasted 30–90 minutes. Three of the people were interviewed twice, providing a total of 11 interviews. The field study was conducted from May 2012 to May 2013, and the interviews were undertaken from June 2012 to April 2015. Over the 12 months of observing the Bench, the researcher was in contact with 70–80 people affiliated with the drug scene. The people included in the study had used illicit drugs for many years, and many had gone through repeated periods of rehabilitation. One of the main challenges was establishing a degree of familiarity and trust sufficient for the researcher's presence to have only a minimal influence on the activities. Conversations in the open drug community were not recorded, since this could have had a detrimental effect on the group's interactions and because it would have been impossible to obtain informed written consent from all those involved. However, verbal consent was obtained and information about the study was provided to all participants.

The study was undertaken in accordance with the principles of research ethics defined in the 2014 Declaration of Helsinki, and it has been approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. Requirements for anonymity and confidentiality have been ensured.

### Data analysis

We used qualitative content analysis (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The field notes and the interviews were carefully read a number of times (naïve reading) and categorised into units of meaning. The units of meaning were entered into the computer application NVivo 10, which provided a good overview and control of the data. The units of meaning were further abstracted into sub-topics and finally into topics. The topics were continuously confronted with the transcribed text and re-contextualised to obtain a new and deeper understanding (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

### Results

To understand the value of interaction rituals and whether they affected the participants' decisions to stay in or return to the open drug scene, three themes emerged:

1. Resistance to the "normal people" who pass by, and bonding as a group.
2. The importance of sharing drugs and services and adhering to the scene's rules of conduct.
3. The focus of attention and production of emotional energy.

Below, we describe our findings and how these topics can be understood in light of previous research and theories on marginalisation and rituals.

#### *Resistance to the "normal people" who pass by, and bonding as a group*

All those who frequented the Bench belonged to the city's drug scene, and many were visibly

intoxicated. Outsiders seemed to perceive the Bench as an unsafe place that was better avoided. Sometimes, however, people needed to pass close by and, when doing so, tended to ignore the people on the Bench or only throw fleeting glances without making eye contact. Those who sat there thus remained unnoticed.

Our field notes from the Bench illustrate users' feelings of being ignored. Anne had been a part of the drug scene for nearly 20 years. She had recently gone back on heroin after a two-month break and told the researcher that she was disappointed about her relapse. One day at the Bench, the following situation unfolded:

A young woman parks her car quite near us. She wears a light summer dress and needs to pass by us a few steps away. She does not look towards us, and it seems to be uncomfortable for her that we can see her. Somehow, this seems to annoy Anne, because she shouts to her in an angry voice, "Be careful, or your tits will fall out." The woman pretends not to hear and continues walking without looking our way. (Field note)

The young woman did what many of us do when we are uncertain or trying to prevent a situation from becoming uncomfortable: she avoided eye contact. This could have been a form of Goffman's (1967/1982) avoidance ritual used to avoid offending someone. Avoidance rituals involve keeping a distance, withdrawing verbally, and only observing the communication between the actors involved (Goffman, 1967/1982). Avoidance rituals often function as a form of deference that preserves the dignity of both parties, but in this situation, the opposite seemed to be the case. Anne was apparently offended. While avoidance rituals in one context may preserve the dignity of the recipient, they may also have a stigmatising and offending effect in another context. The woman passing by was probably offended by Anne's rude remark, but she apparently wished to avoid attracting further attention from the Bench and thus avoided looking at its occupants, relating

to them as though they were not there (Goffman, 1963/2014).

How can we understand Anne's reaction in this situation? In an ethnographic study of homeless heroin users outside San Francisco, Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) used the term "symbolic violence" to describe how society inadvertently oppresses stigmatised people who are undesirable in ordinary society. The term is taken from Bourdieu (2000), who described how we accept and no longer see the injustice that society inflicts on people who fail to fit in. We can thus understand Anne's reaction as a demonstration and counterstrike against the hegemonic power that defines her as less worthy or less human than those who pass by and remain indistinguishable from the crowd.

