Relationality, Individuality and Entanglements of Helping in the Context of a Touristic Vaccine Trial:

Nordic Research Subjects in West Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the idea of relationality and distributive agency in the context of a clinical vaccine trial. The diarrhoea vaccine trial was conducted in Finnish adults, who travelled to West Africa[1]. Engaging with previous research on clinical trials in the global South that has emphasized the relationality and social embeddedness of Southern trial subjects, this article argues for an enacted social-material relationality of *any* research subject. As the vaccine trial under study transformed into practices and ideas of *helping*, the analysis illustrates forms of relational subjectivity and distributive agency by focusing on the notion of helping. The analysis is based on the trial participants' accounts and practices, and draws on qualitative interviews (51) and ethnographic observation conducted between 2017 and 2019 at the trial site in West Africa.

Keywords: vaccine trial, relationality, subjectivity, distributive agency, helping

Introduction

Relationality and the social embeddedness of research subjects is a key question in social scientific research on clinical trials in the global South (e.g., Sariola and Simpson, 2019). It has been suggested that the importance, even primacy, of social and material relations studied in different Southern trial contexts reveals and questions the West-centeredness of ethical guidelines in clinical research, and problematizes their assumptions of the autonomous individual. These guidelines[2] were developed in Europe, mainly since WWII, and it has been suggested that they carry powerful and universalizing assumptions about the autonomous human subject and its capability for consent, resulting in calls for more relational, everyday, and grounded ethics to complement formal ethical guidelines (e.g., Geissler et al., 2008; Molyneux and Geissler, 2008; Tengbeh et al., 2018; Fairhead et al., 2006). As vital as these critiques are, however, here I suggest that by attributing relationality only to 'Southern subjects' they might ultimately enforce racialized ideas of subjectivity. By analysing a Nordic vaccine trial recruiting Finnish trial participants traveling to West Africa, this article engages with previous research on clinical trials, and draws from feminist rethinking of notions of the autonomous individual and relationality. Further, I explore the ideas and practices of helping that emerged in the trial context to grasp some of the relationalities of the Finnish trial participants.

P. W. Geissler et al. (2008) and Salla Sariola and Bob Simpson (2011; 2019), among others, have shown that the realities of trial contexts in the global South – such as in the Gambia or Sri Lanka – aptly manifest the fundamental social embeddedness of an individual, should individuality be considered a meaningful point of reference in the first place. Studies in such contexts reveal the decontextualized underpinnings of formal ethical guidelines and regulations directing the conduct of medical trials. Ethnographic studies of clinical trials in the South challenge the assumed autonomy of research subjects and underscore their enmeshment in their social and material surroundings (Sariola and Simpson 2019; Enria et al., 2016; Enria and Lees, 2018; Fairhead et al., 2006; Kingori, 2015). It is suggested that these guidelines become problematic, or at least challenging to implement, in contexts where the idea of the human is inherently more relational – that is, defined by social and material relationships – or where freedom of choice (to participate) is considerably limited by external conditions (e.g., Sariola and Simpson, 2019; Wahlberg et al., 2013; Kingori, 2015; Geissler, 2008).

Such critical analyses are urgent calls for rethinking (bio)ethics and their cultural underpinnings, but also, I suggest, they speak to the legacy of work, especially in feminist theory, on the concept of subjectivity itself (e.g., Butler, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Barad, 2007; Jackson, 2013); yet the focus of such studies on the South – or non-West – is puzzling in a two-fold way. Although the act of problematizing universalizing notions through contextualized accounts is crucially important (Biehl et al., 2007), I argue that a tendency to simultaneously reproduce and to stabilize a difference between an assumed South and West still prevails. Relatedly, and more importantly for this article, I suggest that a focus on the problematic idea of an autonomous individual in Southern contexts tends to assume, even if implicitly, that such an idea of the subject may be useful and accurate in Western/European contexts. In other words, the critique of the autonomous subject in the field of clinical trial anthropology, when applied specifically to the South, might re-invoke the idea of an autonomous, modern Man, thus hampering (feminist) arguments for the relationality and social embeddedness of *any* subject (e.g., Jackson, 2013; Wynter, 2003; Oinas, 2017: 200-201).

Subjectivity and agency as relational have been theorized in Western social science for decades – as such, it is not new to claim the relationality of Westerners, too. However, gestures implying the idea of an individual, autonomous and rational subject as apt endure, and here, I consider anthropological studies on clinical trials especially in the South as possibly making such a gesture. Discussions on individualization, subjectivity, relationality and materiality also easily remain highly theoretical and abstract, and are not necessarily substantiated with empirical research (e.g., Meskus, 2015). When human relationality and materiality are empirically studied, the focus is easily on situations of emphasized neediness, such as illness, life crises, or childhood (in the Finnish context, see Honkasalo, 2008; Ketokivi and Meskus, 2015; Paju, 2013). Although I situate this study to this strand of research and theorizing, the case of Finnish volunteer trial participants in Western Africa allows to analyse social, material and discursive relationalities even when intentions, motivations and choice surface. Here, I draw from the STS tradition to highlight the importance of the situatedness and contextuality of all phenomena, and ask, with my empirical material: *how* does relationality come to the fore in a vaccine study on Western trial participants in the ethnographic data when spending time with the people travelling to West Africa as vaccine testing tourists? The aim is to detect the subtle ways relationality is done in a specific context of science, and 'helping', in the making.

