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FOOD FOR THE SOUL OR THE SOUL FOR FOOD:

**USERS' PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUSLY
AFFILIATED FOOD CHARITY IN A FINNISH CITY**

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Theology at the
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Original publications

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- II Salonen, A. S. (2016). 'You can vote with your feet if you want.' Users' responses to religious services in the context of food charity in a Finnish city. *Social Compass*, 63(1), 109-124.
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- III Salonen, A. S. (2014). The Christmas celebration of secondary consumers: Observations from food banks in Finland. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, published online before print July 7, 2014.
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- IV Salonen, A. S. (2017). Lining up for charity. A study of the social organization and communal qualities of breadlines in a Finnish city. Forthcoming in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.
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The publications are referred to in the text by their roman numerals.

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What I think, I can communicate to others; what I see, I can let them see, what I say can be heard by hundreds of others – but what a single individual eats can under no circumstances be eaten by another.

- Georg Simmel (2000[1910]:130): *Sociology of the Meal*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores charitable food assistance at the interface between religious organizations and people seeking material assistance. The study aims at understanding the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the food recipients and by taking into account the religious character of the food providers. Against the grain of the ideals of the Nordic welfare state, since the early 1990s, Finland has witnessed the emergence and proliferation of charitable food assistance across the country. In these venues, religious organizations regularly encounter some of the poorest in society. In contemporary society, where religion belongs to the realm of individual choice, people are considered to be entitled to decide whether, where, and to what degree they want to be exposed to religious content and take part in religious practices. Thus, in the context of the last resort material assistance provided by churches and other actors with religious ties, religion has the capacity to promote altruism, but also to provide a source of conflict.

The data for this study was collected from four food charity organizations in the city of Tampere, Finland between the spring of 2012 and the spring of 2013. The data consists of observational notes from over seven months of participant observation in four food assistance organizations, interviews with 25 food assistance recipients, and written documents related to the operation of the organizations. The data was analysed with qualitative methods by applying principles of content analysis and grounded theory. The findings of this introductory article are drawn from a meta-analysis of four individual articles that have explored food charity from the recipients' perspective, both in terms of religion and with regard to the material and social aspects of the assistance use.

The findings of this study portray food assistance as a charitable sphere where assistance is provided only within the available resources, which are disengaged from the needs of the food recipients, and within the terms laid down by the charitable giver, which may include to varying degrees religious participation. The findings demonstrate that food charity has a limited ability to answer the social and material needs of the clients. The additional religious support that some of these organizations offered provided added value for some of the food recipients, but also caused tensions. The recipients of food charity have limited opportunities to influence the activity or to act in a different way, but at the same time their ability to withdraw from participating in the activity is limited. Negotiations over participation in religious activities in the food charity context illustrate these constraints, but also point out the tacit strategies used by the food recipients to voice their views. For the food recipients, religious participation served both as a constraint and as a means to demonstrate agency.

The study demonstrates that as food charity providers, religious organizations become actors in the arena of welfare provision, but also in the disposal end of the food system. They engage in an activity that is not only about poverty, but also about the affluence that produces the preconditions of the assistance. Food charity can be regarded as an effort to overcome problems of food poverty and food waste, but it also bears the danger of constructing charity as an appropriate answer to the problems of poverty and of legitimizing the continuous production of waste by routinely turning this excess into a utility of last resort assistance. Emphasizing the provision of religious support over food can be regarded as a way for some organizations to overcome the problems of hands-on material assistance. While the findings indicate that this does not resonate strongly with the wishes of the clients, the religious emphasis of some of the assistance providers could serve as a potential source of religious critique of charitable solutions to food insecurity.

The need for food charity is not diminishing, and in the current societal situation in Finland, efforts by non-governmental organizations to help those living in weak social and economic situations are increasingly called for. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the prevalence of religious actors in this field and the varying ways they manifest their religious identity in their assistance practices. The religiousness of the charity providers influences the practices of the assistance work and adds a layer to the experiences of the food recipients. For religious and other non-governmental organizations participating in charitable food assistance, in turn, the findings provide food for thought in reflecting the multidimensional character of the activity that they engage in, the roles that they assume and are assigned in this field, and the ramifications that their work has for the people whom they aim to serve

1 INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence and proliferation of religiously affiliated charitable food assistance across the affluent world (Riches & Silvasti, 2014a). For churches and other religious actors, helping the needy by giving them food is certainly not a new invention. Sharing food is at the heart of the Christian faith, and the problem of hunger is inscribed in the history of the churches (Addy, 2005:188; Mäkinen, 2002). There is an apparent, if not straightforward, link between altruism and religion that springs from religious traditions and teachings and has long manifested in the values and actions of individuals and religious communities (Pessi, 2011). Religion has had a great impact on the development of European welfare societies and social protection systems, and church poor relief has preceded and paved the way for state-provided welfare provision (Kersbergen & Manow, 2009; Yeung, 2003). What differentiates food charity from past efforts of helping the poor with food is the expansion of this specific mode of addressing the ongoing food need across affluent societies, welfare states, and growing economies – that is to say, nations characterized as prosperous (Dowler, 2014:170).

Food charity arrived in Finland in the wake of the deep economic recession in the early 1990s. At first, it was meant to be a temporary response by churches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to answer the immediate consequences of the economic downturn of that time. However, following its counterparts in many other countries, it has in recent decades become a permanent way of helping people living in weak social and economic situations (Hiilamo, 2012; Karjalainen, 2000; Malkavaara, 2002; Silvasti, 2015). In the face of the current persistent economic crisis, austerity policies, new public management, and renegotiations of the welfare responsibilities between the state and civil society, food charity is once again a highly topical issue.

Since their inception, the queues of poor people in front of food banks have become symbols of poverty in the Finnish welfare society. They connote distress, scarcity, and the social exclusion of individual people and households, as well as the collapse of the ideals and realities of the Nordic welfare state. At the same time, over and above these symbolic meanings, for people living in poor economic and social situations, breadlines constitute concrete spaces and places of last resort material assistance. Currently, food charity takes place in hundreds of localities throughout the country, without public coordination or shared practice guidelines (Ohisalo et al., 2013; Silvasti, 2015:478). In these venues, religious organizations regularly encounter some of the poorest in society.

Finland is generally regarded as a secularized Nordic welfare state. Still, contrary to the ideals of welfare state development and secularization, which would both indicate a diminishing role for religious organizations in the arena

of welfare (Hiilamo, 2012:402), the current organization of welfare provision challenges the principles of state-provided welfare universalism and instead strives for more cooperation between public, private, and third sector organizations, including religious welfare agents (Angell & Pessi, 2010). In predominantly Lutheran, yet generally secular Nordic countries, welfare provision is largely considered a secular sphere and within the range of responsibility of the public sector, whereas religion easily falls into a presumably separate field of the sacred (Angell, 2010:57). Such a framework produces a dilemmatic role for religious practices and manifestations of religious identities in social settings outside the sacred sphere. For example, a study of local parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) in European Social Fund projects found that in the cooperation between the church and municipalities, the parishes were welcomed into the arena of welfare provision – but without religion. Religion was valued as a cultural and historical issue, but it was expected to be kept in the background in practical work (Lehtinen, 2013:74-78). While religious organizations are welcome in the field of welfare provision, religion is generally perceived as a private matter.

In Finland, food assistance differs from those modes of providing welfare where parishes and religious organizations act as social service providers and enter into contract agreements with public agencies. Instead, contrary to public welfare, which is based on rights and obligations, food charity is based on voluntariness, which does not spring from any legal responsibilities of the food providers or legal rights of the food recipients (Hiilamo, 2012:404; Malkavaara & Ryökäs, 2015:122-123; Ohisalo & Saari, 2014:15-16; Silvasti, 2015:480). In such a setting, religious organizations can in principle include their religious identity in assistance programmes and incorporate religious elements into them as they feel is appropriate, without having to negotiate their identities or compromise their actions in the face of partnerships with the public sector (cf. Hjelm, 2014:214-216). A recent survey has found that Finnish food charity organizations do exercise this freedom: half of the food banks provided religious or spiritual support for the food assistance recipients (Ohisalo et al., 2013:51). It seems that many food banks serve not just material aid, but also, figuratively, food for the soul.

The ability of religious agents to conduct their assistance work in a way that they consider appropriate helps to preserve their motivation to assist the needy (cf. Lambie-Mumford & Jarvis, 2012:260). However, the possibility that charitable assistance provided by religious organizations would come with religious strings attached is problematic. In contemporary European societies that have witnessed a shift from obligation to consumption with regard to religion, it is likely to be regarded as inappropriate for religious organizations to introduce religious elements into material assistance programmes, particularly religious conditions for receiving assistance (Davie, 2015:10, 12; 2007:96-98). Instead, it is widely acknowledged that, in Petterson's (2011:55) words, "people are free to choose their own modes of religious belonging and to decide for themselves whether or not to make use of the services offered by

the churches”. In Finland, despite the country’s high church membership rate (77% of the population were members of the ELCF in 2011), active religious participation is relatively uncommon (Church Research Institute, 2013:40-41), suggesting the possibility that religious elements in assistance programmes could be considered inappropriate.

Another reason for the potential disapproval of religious practice in the charitable context arises from within the ideals of altruism and charity. The normative foundation of charitable assistance differs from the norm of reciprocity, which is a pivotal principle in social relations, including social protection and welfare (Adloff, 2006; Mauss, 1990). Ideally, charitable assistance is an act of benevolent giving which does not contain an expectation of a counter-gift, fee, or obligation. It relies on the principle of “something for nothing”, which requires the giver to help without expecting anything in return from the one being helped (Gouldner, 1973). Thus, it is questionable if a recipient of charitable assistance must, allegorically, exchange his or her soul for food.

The above things considered, for a researcher standing at the crossroads of sociology and theology, the spread of religiously motivated last resort charitable assistance begs the question of how the religious affiliation of the food assistance providers manifests in the assistance practices and what ramifications this has for the food recipients. This study addresses this question by drawing from qualitative research in four religiously affiliated food charity venues in the city of Tampere, Finland. The study applies a research design where information is gathered in a way that makes room for the voices of the research subjects. This approach enables the gaze to be directed from the societal level towards the ground level of the experiences of people living in weak social and economic positions in society in order to generate knowledge that complements and even challenges information gathered on food charity by observing the activity from a distance (Thomas, 1993:4; Törrönen, 2006:16).

Religion is a complex phenomenon that can refer to manifold societal, institutional, and individual issues. Therefore, it is important to explain the ways in which the concept *religion* is used in this study. In the context of food charity in Finland, religion practically always means *Christian*, and Christianity most often refers either to the Lutheran majority church (ELCF) or to various minor free churches. As this study explores an activity in which religious organizations take part, but which is generally discussed in secular terms, it is important to bear in mind the distinction between *organizational religiosity* and *programme* or *service religiosity* (Sider and Unruh, 2004). Noting that the field of food assistance is highly occupied by religious actors does not necessarily mean that all these actors share a common religious mission for their work or that food charity practices involve religious elements. It is a matter of empirical investigation to determine whether, how, and to what degree they do so. By *religious elements*, this study refers to characteristics that can be explicitly identified as religious according to the

general cultural understanding of what religion is, for example, religious practices and beliefs, religious symbols and artefacts, and elements that the food assistance participants themselves consider religious. By *religious services*, the study refers to instances of explicitly religious practices, which can include, for example, sermons and testimonies, hymns and religious songs, prayers and readings from the Bible. This definition makes room for both a traditional, established understanding of religion and for individual perceptions of the religious (cf. McGuire, 2008). It allows for studying food charity at the intersection of religious organizations and individuals seeking material assistance.

2 CHARITABLE ASSISTANCE IN AN ERA OF ABUNDANCE

2.1 FOOD CHARITY IN AN AFFLUENT WORLD

The ambivalence over food assistance lies in its widespread emergence, particularly in affluent societies. Food charity indicates that even in the wealthiest countries in the world, some people are unable to meet their everyday food needs independently and in ways that are customary in the contemporary consumer culture. Food assistance is an increasing global phenomenon, not only a national or local peculiarity, and it is linked to the concomitant development of an affluent society (Lorenz, 2015). Charitable food assistance takes place across first-world societies (Riches & Silvasti, 2014a). From Australia to Turkey, from Spain to Hong Kong, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have taken up the task to alleviate the immediate food needs of impoverished people and households in their local surroundings (Booth, 2014; Koc, 2014; Pérez de Armiño, 2014; Tang et al., 2014).

In recent years, food charity has raised much research interest. Within the scope of this study it is only possible to scratch the surface of the bulk of previous literature. Timely compilations with up-to-date reviews and extensive examples of national case studies have been published lately in the theme section of *Social Policy and Society* (2015, vol 14, issue 3), in the special issue of *British Food Journal* (2014, vol 116, issue 9) and in the book *First World Hunger Revisited* (Riches & Silvasti, 2014a). This section concentrates on the key concepts and general characteristics of food charity, and discusses the institutionalization of food charity systems and the charitable ethos underlying the phenomenon.

