



Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Ethnographic Knowledge in Urban Planning

Bridging the Gap between the Theories of Knowledge-Based and Communicative Planning

Mattila, Hanna; Olsson, Pia; Lappi, Tiina-Riitta; Ojanen, Karoliina

Published in:

Planning Theory & Practice

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):

[10.1080/14649357.2021.1993316](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2021.1993316)

Creative Commons License
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Publication date:

2022

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Mattila, H., Olsson, P., Lappi, T-R., & Ojanen, K. (2022). Ethnographic Knowledge in Urban Planning: Bridging the Gap between the Theories of Knowledge-Based and Communicative Planning. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 23(1), 11-25. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2021.1993316>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Ethnographic Knowledge in Urban Planning – Bridging the Gap between the Theories of Knowledge-Based and Communicative Planning

Hanna Mattila, Pia Olsson, Tiina-Riitta Lappi & Karoliina Ojanen

To cite this article: Hanna Mattila, Pia Olsson, Tiina-Riitta Lappi & Karoliina Ojanen (2021): Ethnographic Knowledge in Urban Planning – Bridging the Gap between the Theories of Knowledge-Based and Communicative Planning, *Planning Theory & Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/14649357.2021.1993316](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2021.1993316)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2021.1993316>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 04 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal



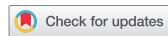
Article views: 600



View related articles



View Crossmark data



Ethnographic Knowledge in Urban Planning – Bridging the Gap between the Theories of Knowledge-Based and Communicative Planning

Hanna Mattila^{a,b}, Pia Olsson^c, Tiina-Riitta Lappi^{d,e} and Karoliina Ojanen^c

^aDepartment of Built Environment, Aalto University, Espoo, Finland; ^bDepartment of Architecture, Design, and Media Technology, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark; ^cDepartment of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland;

^dMigration Institute of Finland, Turku, Finland; ^eDepartment of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

'Knowledge-based' approaches have recently made a breakthrough in urban planning. How to develop balance in knowledge-based planning between abstract and scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and 'local knowledge' on the other hand has been long debated. To this debate, we add a form of knowledge with potential for sustainable urban planning, i.e. ethnographic knowledge that could transmit an understanding of urban dwellers' daily practices and values to planning organisations. Theoretical literature is the foundation of our argument, which we illustrate with a case study involving urban planners and decision-makers in the Helsinki region of Finland.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 February 2020

Accepted 11 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Ethnography; local knowledge; communicative planning; planning culture; urban planning

Introduction

Recently, planners have been increasingly required to practice 'knowledge-based' or 'evidence-based' planning – that is planning in which decision-making is based on or informed by either knowledge or evidence (see e.g. Davoudi, 2015; Faludi & Waterhout, 2006; Krizek et al., 2009). Even though it makes sense to expect that public planning organizations should base their decisions on relevant knowledge, planning scholars have recognized several problems in the concepts and applied practices of evidence-based and knowledge-based planning. Most importantly, controversies exist concerning the selection of the types of knowledge considered relevant for planning that is currently conditioned by post-modern plural epistemologies (Krizek et al., 2009; Rydin, 2007). The main controversy concerns the over-reliance of variants of knowledge-based planning on knowledge produced by natural sciences. The problem relates to the subsequent neglect of other types of knowledge such as lay knowledge or local knowledge that are based on local inhabitants' experiences.

Communicative planning theorists have recently defended the position of local knowledge in planning processes, arguing against the modern model of rational planning that is based on natural sciences and engineering (see especially Healey, 1992, 1997). Nonetheless, the mere recognition of local knowledge does not result in its integration in planning processes. Indeed, Rydin (2007) argues that the central problem of knowledge-based planning concerns not the recognition by planning

organizations of the multiplicity of knowledges within planning processes, but rather the ambiguity regarding how planning organizations could and should create syntheses of the multiplicity of knowledges within planning processes (see also Fenster & Yacobi, 2005).

This article discusses the untapped potential of ethnographic knowledge in informing planning organisations about urban dwellers' daily practices and cultural or social values. We compare ethnographic research to communicative planning methods that are widely used to gather information from local inhabitants, but differ from the production of ethnographic knowledge. For example, compared to local knowledge transmitted to planning via participatory methods, ethnographic knowledge is systematically produced regarding "the interaction between individuals and the subsequent reciprocity of perspectives between social actors in their natural environment" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 256). Ethnographic knowledge does not claim the status of objective knowledge; however, it aims at reflecting on local voices and revealing the reasons behind local ways of thinking and acting. Ethnographic knowledge can thus give a more generalised understanding of local knowledge than can communicative planning practices, during which researchers do not mediate local voices. Yet, we argue that the more generalised understanding provided by ethnographic knowledge does not sacrifice the multiplicity of the voices. Actively recognising people's diverse experiences, the ethnographic process highlights inclusiveness. Although ethnographic knowledge cannot replace participatory practices, we argue that it should be used to complement direct public engagement in planning.

The article's theoretical comparative discussion has two parts: firstly, we discuss local knowledge that ethnographers transmit to planning, and secondly, we compare ethnographic knowledge to local knowledge voiced by local inhabitants in participatory processes. To illustrate our discussion and exemplify our findings, we use a small case study from the Helsinki metropolitan area in Finland. Our case study is based on a focus group discussion and interviews with local planners and decision-makers, regarding experiences of and attitude towards acquiring and using local knowledge and ethnographic knowledge in planning. We discussed local and ethnographic knowledge in the context of multiculturalism, which is a new theme in Finnish urban planning. In Finland, the population has traditionally been considered very homogenous; discussion of the need to include the multiplicity of voices of local inhabitants in the planning processes is relatively new. The discussions and interviews of this research supported our theoretical findings concerning the usefulness of communicative practice and ethnographic knowledge in planning, both of which seem to have distinct roles in integrating local knowledge into planning.