Instead of focusing only on the scientific practices of the trial, I turn my gaze onto the ideas and practices of *helping* that emerged in this context. As I show, the presence of trial participants and practices interestingly transformed into a flow between the participants and local communities of objects, ideas, and desires connected with helping. Hence, I study relationality through contextualized *practices* and *ideas* of helping on the part of the vaccine trial participants, while also aiming to understand *helping*, in this context, from the perspectives of relationality and autonomous subjectivity. Therefore, I do not operate with a pre-set definition of helping; I take inspiration from anthropological research on humanitarianism that focuses on the 'helpers' (e.g., Redfield and Bornstein, 2011; Malkki, 2015; Benton, 2016; Jefferess, 2015) but, primarily, the research participants' views guide me in what can be considered helping in this context. The perspective clearly is one-sided, and the aim here is not to estimate, whether the practices and ideas here named as helping actually were of help to anyone, or to take for granted that such gestures of help were needed.

In my analysis of helping and relational subjects, I draw from theorizations of non-human or more-than-human agency, whose one key aim is to deconstruct the anthropocentrism in social sciences. Such thinking has been intense in theorizations labelled under new materialisms, for example, and in the field of indigenous thinking and Indigenous studies – although, despite similarities, dialogue between these two strands has been largely lacking (Rosiek et al., 2020; Martin, 2017). Here, certain general ideas shared by much new materialist as well as indigenous theorizing of non-human agency and relationality guide the analysis. First, relationality is a starting point and precedes the existence all of entities, human or not; second, relationality is processual – as are the entities generated within different, changing relations – it is about constant enacting and re-enacting; third, concrete and particular relations, environments, and agencies are of interest, instead of a general and abstract theory of non-human agency or relationality (e.g., Martin, 2017; Truman, 2019; Bennett, 2010; see also van der Zaag, 2017). The latter view may be better incorporated in indigenous theories, though it is, at least potentially, also present in some new materialist thinking (Martin, 2016). More specifically, I make particular use of Jane Bennet's (2012; 2010; 2004) notions of 'distributive agency' and 'thing power'. Distributive agency, simply, refers to the idea that agency is not a human capacity or possession, but rather, that "the agency of a self appears not only as radically entangled with nonhuman things, but as partially composed of such stuff" (Bennett, 2012: 258). The human subject appears in and through its relations with all kinds of other things, material and immaterial, human and non-human. Also useful here, Bennett makes a separation between material objects and things, suggesting that *things* are not taken over by the subject-object relation and hence not reducible or defined by the knowing subject. Thing power derives precisely from here; it is the vibrancy and forcefulness of the material stuff (Bennett, 2004; 2012) that may or may not affect human subjects too. While I draw from these 'more-than-human' strands of thinking, I simultaneously acknowledge the discursive and individuating forces at work in the construction of subjects, relational or not, and hence find post-structural theorizations of agency and the subject fruitful, too (Butler, 1990; Hojgaard and Sondergaard, 2011).

Problematically, questions of race, racialization and colonial power relations have been ignored in a great deal of theorization within new materialisms (Ahmed, 2008; Jackson, 2013). To address these processes in the context of my study, I take my cue from critical theories on whiteness that emphasize the invisibility and normalization of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007); I consider the notions of Nordic whiteness and Finnish exceptionality especially useful here (Loftsdottir and Jensen, 2012; Rastas, 2012). In the following section, I introduce the vaccine trial under review, before discussing related research on clinical trial participation. After briefly explaining the methods and materials utilized, I present my analysis in three sections, focusing first on how mere participation emerged as helping; second, on the ways in which the notions of Finnishness were enacted in the context; and third, on the habituality of helping and the 'help objects'. All three themes spin around the notions of relationality *and* individuality, presenting a slide or a spectrum rather than stable categories. Lastly, I return to my research questions.

The case: a Nordic diarrhoea vaccine trial in West Africa

Between 2017 and 2019, nearly 750 Finns participated in a clinical trial testing a vaccine against diarrhoea. Traveling to the other side of the world in groups of 10-30 for a two-week period was also required of the recruited trial participants. This was due to the assumed bacterial abundance at the chosen trial site. Some of the trial activities such as sample giving and dietary and symptom log-keeping was done at the destination. The vaccine under development is aimed for use in travellers and infants in low and middle income countries (LMIC). Infant diarrhoea, a key health concern in many LMIC, was the core reason for many Finnish trial participants to participate in the first place. Alongside trial activities, such as sample giving and log keeping, the trip consisted of typical touristic amusements such as organized sightseeing, eating and drinking in restaurants and bars, sun-bathing and becoming acquainted with the place and its people (Huttunen et al., 2021). My ethnographic study observed the trial participants' daily lives over a period of five months in the resort.

The developer of the vaccine is a rather small biotechnological company based in Sweden that cooperates with Nordic and US universities and other actors in the field. The key executors were a Finnish university, a laboratory company, a travel health clinic, and, more unconventionally, a Finnish-African cultural centre. The trial staff present at the West African destination were all Finnish, but bus drivers and a guide, for example, were recruited from the local area. From the perspective of the trial volunteers, encounters with Finnish medicine and health care at the WA destination (as well as in Finland) formed the core of participation – despite their being travellers in Africa.

