Families: difficult to speak about?

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Introduction

While conducting a study on Finnish reform schools, remarks concerning the concept of family in relation to the young residents left me feeling uneasy. Family, in that particular context, seemed to be an issue of silence, where young people found difficulty in finding the words to express their ideas. Alternatively, the concept of family was limited to mainly legal definitions used by the professionals.

Reform schools in Finland are state-run establishments for young people between the ages of 12 and 17. They have been geared to approach the psychosocial problems of young people from the point of view of the family (Salminen, 2001), in common with much social welfare practice. As the intention in this particular study was to describe and to try to understand the meanings of residential placement for young people, the notion of family became a more complicated issue than simply a description of a treatment approach. What does 'family' actually mean to young people in reform school?

It is a well known feature of social work literature that difficult family relationships may be treated as secrets which are not easily touched upon in professional encounters. In this paper, I would like to challenge this feature by examining the language used when the young residents spoke about their family during interviews carried out in two reform schools in 2001 and 2002 (Pösö, 2004). The young people used few words about family relations. The words that they did use, however, should be taken seriously in analysis, which I hope to demonstrate in this paper. In addition, I will present the descriptions of families found in the young people's case records. The data are used to argue that there is a need to find new words to speak about complicated, damaged or difficult family relations. This need is both conceptual and practical.

My approach is mainly empirical owing to the nature of the information. Underlying this, however, is a theoretical idea which argues that the words play their part in bringing an abstract idea into being, and that the lack of words may be a feature of excluding or silencing practices. There are some connections with social constructionism in this paper, as well as with critical family studies, in that the very idea of family should not to be taken for granted. We need words and definitions to bring a variety of family relations into being (Muncie & Sapsford, 1995; Morgan, 2002) and explore family relations from the points of view of different family actors, including children (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001).

Difficult families in social work

Social work has a long tradition of working with families, especially with children and their mothers. This is even more the case in modern times, as the main issues in residential care are no longer abandoned or orphaned children, but children from families with problems. Analysing the possible risks within family life has become a crucial task of child protection while at the same time the very concept of risk has become a more complicated issue (Parton, 1999). Schultz Jorgensen (1999) argues that there has been a strong tradition in social work to approach families with problems from the point of view of 'social inheritance.' In the Nordic countries, the claim has been made that families with social problems tend to be cross-generational: that problems are socially and culturally transmitted from one generation to another one. Another approach would suggest that social work with families should focus on family problems in terms of morality. In that approach, family problems may be due to a lack of moral standards, moral deviation or even 'evil' (Lournavaare, Varilo, Vuornos & Wahlbeck, 1998). The role of poor communication and confused family roles can also inform approaches to families and are highlighted in the social work literature (Sinkkonen & Killand, 2001). From the perspective of social policy, stratification and class differences have been mentioned as risk factors for the exclusion of families from mainstream family lives (Sauli, Bardyn & Salmi, 2002).

All these approaches share the aim of explaining family problems. They do not intend to ask what is meant by family in the context of social work and research (Forsberg, Kuronen, Pösö & Ritala-Koskonen, 1991). Yet it seems to me that this is particularly important in Nordic countries where the ideological underpinnings of social work and child protection focus more on families than on children (Pringle, 1998; Khoo, Hyvönen & Nygren, 2002).

The context of the study

The reform schools have a special position in Finnish welfare systems. With a history extending more than 100 years, Vehkalahti (2004) claims that while the state schools were the major instrument to regulate private family life in the 19th century, the reform schools were the other main instrument. They were even more powerful than the state education system because they had the power to intervene in private familial relations.

At present, the reform schools are the only child protection institutions maintained by the state in Finland and their role is very clearly defined as being to look after the most difficult children and young people. They are often promoted as being the most specialised form of treatment within the service structure for dealing with the psychosocial problems of children (Bardy, Salmi & Heino, 2001). There are roughly 200 children between the ages of 12 and

18 years old placed in these establishments. The period of placement can be of varying lengths between eighteen months to two years, and sometimes even up to four years. Three-quarters of the residents are boys.