Transmitting Understandings of Everyday Life into the Urban Planning Process

The Conceptual Terrain: Ethnographic Knowledge and Local Knowledge

Ethnographic knowledge refers to knowledge based on research data obtained by ethnographic methods, such as (participant) observation, discussions and thematically oriented interviews with people in particular sites. Other relevant sources of information are typically used as supplementary material in ethnographic research. The production of ethnographic knowledge occurs through a scientific process involving analysis of research data. Such analysis aims at "developing variables that capture social meanings" (Brewer, 2000, p. 107) rather than simply describing how people experience their environment or depict their lives.

Ethnographic methods allow the systematic documentation of people's daily practices and experiences based on qualitative methods such as observation and interviews. The ethnographic

process involves analysing research data with the aim of capturing meanings and values related to activities, materialities and lifestyles within different groups, communities, neighbourhoods, and other urban settings. Such ethnographic knowledge can enable planners to gain a deeper understanding of how planning projects affect people living nearby, and help planners address the needs of different groups of people in newly built areas. Despite being place-based, ethnographic knowledge provides general perspectives both on how people interact and the types of spatio-cultural dimensions included in these forms of social interaction.

Local knowledge is a concept often used in the planning context – especially communicative planning – when at issue is local inhabitants' understanding of their daily lives and environmental practices and experiences. Despite the close relation between the concept of local knowledge and ethnographic knowledge, we argue that differences exist between applications, definitions and methodologies pertaining to these two concepts. The concept of local knowledge has been used to refer to 'subjective' (Fenster & Yacobi, 2005), 'practical' (Taylor & De Loë, 2012) and 'contextual' (Fischer, 2000) knowledge that is based on the experiences of local people. Local knowledge is comparable to raw material or data used in the production of ethnographic knowledge. Local knowledge is typically contrasted with processed expert knowledge, and celebrated as a source of enriching diversity that is often filtered out from the knowledge base of modern, scientific and rational planning.

As a source of non-processed knowledge, local knowledge always comprises a plurality of knowledges. This plurality often raises questions of whose local knowledge should count in planning processes, and how the different local knowledges should be balanced with other types of knowledges (Fenster & Yacobi, 2005, p. 191). Ethnographic knowledge can give a more nuanced picture of who the 'locals' are, and how their ways of using, experiencing and appreciating their environment differ.

Mediating Local Knowledge into Planning Processes

Scholars in cultural studies and planning have expressed concern over planning processes and the lack of understanding of the everyday lives of people (e.g. Risbeth et al., 2018, p. 50). Lay, local and ethnographic knowledge are typically under-represented in the knowledge base of planning for several reasons, mainly related to the modern tradition of basing planning decisions and solutions on natural sciences and engineering (Davoudi, 2015; Healey, 1992, 1997; Rydin, 2007). This tradition often describes urban communities using quantitative data such as demographic statistics and census results (e.g. Healey, 1997). Planning theorists argue that the institution of planning suffers from "epistemological anxiety". Such anxiety results in the disregard of local inhabitants' experience-based, qualitative knowledge whose origins differ from the sources and methods used in natural sciences (Innes & Booher, 2010). The social-scientific, postmodern discourses on knowledge, however, have not supported epistemological anxiety for decades. In social sciences, the traditionally dominant view that abstract knowledge is superior to more particular or specific knowledges has been convincingly challenged, and the neutrality of scientific and expert knowledge questioned (Fischer, 2000).

Planning theorists – especially theorists of communicative planning – have attempted to correlate local knowledge with knowledge produced by engineering and natural sciences. Healey (1992, 1997, 2003), one of the leading proponents of communicative (or 'collaborative') planning, has conducted ground-breaking work in establishing a stronger position for local knowledge. She defines local knowledge, following Geertz (1983), as "a mixture of systematized, formalised and

calculated knowledge” that is “acquired through social interchange and experience, a ‘common sense’ and a ‘practical reason’, a store of proverbs and metaphors, and of practical skills and routines” (Healey, 1997, p. 38). Despite referring to anthropology and ethnography, Healey does not suggest that ethnographic knowledge – as expert-knowledge produced externally to planning processes – should have a more central position in the knowledge base of planning. Instead, she argues that local knowledge will become involved in planning processes through communicative planning methods, which will enable local inhabitants to communicate their knowledge with their own voices. Knowledge of the different ways in which people experience and understand their daily surroundings, and the changes in these surroundings, is becoming increasingly important due to the cultural fragmentation of cities and societies.

However, while ‘living differently’, people share the same places (Healey, 1992, p. 143, 1997; see also Forester, 1993). Consequently, Healey and other proponents of communicative planning argue for integrating local knowledge into planning through communicative planning processes rather than through externalized research processes. Healey (1992, 1997) claims that when knowledge is acquired through communication, participants of the communicative processes not only inform planning professionals of their views and ideas but also reflect on these views. Optimally, people with initially differing views might learn to “make sense together” (Forester, 1993, p. ix), build consensus, and find shared understandings and visions of both the current and future state of their living environment (Healey, 1992, 1997).

Nonetheless, criticism of communicative planning has recently undermined both the validity of local knowledge acquired through communicative practices and the representativeness of the shared views and values resulting from communicative processes. According to the criticism, the voices of powerful stakeholders dominate planning processes (see e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998; Yiftachel, 1998). Pløger (2018) and Hillier (2002, 2003) highlight that consensus-building suppresses differences in cultural values and ways of life (see also Mattila, 2016, 2020). In response to these criticisms, we argue that communicative planning theory should acknowledge that communicative planning methods alone do not give a sufficiently comprehensive view of local knowledge; rather, they should be complemented with expert knowledge produced by ethnographic methods.

What Does Ethnographic Knowledge Add to Planning Processes?