The expression "be careful, or your tits will fall out" can also be seen as a form of "talking back", which is a reaction against being ignored and a resistance against "normality". Goffman (1963/2014) claims that when a person is placed in an unworthy or restrained position, the only ceremonial act this person can perform will be of a discourteous nature, and we can understand Anne's reaction in this light. Anne's reaction also marked a distinction between passers-by and those on the Bench. This distinction could have been established in the form of a comment not so directly offensive, such as when a woman parked her car nearby and an elderly man on the Bench shouted at her:

"What a good-looking lady you are, then." She pretends not to hear him, but I notice that she reacts by looking away and steers well clear as she passes without looking at us. I [the researcher] can sense that she is uncomfortable. (Field note)

The way in which the study's Bench participants related to passers-by and others within the illegal drug scene illustrated interaction rituals of inclusion as well as control. The distinction between passers-by and insiders was made especially clear when we look at how people

affiliated with the drug scene related to those on the Bench:

When people who are associated with the Bench pass by us, they greet us with a nod, a raised arm or a call, such as *hello, coming soon, just have something to attend to first*. In contrast to others who pass by, they see and recognise us. New people constantly drop by the Bench. Some just say hello and continue walking, whereas others stop to chat. Three men pass by us. They greet us with a wave and say that they will be back, they just need to drop by NAV (the labour and welfare office) first. (Field note)

In contrast to "normal" passers-by, people in the drug scene saw those on the Bench and recognised them with salutations as peers, and, if they moved on, they explained why they could not come to sit down. They recognised each other with eye contact, a nod, or a gesture. Eye contact was maintained long enough to establish "face", and "the line" arising in this contact was a form of institutionalised "face work" (Goffman, 1967/1982).

When people who were part of the drug scene passed by the Bench without sitting down, they were expected to explain why, and this had become a "rule of conduct" (Goffman, 1967/1982) for those who belonged to the group on the Bench. This can be interpreted as an interaction ritual that marked those who were included in the scene, and they were also expected to declare that they had no objections to the environment that the Bench represented. These minor, ordinary acts represented inclusion and also control in the form of giving an overview of those who belonged to the group. This is necessary in places where illegal activities take place because of the need to know whether anyone present might pose a threat to users and their activities, as illustrated by the example below:

The entire time while I sit there (on the Bench), people arrive on bicycles with something to deliver. Without saying a word, four men stand

up and go to sit in a corner a little distance away from us, and an exchange of something appears to take place. I try not to pay too much attention, although they seem not to care about me. (Field note)

Becker (1963/2004) wrote that the challenge researchers face in observing marginalised communities is to become accepted and sufficiently well-known to “the deviants” (p. 168) to dispel their fear that the researcher’s presence might pose a threat to their activities. At this point, the researcher had been in contact with the drug scene for no more than two months, and since the users were uncertain if he could be trusted, they kept certain activities concealed. After four months, an undercover police officer showed a picture of the researcher to one of the people on the Bench and asked who the researcher was. When users discovered that the police also kept the researcher under surveillance, they felt confident that he was not reporting anything to the police. In the quotation below, the people at the Bench vouched for the researcher, guaranteeing that he did not pose a threat:

A young man stops in front of the seven men sitting on the Bench. He proudly stretches out his hand, but when he sees me [the researcher], who is approaching the Bench from the side, he startles and draws his hand back. The others say, “Relax, he’s one of us”. He then takes out his hand again to show the others its contents, some withered leaves. “Great pot”, someone remarks. One of the men on the Bench takes out a pipe and fills it with the leaves, and the pipe is passed around. (Field note)

The man interrupted his action when seeing the researcher because his activity most likely was illegal and he needed to have control of his surroundings. Persons who were unfamiliar with the researcher felt uncertain about him because he stood out from the users in that he had no clear markers showing his affiliation with the scene. These markers of affiliation,

such as worn, dirty clothes, a ravaged body, and a slow and unsteady gait, may also be regarded as symbols showing that the person is a drug user. By way of these symbols, users identify those who belong and those who might pose a threat.

It is important to know that illegal activities on the Bench are not shared with people outside the drug milieu, especially not the police. Therefore, there exist rules, called *codex*. Violating these rules has consequences:

One day at the Bench, a young woman stops in front of us six men sitting there. She tells that she was recently released from jail after serving nine months for possession of a few hundred grams of amphetamine. One person told the police about her. Immediately all the men asked her if they should take him down. (Field note)

In this section, we have elucidated the rituals that established the cohesion or boundedness of the group (Collins, 1993). We have also examined the interaction rituals of control that ensured those who were insiders remained loyal to each other in relation to the outside (other people, and especially the police). Such group solidarity is a result of emotional energy. In this way, emotional energy has a controlling quality from the group side. It includes feelings of what is right and wrong and strengthens the group solidarity (Collins, 1993). In addition, we have shown that group solidarity becomes an incorporated rule. To draw on Bourdieu (1999), through their participation in the illegal economy, the participants had developed an understanding of the game, and this incorporated habitus found its expression in their everyday activities in the particular environment that we refer to as the Bench. The rituals and competencies that we have described so far concern how the users related to outsiders, such as how they made sure that those who visited the Bench occasionally were loyal to those who frequented the Bench on a daily basis. We will now address the same aspect of the social and ritualising community with regard to “sharing”.

