Childhood and Society: Perspectives on neglect in out-of-home care, 1930s to the present

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Historically, inequalities between Finnish children have reflected their class and social division within society. (Harjula 2015; Turpeinen 1987; Waris 1973.) One of the areas where inequalities have been visible, is child welfare and out-of-home care. The theme of this panel is child welfare in Finland and recent research results concerning out-of-home care.

In recent years questions of past injustice have been discussed both in media and by historians. One of the hot topics in international discussions is inquiries concerning neglect and abuse of children in foster homes or institutional care. Inquiries and reports on the topic have been accomplished or are ongoing in several countries, e.g. the UK, Austria, Australia, Canada and the Nordic countries, including Finland.

The panel discusses on research of out-of-home care: its possibilities as well as restrictions to produce knowledge about child welfare. Participants of the panel are researchers of history, social work and ethnology. The papers of the panel move from post-war society to the present, with viewpoints of risks of neglect, structural violence and knowledge production, for example. A research concerning child welfare in the past has also meanings in the present, as can be seen in discussions on redress or compensation for those who have been abused in out-of-home care.

Participants of the panel:


**Post-doctoral researcher Kirsi-Maria Hytönen** (University of Jyväskylä): Structural violence in the memories of children living in foster care in Finland, 1937–1983

**Professor Tarja Pösö** (University of Tampere): Children in out-of-home care in present Finland: the mainstream, gaps and silences in knowledge-production

**Professor Pirjo Markkola** (University of Tampere) & **PhD student Johanna Koivisto** (University of Jyväskylä): Redress under construction – the case of Finland
In post-war Finland thousands of children were living in families in which they experienced occasional or sometimes more persistent lack of care, neglect and insecurity. Research has identified several sets of risk factors for parenting difficulties. First, tens of thousands of families lived in a stressful environment characterised by chronic and acute stressors. In urban areas parents had to cope with inadequate housing and homelessness (Malinen 2014), and in rural areas, especially in Lapland and North-East Finland, adult members of families, but also children, had to cope with the stresses and strains of farming, especially on the so-called “cold farms” (Laitinen (ed.) 1995). Secondly, at the family and household level, children living with a single parent (e.g. widowed or divorced) were at risk of experiencing parenting problems related to poverty and lack of social support (Hytönen et al. 2016, 44; Turpeinen 1987, 386). Third, at the level of individual characteristics of family members, many of the returning ex-servicemen displayed a diminished capacity to cope with the stresses of parenting, and showed a tendency for unpredictable and sometimes aggressive responses to stress. (Malinen 2016, Kivimäki 2010; cf. Ghate & Hazel 2002, 15)

In this paper I argue that although thousands of Finnish children were exposed to risks related to poor or even abusive parenting, usually a variety of protective factors helped children to maintain their well-being at a satisfactory level. In their daily lives children were able to find places and moments during which they could experience feelings of safety, warmth and relaxation. In the immediate post-war years children’s mobility increased, and even preschoolers (3-6 years of age), but especially school-aged children enjoyed opportunities to explore and visit places beyond their home environments. In the process they encountered social worlds and activities (playing with peers, going to school, visiting neighbours, spending time in natural surroundings and with animals), which afforded opportunities for receiving social support.

Post-doctoral researcher Kirsi-Maria Hytönen

Structural violence in the memories of children living in foster care in Finland, 1937–1983

Historically, the inequalities between Finnish children have reflected the class and social division within society. (Harjula 2015; Turpeinen 1987.) Children living with a single parent (divorced, widows/widowers, extramarital children etc.) have lived in a particular risk to face poverty, neglect and to end up in a foster care. (Hytönen et. al. 2016, 44; Turpeinen 1987, 386.)

Foster care (including children’s homes, foster families and reform schools) was a modern secure system developed for the best of children. However, the system could not always provide children the security and care to which they had rights. Unfortunately, foster care itself produced insecurity, harm and abuse to children’s life.

In this paper I present how children living in foster care settings have experienced their childhood. I analyze the relationship between structures of society and personal experiences concerning child welfare. The focus is on experiences of maltreatment and neglect. How does the social system of the state react to the inevitable risks of some children to face neglect? How is so called structural violence seen in the childhood memories of children living outside their own home?
I worked in the historical inquiry into child abuse and neglect in child protection institutions and foster homes. The project was set up by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and accomplished in 2014–2016. (See Hytönen et al. 2016.) During the project we conducted 299 life narrative interviews with persons who had lived outside their family and faced abuse and neglect. The paper is based on that material and basic research made in the project.

Tarja Pösö

**Children in out-of-home care in present Finland: the mainstream, gaps and silences in knowledge-production**

In present Western societies there is an interesting dilemma regarding children in out-of-home care: in those countries which are ranked highly in the UNICEF child well-being index the number of out-of-home placements is high. On the basis of this result, one could claim that placing children out of their homes for child protection reasons is typical for societies which best look after the well-being of their children and young people. Finland is one of the countries which rank high on both dimensions. The view in Finland, however, is that the number of out-of-home placements signals problematic social responses to the inequalities and social problems in society; it is therefore argued that a lower number of out-of-home placements should be the aim of present child welfare policy.

A knowledge-based understanding of child protection and its role and consequences on individual and social levels would be needed to address the above dilemma. This presentation looks at the present knowledge-production of child protection and out-of-home care in particular with two questions in mind: what and how do we know about present out-of-home care in Finland. The presentation looks at research, national statistics and policy documents and is also interested in what is missing. It argues that in the end we know very little about out-of-home care and when and how it is an issue of children’s well-being.

Pirjo Markkola (University of Tampere) & Johanna Koivisto (University of Jyväskylä)

**Redress under construction – the case of Finland**

The final report of the historical inquiry on child abuse and neglect in child protection institutions and foster homes in Finland, 1937–1983, was published in April 2016. The inquiry was initiated by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and University of Jyväskylä (Department of History and Ethnology) was contracted to carry out the inquiry. Altogether 299 oral, qualitative interviews were conducted; most experiences are from the 1950s to the 1970s.

In a press conference, the government was represented by MP Annika Saarikko who assured that the government takes the results of the inquiry seriously, but financial redress was not discussed. Instead, she focused on improvements in current child welfare practices.

The report was presented to the interviewees in a closed seminar. They expressed four major standpoints related to redress: 1) Apology ceremony is needed, 2) Financial redress is needed, 3) Improvements in child welfare policies are needed, and 4) peer support is needed. Moreover, an open workshop with social workers, child welfare agencies and scholars of social work discussed the report and commented on the idea of redress schemes.
In April 2016, the government was not prepared to discuss redress schemes. Therefore, Social Democratic MP Maria Guzenina presented a written question to the government asking whether the government will arrange an apology ceremony and consider financial compensations. For apology she referred to Sweden, for financial redress she mentioned the examples of Norway and Ireland. The government stated briefly that decisions are coming.

Presumably, some measures are expected in September-October. However, at the moment we do not have any confirmed information available. In October we will outline the Finnish redress policies, depending on the measures taken meanwhile. If nothing happens, we will discuss the topic on a theoretical level.