Background: clinical trials in the South

In the trial literature, ideas about research subjects' complex social webs and social embeddedness are often linked to rethinking the rationales of informed consent and autonomous decision-making that form the basis of medical research ethics. For example, Sariola and Simpson (2011; 2019) demonstrate in a Sri Lankan trial context that it is the family, not a solitary individual, that makes the decision on trial participation, and consequently, that the global practices of ethics need to be negotiated. Additionally, their study demonstrates that trial participants do not perceive independence from the researchers/medical experts as a virtue but, rather, as an impossibility; the expert is assumed to provide guidance and to know what is best for the patient/trial participant. In their study in Kenya, Gikonyo et al. (2008) also emphasize the communal mode of decision-making on participation or withdrawal, suggesting a need for "greater attention to the diverse social relationships that are essential to the successful application of these procedures" (Gikonyo et al., 2008: 708). Less concerned with the question of informed consent, Geissler et al. (2008) address complex social formations in their study of a 'trial community' (consisting of participants and staff) in a malaria vaccine trial in the Gambia, suggesting that relations between staff and participants should be understood as kinship-like: care-taking in the form of shared meals and shared homes were a part of the trial setting. In response, they call for more relational and everyday ethics to complement the formal ones. That trial practices and protocols do not occur in a vacuum but in relation to "participants' broader social experiences" (Lees and Enria, 2020: 580; see also Tengbeh et al., 2018) is often suggested as a key starting point, or sometimes as a finding, in anthropologies of 'overseas' medical research.

With a slightly different focus, various studies (e.g., Kingori, 2015; Abadie, 2010; Petryna, 2009), discuss how structural conditions, especially impoverished living conditions and a lack of access to sufficient biomedical health care, may complicate autonomous choices to participate. Typically, participation in clinical trials also means access to more or less high quality health care or medication. Patricia Kingori discusses the differences between public health care services and those offered by trials/biomedical research institutions in two anonymized contexts of Eastern and Western Africa, showing how poverty, experienced illness and poorly resourced public health care resulted in an 'empty choice' (Kingori, 2015). Similar findings on the ways in which structural conditions may hamper informed consent and autonomous choice come from the US, the result of both hyper-privatized health care and the practice of offering financial compensation to study participants, tempting many to earn their income by continual trial participation (Abadie, 2010).

In light of these earlier studies that focus, on the one hand, on the everyday relations and socialities of the trial participants (or communities) and, on the other, on more structural aspects of health care provision and poverty, in what follows I analyse the relationalities of a trial case that concurrently recruits Finnish trial participants and entails a trip to enjoy the West African microbial abundance. I begin by explicating the methods and material of the study.

Methods and material

This article is written as part of a social scientific research project studying a particular vaccine trial.[3] It is based on five months of ethnographically oriented fieldwork between October 2017 and April 2019 in a small village in a somewhat stable country in Western Africa. The primary material consists of a field diary and 51 semi-structured interviews personally conducted with the trial participants at the trial site. In focus were experiences and views of trial participation, of falling ill with diarrhoea or other disease, of the trip and the place, and of helping, although in some of the interviews a much larger variety of topics were covered. The interviews lasted 45 minutes on average, the shortest one taking fifteen minutes and the longest nearly two hours. The field diary consists of records of participant observation: descriptions and narratives of daily interaction and informal conversations with the trial participants in situations of, for example, eating (and waiting) in local restaurants or hotels, tourist excursions and sitting and chatting in tour buses. In addition to paying attention to people's speech, actions and interactions, as is typical of ethnographic participant observation, I have also drawn from materially oriented ethnography (e.g., Mol, 2002) and have sought to pay attention to materialities of various kinds both in the speech and the daily practices of the participants. As secondary material, I use media accounts of the trial and a survey conducted as part of the research project. The survey targeted the Finnish trial participants and consisted of two separate parts, the first distributed before or at the very beginning of the trial trip, and the second after the trip. Part one gathered basic information about the participants, such as gender, age and occupation; earlier experiences of trial participation and traveling; and motivations for participation. Part two inquired into post-trial views regarding the trial and its implementation, and experiences of participation and the trip as a whole. The first part of the survey received 542 replies, and the second part 493 replies. Even though in close collaboration, the sociological study was conducted independently from the vaccine trial. Jointly with the vaccine study the sociological study had ethical clearance from the Helsinki University Hospitals ethical board.

All trial participants were Finnish citizens, as that was a trial prerequisite. My interviewees seemed to reflect the views of the trial participants more generally, according to the broader picture we gained from the survey. Middle-aged women were slightly over-represented, and a notable proportion worked in education or the health care sector. The majority came from the capital area of Finland as meetings with research staff before and after the trip took place in Helsinki. In light of Finnish statistics, as we describe elsewhere (Huttunen et al., 2021), the participants – and my interviewees – were somewhat average Finns, slightly better educated, and had an interest in science and health, as well as Africa.

The method of analysis of the qualitative material contained elements from thematic and discourse analysis, and 'new material' analysis concerned with how particular entities come into being in particular contextual relations and processes (Mol, 2002; Bennett, 2010). The centrality of the theme of 'helping' became clear during the data gathering and transcription process; in this sense, it arose from the data and served as a starting point for analysis. I coded the data with the help of ATLAS.ti, paying attention during the coding process to how different subject positions were discussed, and how the participants talked about material objects, such as microbes or pencils for donation. An interest in relationality hence in part arose from the data, yet noticing the 'problem' of relationality in earlier research guided me to focus further on what that could mean in my research material; consequently, the smaller codes were collected under subthemes that all discuss aspects of helping from the perspectives of relationality and autonomous subjectivity in this context.