### *The importance of sharing drugs and services and adhering to the scene's rules of conduct*

On the Bench, there was a great deal of sharing and exchanging of services, such as the exchange of information and the sharing of concerns or goods, such as cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs.

We are eight men sitting on the Bench. A young man in his late 20s comes to sit next to me. I have seen him before but never spoken to him. He asks whether anyone has any "pills" (tranquillizers – benzodiazepines). He explains that he is having an anxiety attack. I say, "Yeah, it's a bummer", and he nods in agreement. Nobody has any pills, but they say that they can get him some hash in a hurry if he wants it. He nods in agreement. (Field note)

The information that he was having an anxiety attack evoked no particular reaction; everyone seemed to be familiar with the experience. Their experiences had been made into a framework for the interpretation of and reaction to what he recounted (Goffman, 1974). Although nobody had any pills, they nevertheless proposed a solution that the person accepted. His anxiety was also accepted and, to some extent, addressed by the group.

Some days later, the researcher was sitting on the Bench chatting with John (aged 32 years) and Kim (aged 40 years). John received a cigarette from Kim and, as he left the Bench, Kim leaned over to the researcher and said, "I hate him. He always scrounges for fags and never gives anything back". How can we understand why Kim gave cigarettes to John without ever receiving any in return? Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) referred to this as the "moral economy". In drug scenes, it is crucial to maintain a reputation for generosity, since this makes it likely that help will be available when needed. This moral economy forms the basis for the code, or the rules of conduct of not being "cheap" (stingy). Goffman (1967/1982)

describes rules of conduct that affect a person in two ways: as external or internal expectations. It is therefore important to share and not be stingy. Even though Kim said that he hated John for not sharing, Kim did not violate the rules of conduct. Therefore, sharing cigarettes can be regarded as a kind of altruism, but it might also be a rational choice. Collins argued that the actors established shared rules of behaviour, and the degree of ritual intensity determines the willingness to sacrifice (Collins, 1993).

In a conversation with Helge (aged 50 years), the researcher asked him about sharing:

Researcher: How would you react if I sat down on the Bench and lit up a spliff without sharing with the others?

Helge: [laughs] Well, that would have been the last time you did so. It would have been extremely unpopular. You would have been chased away. Hash is something to be shared. It's uncool to smoke hash alone. It's a social thing to be shared.

It is obvious that goods available in quantities that cannot be consumed at once should be shared with those who have none. At the same time, everyone is also expected to accept what is offered. In another scenario, a large, well-built man in his late forties was sitting on the Bench and drinking from a bottle of spirits as the researcher arrived and sat down. The man and the researcher were unknown to each other:

He hands me a bottle of spirits, but I decline. He then behaves threateningly, leans towards me, and insists that I take the bottle. The others look worried, and nobody says anything. I take the bottle and merely taste the contents without swallowing anything. I comment on the taste, saying that I cannot understand how he is able to drink



this neat. He grins as I return the bottle. The others relax. (Field note)

The proffering and receiving of the bottle can be understood as a ritual act that included two significant elements: behaviour and respect (Goffman, 1967/1982). The man with the bottle of spirits displayed a ceremonial form of behaviour expected in the drug scene and proffered the bottle to the researcher. By first declining the bottle, the researcher violated the rules of conduct and inadvertently failed to show the man sufficient respect, causing the other to risk losing face. The researcher immediately became aware of having offended the man, and to make amends, he tasted the spirits while also lauding the man's ability to drink it undiluted. This corrected reaction thus became a form of "face-saving practice" (Goffman, 1967/1982).