The term food charity implies that the issue is about food, or the lack thereof. How the need for food is phrased varies conceptually in different studies. Studies that frame the issue as a matter of hunger often differentiate between third-world and first-world hunger (Riches & Silvasti, 2014a; Riches, 1997a). Food charity is mainly related to the latter. Some studies refrain from using the word hunger in reference to first-world food assistance and instead use the term food insecurity. Food insecurity means a limited or uncertain ability to obtain nutritionally adequate safe food that is easily accessible, and the lack of possibilities to obtain food in a way that is socially acceptable (Anderson, 1990:1560). The term pinpoints the nutritional aspects of food as well as the social contexts of nutrition: in particular, the quality of food and the ways of obtaining food. It can be considered as more illustrative than the rather technical word “hunger”. On the other hand, food insecurity has been characterized as a euphemism for hunger (Poppendieck, 2014:180). Furthermore, hunger can be considered a potential consequence of food

insecurity (Anderson, 1990:1560). Notwithstanding the term used, research indicates that the demand for food assistance springs from problems of food access caused by low income. As such, food charity is a political issue (Silvasti & Riches, 2014:191).

The phenomenon that the concept of food charity refers to goes by many names. Terms often used in this respect include, for example, food banks (Riches, 1986), breadlines (e.g. Ohisalo & Saari, 2014; Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014), emergency food (e.g. Poppendieck, 1999), and charitable food assistance (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003; 2005), expressions which point to the form of organizing the assistance practices, to the character of the assistance as emergency aid, and to the nature of the assistance as distinctive from public social assistance, respectively. Acknowledging the variation in the terminology both within and across countries, this study uses both the terms *charitable food assistance* (or just food assistance) and *food charity* to refer to the provision of food by non-governmental organizations to people living in poor economic and social situations. The study uses the term *charity* to distinguish the activity from statutory state-provided welfare. The reference to *food* points out that the assistance comprises material aid that contains food items, and the reference to *assistance* that these food items are given free of charge on particular occasions to people who are considered to live in weak economic and social situations. The term *food assistance* (or food charity) *organization* or *provider* refers in this study in a general sense to any agency or group of people that organizes food assistance work in practice. The words *food bank* and *breadline* refer broadly to the venues, places, and spaces where the hands-on food assistance takes place, without any a priori determination of how the assistance is carried out in practice. In contrast to some other countries, where the word “food bank” refers to the agents that collect and store the food and redeliver it to local charities, the Finnish context allows the term food bank to be used in reference to the local food assistance providers who conduct the hands-on assistance work (Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015:501-502).

Studies from different countries reveal that food charity is organized in many different ways in practice. In some countries, intermediaries collect and store food and redeliver it to local charities (Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015:501-502). Some food charity systems have strict eligibility criteria and referral systems (e.g. Lambie-Mumford, 2013:75), while some work on principles of easy access and anonymity (e.g. Ohisalo et al., 2013:33-34). In some contexts, individual people and households can make donations to central food banks or local food assistance providers, who then distribute the food to the needy. For example, a local grocery store may host a collection bin where one can donate a package of unperishable food when making everyday household purchases (e.g. Lorenz, 2012:392). Food assistance organizations often receive food items as donations from their corporate partners. Food producers donate products that are unsalable in primary food markets because of packaging failures, for example, and food retailers bestow excess food that is near or past its sell-by date (e.g. Garrone et al., 2014; Noordegraaf, 2010:56).

Finally, certain assistance programmes, such as the CSP programme in Australia (Booth, 2014) or the former MDP and the current FEAD programmes of the European Union, provide food for distribution to their partner organizations. Originally, the MDP programme consisted of food items from agricultural overproduction bought by the EU to balance market fluctuation (Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014:81).

The charitable food assistance system as we know it today has a relatively short history. Of course, sporadic soup kitchens and food banks have previously existed, but the expansion of food charity programmes began only three decades ago, in the US and Canada in the 1980s (Poppendieck, 1999:2-3; Riches, 1986:13-15). What seems to be characteristic of the activity – and of the ways of telling the story, to say the least – is that food banks initially start as emergency responses. Many studies remark that the first food assistance initiatives emerged and the assistance systems began to spread due to an economic recession or a restructuring of social security systems and cuts in public spending. Poppendieck (1999:3), for example, dates the expansion of US food banks to the recession of the 1980s. The first Canadian food banks in the early 1980s were initiated as emergency relief in the midst of an economic crisis and growing unemployment (Riches, 1986:22). In New Zealand, the 1991 reform of social security increased inequality and poverty, leading to the development of a food bank system (O'Brien, 2014:103, 109). However, although the first food banks emerge as temporary emergency responses in a sudden predicament, once the system is established, the activity tends to continue even after the initial crisis is over (e.g. Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Riches, 2002). Studies indicate that it is characteristic of the phenomenon to develop from emergency aid to a long-lasting assistance system.

Riches (2002:651-654) points out three key elements in the institutionalization of the Canadian food assistance system: organization, corporatization, and cooperation. The first step towards institutionalization in Canada was the founding of central food bank organizations to coordinate the assistance. The second element was introduced as these food assistance organizations entered into partnerships with corporations. Representatives of the food industry took up positions on the boards of the food assistance organizations, and food corporations, civil society organizations, and broadcasting agencies began to support the food banks. The final element of institutionalization is the cooperation with public welfare providers and financial aid from the government. Similar trajectories of institutionalization, with their local variations, have been traced in, for example, France, where the national umbrella organization has entered into partnership among others with a national gas supplier (Lehtelä, 2008), and in the UK, where the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network has spread rapidly since the early 2000s and cooperates with a variety of local care professionals (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Further, the institutionalization of food charity expanded beyond the boundaries of nation states with the foundation of transnational food bank

networks, such as the European Federation of Food Banks (EFFB) and the Global Food Bank Network (GFBN).

The expansion of food charity systems can be seen as an indicator of errors in the functioning of both the social security net and food markets. First, the need for charity food signals that public policies do not ensure food security and highlight that governments do not carry out their duties of safeguarding the human right to food and other social rights (e.g. Riches, 2002; Rideout et al., 2007). Second, studies have noted that food charity is a signal of unequal, two-tiered food markets (Silvasti, 2008; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005). In a historical perspective, industrialization has diminished the line between luxury and basic foods and thus redefined our cultural norms of consumption (Allen, 1999:126). However, the need for food assistance reveals that even as the global food system has managed to reduce historical class differences in food consumption, it has not been able to fully ensure food security. Studies note that food charity use is not a culturally and socially acceptable way of obtaining food (Riches & Silvasti, 2014b:9). Instead, as Riches (2002:658-659) argues, food banks signal the commodification of welfare, where people's food rights are subordinated to their capacity to sell their labour power as a commodity in the market place.

The common character of much of food assistance is the charitable ethos of the system. Studies have noted that a significant factor behind the emergence and institutionalization of food assistance is a cultural context that embraces voluntary giving and constructs poverty as a matter of charity (Poppendieck, 1999; Silvasti & Riches, 2014). Poppendieck (1999) describes the characteristics of the cultural context that nurtured the institutionalization of food assistance in the US. On the level of individual agencies, institutionalization is a by-product of growth, the evident outcome of a situation where the appeal of the early days of food assistance wears off, but the need for it persists. On a national level, institutionalization is fostered by an environment that supports voluntarism and giving and favours private charity. According to Poppendieck, the role of the media in creating a propitious national environment is significant. The big food assistance campaigns and other media attention construct the concept of hunger socially as a phenomenon that is about charity, not about policy or human rights (Poppendieck, 1999:135-138; see also Riches, 2008:33).

Similarly, drawing from a study of an antihunger campaign in Michigan, DeLind (1994) notes that the discourses surrounding hunger in the campaign faded out its social and political contexts. Conceptualizing the underlying problem as hunger, and conceptualizing hunger as a technical problem of food deficiency, steers the discussion away from the broader issues of poverty and social exclusion, and thus prevents a search for more comprehensive solutions. The social construction of food insecurity as a matter of charity is related to the corporatization of food assistance and to the role of food banks as parts of the food supply chain. Food banks provide means for food corporations to dispose of unsalable products in a way that is considered to be legitimate,

economical, and environmentally friendly. At the same time, they save on disposal costs and taxes, and promote the image of good corporate citizenship (Silvasti & Riches, 2014; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005).

Alongside the charitable ethos is a strong religious ethos in this field. Although their share varies between the countries, many of the food assistance providers are religious or religiously affiliated organizations, agencies, assemblies, and individuals. A study from five Canadian cities, for instance, found that half of the food assistance agencies were faith based and that these provided over 70% of the documented food (Tarasuk et al., 2014a:4). Similarly, churches and faith-based organizations are involved in the field of charity food provision in the UK (Lambie-Mumford & Jarvis, 2012; Lambie-Mumford, 2013) and in the Netherlands (Noordegraaf, 2010), for example. Referring to the inspirations that move the actions of those people most deeply involved in food charity in the US, Poppendieck (1999:188) aptly formulates that “[t]he emergency food system is permeated with religion”.

2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF FOOD CHARITY IN FINLAND

Food charity is an endeavour that spans across nations, but is at the same time heavily rooted in the grassroots level and is shaped by specific national and local contexts. In Finland, the story of food assistance started more than two decades ago. Before then, from the 1970s, notably after the initiation of the Primary Health Care Act in 1972, until the beginning of the 1990s, the construction of the inclusive state-provided social security net had diminished the role of the ELCF in providing social protection (Yeung, 2003). This development changed drastically after the deep economic recession in the early 1990s. With the recession, the unemployment rate rose to 17%, and the gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 13% (Kuivalainen & Niemelä, 2010). The ELCF and other faith-based and non-governmental organizations founded the first breadlines and food banks to confront the economic and social problems caused by the recession (Addy, 2005; Hiilamo, 2012; Kuivalainen & Niemelä, 2010; Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014). The emergence of the ELCF and other religious and non-governmental agents in the field of last resort material assistance was a significant change compared with the general development of the past decades.

As in many other countries, even though the first food banks were intended as temporary arrangements, many of them remained in operation even after the economic boom that soon followed (Hiilamo, 2012:408-409; Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014:73-75). The economy began to recover after 1994, but high levels of unemployment and income inequalities persisted and increased again with the latest economic downturn of 2008. According to Eurostat, in 2010, 13% of the Finnish population was living under the poverty threshold of 60% of the median income. ELCF statistics demonstrate that between the two

recessions, food assistance became a rather permanent feature of the diaconal work of the church. The early 2000s saw a moderate decrease in the number of parishes providing food assistance and in the number of food bags delivered, but the church nevertheless continued the assistance work on a rather large scale. The numbers increased again in 2008 with the global recession (Hiilamo, 2012:409).

One study has estimated that by the year 2013, food assistance was available in over 220 municipalities throughout the country (Ohisalo et al., 2013:11). Food charity activity is widespread, yet it is publicly uncoordinated and scattered in terms of shared practices. The level of institutionalization of the Finnish food charity system has remained relatively low. Unlike in many other countries, there is no umbrella organization to coordinate the assistance, no national level cooperation with food corporations, and no established forms of cooperation with public welfare providers. Instead, the role of the EU's MDP programme has been crucial in the entrenchment of food assistance (Ohisalo, 2013). Since the beginning of Finland's EU membership until the end of the programme in 2013, MDP aid was accepted annually. This steady supply of food enabled food assistance to be established as a permanent system (Silvasti, 2015). The MDP programme ended in 2013 and was replaced by the European Union's new Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) for the 2014–2020 period.

At present, most of the assistance food originates from EU programmes and from food retailers as donations. In 2013, for example, NGOs distributed in total 1,908,000 kilograms of MDP food (Mavi, 2015). Since the food market donations are based on private agreements between individual food retailers and charities, there are no statistics on the scope and amounts of that food available. There is great variation in the frequency and regularity of the food deliveries, in the practical organization of the assistance events, and in the principles and practices by which the individual food recipients are entitled to assistance (Ohisalo et al., 2013). The fragmentation of these practices is not surprising, given the low level of coordination. The only instructions that govern the assistance on a national level are the guidelines of the Finnish food safety authority on the preservation and usage of donated food for those food banks that distribute market excess (Evira, 2015) and the instructions of the EU food programmes for the partner organizations of FEAD, formerly the MDP (Mavi, 2015).

Due to the lack of statistics, it is impossible to draw exact figures on the agencies providing assistance or the share of religious actors, but based on the available data, rough estimations can be sketched. In 2013, more than half of the MDP food was distributed via religious organizations, from which the largest distributors were the ELCF, the Evangelical Free Church of Finland, the aid organization of the Adventist Church, the Salvation Army, and the Street Mission. The other half of the total amount of food was distributed via other NGOs, most notably the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLCW) and associations of the unemployed (Mavi, 2015). In a survey by Ohisalo et al.