Trial participation as helping; Finnishness and helping; and habits and the stuff of helping

"When I first saw the advertisement, I thought that this is *exactly for me",* or "I read the newspaper article[4] and immediately signed up – it was just so clearly *my thing*", were astonishingly common ways to begin to answer my question, "Why did you want to participate in this in the first place?" Such a question, and answers to it, do not merely categorize the various motivations for participating in a vaccine trial; they also allow for a more detailed analysis of the 'I' that was so compellingly signalled as taking part in the unique trial. Here, I suggest reading the responses to advertisements or newspaper articles (exemplified above) as moments of hailing, where the individual is called upon to figure as a particular kind of an individual (Butler, 1990). The data suggests that a compilation of the attraction of science, moral ideas of helping and the cultural practices of travel, as well as imaginaries of Africa, were crucial for the sense of being hailed in this case.

Next, I show how discursive and social-material practices of helping infiltrated the context and were a central mode of constructing the self as a relational subject. Yet, simultaneously, through notions of helping an individual, even autonomous, self was also enacted – in part, through a typical Nordic narrative of strong individuals.

Participation as helping: from centering the individual self to distributive agency

Those whom I interviewed or talked to more informally considered mere participation in the scientific project, the vaccine trial, an act of helping. Many emphasized that they cared about the health of African children, not that of travellers as prospective vaccine users. This view was undoubtedly encouraged by the media coverage of the trial and the briefings, held at the beginning of each two-week trip to the village, in which the responsible doctor expressed gratitude to all the participants, while mentioning how many children die of diarrhoea annually. On such occasions, both the simultaneous 'individuating hailing' and the collectivity of the effort as a key to the trial's success were clearly visible.

Many of the participants worked in the health sector or education, and attributed to these backgrounds their views on why a vaccine for children was something to which they wanted to contribute. As is typical of most Finns' attitudes toward vaccines, vaccination programs were described by many as key factors in improving public health (e.g., Väliverronen et al., 2020). A focus on the wellbeing of children, societally, but also on participants' personal and occupational lives, frequently featured in interviews and discussions. Merja, a school teacher near retirement, emphasized how important helping children had always been for her. The interview took place on an otherwise empty forenoon beach, the ocean glimmering and roaring some fifty meters from us and the smell of sun lotion floating in the air. Laying on her wooden deck chair under a sunshade, Merja took a long look at the ocean and, after a silence, responded to the suggestive question I had posed with a firm "Yes, I really feel like we are doing something important here."

In this context, one's mere bodily existence, underlined by the concurrent sunbathing, becomes an act of engaging with the inequalities of the world. This could be read as a crystallization of 'white saviorism' (Jefferess, 2015; Benton, 2016), as one's desire to help those considered poor and racialized as non-white becomes an assumed state of affairs and a personal experience. Without wishing to downplay the significance of how race is produced in such events, this could, however, also be understood as an enactment of biological global citizenship (e.g., Rose and Novas, 2005) of a kind: in modes that foreground the biological body as active and as activity, rather than passive background. What I want to emphasize in Merja's response to my question is the 'we': that it is necessarily a collective effort of which the individual is part and whereby she gains her significance. Vaccine trial participation as heroic action entangled with the making of respectable and moral selves – a particular desire to help enmeshed with biomedical knowledge production – has been previously recorded in Sierra

Leonian and South African contexts (Tengbeh et al., 2018; Dixon and Tameris, 2018), demonstrating that such processes are not a unique feature of this trial. While I suggest that individualized attempts to make moral and virtuous selves were at play in this situation, and emphasize the contextual specificities in regard to the similarities in these processes with other contexts, the collectivity or relationality of the 'we' should also be addressed.

While I believe Merja was referring with the 'we' to her trial participant companions, a strictly defined human collective, other modes of signaling ideas and practices of relationality were likewise in play. The repeated references to diarrhoeaas agential – such as, "If I got diarrhoea I might feel that I've actually done something", or "Well, this [diarrhoea] is what I'm here for, now I've done my share" – disrupt an idea of the self as autonomous or (successfully) intentional (see Bennett, 2012). In addition to showing how helping was experienced in a very embodied manner, such accounts point towards the notion of distributive agency which Jane Bennett (2012; 2004), for example, describes as locating agency in relations between *things,* and attributing agentic or effective force to non-human beings as well. Here, both diarrhoea and the independently functioning gut, and microbes as the non-human actors causing diarrhoea (see also Huttunen et al., 2021) were assigned such a capacity, admittedly unsettling the idea of the individual self as an autonomous agent. In another interview, I asked a trial participant whether she considered her participation to be voluntary work of a kind, and her response, accompanied by a small laugh and a tap on the belly, was, "Well not really, it's not even me who is doing something!". In yet another interview, with Aura, a woman in her forties, the answer to the question was:

> ...in a way, that was the reason [to participate], I wanted to be of use to humankind – but maybe this is a little too light to be voluntary work, sitting on the beach in your bikini! [Laughter.] I wouldn't categorize it that way. More like, you lend your body to medicine, and hope that it results in something good.

Although in the latter example, the interviewee also expresses disconnection between self and body, I suggest that these remarks incisively express how the individual self was in a sense set aside, as the human subject was only one party, or actant (Bennett, 2012), in the practice of helping.