### *The focus of attention and production of emotional energy*

It was November and cold, but the weather was relatively nice: sunny with no wind. As the researcher and seven others sat on the Bench chatting, a man in his fifties approached. The researcher recorded the field note below:

I have said hello to him before, so he knows who I am. I invite him to sit down, but he says that it is too cold and [he] prefers to stand. Then, without saying anything, he takes out two small, dark-coloured balls and hands them to Kåre, who is sitting next to me. It all happens so unobtrusively that, unless we had been shoulder-to-shoulder, I would most likely have failed to notice it. Kåre puts one ball in his pocket and takes out a pipe, a beautiful pipe made of juniper and oak. He tells us that he has made it himself. He takes some tobacco and puts it in his hand with the ball, then heats them with a lighter and mixes them. I ask what he is doing. The others grin at my ignorance. Nobody is talking, and everybody's attention is focused on Kåre's priming of the pipe. When satisfied with the preparations, Kåre lights the pipe and takes a few good puffs before passing the pipe around, starting with the man who

brought the hash. Nobody talks as the pipe circulates; everybody just eagerly awaits his turn. It's a special rhythm: receive the pipe, take a couple of puffs, and pass it on. It's as if the pipe links everybody. When the pipe comes to me, the others look expectantly at me, and I can sense the invitation to take a couple of puffs. When I nevertheless pass the pipe on without smoking it, I feel that I have sort of rejected the group... "I don't belong here; I just pretend to"... The others relax and appear to be satisfied. It's alluring... The mood on the Bench was comfortable, but suddenly I feel like a complete outsider. (Field note)

As the field note illustrates, the focus of attention was directed towards a shared object – the pipe – which in turn loaded the participants (except the researcher) with a certain emotional energy. The strong sense of becoming an outsider in the group came as a surprise to the researcher and can be understood as a result of his not being in the same rhythm and mode of perception as the other participants, which is how Lalander (2016a) described the concept of insider status. This experience is bodily as well as emotional, and it is one in which some social bonds are weakened and others are strengthened depending on who participates in the interaction. This is reminiscent of Schütz's (1999) description of the observer or spectator: "His motive is not intertwined or synchronized with the motives of the person or persons being observed. He is tuned in to them, but they are not tuned in to him" (p. 53). The non-participation and focus directed towards the pipe created this sense of being an outsider (Lalander, 2016a) to the ritual (Asplund, 1987).

This was further explored in a conversation with Helge (aged 50 years), who described a similar situation. He had quit using amphetamines two months earlier:

Helge: I "publicly" quit using heroin three years ago and switched to amphetamines. I suddenly got totally fed up with the heroin. Now I have stopped

using amphetamines, too. . . . I am so totally through with it that I intend to stop using anything or most of it anyway. Smoking it calms me down. [He did intend to continue using hash.]

Researcher: When did you last inject any substances?

Helge: Thursday or Friday. Was with someone else. Took it out of sheer politeness. Went visiting someone, and then we were all gathered around the table and I was offered some. And then, it's about remaining strong or not and that's . . . If I hadn't taken anything, all the others would have been spaced out and I would have been left sober. It's easier to say no on the street than in somebody's home. Since I am trying to quit, I go out to the scene, need to be social or I would go mad from being alone. . . . I wouldn't have stayed in it for so long if it had all been negative.

Helge was trying to quit, but it was hard not to take any drugs when all the others were taking them. If he did not take any drugs, he would have been left outside, just like the researcher, and he could not stand that. In contrast to the researcher, Helge had a life story that included a wealth of bodily experiences of drug rituals distinguishing insiders from outsiders (Lalander, 2009, 2016). Moreover, unlike the researcher, all his friends were members of the drug scene, and even though he wanted to quit taking hard drugs, he wished to participate in the good atmosphere and bodily experience of interaction evoked by the communal taking of drugs.

Both situations illustrate interaction rituals that represent something beyond the substance use alone. Numerous studies have described the ritual aspects of communal drug use, and the hash-smoking ritual is especially well described (Becker, 1953, 1963/2004; Sandberg, 2013). Both Collins (1993, 2004) and Durkheim (1912/2012) described how mutual attention on joint activity with a particular significance leads to increased intensity in the group's emotions, which in turn leads to increased individual emotional energy that gives rise to group identification and solidarity. In the situations described in this study, the participants seemed to experience cohesion and emotional energy, which were outcomes or results of the interaction ritual (Collins, 1993). The researcher, however, did not experience the feeling of emotional energy, probably because he did not fulfil the interaction ritual and therefore suddenly felt alone.

According to Durkheim (1912/2012), intense group emotions form symbols that demonstrate identification with the group, i.e. collective symbols. The Bench itself emerges as such a symbol. These collective symbols represent group membership and fulfil two important functions: they help unite the group, and they steer its attention towards a shared topic or activity in an interactional ritual that maintains the emotional energy. Another result of collective symbols is their effect on the mindset of individuals even when they are not gathered in a group, and because we think in symbolic terms that are reinforced by our solidarity with the group, they still remain under the influence of the intra-group bonds (Collins, 1993).