(2013:13), which covers both those agencies that distribute MDP food and those who utilize market excess and other sources of food, 30% of the 171 organizations under study were parishes of the ELCF, and 28% had some other religious background. According to that study, religious organizations seem to be particularly active in terms of the frequency of the assistance. In comparison, while 90% of the local associations of the MLCW provided food assistance once a year, 74% of the parishes of the ELCF delivered food assistance once a week (Ohisalo et al., 2013:36). Thus, when it comes to the organizations that are the most actively involved in food charity and encounter food recipients the most frequently, it is fair to say that Finnish food charity is permeated with religion (cf. Poppendieck, 1999:188).

Currently, food charity organizations are estimated to provide food assistance for over 20,000 people on a weekly basis (Ohisalo et al., 2013:61). However, this is only a rough approximation, since the food assistance practices are characterized by a low threshold for eligibility or the absence of eligibility control, and thus in many assistance venues in principle anyone can apply for the assistance. Together with the lack of coordination and divergent practices, this means that comparable data is lacking on the clientele of food assistance as a whole. Some studies have focused on the clientele of the diaconal work of the ELCF (Iivari & Karjalainen, 1999; Jokela, 2011; Juntunen et al., 2006; Kettunen, 2001) or on the situation of the food charity recipients in individual breadlines (Siiki, 2008).

Despite the two decades of food charity in Finland, the first collection of quantitative surveys of food assistance recipients was conducted only recently. That study gives an overall picture of the characteristics of the food assistance users across the country. In total, 3474 food assistance recipients from 11 municipalities participated in the surveys in 2012 and 2013. The study charted, for example, their socio-economic background, usage of public welfare services and income transfers, wellbeing, trust, coping, and experiences of stigma and shame related to the use of food charity (Ohisalo & Saari, 2014). According to the study, an average food assistance recipient is middle-aged or elderly, has a weak labour market position and lower level of education than average, and lives in rental housing. Over 60% lived in a single household. The majority of the respondents, 87%, were Finns. More women than men responded to the study, but the shares between genders varied between municipalities (Ohisalo, 2014). All in all, the food charity organizations in Finland seem to encounter a heterogeneous group of people living in economically more difficult situations compared to the average population.

2.3 INAPPROPRIATE FOR THE WELFARE STATE, APPROPRIATE FOR THE CHURCHES?

What makes the case of Finland particularly puzzling is the emergence of a widespread, even if hitherto uncoordinated, religiously inspired charitable assistance system in a country that is generally perceived as a secular Nordic welfare state (Hänninen, 2008; Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014; Silvasti, 2015). The ambivalence is due to the parallel processes of secularization and welfare state development, which both bear the assumption of a diminishing role for religious organizations in the arena of welfare (Hiilamo, 2012:402). The proliferation of charitable food assistance runs counter to the ideal of Nordic welfare state universalism (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and the perception of the secularity of the welfare sphere, where religion falls under the realm of privacy and individual options (Angell, 2010:57). Lining up for charity is not considered a culturally and socially acceptable way to obtain food in an affluent welfare society. Instead, the universal public welfare provision is perceived to take care of the needs of the people so that widespread charitable models of poor relief are not needed.

The emergence and proliferation of food charity in Finland challenges the notion presented in the first cross-national study of food assistance, which identified the phenomenon as characteristic of residual welfare states (Riches, 1997b:73) by showing that the spread of food charity does not respect the boundaries of the welfare state regime theory. To put it another way, it can be argued that widespread charitable systems of poor relief are inconsistent with the Nordic welfare model and that the institutionalization of food assistance in Finland disconnects the country from the universalist welfare model and calls Finland's status as a Nordic welfare state into question (Hänninen, 2008; Silvasti, 2015). Silvasti and Karjalainen (2014:75) point out that there seems to be an inconsistent construction in the Finnish public discussion, established among the media, political actors, and the ELCF, that charitable food assistance is not legitimate for the Nordic welfare state, but is legitimate for churches.

The Finnish field of food assistance was established between the two recessions of the 1990s and the late first decade of the 2000s. During that period, public perception also changed (Hiilamo, 2012:410). In the public discussions of the early days of food assistance, charitable assistance provided by churches was criticized for going against the grain of the ideals of the Nordic welfare state. However, despite the critical voices, a study of the media debate indicates that the conceptualizations of hunger in the public discussion in the 1990s created a societal atmosphere propitious for the emergence of food assistance (Karjalainen, 2008).

So far, food charity has not yet been taken onto the political agenda as an issue of social policy or welfare (Ohisalo & Saari, 2014:21-22). As an illustrative example, the national-level administration of the EU's food programmes has not been set under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Instead, the MDP

programme was run by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the new FEAD programme, in turn, is governed by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy (Silvasti, 2015:476). Although the programmes are administered by the government, their implementation is left to nongovernmental actors. In practice, as in many other countries, the field of food assistance in Finland is characterized by a strong charitable ethos and occupied by religious agencies.

The current national and cultural environment nurtures the perception of food assistance as an activity suitable for churches and non-governmental organizations. Even though food charity is in principle still understood as inconsistent with the Nordic welfare model, its continuing existence has not been challenged in any fundamental way. Rather, food assistance has normalized, and issues of food insecurity and poverty are reconstructed as matters of charity in a manner that distance them from their political underpinnings (Silvasti, 2015:480). The present societal situation in Finland is characterized by a long-term economic downturn, austerity measures, and social welfare and health care reform, issues which can be considered propitious for charitable work.

The trajectory of the normalization of food charity can also be identified within the church. In the 1990s, the new areas of action and the strengthened welfare role were not received without contentions. Charitable food provision was criticized as contradictory to the ELCF's image as an advocate of the social-democratic welfare model (cf. Kohti yhteistä hyvää, 1999), as the material aid filled the gaps in the public social security net and thus gave the government a chance to withdraw from its duty of taking care of the most deprived (Hiilamo, 2012:408). However, while some criticized the food assistance for steering the public gaze away from societal structures to individuals' problems, others considered it a good way to raise public awareness about poverty (Heikkilä & Karjalainen, 2000:246-247). The disputes reflect the wider critical discussions of the early days of food charity. Echoed in the varying stances is also the space that the Lutheran social doctrine leaves for differing emphases concerning the role of the church in societal and political action (cf. e.g. Ekstrand, 2011).

Alongside providing hands-on charitable assistance, the ELCF has been active in advocating on behalf of the poor. In 1997, the Church Hunger Group was appointed to promote public debate on poverty. In 2011, Archbishop Kari Mäkinen established a new poverty group that also aimed at bringing poverty onto the political agenda (Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014:76). Nevertheless, despite the advocacy work, the institutionalization of food assistance has been accompanied by its recognition as a long-lasting phenomenon, and this change also applies to the role of the church. Hiilamo (2012:410) notes that unlike in the 1990s, when the church was criticized for its involvement in food assistance, after the latest economic crisis, the work of the ELCF in poor relief did not raise objections. Rather, it was considered self-evident and even welcomed by the majority. Furthermore, taking into account that for many Finns, the work of the church in helping the disadvantaged and defending the

poor and the marginalized is an important reason for church membership (Church Research Institute, 2013:52), in the face of declining membership, there is an internal impetus for the church to maintain its image as the leading agent in providing food assistance.

The demand for food charity shows no signs of diminishing. Rather, there is a silent acceptance, if not a call for religious organizations to participate in helping people in weak social and economic situations. The ELCF is the leading actor in this field, but it is by no means the only one. There are various other local churches, religious and other non-governmental organizations, and more or less religious individuals engaged in the hands-on assistance work that often remains obscured in societal-level discussions. The continuing presence of religious organizations in the field of uncoordinated but pervasive charitable assistance calls for the phenomenon to be explored on a grassroots level.

2.4 A CALL FOR THE USER'S PERSPECTIVE

The studies of food charity have so far mainly explored the phenomenon on the societal level and from the perspective of the roles and responsibilities between the voluntary sector organizations and public welfare provision. Less attention has been paid to the individual and interpersonal level of food charity. Although extensive research has been carried out on food charity, more detailed research is needed that addresses the experiences and repercussions of food bank use for the individual food recipients (Caraher & Cavicchi, 2014).

First, there is a need to study how the assistance meets the needs and aspirations of the food charity recipients. Previous research from other contexts indicates that food charity does not reach everyone in need of assistance, and that even some of those who obtain assistance still remain food insecure (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). It is important to explore the effectiveness of food assistance from the point of view of the users. Further, studies should not be limited to nutrition and income, but must also take into account the social aspects of food charity. In addition to the income-related problems, many studies from both Finland and elsewhere point out the social deprivation of the food assistance recipients. According to previous research, food assistance use is not merely an issue of material resources, but it has more comprehensive social outcomes for the participants. Previous studies have revealed that obtaining food assistance evokes negative emotions, such as shame (Van der Horst et al., 2014; see also Siiki, 2008), but also has positive outcomes. For many deprived people, material poverty narrows the sphere of life and brings loneliness with it. Many studies mention that participating in a food assistance event can be a social occasion, a way to spend time and meet other people (Kainulainen, 2014; Lorenz, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2010; Ohisalo et

al., 2014; Salonen, 2016; Siiki, 2008). However, the notions from the previous research on what the social dimension of food charity involves in practice have so far remained rather vague.

Second, there is a call for research that addresses the agency of the food recipients, that is, for studies that consider food charity users as active subjects and important informants, not only as objects of scrutiny. In previous research, the material assistance provided by churches and other religious organizations has been characterized as the last hatch in the social security system (Juntunen et al., 2006:33) or the last resort aid in the perdition zone, into which people fall as the public social security net fails or turns them away (Hänninen & Karjalainen, 2007:173). These metaphors illustrate well the points of convergence that food charity has with social policy and the welfare system. They point out well the difficult social positions that the recipients of charitable assistance are often trapped in. However, this imagery bears the danger of obscuring the active voice of the food recipients. The excluded and constrained position of charity recipients should not be taken as a precondition, but as a subject of critical analysis. It is important to study the constraints that people living in weak economic and social situations face and the degree to which these obstacles limit and leave room for agency.

Third, both with regard to supply and demand and the agency of the food recipients, valuable insights could be gained from taking into account the religious character of many food charity providers. A survey has estimated that half of the Finnish food banks provided religious or spiritual support for their food assistance clients (Ohisalo et al., 2013:51). That study did not discuss this finding in detail, nor did it provide specific information on the extent or content of these religious support activities, but the finding clearly signals the presence of religious practices alongside the material assistance provided by food charity agencies. Such a supply of religious support can be seen as an additional value for the food recipients. Studies have pointed out, for example, that diaconal workers of the ELCF consider that the spiritual dimension of their work mediates hope and meaning to their clients' life and empowers clients more than mere financial support (Juntunen, 2011). A comparative European study has found that when it comes to the welfare provision of the majority churches, their quality is evaluated as higher than the public welfare provision due to their holistic approach and empathy (Pettersson, 2011).

On the other hand, studies have pointed out a variety of ways and depths in which religion is present in faith-based social programmes, which might be problematic from the perspective of the religious autonomy of the participants (Hugen & Venema, 2009; Sider & Unruh, 2004; Unruh, 2004). A study by Sager and Stephens (2005) explored how religious elements that occur in congregation-based food programmes for homeless people in Tucson, Arizona are integrated into the assistance delivery, and how those elements, especially sermons, are perceived by those who eat there. The study revealed that most of the clients were focused on their immediate needs and that the majority responded negatively to the religious elements that they encountered. The

clients valued respect and choice regarding both food and the religious content of the assistance (Sager & Stephens, 2005; Sager, 2011). As a Finnish example, a study by Jokela (2011) demonstrates that in the context of church social work, the clients and workers can have diverse objectives and hold varying expectations of the aims and scope of the assistance situation. All in all, religion has the ability to promote altruism and good deeds, but also to provide a source of conflict (Cadge et al., 2011; Pessi, 2009). Hjelm (2014:213) argues that in the field of sociology of religion, the role of religion as a solution to social problems is better established than its role as a source of social problems. This study provides equilibrium by taking both possibilities into account.

3 REACHING FOR THE WORLD OF FOOD CHARITY RECIPIENTS

3.1 THE RESEARCH AIM AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study explores food charity at the interface between religious organizations and people seeking food assistance. The study approaches the phenomenon both in terms of religion and with regard to the material and social aspects of assistance use by addressing the following questions:

- 1) How, for whom, and to what extent is religion a part of the reality that people enter into as they seek food assistance from a religious organization? (Article I)
- 2) How do food assistance recipients respond to the religious services they are presented with when seeking material assistance from a religious organization? (Article II)
- 3) How are food charity users positioned as consumers, and what strategies do they use to manage in this position? (Article III)
- 4) How does the social organization of food charity contribute to the social relationships between the food recipients and to their experiences of these places as communities? (Article IV)

This introductory article discusses the findings of the four articles by setting them in dialogue with each other and with previous research on food charity. Together, the findings illuminate the intersection of what the food charity recipients desire and what religious organizations offer, and how the food recipients navigate in the assistance system and negotiate expressing their expectations and experiences with regard to what is on offer. In other words, the study focuses particularly on the dynamics between the organizations that provide the assistance and the individuals that participate in the activity. However, by doing so, the study also provides new insights into understanding the societal roles available for religious organizations as food charity providers.