Another central mode of how 'mere participation' became a form of helping was through tourism; one contributed by being a tourist. Often, the participants referred to themselves as "not just ordinary tourists", and the trip was "not just any holiday trip". Instead, it seemed to constitute the participants as helpers in multiple ways. Mentions of the positive effects of their travel to the village were common, along with the reservation of not wishing to contribute to the spoiling, often seen as "westernization", of the place. In an interview with Tiia, a kindergarten teacher in her thirties, an optimistic atmosphere prevailed, although she also described how terrible it was to see the poverty and suffering, especially of the local children. She described her thoughts in the following way, speaking from the comfort of a deck chair, on a cooling evening:

> T: I decided to join when I saw the advertisement in the newspaper in the summer, about this trip, or the very first article that was written about this. So I thought right away that this is exactly my thing. And, because I wanted to go to Africa, after my previous trip to [East African country], and then the significance of it, that you can help children, you can do something good at the same time.
> …
> K: What did you think of that, about building a laboratory somewhere, quite far from Finland, and…
> T: I think it was good, the way the article described what the village thought about it, and that it had been carefully explained to the village why it is being done here, why there will be lots of light-skinned[5] people coming here. Then, I was like, it is OK for this place, that we come here, and we won't mess anything up.
> K: And have you thought about that now that you're here?
> T: Yes, I've thought about it, I think this is bringing quite a lot of good things to this village. Because after all this brings… we bring an awful lot of money to this place. So it is a good thing.

Effectively exemplifying the "exactly for me" response mentioned earlier, this excerpt clarifies the multiplicity of the event: how it emerged as science, as helping, as travel, and as Africa, and how these spheres were constantly enacted and re-enacted – for example, in such utterances. Here, the individualizing discourses and practices are forcefully present as Tiia describes her multilayered choices: the 'doing good' is understood as the individual's action and choice, and as a delightful side product, insofar as she regards consumerist ideas of tourism as a means for development. Casting oneself as a morally sound, caring individual seems strikingly successful here. If the expressed concern for 'the village' is taken seriously as a longing for responsible global connectedness, this statement also shows the limited, and somewhat naïve, attempts to position oneself in such forms of subjectivity. This, however, should not mean that such a longing in itself is naïve or patronizing.

The participants' being Finnish welfare state citizens – and often, as in the examples above, employed in care work in the public sector – provides an interesting viewpoint in relation to previous studies on the ways in which structural conditions may hamper informed consent on trial participation in Southern contexts (Kingori, 2015). Here, the structures of the welfare state matter in a rather different mode, yet are not insignificant for understanding both trial participation and the ideas of the subject that are generated. In the Finnish context, the state has been theorized as not only regulating and governing, but also, in some cases, as enabling and allowing a positive attachment or embeddedness to the 'social' without complete denial of individuality, (e.g., Oinas, 2017; Homanen, 2016). Here, the welfare state (ideology/background) enables a particular kind of individuality, one wherein collectivity and social belonging are integral. Yet it also demands and generates a strong, charitable (and gendered) individual who cares and works for the common good (Sulkunen, 2009) – not only in nationalistic terms, but as a caring, global citizen. Relationality, practiced here in voluntary helping, is an enactment of an individuated self, hence, one that is thoroughly relational.

Finnishness as a location for the helper-self: 'Finnish exceptionalism' or situating the relational self?

Among the participants, Finnishness was a constant point of reference, but not in any univocal way. Being a Finnish citizen was a requirement for participation, but Finnishness also functioned as an attribute for particular kinds of positionings in regard to histories of colonialism, privilege, and the obligation and opportunities to 'help' – as well as a way of referring to particular observed or assumed differences and characteristics (of Finns as not very sociable and rather silent, for example). Here, I have analysed modes of discussing and enacting 'Finnishness' in conjunction with ideas of helping, suggesting a reading of these enactments of Finnishness as (helpful) exceptionalism (Irni et al., 2009; Rastas, 2012), yet one that points to Finnishness as situated accountability.

The notion of Finnish or Nordic exceptionalism has been suggested in order to describe a particular attitude towards notions of colonial histories and race/racism articulated in national discourses. Specifically in relation to Africa, Anna Rastas (2012) has traced Finnish exceptionality in historical and contemporary use of the N-word in Finnish school books and in the way certain cultural products are discussed, revealing a tendency for Finns to consider themselves outsiders to colonial histories, and for race and racism to be understood as non-existent in Finland. In addition to an 'aspiring whiteness' – the desire to belong to the 'West' (Oinas, 2020: 5) – such ideas of exceptionalism can be understood as typical of Finnish (and Nordic) formations of whiteness. Although here it is not a question of racism within Finland, versions of exceptionality were narrated and enacted among the trial participants. The trial setting itself generated ideas of exceptionality in a manner that connected the uniqueness of the scientific experiment and Nordicness/Finnishness. Indeed, the special nature of the endeavour and of the people participating in it were propounded in the official briefings of participants, and in the Finnish media. In the ethnographic material, two ways of enacting this exceptionality were particularly identifiable: that of repeatedly raising the horrors of slave trade and colonialism, while noting that at least Finland never had colonies of its own; and that of assuming that 'we' have something to give to the 'locals', specifically in terms of education and gender equality, as we are Finns. Here, I focus on the latter mode as it is directly links to the notion of helping.