In this study, the main aim was to try to understand what a reform school meant for the young people living there. Forty-two young residents took part in individual interviews and 15 group interviews were carried out between 2001 and 2002. Participation in the research interviews was on a voluntary basis – so far as one can talk about voluntary participation in a semi-closed institution (Honkatukia, Nyqvist & Pösö, 2004) – and the themes of the interviews were not meant to be intrusive. The residents were also asked to take photographs of the reform school to provide additional information about their views of the establishment. As a result, 588 photographs were taken. Additionally, the case records of 62 residents were analysed. The study looked at the reform schools as a state of being on the one hand, and as a phase of life, on the other, reporting individual experiences. A large amount of data were collected. For the purposes of this paper, I will look only at the notions of family relations.

Family talk: descriptions by young residents

Throughout the study, the eagerness of the young people to participate was welcome to me. The family issue was, in effect, the only issue which caused any obvious irritation among the young people. The only interview which was not completed was one where the boy interrupted the interview around the family theme by saying that he could not understand why such issues should be discussed at all. He challenged me about why I was asking if he knew why his mother visited the establishment or not (which I did not actually ask).

During the field work periods, I mentioned to the staff my surprise at how difficult the young people found it to speak about family issues. They did not seem to be surprised at all. They reported that family was a very sensitive and difficult issue for the children to discuss with them as well. Some staff reported that it might take a long time before the young person trusted the staff member sufficiently for family relationships to be introduced in the discussions. This sensitivity and vulnerability around family relations seemed to function as a barrier even in a professional residential relationship, which is otherwise characterised by a high degree of closeness.

When looking at the rare words used by the young people about family relations, family is given a variety of meanings. I will present the six different sets of meanings which became apparent when the young people were talking about families. The six themes which emerged are not about the actual families of the young people, but represent the underlying ideas about their families which became clear during their narration.

The 'of course' family

In some accounts, when talking about family, the young people mentioned mothers, sisters and fathers as self-evident family members. Very often they also added that these were the most important people in their world, of course. They also claimed that they were missing their mothers, fathers and sisters as the home is always a better place than an institution, of course. The 'of course' family is a culturally accepted construction about the structure and importance of one's family in one's life history.

The 'has to be explained' family

This refers to talk where the young people gave accounts about the particular members of their families. The family is not taken as a self-evident construction; instead its members and their relations have to be explained. The most complicated story included 16 family members. The girl wanted to make clear what the biological and emotional relationship of these various members were in relation to her. She also explained in some depth the generational aspects of her family. For example, one could have a sister who is as old as one's mother even if it makes the story very complicated. The description of half-brothers/sisters/fathers/mothers was common. It was also not uncommon for the young people to state that their mother was really a foster mother but her meaning to that young person was so important that they called her their mother. Some accounts included a statement about sisters being the most important family members. This suggested that family relations and problems do not have to be cross-generational, as young people used their own constructions of family to understand where they fitted within the structures.

The 'to be cared for' family

This refers to those descriptions where the young person in residential care expressed his or her concerns at how the parents (most often the mother) cope while the child is not there at home to look after them (or her). For example, one boy who was a master cook in his unit was concerned what would happen to his mother. He reported that his parents had periods of heavy drinking and that during those periods, she could not take care of herself. The boy was worried whether she would get anything to eat. In that account, the boy's role was unconventional as he was not the one to be cared for, but was the one who cared for his mother.

The 'to be protected from' family

This means that the children described their family relations as harmful or violent. In that context, life in a reform school meant escape and a shelter from violence. The violent family theme appeared on many occasions in the residential life of the young people. For example, some children wanted to stay or at least sleep behind locked doors to be sure that their violent father would not get there to harm him or her.

The 'to be rescued' family

On some occasions, the family was sometimes seen to be the object of the resident's protective activities. These stories were mainly told by the boys. In those accounts, there had been violent episodes at home and the child had to intervene in order to, for example, rescue the mother from the father's violence. There were children who said they had been as young as nine years old in a situation when trying to stop their father from hurting or even killing the mother.