Planners use background reports on the natural environment created by non-planners; similarly, planners could use ethnographic knowledge to inform planning processes, including participatory practices (Maginn, 2007). This would enable them to both identify who the locals are and be better able to judge whether, or to what extent, the interests voiced in local participatory processes represent a community. Ethnographic knowledge would help planners to see beyond issues raised in participatory processes, and recognise the unexpressed or silenced voices.

Furthermore, using ethnographic methods during planning processes can reveal how the processes and structures of participation, as well as the styles of discourse, are reflected both in participants’ experience and attitudes, and in their general willingness to participate (Maginn, 2007, p. 30). More generally, ethnographic knowledge facilitates the empowerment of local communities, as it contributes to planners’ knowledge of both “the agency of people and the influence of context” (Henderson, 2016, p. 29).

The value of ethnographic research lies in particular in situations involving local resistance to planning projects. Local stakeholders may feel that planners do not support them; consequently, the local stakeholders might not be willing to provide planners with information. If the local stakeholders feel they have not been heard during planning processes, they may resist initiatives. Local stakeholders may consider independent ethnographers as neutral collaborators; however, ethnographers can be interpreted as allies of public officials and therefore, as non-reliable collaborators (Maginn, 2007, p. 38).

Finally, planning processes benefit from ethnographic research that can give a comprehensive picture of the meaning of planning interventions to peoples' everyday lives in cities. Koster (2020) describes three ways in which the ethnographic approach can contribute to the understanding of planners and planning organisations regarding the meaning of their interventions. Firstly, it helps scholars to see the different temporalities of residents ('people's time') and planners ('project time'). Secondly, it can "capture the variety of practices and perspectives of affected residents and the diverse consequences of urban planning on their lives". Thirdly, it "can show how urban planning interventions are recurrent and high-impact events in the lives of marginalized, yet agentive, city residents" (Koster, 2020, p. 1).

Planning practice often views public spaces and places using "simplistic and homogeneous visions of public life and uses of public spaces", which lack both an understanding of and "response to the complexity and fluidity of local populations" (Risbeth et al., 2018, p. 36). Using ethnographic methods increases the likelihood of inclusion of the plurality of local cultural values in planning process. Such inclusion can subsequently contribute to the social sustainability of planning and its end products: that is, places (Hyler, 2013, p. 362). Ethnographic processes increase the transparency of planning process and deepen stakeholders' understanding of the diversity of local cultures. Planners must still often choose whose values and preferences to account for in planning processes, but these choices are more acceptable for local stakeholders when they understand the diversity of their local community values.

One strength of ethnographic knowledge is that organisations suffering from epistemological anxiety typically find ethnographic knowledge more legitimate than local knowledge produced by local stakeholders. Local stakeholders often refer to common sense and practical reason regarding methods of knowledge production (Healey, 1997). Given that communicative planning emphasizes local knowledge produced by local stakeholders, it does not strengthen the methodological basis of knowledge production in planning.

Despite leaning on systematic methods, the producers of ethnographic knowledge – like the proponents of local knowledge in the field of planning – often encounter epistemological anxiety. Planners and political decision-makers typically tend to rely on generalized knowledge that is independent of particular locations or local interests (e.g. Lappi, 2007, p. 25). For instance, do statistics-based generalizations, typically favoured by planning organisations and bodies of decision-making, provide more exact or correct knowledge than case studies (Andersen & Atkinson, 2013, p. 3)? In particular, do such generalizations produce more applicable knowledge for disciplines such as urban planning (Healey, 1997)? Even when planners aim at relying on 'objective' knowledge, the knowledge base that informs planning is often partially incidentally formed (Henderson, 2016, p. 28). Generalizations and abstract knowledge are valuable in planning, but so is knowledge produced by disciplines such as ethnology and anthropology. The value of this latter type of knowledge relates to the retention of the multi-vocal nature of sources, and thus to the provision of a nuanced understanding of diverse cultural or social phenomena (see Figure 1).

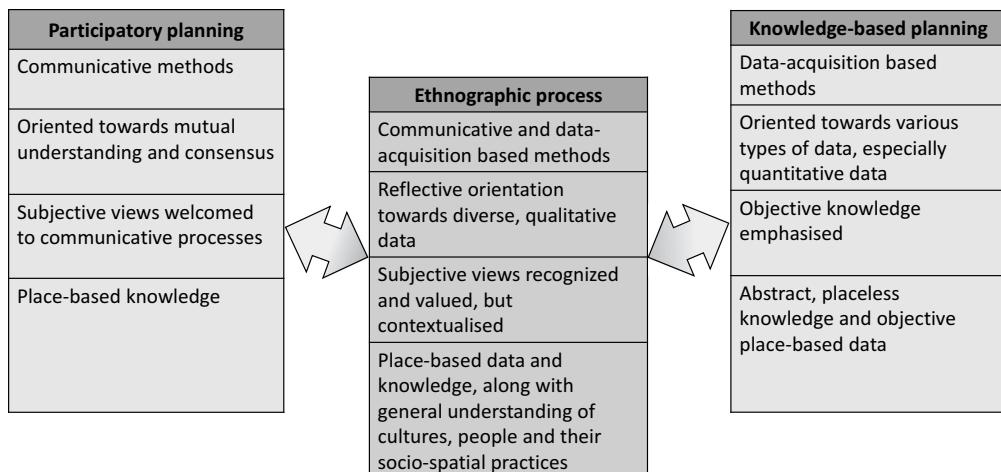


Figure 1. Ethnographic process as a bridge between participatory and knowledge-based planning.

Relevance or Rigour? Applied Approaches for Producing and Presenting Ethnographic Knowledge

The current under-representation of ethnographic knowledge in the field of planning relates both to the lack of interest in qualitative knowledge about the daily lives of people, and to the lack of practice-relevant ethnographic knowledge. Ethnographers typically design their research projects as time-consuming and resource-intensive (Majoor, 2018). Furthermore, ethnographers typically report their findings in comprehensive reports that include profound descriptions of the case at hand. Recently, some ethnographers have found such research and report design as problematic, given that it hinders actionability of ethnographic research. This observation has led to a demand for action by anthropological and ethnological research (e.g. Risbeth et al., 2018, p. 50).