Among the trial participants, the assumption that 'we' have something to provide in terms of gender equality was a repeated one and functioned as a mode of enacting the notion of Finnish exceptionality. It is precisely the repetition of such utterances that is important here, not because quantity always matters, but because it suggests the habituality and normalization of particular ways of seeing and knowing (Ahmed, 2007). Branding the Finnish state as 'woman-friendly' (e.g., Jauhola, 2016) is common not only in the media, but in the chat among participants who attributed a keen interest in gender equality to being a Finn. "For us, it is so self-evident that we are equal, that's why it's so difficult to see this; it really makes me angry and want to do something", as a middle-aged participant commented on hearing a lecture-like speech by a local actor on girls' issues after a mini-tour of the research site in the village. Getting girls to school was a motivating intention throughout the trial, one supported by both the participants and trial staff. Yet writing one's name on an email list for a future support group for local girls as the tour bus headed back to the hotel was sometimes the most marked materialization of this intention. Bemoaning the fact that girls often still remain at home while boys go to school, or that girls have to cut their hair short around puberty if they do go to school, was understandably a more available mode of positioning oneself in the gender equality discourse. The intense desire for change in the area of gender equality is especially notable given that the participants often expressed either respectful awe or calm interest toward other practices observed as different, such as religious, vodun-related events.

Education, another Finnish export (Schatz et al., 2015), was also often cited as a "Finnish value" and its support was justified by the knowledge of how important equal education has been for the country's success story – a typical narrative in Finland. Apart from their connection to nationalistic discourses, such views may also stem from the 'common knowledge' conveyed by the development industry that education is the key to change. Such statements were constantly brought up as the participants wondered what could be done to alleviate the poverty they witnessed. Here too, references to personal experiences and appreciation of the Finnish education system prevailed. Many brought or bought pencils and notebooks for the schools and, additionally, schools were selected as receivers of more systematic charity. Collecting money for solar panels or Wi-Fi for schools became an activity in which many of the trial groups took part, typically culminating in a visit to the school when the object was donated. Photographs taken to witness the event and applause by groups of pupils were the norm.

As these examples show, Finnish exceptionality as a particular mode of enacting (Finnish) whiteness is here about attaching oneself to narratives of Finnish success stories of gender equality and education. These modes allow for a detachment from historical-political trajectories of race and racism, and generate hierarchical modes of relating, as 'Finnishness' becomes a position of superiority in terms of gender equality as well as education. However, other modes of relating from a position of 'Finnishness' were also sought and enacted.

The following example illustrates how a gesture towards 'us' and nation does not exclude aspirations for a more global relationality. Maija, a teacher in her fifties, considered helping as 'our' duty, although not so explicitly referring to Finnishness here. For Maija the notion of Finnishness described what she saw as the boring characteristics of Finns – pessimism, constant worrying, the need to have everything in order and under control – something she longed to get away from, much as Liisa Malkki (2015) describes in her account of Finnish humanitarians. In Maija's short account, various positionings overlap in considering the 'why' of helping:

> K: And why do you want to help, like you said?
> M: Well I'm a teacher! That's like a basic human need, I think. Like, if we've been born with a silver spoon, or a dozen silver spoons, compared to these [people], then goddamit, if we can't at least do something. I think it's just part of the game. It's like a human duty, we're one, after all. Or that's how it should be seen, I think. I've probably always

> thought about it this way, but then I'm a teacher too, so it probably adds to it.
> K: So it's like an everyday thing for you?
> M: Yes, yes. It's my job to think of, as I'm a teacher, to think of what is right. So not only that everyone gets the same, but what is right. And this [trial participation] is like a tiny drop, but in that direction anyway.

First, and last, Maija attributes her will to help, and interest in morality, to being a teacher – as already mentioned, a valued profession in Finland, where education is an export and often narrated as one of the cornerstones of the success of the nation (Schatz et al., 2015). As such it does resonate with the analysis above, yet also suggests a rather specific location and narrative of the source of one's interest in helping. Interesting here is the way Maija suggests that helping is a basic *human need*, and *a human responsibility* as *we are one* – a particular way of relating to other humans through a universal connectedness. The need seems to suggest the fundamentality of being in such relations, not merely a need to reach for more lively relatedness (Malkki, 2015). Talking about *us* as being born with silver spoons in our mouths is an attempt to be simultaneously accountable for one's privilege, even though helping is a universal human responsibility. Referring to 'us' is, therefore, not merely about enacting exceptionality, but about situating oneself in broader structurers of inequality. Yet such an account seems inevitably to stabilize subject positions, particularly the infamous 'helper' and 'helped' (e.g., Redfield and Borstein, 2013), with the position of the 'helper' racialized as white (Benton, 2016; Jefferess, 2015). A comparative perspective is taken for granted, introduced with "a dozen silver spoons, compared to these [people], then goddamit, if we can't at least do something". For Maija, helping materialized as participating in joint solar panel donations and delivering French books, pencils, sharpeners and children's underwear to a local orphanage, which was a popular and debated receiver of donations. Children, for Maija as for others, were a self-evident object of help. As an illuminating background, Maija described herself as a mother and recent grandmother, and mentioned her exhaustion with being responsible for everything and everyone, with someone always needing something from her, including at work. She described her nearly desperate need to get away from all that and have a moment of rest as a key reason for her joining the trial trip, but there too, being a responsible person/helper is clearly enacted. Inevitably, various relation(alitie)s are enmeshed in each situation, and moreover, as Maija's case suggests, their enactments are gendered processes.