The aim to understand food charity from the ground-level perspective requires qualitative methods that enable exploring everyday food charity occasions. Therefore, the study applies an ethnographic approach. Ethnography can be described as “an attempt at reaching for the life world of the other” (Utriainen, 2002:176; cf. Ortner, 1995). It is a methodological style that emphasizes the relevance of the social environment in the creation of meanings and in the facilitation of social interaction, relies on the idea of reality as socially constructed, and requires the embodied presence of the researcher throughout the research process (Tedlock, 2000:471; Thomas,

1993:3; Utriainen, 2002:174). The ethnographic research strategy helps in understanding the life situations of people who are not easy to reach with large-scale surveys, and it is thus well applicable in studying situations involving people in vulnerable positions in society. It is also fit for the purpose of studying how religion is incorporated into social life. In practice, an ethnographic research strategy includes studying people's actions and accounts on everyday occasions; gathering data from various sources with an unfixed design, often with participant observation as a main source of data collection; focusing on small-scale settings; and analysing the data by interpreting the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:3).

3.2 THE LOCAL CONTEXT

The data for this study was collected in the city of Tampere, Finland between the spring of 2012 and the spring of 2013. With a population of some 220,000 inhabitants, Tampere is one of the biggest cities in Finland and the largest inland city in the Nordic countries. The selection of a reasonably large city was justified in order to uncover possible variation between the ways of providing food assistance. Concentrating on a regionally defined setting enabled reaching a wider group of food recipients and those people who, for some reason or another, obtained food from one venue instead of another. At the time of the study, the city was still suffering from the consequences of the latest economic crisis of 2008. In 2013, the unemployment rate was 15.6%, while the number was 11.3% in the whole country. The long-term unemployed comprised 35.8% of all the unemployed, while the average in the country was 25.1%. The proportion of low-income people below the poverty threshold of 60% of the median income was high: 18.0% compared with the average of 13.9%. The number of people applying for income support had grown from 8.1% in 2008 to 9.4% in 2013 (THL, 2015).

The city has a two-decade history of food charity. The local parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church were among the first in Finland to deliver emergency food to people in need. Alongside the ELCF, other non-governmental organizations have conducted food deliveries since the mid-1990s. A quantitative survey (N352) conducted during the observation period by Koivula et al. (2013) in three food assistance venues provides the general demographics of the local food assistance recipients. According to that study, one-third of the respondents were over 55 years old and a small majority (52%) were women. Almost half (46%) were unemployed, and one-third were pensioners. Half of the respondents lived in single households, and half of the families with children were households with a single adult. Not surprisingly, low income was a severe problem among the recipients of food assistance, and many of them regularly used social work services. Most of the respondents

(89%) considered food assistance as necessary for their coping. Food assistance use was regular for many: 81% reported that they used food assistance at least once a month. All in all, the food assistance organizations in this city seemed to encounter a group of people who were living in economically and socially vulnerable situations and for whom obtaining food from these venues was necessary in order to cope with their everyday lives.

I identified the local food charity organizations by first searching for information on them from the internet. During the first visits to some of these organizations, I then questioned the food recipients about other places from which they had obtained food. The study was targeted to those food assistance venues in the area that were in regular operation at the time of the study and offered food to people to take home free of charge. Further, the study focused on those venues which operated on a low-threshold principle and provided food for a wide variety of people instead of focusing on strictly specified target groups, and where people could walk in without prior notice or previous contact with a worker. These criteria helped to limit the number of venues observed and facilitated comparisons between the organizations. The selected criteria excluded from the study the infrequent, one-off, and ad hoc food delivery occasions; those food deliveries taking place in one-on-one situations in, for example, diaconal offices; and those operations which require an in-depth assessment of income and eligibility. Religious affiliation was not a precondition for the selection.

At the time of the study, four organizations provided food assistance in a way that adhered to the above conditions. The four venues were in different parts of the city and in differing neighbourhoods. Two of the places were in or near the city centre, and the other two were located in the suburbs. However, all the venues were reachable by public transport, the clientele in each place was not restricted to the local neighbourhoods, and many food recipients travelled to these venues from different parts of the city. The four venues are shortly described below.

In the first venue, two volunteers were in charge of the food delivery, which was conducted in cooperation with an international relief organization and a local minority church. Each client was entitled to one food bag once a month. The workers verified the eligibility of the clients when they first arrived to obtain food by asking to see proof of the person's status as an unemployed person, a pensioner, or a student, but no detailed income assessment was conducted. At the time the study began, the food delivery took place once a week, but the hours of operation were soon cut down to once a month due to the small amount of food available. The food was almost exclusively unperishable food from the EU's MDP programme. Occasionally, bread from a local food producer was delivered. The organization served approximately one hundred people a month.

The second venue was hosted by the parish union of the ELCF, which also ran other kinds of food assistance programmes in the city, including a mobile food bank bus that circulated around the city and meals for the unemployed in

the local parishes in various neighbourhoods. The place where this study was carried out was a drop-in centre targeted to the mentally ill, substance abusers, and homeless people. However, the status of the newcomers was not assessed, and in practice, the organization served a wide variety of people. In addition to seven permanent workers, there were workers on unemployment subsidy and a varying number of volunteers. At the beginning of the study period, MDP food was delivered three times a week, once a month for each client, but this operation was transferred to the local parishes a few months after the observation period had begun. The majority of the food delivered in this venue was excess food donated by local grocery stores. In the beginning of the observation period, whenever there was food available, it was placed on the tables of the drop-in centre to be taken freely. Over the course of the study, more structured food delivery practices were developed. In addition, a daily hot meal was reserved for clients whom the staff had given a client card after a detailed income assessment. In addition to food, the organization provided clients with clothes, personal hygiene items, and guidance in arranging personal matters such as applying for social benefits. The drop-in centre was open five days a week (seven days during the winter time), and people were able to spend time inside or in the yard. Once a week (twice during the winter time) a 15 to 20 minute religious service, including, for example, prayers, religious songs and readings from the Bible, was held for the clients. The venue served some dozens of clients in a day.

The third venue under study was a drop-in centre run by a local registered association. The operations were carried out by about a dozen volunteers who were recruited via local Protestant congregations. Excess food donated from local food retailers was delivered to the drop-in centre three times a week. In addition to this venue, the association ran two smaller food deliveries in nearby localities. According to the association's newsletter, the clientele consists mainly of unemployed people, pensioners, students, "down-and-outs", and immigrants. However, the eligibility of the food recipients or the frequency with which they came to obtain food was not assessed or checked. The drop-in centre was open for several hours on its days of operation, and people could spend time inside or in the yard and buy coffee and snacks at an affordable price. A one-hour religious service always took place before the food delivery. The organization served from 40 to 70 people at one time.

Finally, the fourth organization under study was a minority Protestant church that organized a free lunch event together with a food bag delivery once a week. The operations were carried out by a group of volunteers. The food was excess goods donated by food retailers. The occasion was targeted to the unemployed but had no eligibility control, and in addition to unemployed people, other groups, in particular many pensioners, belonged to the clientele. The number of clients varied from 60 to over 100 per week. Before the meal and food bag delivery, a 45-minute religious service was always conducted. Occasionally, additional religious and recreational events were provided for the same target group as the food assistance.

3.3 DATA

The data for this study consists of observational notes from over seven months of participant observation in the four food assistance organizations presented above, written documents related to the operation of the organizations in question, and interviews with 25 people who obtained food from these venues.

After setting up the general principles to determine the field of study, the data collection proceeded by negotiating access to that field. It is instructive to see access as a process rather than an isolated event. The first step was to gain permission for the study from those in charge of the activity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:41). I first identified the director or the person most probably in charge of each food assistance operation. I then approached this person, in three places by phone and in one via email, to introduce the study and to obtain preliminary permission to conduct the research. It was not always self-evident who was in a position to allow permission for access. For example, in one venue, I first contacted the official head of the organization, but soon found that in order to proceed with the study, I should negotiate with a voluntary worker who was in charge of the practical operations. In another venue, the director was difficult to reach, and it took a while to contact him. Eventually, I was able to contact the right people, and in each venue they welcomed me to study their food assistance operations in more detail. After gaining initial permission, I then visited each venue to explore the operations and to discuss the study in more detail with the directors. The first visits took place in May and June of 2012. Permission to conduct the research was agreed verbally, and I provided each organization with a written description of the relevant details of the study. The sustained observation period started gradually between August and September of 2012. I wrote down notes from these initial discussions with the directors and workers, as well as from the numerous discussions that followed, and included them in the observational notes.

The next step in negotiating access was to introduce the study and build a rapport with the actual informants: the food recipients. Given the anonymous nature of the venues and the events under study, this was not a one-time event, but my relationship with the regular participants had to be maintained throughout the observation period and negotiated again in encounters with new informants. However, the first days of observation were particularly crucial for the successful continuation of the study. Since the practical operations in each of the four venues varied, I had to apply different strategies to introduce the study. In three of the four venues, I placed a short written description of the study with my contact information on display. In two of the places that run drop-in centres, I introduced myself and the study to the people who were present on my first day of observation and discussed the study and my interests with them. In one venue, a worker had discussed the study with the food recipients on a food delivery occasion prior to the beginning of the observation, and then introduced me to the clients on my first day of observation in that place. Further, in all the venues, whenever I was in

discussion with the food recipients and it was suitable at that time, I reiterated why I was there.

Having read about the possible difficulties of accessing the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:41-62), in the first instance I was somewhat cautious about how the food recipients would respond to the study. The general response was, however, rather positive. Some of the food recipients explicitly expressed how they considered it important that there were studies that explore the grassroots-level activities taking place in the food banks. In a casual conversation about my study in the early days of the observation period, a food recipient emphasized that in order to understand the activity, I ought to visit the venue regularly. From the outset, some eagerly explained to me the practices of the food deliveries and shared their views about the activity, socializing me to the everyday practices.

Over more than seven months between August of 2012 and April of 2013, I participated in the activities of the four sites several days a week. The frequency of the observation visits among the four venues varied according to the variation in the frequency of their operations. In total, I observed 98 food assistance occasions with more than 250 hours of observation. I took handwritten notes during or immediately after each observation session, and transcribed and completed the notes as soon as possible, most often later the same day. The data comprise around 230 pages (680,030 characters with spaces) of observational notes.

Towards the end of the observation period, I conducted a small survey in one of the organizations. With the survey, I wanted to test the impressions I had formed during the data collection of what I considered to be important for the participants. I asked the regular clients of one of the organizations to reflect on the following questions in writing: 1) What is the best thing in the organizations' activities?; 2) What could they improve?; 3) What did they think of the food?; 4) What did they think of the religious services provided by the organization? I received 21 answers, of which some were answered together in a group, most by individuals. These short answers to the open questions provided no new perspectives for the study but supported my observations on what seemed to be meaningful for the clients, and thus served as assurance that I was on the right track.

In addition to the observational notes, I collected written documents from the venues under study. I asked the directors of the food banks to provide existing documents, data, and statistics on their activity from past years. The organizations differed in their methods of compiling statistics and producing written information about their activities. The first organization presented above provided their yearly attendance statistics from the years 2010–2012, an organization newsletter from the year 2012, and an advertising brochure about the organization (no year). From the second organization, I received their programme description from the year 2012, annual reports from 2009–2012, their functional goals for the years 2013–2015, and several newspaper articles about their work. The data from the third organization included an

annual report from the year 2011 and organization newsletters from 2009–2012, and from the fourth organization I received day to day attendance statistics from 2009–2012 and an article published about their work in a Christian newspaper. The variety of these documents makes comparison difficult. The compilation of attendance statistics, for example, varied between different organizations, and thus these statistics are incompatible. However, while a direct comparison between the four venues is not reasonable based on these documents, the documents provide important insights into the ways these organizations conceptualize their assistance work and communicate it to different audiences when considering the contexts in which they are produced and contrasting them with the practices in these venues and my discussions with the workers.

Over the course of the observation period, I interviewed 25 recipients of food assistance. The interviewees represented different kinds of food recipients, some regulars, some occasional food charity users. The interviewees were all Finns, as were the majority of the food recipients in these venues. I aimed to interview people from all four venues, and I found that most of them had received food from more than one of these venues. The age of the interviewees varied between 30 and 80. Eight of them were women, and 17 were men. The interviewees came from various walks of life. Some were unemployed, others had been unemployed for a long time, and still others were sporadically employed. Some were pensioners, either due to retirement or disabilities. Some were currently homeless or had experienced homelessness in the past.

The interviews were open-ended, rather informal discussions. I used a rough interview guide to cover the essential themes, which I chose based on the research aim and my observations. The interviews were structured in a flexible way to include two parts. I most often started by asking the interviewees to describe themselves and to reflect on how they first came to the venue, an opening which allowed the interviewee to frame the activity in a way they considered relevant to themselves. The first part of the interviews covered the life situation of the food recipient, their reasons for and frequency of participation, their experiences of receiving food assistance, and their thoughts on the activity in general. Second, if the interviewee did not take up religious themes unprompted, I asked whether they had noticed that religious elements were present in these venues and enquired about their reflections on these elements and the participant's own religious background and affiliations. The interviews ended with the interviewees' reflection on their future. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The duration of the interviews varied from ten minutes to two hours, less than half an hour on average. This variation reflects both the diversity of the interviewees and the varying interview situations.