Cultural scholars have been increasingly interested in designing research methods that could be applied in fields of practice such as urban planning. The application of ethnography to the systematic gathering and subsequent documentation of knowledge in different fields of practice has led to the introduction of new concepts and ways of understanding ethnography. Examples of such concepts include multi-targeted ethnography (O'Dell & Willim, 2015), focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005), and micro-ethnography (or short-term) ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013; see also Lappi & Olsson, 2018). Such ethnographic approaches can offer more focused and less time-consuming forms of knowledge production for urban planning than can communicative planning methods.

Planners' and Decision Makers' Reflections on Ethnographic Knowledge

Our case study that was based on discussion with Finnish planners and decision makers focused on the diversity of practices and experiences related to local and ethnographic knowledge. In particular, we aimed to find out how ethnographic knowledge elicits – or could elicit – voices that otherwise would not be heard in urban planning processes.

Grasping the Diversity of Urban Experiences in the Helsinki Metropolitan Region

This section is based on a focus group discussion and interviews with planners and decision-makers in the Helsinki metropolitan area. It discusses the reflections of Finnish local-level planners and decision makers on local knowledge and ethnographic knowledge. The context of the discussed theme was multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a relatively new phenomenon for Finnish planners, due to the traditionally homogenous nature of the Finnish population, both ethnically and socio-economically. However, the urban population of Finnish cities is increasingly heterogeneous. Some argue that local planning in Finland has not yet adjusted to this changed environment. Consequently, adequate assessment of multiculturalism is often missing both from planning practice and professional and academic discourses on planning in Finland (Lapintie, 2015).

The Finnish planning system facilitates input from multiple stakeholder groups in planning processes through two channels: communicative practices and knowledge-production through impact assessments. The Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) of Finland requires local and regional authorities, first, to interact with stakeholders and, second, to base their decisions on sufficient impact assessments. The Act further requires designing participation and assessment procedures in one plan, the Participation and Assessment Scheme (Osallistumis- ja arvointisuunnitelma), to allow participation and assessments to complement each other and stakeholders to participate in drafting the scheme (Land Use and Building Act, 132/1999, Sections 63 and 64). Interactive planning methods allow inhabitants to provide local knowledge in an unmediated form to planners and planning organisations. However, social and cultural impact assessments could complement the direct voicing of local knowledge with processes of ethnographic knowledge production. The Act does not specify the type of required impact assessments; rather the definition of the range of impacts to be studied is decided on a local level, based on the individual characteristics of planning projects at hand. In Finland, few examples exist of ethnographic knowledge used in planning-related impact assessment processes. Internationally, social impacts also tend to be assessed using statistical methods or methods that generally produce quantitative results (Päivänen et al., 2005, p. 68). Cultural impacts, in turn, are often too ambiguous for assessment (Gray, 2006).

We aimed to discuss the use of ethnographic knowledge against this background. Our understanding of the usability of ethnographic knowledge in urban planning was based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the *Shared City* project (2017–2018) funded by the Helsinki Metropolitan Region Urban Research Programme. The project examined the influence of the design and uses of public and semi-public spaces, asking how people experience inter-ethnic encounters in their everyday lives in the Helsinki metropolitan area urban setting. During the fieldwork, we reflected on the relation between physical infrastructure and the social and cultural practices of inhabitants (see also Hyler, 2013, p. 365). The ethnographic analysis revealed, for instance, that people with migrant or minority ethnic backgrounds typically did not consider the city inclusive (Lappi & Olsson, 2018; Ojanen, 2018). This result justified our exploration into whether, and to what extent, urban planners and decision-makers in the Helsinki metropolitan area understand diversity in experiences of actual or potential users of urban space. Furthermore, we wanted to discover the existence and potential process of transmission of this understanding to planning processes.

We aimed to analyse the actual and potential uses of experience-based knowledge, either local or ethnographic. Therefore, we invited 61 people, whose work overlapped with urban planning, to participate in a focus group discussion (see Hennink, 2015, pp. 2–3). The invited people were town councillors, members of urban planning committees, city officials working in city planning, and

university teachers working in urban planning. Of the 61 people invited, eight accepted our invitation. The main reason given for not accepting the invitation was lack of time; however, the majority did not respond in any way, which made evaluating the reasons for the low number of participants difficult. Another possible reason is that the project topic and related discussions were insufficiently relevant to the people who were invited. Due to scheduling problems, six people participated in the actual focus group discussions and two people were interviewed individually.

The use of ethnographic knowledge in the city planning process should include both narratives about experiences and observational data: that is, observations of how people actually use spaces and places in the city. Additionally included should be how the narratives relate to the observational data. However, ethnographic knowledge may be difficult to comprehend for those who apply knowledge to practice. This difficulty concerns the common format of ethnographic knowledge: a comprehensive research report involving a profound description of a particular case. The typical format seems to contradict the expectations of case study participants regarding knowledge and information “in a world where everyone is in a hurry” (I1). The participants expected the information provided to them would be “assertive, vigorous and compact” (I2):

[-] the knowledge should be pretty compact; not many will read [long texts] unless they themselves are researchers. For decision-makers it should be in a very crystallized form. (F4)

If the value of ethnography lies in the portrayal of “subjective accounts of reality” and “the variable, fallible and ingenious dimensions of human life” (Hall, 2012, p. 13), the essential question becomes how to transform all this data into ‘refined’, ‘crystallized’ information, as expected by the participants.