Habits of helping and vibrant stuff

As has become clear, the trial participants were faced with a need for constant negotiation over how to relate to helping: whether it is something self-evident and simple, something highly affective arising in that particular place, something endlessly problematic – or something from which one can just maintain a firm distance. Much like in the previous section on ways and attempts to situate oneself as a Finn/European, what seemed rather clear is that different kinds of practices of helping always do something important to the helper; they fulfil a need, often one for belonging and connection (Malkki, 2015). Here, I suggest that the helper-individual emerges in the multiple entanglements with all kinds of material objects, not only with other humans or in merely discursive formations.

Although the clear majority engaged in helping in one way or another, for some, the intensity was more powerful. They were the ones who often took the lead in what the group in question would donate and how, and disseminated ideas of what might be a good way to help the local people – usually children or women, as indicated above. One of these enthusiastic helpers was Emma, a woman in her thirties, whose original plan had been to "chill and read books by the pool". Even in advance, however, she had already recruited some friends to donate money for certain needs she had seen in the trial participants' Facebook group, and conceived of the vaccine trial participation as a modest act of helping which could justify the flight. This was something often mentioned, especially by the younger participants in their twenties and thirties, as travelling was regarded as something rather troubling that needed justification. After Emma had detailed her many activities and plans to help, she gave an interesting answer to my question of why she was so keen on helping there:

> Well, I don't know, I guess I've just always been like this, and I think it's not, it's like brushing teeth to me, I don't even think about it. But perhaps there has been a peculiar energy-spirit-atmosphere here that has just taken me there, but I haven't thought about the issue at all! I've just been doing it. It has been so natural somehow. I don't know, I've been maybe so addicted to all kinds of voluntary work lately, it's really addictive you know, like, it pulls you in, and it's so simple in a way; there's no one telling you what you must do, you can do what you want to, it's voluntary.

I find three things of interest condensed into this utterance: first, the described habituality and naturalness of helping; second, the desire for individual autonomy; and third, the 'atmosphere' that seems to move the speaker's body so strongly, taking and pulling it. As Emma compares helping to brushing her teeth, she seems to suggest that it is something nearly automatized, even normalized, for her. As she is saying this as a white Finn in an African village for the first time, Sara Ahmed's notion of whiteness as a (bad) habit that becomes an unnoticed background for experience (Ahmed, 2007) is helpful. Here, this phenomenological notion shows how effortlessly the world becomes white, that is, inhabits the white body (Ahmed, 2007), even in a context of a non-white society. Whiteness works through its invisibilization even when it is hyper-visible, as was the case in this context (Benton, 2016). Hence, the acts of helping, precisely purposed to affect other people's lives, may become so natural that they do not even require stopping to think of such effects.

However, instead of advocating a totalizing reading of whiteness as all-explanatory of the event/statement, I suggest that the described feelings of naturalness and easiness are also telling of an attempt to settle into relations with others in an effortless manner. Instead of merely being a neoliberal project involving the conscious making and branding of a (benevolent, moral, useful) self, one seeks a mode of being and selfhood that is not troubling or burdensome, that does not require active work on the self. Yet, as Emma simultaneously does not want anyone "telling you what you have to do" and values a state where "you can do what you want to", longing for easy (human) connectedness does not exclude a deep desire for, and enacting of, individual autonomy. Instead of considering these longings and modes of constructing a self as contradictory, or in terms of one-directional causality, they should be seen as co-emerging. Importantly, as I attempted to exemplify in the first place, racialized relations of power further complicate settling into such easy connectedness or individuality.

The place, the village, its sounds, smells and colours – and aspects less simple to identify – were powerful, affective and effect-generating, as many described with confusion. In the excerpt above, Emma is describing a force, a "peculiar energy-spirit-atmosphere", that is taking her in different directions, which indeed seems to complicate the simplicity of comparing helping to brushing teeth. It is a question of being affected and not perfectly knowing what it is that has such a strong effect. The material environment, in its multiplicity, was affective in ways that are not reducible to *discourses* of 'Africa' or development, yet not completely detached from them, an observation that brings the discussion to how some ordinary objects, or *things* (Bennett, 2012) take part in agentic relations of helping. Although the constant presence of 'aid objects' has already been mentioned, the activity, or vibrancy, of such material things can be further underlined.

Beside samples and laboratory equipment, a flow of all kinds of objects became a nearly integral part of the trial trips. As I have shown, the participants brought school notebooks, pens and children's clothes with them to be donated to those in need in the village. The cultural centre that was part of the organizing team instructed that these kinds of objects would be useful, and they were also in charge of distributing the donations at the site so as to avoid haphazard charity. In addition to the participants being, to some extent, obedient to instructions to be sensible in their giving, the role of the material stuff seemed not to be merely about donating something useful and needed. Interestingly, objects of various kinds suddenly seemed to turn into 'help objects'. For example, when I asked Nea, a student in her early twenties, about her helping initiatives, her response was that she had not brought anything but had given empty water bottles and nuts to the kids. A similar example is that of Teija, a middle-aged woman working in health care. In touched tones, she described a memorable event during the holiday:

> When we were there in the salt village, and there, we were all totally like, "Oh no, now we don't have the notebooks, and we could've brought children's clothes, and we could've brought this and that." And we didn't have that. But then I thought like, should tourists always have something to take there, or was there some deal that they get some share of what we paid? Probably someone does, but who then… So then, I had this scrunchie, or hair clip, there. The children got something, some gave pencils from their purses. So you get this embarrassed feeling, you know…. That people start digging stuff from their pockets. So there was this older woman sitting nearby all the time. It was an ex tempore thing, I was first like, "I don't have anything", but then I realized that I do have the hair clip, and I asked if I could put it in her hair. And her face was like that of a happy child's.