The quality of the interviews was influenced by the interview situation and my ability to build rapport in each case. Four of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes. These interviews were arranged well in advance,

which helped both the interviewee and me to prepare for the event. The home interviews allowed for longer and more in-depth conversations compared to those conducted in the food charity venues, but were rather time-consuming for the interviewer. The other 21 interviews took place in the course of the food deliveries in the food charity venues under study. The arrangements were not always ideal. One interview, for example, took place in a vestibule, through which other people occasionally walked during our discussion. Eventually, what was more distracting than the occasional passers-by was the freezing winter cold that seeped through the door and forced us to end the interview after about twenty minutes. Most of the time, however, a relatively quiet room was available. The interviews were conducted prior to or just after a food delivery, which sometimes limited the time available for discussion. On the other hand, the food recipients often had more or less time on their hands while waiting for food, and some were happy to spend that time in an interview.

Regardless of the space and time available, not every interview succeeded in the best possible way. In one case, for example, the interview ended rather perfunctorily as I failed to facilitate the interaction and create an atmosphere where the interviewee would openly discuss his experiences. In retrospect, I should have emphasized more the character of the event as an informal discussion. Nevertheless, my long presence in these venues enabled some of the shortcomings of the interviews to be corrected. Since I was already to a degree familiar with many of the interviewees, I was able to use the interview situations to deepen the themes of the everyday conversations I had had with these people, and if I remained puzzled about anything after the interview, I was able to ask more specific questions later. My ongoing presence also enabled some of the interviewees themselves to comment later in more detail on issues that had been raised in the interviews.

The issues of consent and confidentiality are essential in a study on people living in vulnerable social and economic positions. Writing in the context of organizational ethnography, Plankey-Videla (2012:3) argues that informed consent should be seen as an ongoing process, which “does not end upon being granted access by gatekeepers”. Nor does consent shrink into a formalized agreement between the researcher and the individual participant, but is an ethical issue that is bound to the relations in the field and requires maintenance throughout the study. While the possible risks of this study for the participants can be considered minimal, there are potential emotional or psychological risks, mainly in relation to the participants’ feelings of discomfort concerning the questions about their life situations and of being observed by an outsider. I aimed to minimize the emotional risks by reassuring the participants about the confidentiality and anonymity of the study. In the interview situations, I ensured consent by explaining the purpose of the study and by emphasizing the voluntariness of participation and the anonymity and confidentiality of the interview both verbally and in writing. I did not ask the participants to sign anything or give me their names or other details about

their identity. This was in line with the general character of these venues as anonymous low threshold spaces. I agreed with the informants that I am the only one with access to the raw data. I protected the confidentiality of the informants by storing the recorder and transcripts in secure files and a locked cabinet only accessible to me. When reporting the findings, I anonymized the identities of individual informants so that particular information could not be linked to any particular participant.

Since the venues that I observed were in principle open spaces where the group of participants was not fixed and informed consent was in practice impossible to be obtained on each occasion individually from each participant, overt observation was particularly important. My role as a researcher is best characterized as an observer-as-participant, which meant that I made my position as a researcher clear to the participants when taking part in the activities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:79-86). Depending on the situation at hand, the emphasis varied between passive observer and active participant. I chose my role as a researcher purposefully on each occasion according to what gave me the best access to the activity at hand, with the focus on those activities in which the recipients of assistance took part (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:86-89).

However, the position of a researcher is not only something that is chosen, taken, and retained. In part, other participants addressed my differing roles (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:41). For example, even though I was particularly interested in understanding the experiences of the food recipients, in the beginning of the observation period, I volunteered to hand out food bags to the clients in one of the venues. I did so in order to gain access to the one-on-one food delivery situations that took place for a while in that venue. On the part of that food bank, the issue at stake was their shortage of staff, which made them willingly utilize my presence in the field in their everyday assistance work. In this and other venues, I was occasionally confused as representing the staff, but I pointed out when needed that I did not represent any food assistance organization, any religious organization, or any other authority.

In addition, I was often considered to be part of the clientele, but again, at such times I mentioned my research interest. Whenever it was possible for gathering the relevant data, I participated in the activities from the point of view of the food recipients, but with one important exception: I only occasionally obtained assistance food myself. With this limitation, my purpose was to refrain from interfering with the allocation of the limited resources, but I also tried to avoid the dangers of over-rapport lying in long-term participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:86-89). This marked a clear boundary between the food recipients and me, but also led to valuable insights, as my marginal position with respect to the food was noticed and time to time even questioned by the other participants. Through discussions about me not taking food, I was provided opportunities to introduce the study and to get to know that person's experiences of assistance. Most importantly, I learned that

it was extraordinary that a person, other than a staff member, would spend time in these settings without utilizing the food that was on offer.

Alongside consent and confidentiality, a further ethical challenge for the study of people living in vulnerable social positions is the social distance between the researcher and the informants. Furset and Repstad (2006:143) note that a researcher might be inclined to give a more passive and manipulated role to people who are socially distant from the researcher than to those closer to one's own reference group. With data that focuses particularly on the perspective of the food recipients, which was collected by participating in their everyday life and contains the active voice of these people, I have aimed at overcoming this distance, or at least making a leap in that direction.

3.4 ANALYSIS

The essence, if not also the trouble, of describing the process of analysis in ethnographic studies in general, and in particular in research compiled from several individual publications such as this study, is the intertwined character of the procedure. The process proceeds concomitantly from the initial research design through choosing the primary methods of collection of the empirical data, to continuing with the conceptual reflections and writing the final report of the dissertation, and during this process, analysing, outlining, writing, rewriting, and finally publishing the individual articles. The analysis can be seen as beginning already in formulating the research aims. The starting point of this study was to better understand the experiences of the recipients of charitable food assistance, taking into account the role of religion in these settings. This subject guided the phases of the study that followed, and these phases in turn amended and clarified the subject throughout the process.

Instead of having clear-cut, separate steps, in ethnographic research the research design, data collection, and analysis overlap (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:158). They also become entangled with the embodied and subjective presence of the researcher as both the agent and tool of the process. Writing the observational notes is a clear example. As an observer, I made choices of what to observe and what and how to write about what I observed. The process of selection and writing was guided by the physical and social positions that I obtained and was given by the other participants on each occasion, as well as by my initial perceptions. This phase already involved analytical classification and conceptualization. The observational notes comprise what I considered relevant and what I chose to observe and write down, and how. This bias cannot be fully avoided, but efforts can be made to reduce its effects in the findings by taking reliability considerations into account already when planning the observation and by becoming aware of and making visible the underpinnings of the research procedure. A certain level of

subjectivity is inescapable in ethnographic research and must be kept in mind when analysing the data and interpreting the findings.

It is impossible to observe everything, and thus a researcher inevitably must choose what to concentrate on and what to overlook. The preliminary research aim helped to steer my gaze towards what I considered essential for this particular study. However, as important as it is to have an initial understanding of the focus of the study, it is equally important not to let this perception obscure what else is happening. To focus on what I considered significant, on the one hand, and to avoid narrowing down the subjects of observation too much, on the other, in the beginning of the observation period I used an observation matrix to guide the analytical gaze. The matrix helped to focus the observation on the assistance spaces (milieu, interior, artefacts), on the activities taking place (the assistance practices, formal and informal activities), and on the interaction between the participants (discussions, locutions, nonverbal communication) in all four venues and at different periods of time. I used the themes of the matrix to observe issues that related to religion as well as other parts of the activity.

After the data collection, I transcribed the interviews and started reading, rereading, and coding the data. I treated all the data as text, taking into account the social contexts and the differences in the ways the texts were produced. I analysed all the data with a help of qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti), which aided in processing, classifying, and coding the texts, and in examining and choosing particular sections of the data for more detailed scrutiny. However, I did not rely solely on the software but also used electronic and printed sheets to assist the coding, and used colours and drew tables, figures, and diagrams to aid the analysis.

When it comes to interviews and written documents, I applied qualitative, inductive content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). Through a close and repeated reading of the texts, I developed a general understanding of those themes and issues present in the data that were relevant for the research problem. I then coded the data by simplifying the expressions and developing concepts that helped to make sense of the data. I compared and compiled these concepts and ideas to understand the similarities and differences between the interviewees' experiences and accounts and to elicit the general themes that the interviewees addressed in relation to food charity. When interpreting the interview data, I aimed at taking into account the context and interaction in addition to the content (Puroila, 2002).

I conducted a similar process to the observational notes while retaining the specific character of that data. As the process of making the notes already involved the selection and interpretation of the activity, the coding and conceptualizing of the observational notes at this phase can be considered as second-level analysis, which also involved critical reflection on my own preceding work. In the analysis, I applied the procedures of grounded theory, particularly in the process of the initial coding and creating of sensitizing concepts to build the analysis and make comparisons. As is customary in

grounded theory, I compared and contrasted different incidents, different assistance venues, different people, and the same individuals with themselves on a different occasion. Further, I compared and contrasted the ideas elicited in different sources of data (Charmaz, 2000:515). However, I considered the aims of the analysis somewhat more humble than in grounded theorizing; rather than to generate a new theory in any strict sense of the word, the purpose was to produce a critical, reflective ethnographic description and to provide knowledge that complements, counterbalances, and even challenges what we know about food charity (Thomas, 1993; Törrönen, 2006).

The triangulation of the different sources of data enabled producing a nuanced view of the situation. After gaining an overall understanding of the main themes of the data, I began to focus more on outlining and planning the individual articles. At the outset, the religious dimension of the assistance was the hub of the study, and the processes that lead to Articles I and II derive from that focus. However, I soon realized the need to explore more deeply the social context in which the expressions of religion were embedded and by which they were conditioned. This need led me to analyse more generally the activity in which the religious organizations and poor individuals encountered each other – with or without explicit religious manifestations. Articles III and IV spring from this effort. In each article, the analysis began with loosely formulated questions and themes, with the aim of crystalizing what was essential from the data. I first approached the data inductively (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002:95-99). Then, to focus the analysis, I proceeded in Article I by applying Lefebvre's (1991) theorization of social space to assist the analysis and in Article IV by utilizing theories of queuing (Löfgren & Ehn, 2010; Mann, 1969; Wexler, 2015). In Articles II and III a less predefined set of theoretical concepts was used to interpret the overall findings.

The overall methodological procedure in each case was bound with the idea of writing taking a central role in the process of analysis. I find that one of my key personal learning experiences has been to understand the intimate relationship between writing and knowing. What I experienced in the process of this study made me adhere to the notion by Hammerlsey and Atkinson (2007:191) that ethnography is “inescapably a textual enterprise” and to Richardson's (2000) idea of writing as a method of inquiry. In writing the study, I not only reported what I had already found, but came to know what I did not necessarily know before I began to write. In the process of sketching the first drafts of the articles, I often ran into puzzles and new ideas that guided me further (and sometimes side-tracked me) from the questions I had in mind at the outset and forced me to go back to the data to seek further answers.

Understanding writing as a method is anchored in the perception of the social world as constructed in interaction and in language. We not only describe the world, but “word the world” (Richardson, 2000:923). This is a notion particularly relevant when one aims to communicate experiences and incidents originally expressed and written down in a different language than the research report. This was a challenge for this study, as not all meanings

translate from one language to another and since translation has the tendency to alter connotations. However, the interchange and weaving between two languages also benefitted the analysis by enriching the interplay between the everyday expressions and theoretical conceptualizations.

The process of coming to know what I have found with this study still continued in writing this final contribution, as a synoptic view on the four individual publications revealed common themes between the articles, as well as blind spots that remain to be explored in future studies. The outcome of this reflection is presented in the remainder of this study. The following chapter presents the key findings of the individual articles and then common themes and insights disclosed by a meta-analysis of these four studies. The study ends with a conclusion section that evaluates the research outcomes, comments on their implications, and proposes directions for future research.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE FOUR ARTICLES

Article I: Locating religion in the context of charitable food assistance: An ethnographic study of food banks in a Finnish city. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 31(1), 35-50.

Article I concentrates on the religious aspects of food charity by exploring how, for whom, and to what extent religion was a part of the reality of the food assistance venues under study. The focus of the study is on the explicitly religious characteristics of the social space of food assistance and on the elements that were considered religious by the participants. The study applies Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad as a theoretical tool to locate religion in the practices of food assistance, in the ways the assistance was planned and conceptualized by the organizers, and in the lived experiences of the participants.