Our focus-group discussion and interviews involved planners’ and decision-makers’ reflections on their actions. Reflections indicated that they made decisions under conditions of “contextual ambiguity” (see also Majoor, 2018, p. 1). Two main problems identified by the planners and decision-makers are the heterogeneity of background knowledge in planning processes, and the formal requirements concerning planning procedures. Numerous legal norms set requirements for processes of public participation and impact assessment. Legal norms are often systematically applied from one site to another, despite possibilities for local discretion in land-use planning legislation. According to the participants, the scarcity of resources and requirements concerning the efficiency of administrative practices usually leaves little space for local particularities and citizen participation. Previous research on Finnish planning practice has noted that goals such as appropriate citizen engagement and appropriate employment of knowledge and information produced by different disciplines are typically hindered by tight schedules (Häyrynen, 2017, pp. 12–13).

The participants unanimously agreed that ethnographic knowledge could provide new insights and important information for city planning, implementation of plans, and follow-up evaluations of plans. The participants seemed to particularly value the potential of ethnographic knowledge for explaining the mechanisms behind the (un)popularity of urban spaces and places. They wanted to know, for instance, “what makes it [the city] pleasant so that people can really feel it is their own?” This kind of knowledge was considered solution-oriented, and participants typically required “solutions, not only problems” (I1; see also Andersen & Atkinson, 2013, p. 3). Another positive feature of ethnographic knowledge was its potential in covering the views of diverse groups of people. As such, ethnographic knowledge could provide valuable insights for planning processes: “You could hear opinions from people who don’t make much noise about themselves”. (I1)

However, the participants admitted making little effort to acquire ethnographic knowledge during planning processes. They reported sometimes meeting locals and visiting places under

planning, but not always. One discussion topic in the focus groups and interviews was the objectivity of ethnographic knowledge. For example, the participants discussed the necessary criteria for reliability and validity. To illustrate the nature of ethnographic data, we gave the participants some transcribed extracts from interviews with people living in the focus areas. The examples were not interpretations of the experiences, but direct quotations. "Personal, emotional narratives" in the ethnographic data were considered even dangerous and irrelevant to urban planning by one of the participants. "I wouldn't use them, as these kinds of stories can endanger the objectivity of the decision-making process". (I2)

The comment clearly contains the ideal of objectivity as a criterion of relevance for knowledge. The participants claimed that further criteria of relevance includes knowledge being well structured, comprehensive rather than fragmentary, and not emotionally charged. However, regarding criteria of relevant knowledge, the ideals and reality do not typically meet. Participants claimed that city planning decision makers struggle with the fragmentation of information, time pressure and haste. Additionally, they claimed that despite decision-making processes following certain formal patterns, decisions are rarely objective. However, some comments emphasized the importance of personal and individual narrations that can operate as alarms and highlight problems that have previously been invisible. The problem from planners' and decision-makers' points of view was how to differentiate between authentic experiences and strategically expressed opinions. Ethnographers' expertise could be useful for analysing the reasons for expressing experiences and opinions.

If cultural differences are considered an asset (and a reality within urban centres) rather than a problem for planning, then planning institutions and processes clearly benefit from knowledge that contributes to better understanding of the differences. Ethnographic knowledge increases understanding of the diversity of social and cultural meanings and practices. This type of knowledge arguably should be both made available and utilized in planning and decision-making processes. To discover planners' and decision-makers' opinions regarding the diversity of how different groups in the city experience public urban space, we asked what would be characteristic of urban spaces that reflect or promote equality.

Participant 1: This is a weird question. What is a space for equality ... (-) But basically, for example, anyone can go to a park or something like that. (-) Sometimes a certain group of people may take them as their own (-). But schools, libraries are good examples of spaces promoting and reflecting equality (-) migrants visit these places too.

Participant 2: (-) segregation is a problem in terms of equality in public spaces. (F2)

These focus group discussions emphasized physical accessibility as a criterion for equality-promoting public urban spaces, although 'mental' accessibility was also mentioned. The participants stated that the Finnish policy of mixing different housing types in housing areas promoted interaction between different socio-economic groups and thus equality in urban spaces. However, that comment raises questions regarding whether the policy of mixing socio-economic groups leads to conflicts among user groups, and whether more information about 'mental accessibility' of urban space helps prevent such conflicts. The focus group comments suggest that the viewpoints of certain groups had been considered in the discussion and decision-making regarding equality-promoting urban spaces, whereas other viewpoints had been neglected. The groups included in decision-making (although insufficiently according to some participants) were the aged and disabled. Gender and cultural factors were rarely considered in decision-making concerning the design of urban spaces.

Given that the participants reported that they lacked knowledge and understanding of the different kinds of uses and ways of appreciating urban spaces, we argue that ethnographic knowledge could provide them with important and detailed information on how different people experience public space. For instance, people with migrant backgrounds or people of colour encounter racism on a daily basis in Finland (Isotalo, 2016; Ojanen, 2018; Rastas, 2002, 2013). Officials and other actors involved in city planning should be made aware of these kinds of experiences. As the discussion showed, city planning has not adequately accounted for ethnicity. Equality-promoting public space was conceived in physical terms only, not culturally or experientially. Ethnographic information and knowledge could provide insights and understanding pertaining to culture and experience. The participants recognized this possibility, as they emphasized that city planners should frequently meet local residents in specific places during the planning process. However, they were unaware of the possibilities that ethnographic knowledge could add to the understanding produced by interactions with local inhabitants.

Applicability of Ethnographic Knowledge

The use of ethnographic knowledge in planning was positively approached by the participants – all of whom were involved in planning in some ways. They considered that experience-based knowledge could improve planners' and decision-makers' understanding of different ideals concerning a 'good life', and the mechanisms for the realization of these ideals. They understood the usefulness of experience-based knowledge for making sense of and managing certain developmental trends in the city, such as ethnic segregation, socially unbalanced population base or concentrated social challenges in certain areas. Moreover, the participants considered that ethnographic knowledge could be gathered during ex post evaluations, although they reported that such evaluations have not so far been systematically carried out in their own planning organizations.