In this quote, despite the reflexive comments, actions take place, such as digging stuff from one's pockets to distribute and infantilizing the recipient of the hair clip by comparing her to a "happy child", that create hierarchical positions. Concurrently, the animated way in which Teija described herself giving away her hair clip shows the significance of seemingly random, material stuff (Bennett, 2004). As these snippets exemplify, ordinary (use) objects, nuts, water bottles and hair clips, emerge as 'help objects'. Instead of bemoaning the idea that one is helping when giving nuts or one's leftover bottles, I suggest it reveals the agentic role of everyday stuff in the constitution of relationality and subjectivity. It is not merely about human intentions (to do good), but also enacted in compilations of all kinds of stuff, not only human. These examples and the intensity of 'stuff' effectively demonstrate that helping is both discursive *and* material (Hojgaard and Sondergaard, 2011; Barad, 2007): the nuts and the bottles might not emerge as help objects without the forceful discourse(s) of helping African children and saviourness (e.g. Benton, 2016), yet they are key, even agentic, in maintaining and enacting such discourses and practices. The thingness and object-nature of the material stuff suggested by Bennett (2004; 2010) hence seem inseparable here, yet "the active participation of ordinary objects inside these collectives, and inside the collective called the I" (Bennett, 2012: 258) becomes clear.

Conclusions

With a focus on social scientific studies of clinical trials, I started by suggesting that empirical studies on 'relational subjects' tend to come from 'elsewhere' – often, from the South, depicting a different, more relational ontology to Southern subjects. I argued that, although importantly problematizing the (universalistic) tenets of medical research ethics, such work may also (re)produce essentializing ideas of the South and of difference, and further, enforce the idea of the autonomous subject regarded apt in the West. By attending to the notion of helping, I have discussed what, then, relationality and distributed agency might mean when looking at Nordic, specifically Finnish, trial subjects. Further, I have suggested that the notions of (social-material) relationality or social embeddedness and of individuality and processes of individuation do not need to be considered in dichotomous terms, as contradictory or mutually exclusive.

As for example van der Zaag (2017) has suggested, a clinical trial requires, but also generates multiple materialities, and material politics. Therefore, for STS scholars too, it is crucial to study also those relations and practices that are not in the centre of scientific practices. Here, I have shown how a diarrhoea vaccine trial transformed into a web of humanitarian charity practices, idea(l)s of benevolence and a quest for ethical relations in a context of tangible inequality. First, I described how mere trial participation was regarded as helping, thereby underlining the importance of the individual helper self. However, agency was distributed among collectives of humans and non-humans in that mode too. I then discussed how Finnishness was enacted in connection to ideas and practices of helping. Using the examples of education and gender equality as key interests in helping, I suggested that 'Finnish exceptionalism' is a racialized enactment of relations of helping. I also showed how modes of more situated accountability as a Finnish helper were sought, yet easily interrupted by white habits of Finnishness and/as superiority. Lastly, I attended to the habituality of helping as a white habit (Ahmed, 2007), as a search for easy connectedness *and* autonomous individuality, and as the vibrant power of the material environment, and also discussed the ways ordinary objects turned into help objects and took part in the formation of the helper-selves.

Hence, I suggest that the practices and ideas of helping enacted in this context produce particular kinds of subjects: always relational and distributed, emerging in undetermined social-material relations. Simultaneously, the trial context calls for and requires individuals capable of informed decision-making and responsible choices. In other words, in the material, simultaneous emphasis on an individual, unique helper self and the self as a human and non-human compound (Bennett, 2012; 2004) are present. I argue that an intentionally acting, individual helper self is enacted, yet immediately troubled by the multiplicity of 'actants'. Following Bennett (2012, 2010), this unsettles the more simplistic notions of causality and, therefore, those of responsibility. Importantly, processes of racialization cannot be seen as external to these processes of individuation and relationality, or of helping (Jackson, 2013). As I have shown, relationality may be considered as a(n ontological) starting point, yet is constantly in process, and requires empirical interrogations of the 'what' and the 'how' (Meskus, 2015) in order to properly dismantle problematic notions of an autonomous subject that tend to carry racialized prerequisites.

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NOTES

1 Due to anonymity reasons, the exact country is not named in this article.

2 Foundational documents are the Nuremberg Code (1947) declared after WWII, the Belmont Report (1978) issued after the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and the Helsinki Declaration (1964; 2013) – codes of conduct that were born out of the necessity to protect human subjects from violations of their physical and mental autonomy. This article is by no means suggesting that such guidelines are not essential; rather, it engages with anthropological discussions of how the implementation of these guidelines materializes in some contexts.

3 SCRIBE: Socialities of a vaccine trial: tourists, researchers, microbes and local communities in Benin. University of Helsinki, PI Salla Sariola.

4 The biggest newspaper in Finland published a long article about the vaccine trial in spring 2017 as signing up for trial participation began, which was repeatedly referenced in interviews and discussions with the trial participants. On the Sunday the article was published the trial got thousands of submissions of interest.

5 In the Finnish language, the terms 'white' or 'black' are typically not used to refer to people's skin color, as they tend to be considered to imply a racist tone. Terms that directly translate as 'light-skinned' and 'dark-skinned' are more typical.