The four food assistance deliveries varied with regard to the religious manifestations in the assistance practices. Depending on the venue, religion was either highlighted or de-emphasized in the assistance environments, in the names of the venues, and in the assistance programmes. The most prominent religious elements were religious services that were provided for the food recipients in three of the four food assistance venues. These services included, for example, prayers, religious songs, readings from the Bible and testimonies. The integration of religious activities into the food deliveries varied between the venues. The varying role of religion in the spatial practices was contingent upon the aims that the organizations had for their work. The aims of the food providers varied between religious and nonreligious, as well as between accommodative and restorative aims (cf. Sager & Stephens, 2005). All the venues under study shared the social accommodative goal of providing food for people in need. However, they all also had goals that went beyond this, and which shaped the ways in which the food delivery practices were organized, including whether religion was highlighted or de-emphasized. The food recipients were well aware that they obtained food from a religious organization, and they were able to identify religious elements in the food programmes. However, for most of them, personally, the religious dimension was of minor importance. For the majority, religion either created a backdrop for the material assistance, or it was considered an additional feature and part of the social dimension of the assistance. Some mentioned that giving food for people in need can be seen as a religious act in itself. However, only five of the 25 interviewees mentioned the religious content as a reason for them to participate in the activity.

The findings contribute to the overall study by describing the varying role of religion in the food assistance context. The findings show that the goals of the food providers influenced the assistance practices. To a certain degree, these practices, in turn, contributed to the experiences of the food recipients by more or less sensitizing people to the religious. However, this was not a clear-cut causation, since the readings of the space as either religious or nonreligious also differed between the food recipients and providers. The findings indicate that religion may play a role in exacerbating the asymmetrical relationships of food providers and recipients in situations where the religious conceptions of the food assistance provider confront the material needs of the food recipient.

Article II: 'You can vote with your feet if you want.' Users' responses to religious services in the context of food charity in a Finnish city. *Social Compass*, 63(1), 109-124.

Article II explores the potentially contested role of religion in the food charity context by asking how the food recipients respond to the presence of the most evident religious elements, the religious services, in the food delivery programmes. The study approaches attitudes not as fixed properties of an individual nor solid parts of the personality, but as social and situational in character (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). This approach enables exploring the food recipients' responses to the religious services in their social contexts and taking into account the interaction situations where they are constructed.

Regardless of their own personal religious background, the interviewees mainly had a positive or neutral general outlook towards the religious services. The critical notions were discussed in reference to details or to past prejudices that had since faded away, or they were phrased as the attitudes of other participants. Contrary to the interviews, on the everyday food delivery occasions there was rather widespread indifference and disinterest towards the religious services. However, dissent was not often expressed openly, but indirectly by using humour, inattentiveness, or sometimes tacit protest. The food recipients emphasized the primacy of choice with regard to religious services. The choice had both descriptive and prescriptive dimensions. On the descriptive side, it referred to the food assistance recipients' right to choose whether to participate in a religious service or not, and their perception of the content of the religious service, in the event that they did take part in it. It also referred to the food providers' right to participate in the activity on their own terms. On the prescriptive side, the choice obligated the food recipients to stay away if they disliked the religious content. The rule of voting with one's feet undermined any criticism towards the religious services.

The findings indicate that the food recipients' responses to the religious services correspond with the "belonging without believing" type of religiosity (Davie, 2000), where a positive general attitude towards religion does not

result in participation in religious practice. Further, the findings reflect the prominence of the rhetoric of choice in contemporary society (Sassatelli, 2001), which extends to the sphere of religion. Finally, the findings of the study underline the charitable character of food assistance. In contrast to the public welfare provision where assistance is an entitlement, charitable assistance is subject to terms determined by the local food assistance providers, which may include religious participation.

Article III: The Christmas celebration of secondary consumers: Observations from food banks in Finland. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, published online before print July 7, 2014.

Article III addresses the material aspects of the lifeworld of the food recipients by exploring what happens in the food banks at the peak of the yearly consumption, Christmas. The study approaches food assistance as an institutionalized form of secondary consumption (Hill, 2003; Hill & Stamey, 1990), and uses Christmas time as an illustrative example to point out the ambivalence of the social position of food assistance recipients as secondary consumers. At the four food charity venues under study, Christmas was a special time that brought with it special arrangements. These included, for example, supplementary food items, extended opening hours, or Christmas dinners. The religious meanings of Christmas were communicated to the food recipients, for example, with greetings or in special Christmas events.

For the food charity recipients, Christmas marked an ambivalent time. Due to the increase in the material assistance available in the food banks during Christmas and rising expectations of what should be available for a successful Christmas celebration, for the food recipients, Christmas simultaneously entailed both more resources and more intense experiences of social exclusion. The study demonstrates how Christmas highlights the paradoxical dual position of secondary consumers who are at the same time both excluded from and dependent on the prevailing practices of consumer culture. The food recipients used three strategies to cope with this ambivalence: some refused to celebrate Christmas, some distanced themselves from their dependence on charity, and some reframed their situation by considering the food donations as gifts from God. These strategies did not provide a way out of the ambivalent social position, but helped to manage the situation emotionally.

The article emphasizes that poverty not only means low income, but materializes in the inability to consume goods that are considered necessary for a culturally and socially decent life. The findings underscore that the practices of food charity are both rooted in everyday life and punctuated by extraordinary events, and take their shape in a context where materiality, sociability, and religious tradition and spirituality intertwine. The article contributes to the overall research aim by providing insights into the material

aspects of food charity and by emphasizing the resource-dependent practices of food assistance.

Article IV: Lining up for charity. A study of the social organization and communal qualities of breadlines in a Finnish city. Forthcoming in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.

Article IV focuses on the practical organization and the social and communal dimension of food assistance. The article gives a greater depth to the notion familiar from many previous studies that participating in a breadline is not just a material issue, but also a social event. The study applies the theories of queue culture (Löfgren & Ehn, 2010; Mann, 1969; Wexler, 2015) to analyse how the food deliveries were organized in each venue. The study demonstrates that the social organization of food assistance – particularly the ways that access, mutual order, and waiting were governed – contributed to the participants' experiences of these places as social events and communities.

The findings of the article reveal that the communal qualities of the breadlines were manifold. First, the absence of eligibility control, which adheres to the ideal of a low threshold for access, was not greeted by all and gave rise to mutual surveillance between the participants. Further, certain features in the negotiation of the mutual order between the participants made these venues socially demanding communities. Food assistance use was often time-consuming, and learning the local rules required skills from the participants. Finally, despite these negative aspects, the article agrees with the notion from previous studies that for many participants, coming to the food delivery became a socially significant event (Kainulainen, 2014; Lorenz, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2010; Ohisalo et al., 2014; Salonen, 2016; Siiki, 2008). This experience was facilitated by spaces that allowed the participants to spend time and meet other people while waiting, and by the additional social content integrated into the food deliveries. The study concludes that while the ability of the breadlines to provide a community can be considered a safeguard against experiences of social exclusion, the breadlines also gave their users experiences of being left without, trampled upon, and monitored by others.

The findings of the article demonstrate how queuing can serve as a means of social control in a situation where people have limited room to voice their experiences and views of the activity. People standing in a breadline rarely have a chance to withdraw from queuing or openly criticize the practices, even in the face of deteriorating assistance or experiences of unequal treatment (cf. Hirschman, 1970). However, the findings also demonstrate how they accommodated themselves to the situations and social roles available in the particular breadline contexts. The findings add to previous research by disclosing the many faces of food assistance communities. The article contributes to the overall aim of this study by revealing the negotiations around waiting, mutual order, and access to food, and by deepening the

understanding of the manifold social practices and relations taking place in a charitable context.

4.2 THE INCONSISTENCY OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Taken together, the findings of the four articles disclose inconsistencies in what the food charity recipients desire and what religious organizations offer. This applies to both food and religion. Food charity is often regarded as an effort by non-governmental organizations to fight against the material and social maladies of poverty. It is acknowledged to be perhaps inspired by religious motivations, but is nevertheless mostly treated as a secular undertaking. Aiming at alleviating the immediate needs of people living in poverty was indeed a shared goal of the food charity work in the venues under study. The four organizations all shared an understanding that the people whom they served lived in socially and materially weak situations, and that they urgently needed material assistance. However, the findings of Article I reveal that in the food charity venues under study, religion was not merely a background motivation for non-religious aid, but was present in the practices of food assistance in varying ways. The religious services provided by three of the four organizations in connection with the assistance work were the most evident manifestations of religion for the food recipients. From the perspective of the food providers, these religious activities can be considered as a means for answering the social needs of the food recipients. In addition to religious services, the food assistance workers also provided to varying degrees private, one-to-one spiritual support for those who wanted it, but this was only occasionally promoted, mostly in conjunction with the religious services targeted to all participants.

For the food recipients, in turn, religion was one part of the activity that influenced the practices and had on particular occasions the ability to provide sources of meaning (III). It was clear to the participants that the food charity agencies were religiously affiliated, and some of them even remarked that helping the needy is particularly characteristic of religious organizations and can be as such interpreted as a religious manifestation (I). The religious services were sources for collective experiences that fostered a sense of community, as the assemblage of food recipients was transformed into a momentary devotional community (IV). Some of the participants considered the religious parts of the activity as additional social events, pleasant pastime activities, or as personally significant possibilities to listen to the word of God. However, even though the religious dimension was important and meaningful for some of the participants, it was by no means meaningful for all (I). The food recipients' experiences relativize the role of religion in these venues. Despite the efforts of some food charity providers to highlight the religious dimension of the activity, and despite the fact that the food recipients were

well aware of the religiousness of these settings, many did not find religion in these venues as personally essential. As noted in Article I, the material need mostly eclipsed any religious reflections.

The food charity clientele is a heterogeneous group consisting of people from various walks of life. What they do share in common, however, is that they live in difficult social and economic situations. Low income, economic insecurity, and relative poverty were common denominators among the food charity users under study. Thus, it is not surprising that the main reason for the participants to join the activity was to alleviate their material deprivation. From the perspective of a poor individual, food assistance use can be seen as a practical coping mechanism in a weak social and economic situation (Hill, 2003; Hill & Stamey, 1990). Obtaining food assistance provides relief in an everyday life with restricted resources.

It is important to acknowledge the material significance of food assistance for individual participants. That said, it is equally important to discuss the limitations in the capacity of the food charity system to surmount the material deficits of people living in poverty. Food charity answers immediate food needs, but as bare hands-on material assistance, it does not address the root causes or structural problems behind these needs, and in fact, the ability of the assistance to meet the immediate food needs is even limited. This is due to the detachment of the food resources from the needs of the food recipients (Poppendieck, 1999; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003; 2005). It is not just the amount of food that is problematic, but the dependence on excess more generally, particularly the disconnectedness of the resources of the system from the needs of the people it aims to serve. The findings point out that the circumscribed moments of food abundance that took place in the food banks, for example, at Christmas time, did not challenge, but rather underlined the incongruence between demand and supply. When it comes to material deprivation, food charity can at its best alleviate the direct, immediate food needs of these people, insofar as these needs fall in line with what happens to be available (III).

In addition to food, many of the informants mentioned social reasons for coming to these venues, such as meeting other people, spending time, and enjoying the additional programmes (I and IV). Food charity venues provide sites for people to gather together with others sharing the same experience (Kainulainen, 2014; Lorenz, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2010; Ohisalo et al., 2014; Salonen, 2016; Siiki, 2008). The findings of this study acknowledge the potential of food banks to provide places for the excluded to gather together and share social support, which makes room for the emergence of a community. But the findings also diversify the picture by disclosing the manifold qualities of the food assistance communities and the mutual relationships between the food recipients. For some of the participants, food bank use became emotionally burdening. This experience derived from the practices of negotiating mutual order, which affected the social interaction and everyday relationships between the food recipients, and from the mutual

surveillance among the participants caused by the absence of control measures for access. Despite these challenges, over time, for many of the participants, the food banks became important communities, and some regarded the assistance use as such a socially significant activity that they continued participation regardless of their improving economic situation (IV).

All in all, the findings of this study reveal tensions and imbalances between what the food charity recipients desired and what religious organizations offered. With regard to food, this finding supports the evidence from previous research that has noted the supply-driven practices of the food charity system (Poppendieck, 1999; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003; 2005). For the food charity recipients, assistance use was first and foremost a means to cope with material and social deprivation. However, these needs were only met inasmuch as they complied with the supply. The social and religious support activities did not provide relief for this situation (cf. Tarasuk et al., 2014b:1411). What is more, the findings of this study add that, importantly, the inconsistency between supply and demand concerns not just food, but also the religious aspects of the assistance. When it comes to the needs and expectations of the assistance recipients, the food charity venues under study were predominantly secular spaces and places that were used as a means to cope with material and social deprivation. At the same time, however, these places were inescapably religious insofar as the food recipients were more than likely to encounter religious elements – whether highlighted or kept in the background – and more often than not they had to exercise their ability to choose whether or not to participate in the religious practice in the process of receiving food assistance (II). The rather strong prevalence of religion in these settings was inconsistent with the relative unimportance of religion for the participants.

4.3 THE CONSTRAINED AGENCY OF THE FOOD CHARITY RECIPIENTS

The inconsistencies between supply and demand lead to the question of whether the food recipients have room to manoeuvre in terms of what they are offered. The findings reveal that the food assistance recipients under study faced constraints that limited their ability to voice their expectations and experiences. This is illustrated in terms of both religion and food. To begin with religion, the findings indicate variation in the degree to which the food recipients were exposed to the religious services that took place in all but one of the venues (I). The religious activities were embedded in the social organization of the assistance, where they served different functions in different parts of the process of receiving the assistance. There was variation in whether participation determined access to the assistance, whether it affected the mutual order between the participants, and whether it was relevant for the content of the material assistance. In all the venues that

provided religious services, these events structured to some degree the waiting time before the food deliveries (IV).