While the participants had a positive approach to the use of ethnographic knowledge in planning, they recognized problems in applying ethnographic knowledge. Such problems seem inherent to the nature of ethnographic knowledge. Through systematic documentation, ethnography produces knowledge that makes the different ways of experiencing an environment visible, in this case, urban space. Furthermore, ethnography deepens our understanding of the factors and causes behind these experiences. However, the production of ethnographic knowledge is time-consuming and potentially costly. Furthermore, because it is rarely commissioned explicitly for this purpose, ethnographic knowledge rarely provides direct answers to planning problems; instead, ethnography may reveal new problems or challenges, or the causes of the problems or challenges.

Planners and decision-makers clearly wished to gain knowledge that provided answers to problems; however, the wish counters their preference for knowledge that is neutral and objective.

According to Greed (1994), planners tend to question the reliability of qualitative, 'soft' methodology and its applicability to spatial issues, despite "the need to develop quantifiable social indicators" of the processes having led to "an oversimplistic statistical presentation of complex qualitative social variables" (pp. 122, 125). Most discussants did not question the importance or the reliability of ethnographic knowledge. The problem of applicability was nevertheless present in their comments, especially when they described the need for quickly adoptable "assertive, vigorous and compact" knowledge. Discussants' comments are related, not only to the nature of ethnographic knowledge and its applicability, but also to the unfamiliarity of the participants with ethnographic research as a specific disciplinary genre and their inability to read the products of this genre (see Hammersley, 1990).

The nature of ethnographic knowledge challenges not only those involved in urban planning but also those who produce such knowledge. To make ethnographic information significant, ethnographers must find ways of packaging multi-layered and fine-grained information into suggestions and policy briefs and subsequently present new ways of involving cultural understanding in planning processes. To be able to do so, they would need to interact with planners and to get acquainted with the basics of planning processes. This would also increase planners' awareness of the potential of ethnographic research in the promotion of culturally sustainable planning. One participant suggested that ethnographic reports on everyday life in the area could become an integral part of the knowledge base of planning processes, just as reports on the built heritage are typically included in planning processes. The availability of an ethnographic report at early stages of planning would help planners recognize potentially sensitive issues in a specific area. Such recognition would provide more heterogeneous viewpoints regarding area than those currently produced through official, legally-mandated communicative methods.

Concluding Remarks

The highly complex realm of urban development in contemporary societies requires new ways of applying different forms of knowledge in planning processes. By enriching the knowledge base of planning with more inclusive knowledge on the everyday lives of city inhabitants, planning institutions could promote more cohesive, sustainable forms of urban development, even when the planners cannot typically include all the diverse values and preferences of the inhabitants in one plan (Moser, 2013, pp. 18–19).

As we have argued, local knowledge deserves a firmer position in the knowledge base of planning. Proponents of communicative planning methods have recently implemented important and ground-breaking work in strengthening local stakeholders' voices. The transmission of local knowledge can happen also via ethnographic processes. Ethnographic processes produce more comprehensive and systematic pictures of local cultures and the impacts caused by planning solutions than communicative planning methods can. Ethnographic knowledge typically covers the views, experiences and practices of local communities and cultures more broadly than knowledge produced through participation, because it extends to the daily lives of groups not participating in planning processes. Although ethnographic knowledge is place-based, it contributes to a general understanding of the spatial and cultural dimensions of social interaction. Systematic documentation of such knowledge makes it accessible to planners who are not involved in the planning process at hand, which potentially increases the general awareness of the cultural and spatial patterns of everyday life.

However, ethnographic knowledge does not provide ultimate solutions when decision-making in planning concerns choosing which kinds of future states are desirable, which kinds of plans should be created, and which cultural values should be prioritized in cases of conflict. Ethnographic knowledge rather suggests candidates for good solutions. Thus, to make value choices concerning the future of urban places, planners and decision-makers should implement communicative processes and interaction with local inhabitants. The planners and decision-makers in our small case study did not fully understand the difference between questions of uncertainty that can be solved by research – natural-scientific, ethnographic or other – and questions of ambiguity that call for value choices, communication and public deliberation (Forester, 1993, p. 9).

Planners and decision-makers recognised the potential of ethnographic knowledge, even though they thought that the production of ethnographic knowledge was resource intensive. Nonetheless,

all production of qualitative knowledge is time consuming, including knowledge production through communicative planning processes. Ethnographic knowledge is still a relatively unknown commodity for many in the planning profession; however, professionally produced ethnographic knowledge can complement knowledge gained through communicative processes. Not all groups of people involved in a community participate in planning processes; therefore, the knowledge produced through typical processes is usually unrepresentative of the diversity of the community's views. Notably, planning processes can be delayed by conflicts arising from a poor understanding of diverse values and habits of local cultures. Consequently, the production of ethnographic knowledge as background information for planning may accelerate planning processes (see also Maginn, 2007).

Current planning law in Finland links participation and impact assessment processes – including social and cultural impacts – via Participation and Impact Assessment Schemes. This linkage may have led to the current transmission of local knowledge to planning mainly through participation, with scientific and systematic ways of producing ethnographic knowledge not typically used to support planning processes. The Land Use and Building Act of Finland is currently being reformed: we hope that the relation between participation and knowledge production through research will receive further attention in the reform process. These two aspects of producing and transmitting knowledge are currently interconnected via existing legal norms, just as they should be, but more specific elaborations on the connection are needed at the system-level. Such elaborations should concern the relation between questions of uncertainty that can be solved by knowledge acquisition, and questions of ambiguity that call for deliberative practices (see also Forester, 1993).

We are not suggesting that the formal regulations concerning studies and impact assessments should require the use of ethnographic reports in planning processes, given the scarcity of time and other resources in planning. We suggest promoting use of ethnographic methods in informal planning and development policies to better inform planners and decision-makers about the importance of ethnographic knowledge for understanding people's identities, communities, cultures, and narratives on the interaction between places and people. Both professionals and lay participants of planning processes would benefit from awareness of the advantages of ethnographic knowledge. Raising awareness of ethnographic research approaches in local communities would raise demand for the use of ethnographic methods to complement the often-dismissed results of participation. After all, local communities would have their values and preferences more efficiently transmitted to planning procedures were their voices included both in participatory processes and impact assessment reports.