The 'invisible' family

This refers to the family which paradoxically existed in residential life mainly through its invisibility. This theme did not emerge from the interviews, as did the previous five themes, but was to be found in the wider ethnographic data. Invisibility became a topic for example in the residents' attempts to contact the parents during their residential period, with no response. Parents sometimes did not answer phone calls or attend meetings which had been arranged by the institution. The 'invisible' family did not respond to the needs of the young people. This invisibility was heard in some life stories. For example one boy described how he had been drinking alcohol, and later taking pills and drugs since he was eight years old, and how his mother did not know anything about this. She did not pay enough attention to his behaviour or needs, even though they shared the same home. In residential care the boy, now 15, tells this story about the 'invisible' mother.

Objective families?

The analysis of the case records of the young people in the reform school did not yield any helpful unifying concepts to describe the family relations. The case records which can be so rich in many aspects, most often described the family in custodial terms. The names, addresses and phone numbers were to be found in the papers. This means that the very idea of family in the formal texts was primarily administrative and legal. It was impossible to construct a comprehensive picture of the family relations of young people in any other sense but administrative and legal. The case records varied vastly in relation to the information given about, for example, the living arrangements of the children before the residential placement. Therefore it was not possible to learn with whom the young people had shared their everyday lives. Who were the adults looking after them? Were there any siblings to share the life with? Was there anyone who was close to the young person? In other words, family as a set of emotional, caring or indeed abusive, relations was weak as a theme for the case records.

There were a few helpful aspects, however. Some care records included detailed accounts of the child's family relations, even having the important pets listed. Some included careful descriptions of the psychological and emotional relations as well as detailed information about the changes in family relations during the child's life course. There might be a reason to assume that some of the residential workers had become acquainted with the residents' family relations and that they knew the family relations in a wider sense than simply what they needed to know as their current custodians. The important point here, however, is that family relations are not easy to know: even the professionals tend to approach the issue in a narrow (administrative and legal) way, excluding other dimensions of family relations from the 'agenda of knowing.'

Challenges in finding a voice

The difficulties in putting the concept of family into words either by young residents or by staff writing the case records should challenge us to think of more words which might allow young people in care to find a clearer voice. One feels challenged to argue that the fact that we do not have easily available words to describe family relations in practice is very much a reflection of the general theoretical approaches to family life. Children's descriptions, and especially those which report cruel or neglectful relations, have not been heard very much in a theoretical sense. Children's accounts should play an equal part in research approaches.

Assuming that we need words to be able to handle family issues such as those mentioned by the children in the study, I am challenging researchers and practitioners to develop some new words. The words which I would like to see emerging for use should be such that:

- they would be sensitive to the variety of family relations and the variety of social and emotional positions that adults and children have in the family
- they would recognise the dilemmas of being dependent and independent in each family position
- they would recognise the emotional ties which might be contradictory by nature
- they would recognise change in the meaning of family relations because the meanings of *family* change over time. For children in residential care, there may be an even greater amount of change during childhood
- they would be free from moral stand points as they should be non-judgemental.

In the Finnish debate, Jokinen (1996) introduced the powerful concept of *tired mother* to mirror the common state of motherhood as experienced by women, and Granfelt (1998) introduced the term *broken motherhood* to describe the motherhood of homeless women whose children had been taken into care. Both of them touch some secret and silent parts of parenthood without being

judgemental. We would need more words of that type, so that both research and practice can explore family relations which do not fit into the concepts and words available so far. The young people in residential care and the adults working with them should be encouraged to develop this new vocabulary as they are the ones who best understand the situation of children in care.

Conclusion

These findings are not unique or new. My point is, however, that the kind of remarks made by children and young people in residential care should be taken seriously by the researchers and practitioners within family and childhood studies. These remarks belong to the present practices of family life. For the children and young people involved, these descriptions make an essential part of their life story and their self-understanding. How can you make sense of something you do not have any easy words for?

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