As in the study by Sager and Stephens (2005; Sager, 2011), the food recipients valued choice with regard to religious participation. The right to choose whether or not to participate in a religious service was considered important, together with the right to determine how one perceived the religious content of these events, if deciding to participate. A restrained preaching style that gives more room for the listeners' personal beliefs was preferred over forcible proselytizing. On the other hand, the food assistance recipients admitted that the food providers also had a right to choose concerning religion. They acknowledged that the food assistance organizations engaged in the activity of their own accord and thus were free to organize the activity on their own terms (II).

Despite the relative unimportance of the religious dimension of the assistance, which would make it reasonable to expect some degree of disfavour towards these events, the food recipients responded to the presence of religious services in these settings rather positively. However, a closer exploration found that this positive attitude was a norm against which opposing voices had to be restrained. The ways in which the expressions of the attitudes toward religion were managed in everyday life disclosed power differentials between the food providers and the recipients. The negotiations over participation in religious services in the food charity context underline the charitable character of food assistance from the side of the food providers. For the food recipients in turn, having a choice with regard to religion was not only empowering, but resulted in constraints. The ability to "vote with one's feet" and thus to choose with regard to religion constrained the capacity of the food recipients to criticize the social organization of the assistance (II).

With regard to food, then, there was limited room available for the food charity recipients to express their wishes about the content of the assistance. Instead, they had to accept whatever was available. Further, the food recipients had a limited ability to voice critical societal concerns with regard to food. Of course, utilizing market excess can be considered in itself a demonstration of the problems of the food system and a practical way of criticizing conspicuous consumption. However, the social position of food charity recipients leaves little room for their criticism. Occasionally, the food recipients did remark on the huge amounts of excess food from the local grocery stores. However, their reliance on the excess and its direct benefits for their coping from a short-term view made it difficult to pose critical questions concerning the system producing food waste (III). Objecting to this waste would mean hoping for the demise of the preconditions of the food recipients' everyday subsistence (cf. Dowler, 2014:174; Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2015).

The findings demonstrate that compared to, for example, church going or food shopping, activities in which the participants have more room to manoeuvre, the ability of the food charity recipients to present their views is highly constrained. The food recipients have a limited ability to exit or

withdraw from the activity, but also little room to voice their views, expectations, and experiences (Hirschman, 1970). With regard to food, the exit option is of course available to those who can manage without the assistance. However, for those for whom the assistance was necessary for subsistence, the exit option posed severe risks and was thus practically absent (III and IV). In the case of religious participation, in turn, the exit option was, at least in principle, available. If one did not want to participate, the options were to wait outside or go to another food bank where no religious services were held or at which participation was not mandatory. However, the tendency of the availability of the option to exit “to *atrophy the development of the art of voice*” (Hirschman, 1970:43, italics in original) can be seen in the responses to the religious services: the possibility to refrain from participation hindered open criticism (II). These findings underscore the asymmetrical power relationship between the charitable giver and the recipient, where the choices of the food providers to integrate religion into the material assistance programme override the freedom of the food recipients to refrain from being exposed to religion against their will.

However, on the other hand, the findings of this study allow for an interpretation that emphasizes the agency of the food recipients. Their tacit strategies to control their exposure to the religious content illustrate how the food recipients were able to demonstrate agency from a materially highly constrained social position (II). Similarly, their ways of negotiating access to food by socializing into the rules of queuing demonstrate the ability of the food charity recipients to carve out space for agency within the constraints laid down by the food providers. The findings illustrate how food charity recipients accommodated themselves to the situations and social roles available on a given occasion (IV). They did so in creative ways by obeying, generating, and sometimes by disregarding the rules. These delicate strategies demonstrate beautifully the art of voice, even if it is tacit and highly constrained.

Further, the participation in religious services can be interpreted as a way for food charity recipients to reciprocate for the received food. Hierarchies are built in situations where the exchange is asymmetrical and there is no way to reciprocate (cf. Blau, 1964). Religious participation can be seen as a counter-gift that undermines the hierarchy, as a levelling mechanism to counterbalance the power differential caused by a charitable gift. This notion is pivotal against the background of the ideas of altruism and a pure gift that are important in much of religious thinking (Adloff, 2006; Gouldner, 1973; Grant, 2001; Pessi, 2011). However, this explanation is only tentative. Despite the connections between food and religion in the social organization of the assistance, the food assistance recipients rarely pointed out the reciprocal relationships between the two.

Article II notes that the fact that the food recipients rarely mentioned the reciprocity between food and religion is in line with the Bourdieu’s (1998:97) notion of the shared silence of the truth of exchange, where people act as if there is no relationship between a gift and a counter-gift. Yet another tentative

interpretation can be suggested for the silence. Even though the religious participation was in some venues used as a way to determine access to the assistance or the mutual order between the participants, it might not be considered by the participants as a legitimate reason to justify the social organization of food charity. This signals the limited ability of religion to authorize social hierarchies in contemporary society. Instead, choice concerning religious participation was a norm which overrode the explicit use of charity for proselytizing or indoctrination, and as such constrained not just the food recipients, but also the food providers.

4.4 THE PROBLEMATIC ROLE OF THE FOOD CHARITY PROVIDERS

Studying the interface between religious food charity providers and people seeking food assistance from these organizations provides new insights into understanding the societal roles available for, and obtained by, religious organizations in this field. To begin with, there is a widely shared perception that as food charity providers, religious organizations participate in welfare provision. They become actors in the welfare society and in the arena of social security, particularly in the last resort end of the chain of social protection – although without being assigned a legal role or responsibilities (Hiilamo, 2012:404; Malkavaara & Ryökäs, 2015:122-123; Ohisalo & Saari, 2014:15-16; Silvasti, 2015:478, 480). Much of the scholarly interest is focused on discussing charitable material aid in the framework of poverty and from the point of view of the welfare society. This study does so as well, most explicitly with Articles I and IV. Further, the findings of Article I, which discuss the food providers' aims for their work, suggest that the food charity organizations under study also themselves complied with this role. All four organizations shared an understanding that the people whom they served were living in weak social and economic situations and were in need of material assistance, and they were willing to alleviate that need.

Food charity can be seen as an attempt to alleviate the acute food needs of people living in poverty. However, the welfare role of religious and other non-governmental organizations has been criticized in previous studies on the grounds of the legitimation of charitable solutions. Previous research has often stated the criticism that by providing charitable assistance, charitable organizations stand in the way of more lasting solutions to poverty and even participate in dismantling the welfare state (e.g. DeLind, 1994; Poppendieck, 1999; Rideout et al., 2007; Silvasti, 2015). Food charity can be seen as an effort to help the needy, but it is only a band-aid that does not enable the root causes of poverty and food insecurity to be addressed. It has been stated that the food banks have themselves contributed to the policy changes by bringing poverty into the public agenda in a way that has fostered an ideational turn in Finnish

policy prescriptions from universalism to selectivism (Kuivalainen & Niemelä, 2010:270).

Thus, the role of religious organizations as welfare agents in the field of food charity is problematic. By continuing to provide food assistance, religious organizations participate in the construction of a cultural environment that is favourable to charity. Some of the organizations under study set goals for their work that can be read as efforts to overcome this problem. The restorative nonreligious goals reflect an understanding of food assistance as a restorative social space where the aim is to have a more comprehensive impact on the lives of individuals and on the structures of society (I). However, from the perspective of the food recipients, in the everyday practices of the food banks, the advocacy work was often overshadowed by the hands-on material assistance. Further, as the findings of Article IV suggest, there is a risk that instead of helping people to better their situation and rise out of poverty, the processes inherent in food charity may contribute to institutionalizing food assistance at the individual level.

Further, alongside the welfare role, religious organizations have another role in this field. Whether agricultural surplus, damaged items, the charitable purchases of individual consumers, or excess from food markets, the material preconditions for the hands-on food assistance rely strongly on the food system. The findings of Article III illustrate that as food charity providers, religious organizations not only participate in welfare provision, but also in the redistribution of the assets of the food system (Riches, 1986:122; Silvasti, 2008). Food charity utilizes the excess of the food markets. Thus, food charity organizations should be regarded as actors in the food markets, particularly in the disposal end of the food system.

Food charity can be seen as an attempt to overcome the problems of both food poverty and waste and thus to enhance the sustainability of the food supply chain (Garrone et al., 2014). However, the role of food charity organizations as actors in the food system confronts a problem parallel to that of their welfare role. What often escapes remark in discussions that emphasize the idea of salvaging waste by feeding the needy is that food charity is bound to food waste, and the ability of charitable actors to maintain their work relies heavily on the flow of excess from the food markets (III). Food charity is tightly linked with the abundant production and waste of food, whereas socio-ecological sustainability would require both less excess food and less social exclusion (Lorenz, 2012:393). Hence, efforts to overcome excess by using it for charitable purposes end up preserving the continuous production of waste.

Turning to charitable assistance instead of buying one's own food, and in particular, obtaining and eating food that is left over from the more affluent population, does not correspond with what is considered appropriate and sufficient in contemporary society, and thus marks a boundary between food assistance recipients and the more affluent population with regard to food consumption (Lorenz, 2015:10-11; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014:9; Silvasti, 2015:478). However, the findings of Article III demonstrate that in the context

of food charity, social exclusion does not mean absolute omission from the wider society, but due to the dependence of the assistance content on the excess from the food markets, it is accompanied by the concurrent dependency on the consumer practices of the more affluent population.

Even though three of the four food banks utilized market excess as their primary source of food, none of them emphasized the idea of salvaging waste by redistributing it to people in need. Neither was the flow of excess widely questioned or pondered as a societal issue in the everyday discussions in these venues. The excess food seemed to be by and large a utility for the assistance (Lorenz, 2015:11). It was not given a role as a social problem in itself. If the excess was a problem, it was mainly a practical one, relating, for example, to the quantity or practical usability of particular food items. In the goals of the food providers, their role as actors in the food system remained obscure.

Finally, the findings of this study demonstrate that a third role can be assigned to the food charity providers. For the food recipients, these venues were inescapably religious insofar as they were prone to encounter religious elements – whether highlighted or de-emphasized – in the process of receiving food assistance. The food recipients were aware that they were receiving food from religious organizations and recognized religious elements in the assistance practices. Thus, as food charity providers, religious organizations have the ability to communicate the values of the community to the food recipients and sensitize people to the religious. The findings of Article I suggest that some of the food providers were more willing to assume an explicitly religious role than others.

It is pivotal for social scientific research on food charity to understand the religious aims of some of the food charity providers. Those organizations that had restorative religious goals for the assistance work aimed first and foremost at bringing about religious change in the food recipients' lives through proclaiming a religious message. From this perspective, food has instrumental value in gathering people together and creating propitious conditions for religious practice (I). Emphasizing the provision of religious support over food overcomes the problems of hands-on material assistance presented above. The social scientific critique that blames food charity for standing in the way of more lasting solutions to defeat social and material deprivation or food waste does not address assistance work that is in the final analysis more inclined to provide a religious message than material assistance.

Instead, an alternative critique of food charity can be found from within the restorative religious understanding of food assistance. A worker cited in Article I voiced this point frankly by stating: "If we only give food, people are hungry tomorrow." Implicit in this perspective is the thought that giving only food is an insufficient way of helping people in need, which stands as an argument against accommodative charitable assistance. The argument is analogous to the criticism posed from the welfare society perspective, which maintains that giving food is an inefficient way to promote social welfare and reduce poverty. However, this critique is not voiced from a societal, but from

a theological standpoint. It argues that people crave not only food to fill their stomachs, but also food for the soul. While in the light of the findings of this study, this statement hardly seems to correspond with the primary needs and desires of the many food recipients (I), and the implementation of this goal can even cause tensions (II), it is important to take notice of its power as the prime mover of some of the food charity organizations. Although studies from other contexts indicate that theological arguments are used to preserve rather than to challenge the food charity system (Salonen, 2016), religion can also provide a basis for criticism of the forms of food charity that only concentrate on accommodative material ends. From within lies a potential source for the constructive criticism of religiously inspired charitable assistance.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

By reaching into the world of the food charity recipients, this study has explored charitable food assistance at the interface between religious organizations and individuals seeking material assistance. The findings of the four articles that constitute this study have shed extensive light on this phenomenon where religious organizations meet some of the poorest in society. The above sections have explored common themes raised by these four studies by discussing the inconsistency of supply and demand, the constrained agency of the food recipients, and the problematic role of religious organizations as food charity providers.

The findings indicate that, first, food charity has a limited ability to answer the needs of the clients. At best, the assistance serves as a means to cope with material and social deprivation. The material aid and social support provided by the food assistance venues are of great importance for the everyday subsistence of the participants, but the activity is not without problems. The social side can very well be demanding or burdening, and the material part erratic or insufficient. The additional religious support that some of these organizations provided was relatively insignificant for the participants. The explicit religious elements provided added value for some of the food recipients, but also caused tensions in these settings. There were disproportions between the efforts by some of the food providers to introduce religion into the assistance programmes and the expectations concerning the assistance from the side of the participants.