One way to enhance awareness of ethnographic methods involves including the basics of ethnography in planning education. Planning education in Finland mainly happens in technical universities, and thus focuses on the physical rather than social or cultural dimensions of planning. Both planning and ethnography curricula could be enriched by project courses involving interaction between students in these fields. Such interaction would allow future planners and ethnographers to benefit from each field's approaches, needs and practical limitations in the use of knowledge (Ainiala et al., 2020). By becoming familiar with ethnography, planning students could apply ethnographic knowledge to planning processes, and thus have a more informed and impartial view of people's daily lives than their current view, based on interactive planning methods.

Based on our analyses, we argue that ethnographic knowledge would support the aims of communicative planning by bridging the gap between participatory methods and so-called scientific

knowledge. We presented some concrete ways to combine communicative practices, ethnographic processes, and traditional scientific knowledge-production that aims at neutral and placeless knowledge. Development of sustainable mechanisms for integrating ethnographic knowledge into the structures of urban planning requires further co-operation between ethnographers and planners. Co-operation calls for an enhanced understanding of the nature of ethnographic knowledge in planning institutions, and better understanding of the nature of planning practices in the field of ethnography.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant number 13333366, Grant number 326234, and by the Helsinki Metropolitan Region Urban Research Programme 2017–2018.

Notes on Contributors

Hanna Mattila, D.Sc. (tech.), is an Associate Professor in urban design in Aalborg University, Denmark. She has also worked as a Senior University Lecturer in land-use planning at Aalto University, Finland. Her research interests include planning theory, design theory, planning systems & law, and comparative planning studies.

Pia Olsson, PhD, Associate Professor, is a University Lecturer in ethnology at the University of Helsinki. In her urban studies research, she has focused on the ways people experience, feel and make meaning of their close environment. She has applied both ethnography and oral history methods in her work.

Tiina-Riitta Lappi, PhD, is an Associate Professor in urban ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä and at the University of Turku. Her research interests include transdisciplinary urban studies, migration, placemaking, cultural diversity and application of ethnography in urban contexts. 2019–2021 she worked as a Senior Researcher at the Migration Institute of Finland.

Karoliina Ojanen holds a PhD in folklore studies and is an Associate Professor in ethnology at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests include girl cultures, cultural gerontology, and intersectionality. She has a master's degree in social sciences, and is currently working as a social worker.

ORCID

Hanna Mattila  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1911-7618>

Sources

Interviews (I1, I2)

Focus group discussions (F1, F2, F3)

References

- Ainiala, T., Olsson, P., Mattila, H., & Vesala, M. (2020). Työelämätaidot korkeakouluopetuksessa. Opiskelijoiden kokemuksia asiantuntijuuden ja taitojen kehittymisestä monialaisella kaupunkitutkimuksen projektikurssilla. *Aikuiskasvatus*, 40(2), 96–111. <https://doi.org/10.33336/aik.95449>

- Andersen, H. T., & Atkinson, R. (2013). Existing and future urban knowledge: Studies in the production and use of knowledge in urban contexts. In H. T. Andersen & R. Atkinson (Eds.), *Production and use of urban knowledge: European experience* (pp. 1–15). Springer Science+Business Media. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-8936-6_1
- Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (1994). Ethnography and participant observation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 248–260). Sage.
- Brewer, J. D. (2000). *Ethnography*. Open University Press.
- Davoudi, S. (2015). Planning as practice of knowing. *Planning Theory*, 14(3), 316–331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095215575919>
- Faludi, A., & Waterhout, B. (2006). Introducing evidence-based planning. *disP – the Planning Review*, 165(2), 4–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2006.10556950>
- Fenster, T., & Yacobi, H. (2005). Whose city is it? On urban planning and local knowledge in globalizing Tel Aviv-Jaffa. *Planning Theory and Practice*, 6(2), 191–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649350500137051>
- Fischer, F. (2000). *Citizens, experts, and the environment. The politics of local knowledge*. Duke University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998). *Rationality and power. Democracy in practice*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Forester, J. (1993). *Critical theory, public policy and planning practice*. State University of New York Press.
- Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge*. Basic Books Inc.
- Gray, C. (2006). Managing the unmanageable: The politics of cultural planning. *Public Policy and Administration*, 21(2), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095207670602100208>
- Greed, C. (1994). The place of ethnography in planning: Or is it 'real research'? *Planning Practice & Research*, 9(2), 119–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459408722918>
- Hall, S. (2012). *City, street, and citizen. The measure of the ordinary*. Routledge.
- Hammersley, M. (1990). *Reading ethnographic research: A critical guide*. Longman.
- Häyrynen, M. (2017). Kulttuurisuunnittelu, kulttuurikartoitus ja suomalainen kaupunkikehittäminen. In M. Häyrynen & A. Wallin (Eds.), *Kulttuurisuunnittelu. Kaupunkikehittämisen uusi näkökulma* [Cultural planning. A new point of view for urban development] (pp. 7–28). Finnish Literature Society.
- Healey, P. (1992). Planning through debate. The communicative turn in planning theory. *Town Planning Review*, 63(2), 143–162. <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.63.2.422x602303814821>
- Healey, P. (1997). *Collaborative planning. Shaping places in fragmented societies*. Macmillan.
- Healey, P. (2003). Collaborative planning in perspective. *Planning Theory*, 2(2), 101–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14730952030022002>
- Henderson, H. (2016). Toward an ethnographic sensibility in urban research. *Australian Planner*, 53(1), 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2015.1135817>
- Hennink, M. M. (2015). *Understanding focus group discussions*. Oxford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199856169.001.0001>
- Hillier, J. (2002). *Shadows of power. An allegory of prudence in land-use planning*. Routledge.
- Hillier, J. (2003). 'Agon'izing over consensus: Why Habermasian ideals cannot be 'real'? *Planning Theory*, 2(1), 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095203002001005>
- Hyler, S. (2013). Invisible lines crossing the city: Ethnographic strategies for place-making. *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 5(3), 361–384. <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.135361>
- Innes, J. E., & Booher, D. E. (2010). *Planning with complexity: An introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy*. Routledge.
- Isotalo, A. (2016). Rasismi kaupunkilassa: Tilallinen valkoisuusnormi ja somalialaistaisten naisten vastarinta [Racism in urban space: Whiteness norm and resistance of women with Somali background]. *Sukupuolentutkimus*, 29(4), 7–21. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:ELE-1819074>
- Knoblauch, H. (2005). Focused ethnography. *Forum. Qualitative Social Research*, 6, 3. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.3.20>
- Koster, M. (2020). An ethnographic perspective on urban planning in Brazil: Temporality, diversity and critical urban theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 44(4), 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12765>
- Krizek, K., Forysth, A., & Schively Slotterback, C. (2009). Is there a role for evidence-based practice in urban planning and policy? *Planning Theory & Practice*, 10(4), 459–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649350903417241>