## Discussion

In this article, we have explored the values of interaction rituals to understand why persons who earlier were a part of the gang at the Bench now regarded the Bench as a "dangerous" place. The rituals we discovered were illuminated in light of the theories of Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins. We will now discuss how the

rituals seem to serve as a glue between insiders, as a magnet to former members, and as a wall against outsiders.

Because the Bench mainly consists of people who are marginalised and do not fit in with ordinary society, the Bench becomes their place – a place where they can feel free and interact with others who to some degree value their expertise. When they come together, a process of intensification of shared experiences takes place; what Durkheim (1912/2012) called *collective effervescence*. As we have shown, these collective effervescences become embodied sentiments, which give rise to markers of group identity and bonding as a group. The fact that they feel stigmatised and unwanted in ordinary society, and that some of the activities of the place are illegal, strengthens the interactional ritual (Collins, 2004). Bonding as a group and resistance to passers-by might be regarded as both part of the interactional ritual and the result of it.

It is well-known that illicit drug milieus have rules, called codex (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2006/2009). One of these rules is to share with others and not to be “stingy”. However, it came to a surprise to the researcher that it was also a rule to receive. When the researcher declined receiving the bottle of liquor, he could sense by the others’ reactions that he was breaking a rule and offending the person who handed him the bottle. The researcher became part of a forced ritual by being offered drugs with expectations of receiving, and therefore he had to give an impression that he liked it. The importance of sharing drugs and services can be regarded as a result of the interactional ritual of group solidarity. This solidarity contains rules of conduct relative to the drug scene (Goffman, 1967/1982). Such rules are important ingredients in the interactive ritual. Violating rules might result in some kind of punishment. Durkheim (1895/1982) argues that punishment has the effect of reinforcing the group’s commitment to symbolic ideas; it is a ritual to maintain group solidarity.

The glue in the Bench milieu, or what holds it together, is emotional energy. A successful interaction ritual will produce positive emotional energy, and the mutual focus of attention is a crucial ingredient for a ritual to work (Collins, 2004). The example above, when people are sharing drugs, has all the ingredients of a successful interaction ritual: (1) two or more people are physically assembled in the same place, (2) there are boundaries to outsiders, (3) the focus of attention is on a common object, and (4) they became loaded with emotional energy (Collins, 2004, p. 48).

The awareness of being together and the sharing of high-level emotional energy produces group solidarity and collective symbols. Interaction rituals are cumulative in the sense that individuals who have taken part in a successful interaction ritual want more of it and develop a need for repetition (Collins, 1993). The Bench might be regarded as a collective symbol of the interaction rituals that take place there. Because people think in terms of symbols, which are charged up by emotions, the members of the Bench are still under the group’s influence even when they are alone (Collins, 1993). This is probably why the Bench also has a “magnetic” force, according to former members, and at the same time signals distance from outsiders who have never participated in experiencing the emotional energy. People are social beings, and therefore we need to socialise with other people. It is only together that we can be loaded with emotional energy. That is a major reason why open drug scenes are so hard to close.

Politicians, police and, not least, urban planners must take into account that people who are addicted to drugs also need a place of their own. They need to consider the value of open drug scenes as a place where people who are otherwise unwanted in ordinary society can stay, and where they can be loaded with emotional energy through rituals that fulfil the human need for belonging.

## Conclusion

Those who frequent the Bench were seasoned users of drugs and alcohol. During their time in the drug scene, they had learned how to act and had gained what Bourdieu refers to as an understanding of, or a feeling for, the game. In this case, the game was one of interaction rituals. Interaction rituals are the glue that holds the Bench together. Rituals have rules, and those who knew the rules were able to act in an initiated and natural way in their encounters with the other occupants of the Bench. The knowledge that enabled them to take a seat on the Bench was largely embedded in their bodies as habituated experiences.

The bodily experiences and memories of Bench life may explain why former occupants perceive the Bench as a risky place to pass by or visit. Those who have been off drugs for a period may see their lives as void of content, and they may long for a carefree existence in which everybody shares drugs and has a feeling for the rules of the game. Further, knowledge of the ritual means users are not degraded as humans. For them, the Bench represents a symbol of group identity, dignity, and emotional energy. That is why the Bench is so hard to leave and so dangerous to pass for those who wish to abstain from drug use.

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