Second, the recipients of food charity have limited opportunities to influence the activity or to act in a different way, but at the same time their ability is limited to withdraw from participating in the activity. Negotiations over participation in religious services illustrate these constraints. The findings draw attention to the binding character of choice for those who occupy constrained positions in society, but also point out the tacit strategies used by the food recipients to voice their views. The food recipients accommodated themselves to the situations and social roles available on a given occasion and found niches from which to express their voice. Religion served both as a constraint and as a means to demonstrate agency.

Third, as religious organizations engage in food charity, they take part in a multifaceted and problematic activity. As providers of food assistance, they become actors in welfare provision, but also in the disposal end of the food system. Food charity can be regarded as an effort to overcome problems of food poverty and food waste, but the activity also bears the danger of legitimizing the problems of poverty and waste. The position of the food providers is further complicated by the explicitly religious role that some of the food providers assume in this field. Emphasizing the provision of religious support over food aid can be regarded as a way for some organizations to

overcome the problems of hands-on material assistance. While the findings indicate that this does not resonate strongly with the wishes of the clients, the religious emphasis of some of the assistance providers is important to note as a potential source of religious critique of charitable solutions to food insecurity.

Religion adds a layer to the social fabric from which the food assistance recipients' everyday experiences are drawn. Religion cannot be isolated from everything else taking place in this context, nor should its role be overemphasized or undermined. To merely note that there are religious actors providing material assistance, without addressing the ways in which the material and religious interplay in a particular context, oversimplifies the rich reality of food charity. The findings portray food assistance as a charitable sphere where assistance is provided only within the available resources, which are disengaged from the needs of the food recipients (cf. Poppendieck, 1999; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003; 2005), and within the terms laid down by the charitable giver, which may include to varying degrees religious participation, or food for the soul.

The presence of religion in a social space influences, but does not determine the participants' perceptions of that space as religious. Religious manifestations can sensitize people to the religious, but they also have the ability to create tensions, particularly in an assistance context characterized by power differentials. The food recipients adhered to the idea that religion falls under the realm of individual choice instead of obligation (cf. Davie, 2007:96-98). As a matter of choice, religion lacks the power to legitimize social order, even in situations characterized by disproportions of power. Despite this, the findings reveal that religion can have an influential role in the practical organization of a charitable social setting. Counter to the development in church social work where diaconal aid is found to be increasingly considered an entitlement parallel to public welfare, charity food is not a right, but a gift (Malkavaara & Ryökäs, 2015:122-123; Silvasti, 2015:480). A gift either evokes a duty to reciprocate or, in the absence of such an opportunity, builds a hierarchy (Adloff, 2006; Blau, 1964). The findings suggest that in the context of food charity, religion can play a dual role: the request for religious participation can aggravate the hierarchy, but also allow for a counter-gift. Exchanging one's soul for food, in a manner of speaking, can be constraining, but also a way to demonstrate agency.

This study draws attention to the notion that food charity is not only about poverty, but also about affluence, which produces the preconditions of the assistance (Lorenz, 2015). With their work, food charity organizations represent the paradox lived by the food assistance recipients that food is simultaneously so cheap that it can be thrown away and so expensive that some cannot afford it. In the food charity system, a means to overcome food deprivation is the affluence and waste of others. With the absence of critical voices, the food charity organizations participate in upholding a society where

the poor are both excluded from and dependent on the prevailing practices of consumer culture.

It is not reasonable to assume that religious or other charitable organizations would intentionally promote the institutionalization of charitable solutions to poverty and waste. Rather, as Silvasti (2015:479) points out, the current state of the field of Finnish food assistance seems to be an unintended by-product of a combination of certain economic developments and policy actions, not an intentionally established system. However, the institutionalization of food assistance is a sign of a changing cultural environment (Poppendieck, 1999; Silvasti & Riches, 2014). With their work, food charity organizations participate in the social construction of this culture by promoting charity as a normal and legitimate way to answer the problems of poverty. Further, they participate in legitimizing the continuous production of waste by turning excess routinely into a utility of last resort assistance.

On the other hand, as a more upbeat conclusion, food charity also bears the ability to promote social change with regard to both poverty and waste. This advocacy role is enabled by the important first-hand knowledge that these organizations have of the lived situations of the people living in poverty and of the amounts and quality of the surplus and waste that they confront in their everyday operations. Together, the religious organizations under study redelivered hundreds of bags of excess food every week and encountered hundreds of people living in weak social and economic situations. As food charity providers, religious organizations do have the knowledge required to reveal the problems of poverty and waste, and to advocate for social change in these fields. Thus, they have the ability to expose the ills of the food system and the social safety net (Silvasti, 2011:284).

The findings have implications for policy and practice in terms of the future development of the food charity system. There are no signs of the reduction of food charity, but instead of further institutionalization, including initiatives for closer cooperation between different food assistance organizations and between local food charity providers and public actors. In the spirit of the policy of neutrality of public administration, it is likely that the most appealing partners for co-operation with the public sector are those religious organizations that emphasize social goals and keep their religious convictions in the background (Lehtinen, 2013:74). From the perspective of the religious organizations, cooperation with public actors in combating social problems may require the agencies to define their identity in terms of these partnerships (cf. Hjelm, 2014:216). Government funding can be a powerful secularizing force for faith-based organizations in the field of social protection (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013:452), but the institutionalization of food charity can mean secularization of the assistance also regardless of public funding, in partnerships with various religious and non-religious NGOs in pluralistic settings.

This study is based on a compilation of four individual articles, which carries with it some limitations. When the first articles have left the

researcher's desk for the review and publication process, it is difficult to adjust the direction of the study in the face of new perspectives. This led to some incongruence in the terms and theoretical perspectives between the articles. In addition, due to restrictions in the word count in the individual publications, there was limited space to present some of the illustrative details that are the lifeblood of ethnographic research. Then again, requirements to report the findings in a compact form force the essential to be crystalized from the vast data and thus can reinforce the arguments. Moreover, the lived experiences of the food charity recipients are manifold, complex, even ambivalent, and the assemblage of the four divergent articles well captures this. Writing four individual studies from the same data enabled making visible the connections between everyday life through a variety of theoretical and societal themes and issues.

The local knowledge that the findings provide is both a challenge and a merit of this study. The empirical findings are drawn from the distinctive Finnish culture and society, and as such cannot be generalized outside this context. The findings are limited to a setting where the institutionalization of food assistance is relatively low and where the individual grassroots charitable actors thus have autonomy in deciding how to organize their assistance work in practice. Furthermore, even in Finland the findings are limited to contexts in which more than one food charity venue is available, but where the clientele of each setting is moderate and does not run to hundreds or even thousands, as in the capital area. In addition, this study only targeted those people who use food assistance and did not attend to the experience of those people who, for some reason or another, do not obtain food assistance while belonging clearly to the target group. The reasons for the non-use of food charity can be manifold (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). It remains to be studied whether religion plays a role in these reasons.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings point to issues that have significance beyond the local context. The concomitant exclusion and dependency of the food charity recipients vis-à-vis the affluent population, the ways in which the social organization of the assistance influences the experiences of food banks as communities, the manifold ways in which religion can be present in these settings and how this is contingent upon the aims of the food providers, and the ability of the negotiations around religion to reveal power differentials in charitable settings and disclose the normativity of choice in contemporary society are all issues that give insights applicable outside the local context. In fact, these issues would not have been fully grasped without studying a local setting with a qualitative, ethnographic approach.

The findings exemplify the strength of studying everyday activities and interaction, and encourage steering sociological scrutiny towards ground-level details of social life, not least with regard to research on religion. Theoretically, the findings point to a pivotal issue of understanding the value of contradictions. The research process has prompted consideration of the inconsistencies in the social phenomenon not as problems for the research(er),

but as valuable findings that provoke theoretical reflection. In Article II, for instance, combining my observational notes from my everyday encounters with food assistance recipients with the recorded interviews from more formalized situations and comparing the data illuminated both continuities and discrepancies in what the participants said and what they did. Saying and doing are indeed two different modalities of action. Neither should be valued above the other, since the discontinuities between the two are only human (Utriainen, 2002:185). Rather, the inconsistencies can be used as resources for understanding multifaceted social phenomena. The courage to confront discrepancies, puzzles, and perplexities and not explain them away too easily is a precious skill in research. It is particularly useful in studying food charity, a phenomenon permeated with ambivalence.

Food charity has provided an intriguing, yet challenging subject for research. After this study, much still waits to be explored. First of all, the findings encourage future research on food charity to take the role of religious organizations as actors in this field explicitly into account. The findings of this study are derived from open, low-threshold food delivery events where there are no general regulatory frameworks or bodies to govern the manifestations of religion in these venues. Different insights could be captured by studying more institutionalized food bank systems. It would be interesting to explore, for instance, how agencies with restorative religious goals reach for these aims and communicate them to the food recipients in contexts where explicit religious manifestations are precluded. Do they renegotiate their goals, and does that affect the identity of the religious community? Or does the institutionalization of food charity rule out the cooperation of such agencies with major food distributors and marginalize their charitable work?

Second, this study calls for a more integral approach that critically examines both the social and ecological ramifications of food charity. Silvasti (2015:475; see also Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014) positions the development of food charity in Finland in the crossroads of the often divergent policies of social welfare, agriculture, trade, and the environment. So far, the research concerning the topic has been mainly targeted to social welfare (Hänninen et al., 2008; Hiilamo, 2012; Ohisalo & Saari, 2014; Silvasti & Karjalainen, 2014), and there has been little concern over the issues of the food system or environmental matters (see, however, Kortetmäki & Silvasti, 2016; Silvasti, 2015). These themes would expand the horizons for more in-depth deliberations concerning both the ethics and practices of charitable assistance from both sociological and theological perspectives. Currently, even in the most low-income groups in Finland, the material footprints exceed the ecologically sustainable level of the use of natural resources (Hirvilammi et al., 2013; Hirvilammi, 2015). Social scientific studies of food charity would benefit from taking better into account the interconnections between charitable assistance and the food system at the level of the individual and hence consider critically the efficiency and sustainability of the assistance from social and ecological perspectives. Theological research, in turn, could inform studies on

food charity by exploring the ecological teachings of religious traditions and organizations alongside and in connection with the social gospel of taking care of the poor. What insights can theological analysis bring to a situation where there is not “too many mouths and not enough bread” (Boureux et al., 2005), but rather where ecologically unsustainable amounts of excess are produced alongside persisting food insecurity, even hunger?

Third, the findings of this study broaden perceptions of food charity by taking into account not only poverty and social policy, but also affluence and consumer culture. Lorenz (2015) uses food charity as an illustration of a shift in contemporary society from necessity to affluence and from meeting needs to having choices. Contemporary society is a consumer society, where social inclusion is attained by consumer practices and identities are constructed and maintained by participating in consumer culture (Bauman, 1998; Featherstone, 1990; Sassatelli, 2001). The food charity recipients rarely have a choice of whether or not to make use of the assistance. The lack of choice separates food charity recipients from the secondary consumption of those who voluntarily rely on market excess and are conscious and aware of the paradox of their dependence on the lifestyle of others (Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2015). Food charity would provide an interesting reference point for studies to compare, for example, voluntary and involuntary forms of secondary consumption, ethical consumption, and anti-consumption.

Fourth, the normativity of choice is prominent not only with regard to food or material consumption, but also when it comes to religion. In an affluent society, the dividing line of social exclusion is drawn between those who have the ability to choose and those who cannot choose (Lorenz, 2015), and this has implications for religion. This study invites research on religion to take better into account consumer culture as a characteristic feature of contemporary life that has both a constraining and liberating potential. Innovative new insights could be gained from this perspective. For instance, Harvey (2015:32) suggests that “[p]erhaps religion (as a locus of scholarly attention) ought to be defined not as believing but as eating”. Thus construed, what is religion in contemporary consumer culture? And what is it for those who cannot choose, but who eat what is left by others?

Finally, even though this study has approached food charity from the viewpoint of the recipients, the findings point out the relevance of the food providers as organizers of the assistance. It is important to note not just who helps and who ought to help, but also the ways of helping. In order to understand what happens in a social setting, it is crucial to understand how the occasion is conceptualized, planned, and represented by those in charge of the event. The findings of this study encourage the future analyses of food charity to take into account the spatial and temporal organization of the everyday assistance practices and the essential role that food assistance providers have as designers of these venues. In this way, the research can critically address the efficacy of the charitable assistance system. More scrutiny is needed of how and under what conditions charitable assistance

meets the needs of its target groups and promotes societal change, and when it rather contributes to legitimizing social problems and institutionalizing inefficient solutions. These insights are of particular importance in the face of current economic and policy changes and renegotiations of welfare responsibilities. There is a need for critical studies of good deeds, accompanied with constructive analyses of how to do good in a better way.

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