- Land Use and Building Act (132/1999). *Unofficial translation of the Land Use and Building Act of Finland*. <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990132.pdf>
- Lapintie, K. (2015). Miksi monikulttuurisuus ei mahdu suunnittelijan suuhun – eikä päähän? [Why is multiculturalism so difficult for planners?]. *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu*, 52(3), 36–44. <http://www.yss.fi/journal/miksi-monikulttuurisuus-ei-mahdu-suunnittelijan-suuhun-eika-paahan/>
- Lappi, T.-R., & Olsson, P. (2018). Encounters and avoidances in suburban spaces. Experiencing cultural and social diversity in a multicultural city. *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 48, 139–152.
- Lappi, T.-R. (2007). *Neuvottelu tilan tulkintoista: Etnologinen tutkimus sosiaalisen ja materiaalisen ympäristön vuorovaikutuksesta jyväskyläläisissä kaupunkipuhunoissa* [Negotiating urban spatiality. An ethnological study on the interplay of social and material environment in urban narrations on Jyväskylä]. University of Jyväskylä.
- Maginn, P. J. (2007). Towards more effective community participation in urban regeneration: The potential of collaborative planning and applied ethnography. *Qualitative Research*, 7(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106068020>
- Majoor, S. J. H. (2018). Coping with ambiguity: An urban megaproject ethnography. *Progress in Planning*, 120, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2016.07.001>
- Mattila, H. (2016). Can collaborative planning go beyond locally focused notions of the “public interest”? The potential of Habermas’s concept of “generalizable interest” in pluralist and trans-scalar planning discourses. *Planning Theory*, 15(4), 344–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095216640568>
- Mattila, H. (2020). Habermas revisited: Resurrecting the contested roots of communicative planning theory. *Progress in Planning*, 141, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2019.04.001>
- Moser, P. (2013). Integrating urban knowledge. In H. T. Andersen, and R. Atkinson (Eds.), *Production and use of urban knowledge: European experience* (pp. 17–34). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-8936-6_1
- O’Dell, T., & Willim, R. (2015). Rendering culture and multi-targeted ethnography. *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 45, 89–102.
- Ojanen, K. (2018). Erojen yhdentekevyydestä jokapäiväiseen rasismiin. Monikulttuurisia kohtaamisia Helsingin lähiöissä [From conviviality to everyday racism. Multicultural encounters in the suburbs of Helsinki]. *Alue Ja Ympäristö*, 47(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.30663/ay.73015>
- Päivänen, J., Kohl, J., Manninen, R., Sairinen, R., & Kyttä, M. (2005). *Sosiaalisten vaikutusten arvointi kaavoitukseissa. Avauskias sisältöön ja menetelmiin* [Social impact assessment in land use planning. Insights into content and methods]. Suomen ympäristö 766. Ympäristöministeriö.
- Pink, S., & Morgan, J. (2013). Short-term ethnography: Intense routes to knowing. *Symbolic Interaction*, 36(3), 351–361. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.66>
- Plöger, J. (2018). Conflict and agonism. In M. Gunder, A. Madanipour, & W. Watson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of planning theory* (pp. 264–275). Routledge.
- Rastas, A. (2002). Katseilla merkityt, silminnähden erilaiset. Lasten ja nuorten kokemuksia rodullistavista kateista [Marked by look, visibly different. Experiences of racializing looks by children and youth]. *Nuorisotutkimus*, 20(3), 3–17. <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:uta-201301301018>
- Rastas, A. (2013). Nimeämisen poliittinen ja rasismin rajaamat sosiaiset suhteet. In M. Lehtonen (Ed.), *Liikkuvaa maailma* [Mobile world] (pp. 153–175). Vastapaino.
- Risbeth, C., Ganji, F., & Vodicka, G. (2018). Ethnographic understandings of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods to inform urban design practice. *Local Environment*, 23(1), 36–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1385000>
- Rydin, Y. (2007). Re-examining the role of knowledge within planning theory. *Planning Theory*, 6(1), 52–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095207075161>
- Taylor, B., & De Loë, R. C. (2012). Conceptualizations of local knowledge in collaborative environmental governance. *Geoforum*, 43(6), 1207–1217. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.03.007>
- Tewdwr-Jones, M., & Allmendinger, P. (1998). Deconstructing communicative rationality: A critique of Habermasian communicative planning theory. *Environment and Planning A*, 30(11), 1975–1989. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a301975>
- Yiftachel, O. (1998). Planning and social control: Exploring the dark side. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 12(4), 395–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088541229801200401>