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Coping with Separation in Childhood - Finnish War Children's Recollections about Swedish Foster Families

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a study on the recollections of two Finnish siblings who were children during the Second World War; they were separated from their families and were transported to live with Swedish families. The data were collected in the form of open autobiographical interviews with these two participants. They offer an oral history that provides insight into a traumatic historical era of Finnish history. Special attention is paid to these siblings' individual experiences of multiple separations and living in a foreign country with a new family. The results indicate that the participants' childhood recollections differed from each other, despite their similar situations during childhood. This highlights the fact that during traumatic events, personal experiences need to be identified rather than stereotyped.

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1. Introduction

During World War Two (WWII), Finland experienced three separate wars. The Winter War with the Soviet Union lasted from late 1939 to early 1940. The Continuation War with the Soviet Union came after the Interim Peace and lasted from March 1940 to June 1941. According to the agreement with the Soviet Union, German troops were to be removed from Finland; this led to the Lapland War, which lasted from late 1944 to early 1945 (Kulju, 2013).

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When the Winter War started, a Swedish organization called *Centrala Finlandshjälpen* [the Finnish Help Society] started plans to transport Finnish children away from conditions of war to Sweden. This child transportation system expanded and soon negotiations started with Denmark and Norway (Kaven, 2010; Salminen, 2007). These transport activities aimed to provide proper living conditions and a safe environment for affected children. Children accepted in the programme were younger than 12 years of age, and mothers could escort any child younger than 3 years of age. Families could request that siblings be kept together and accommodated by the same family; however, this was not always possible (Salminen, 2007). Overall, during these periods of war, approximately 70 000 Finnish children were transported to different countries. This was one of the largest evacuations of children undertaken during the twentieth century. Most children, approximately 65 000, were evacuated to Sweden, approximately 4 000 children went to Denmark, and a few hundred went to Norway (Korppi-Tommola, 2008).

The extensive evacuation of Finnish children to Sweden involved well planned and organised transportation as well as large numbers of people, such as Finnish families, Swedish foster families, and volunteer workers. Several Finnish charity organisations started to accumulate materials and supplements, such as shoes and clothes. Other Nordic countries sympathised with Finland and played active roles during this endeavour (Korppi-Tommola, 2008). A Swedish, well organised association *Nationalinsamligen* (National collection), initiated the idea and played an important role in fundraising. Another Swedish fellowship, called *Centrala Finlandshjälpen* (Finnish Help Society), was in charge of transporting the Finnish children to Sweden (Kaven, 2010).

In the beginning, Finnish mothers were not eager to send their children abroad, but the marketing of the programme, such as its benefits to children, was so effective that mothers were increasingly using the opportunity to provide better living conditions for their children (Salminen, 2007). These refugee children were and still are called war children in Finland. They were transported by ships, planes, and trains. Upon arrival, the children had a health check. Healthy children were transported to foster families and treatment was given to children who were sick or otherwise suffering from poor health, such as malnutrition (Korppi-Tommola, 2008).

Part of these wartime experiences included several separation episodes for children participating in the transport programme. They were separated from their mothers, and often their fathers had already been sent to war duties on the frontlines. In the receiving countries, they might have been separated from their siblings and placed in different foster families. During their stay, which could last for several years, many children became attached to their foster parents and experienced a separation from these important new parents when they returned back to Finland. According to the previous research, these kinds of separation experiences can cause emotional and physical symptoms in children, such as slower biological growth as well as difficulties trusting people or developing relationships (Räsänen, 1988). The parent-child separation may also cause health-related problems, such as depressive symptoms and trauma in adulthood (Fonagy, Giergely, Jurist & Target, 2002; Pesonen et al., 2008), and it may require lifelong healing processes (Chethik, 2001; Edelman, 2007; Edelman, 2014). According to Murray (2002), children aged 6–8 frequently experienced sadness and grief related to their separation experiences during wartime.

War experiences and war trauma have far-reaching consequences (Kivimäki, 2013). Childhood experiences of WWII left deep traces and often needed to be shared for individuals to cope with the stress-derived trauma (Kuisma, 2011). Individual experiences, and the meanings that they were given affected former war children's life courses (Järvenpää, 2012). According to an extensive survey, the majority of war children survived the migration experience without major trauma. In 15% of the children, their wartime childhood affected the rest of their lives: they felt bitterness and anger (Santavirta & Santavirta, 2014). According to Junttila (2014), former war children carried negative themes from their childhood into adulthood such as fear and rootlessness. Their way of life was also associated with their childhood's family atmosphere and their period of immigration in a foreign country (Alastalo, 2005).

According to a previous study, wartime experiences shaped war children's attachment to relationships and how they dealt with differences and losses (Näre, Kirves & Siltala, 2007). It indicates that children were burdened by adults' needs and participated in work and even military action. The *sisu* (a Finnish word meaning persistence and courage) and 'copying alone' culture did not provide empathy or comfort, and most of the children had to carry their fears, feelings of loss, and sorrows alone. Many of them lost the ability to cry. During the war, the children became accustomed to handling sudden changes on their own and gained independence at a young age. Children's

separation from their parents during the war caused a wide range of mental side effects and repercussions (Lahti, 2014). Afterwards, it was considered by some to be a wide-ranging political mistake (Kaven, 2010).

In this paper, we investigate wartime separation experiences through the recollections of two elderly siblings who were transferred to Sweden as part of the transportation programme. Their oral history accounts provide insights into macro-level historical incidents; how these incidents were experienced by individuals; and how these experiences were recalled decades later (see Clary-Lemon, 2010; Portelli, 2004). This paper contributes to the growing body of literature related to wartime childhood experiences (e.g. Laqueur, 2001; Paksuniemi, 2014; Pesonen et al., 2007) and provides an eyewitness accounts and personal reviews of the historical incidents in Finland.

2. Method and Research Data

Wartime childhood recollections were studied using an oral history approach. Oral histories are memoirs and personal life reviews that are filtered through the present (Scott & Alwin, 1998). These kinds of personal experiences do not exist in historical archives or books; the oral history method provides a tool to acquire them (Charlton, 2006). Memories as research data provides information on individually constructed meanings related to historical events that cannot be found any other way (Yow, 2005). Subjectivity makes memory data unique and valuable.

In their autobiographical narratives, people tend to remember meaningful events (Yow, 2005). Not all memories are similar. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) have defined three areas of autobiographical knowledge bases: lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge. Lifetime periods are distinct periods of time with identifiable beginnings and endings, such as the period of being a war child. General events are more specific repeated events, such as going to school every day. Event-specific knowledge is typically characterised by vivid and detailed imagery; it can be constructed in the form of self-defining memories and used as integrative tools when individuals construct their autobiographical narratives. They are lessons about the self, important relationships, or life in general (Blagov & Singer, 2004).

In this study, data were generated through autobiographical interviews with two participants. Sara, born in 1934, was 79 years old during her interview, and her brother, Samuel, born in 1938, was 75 years old. During the time of their transport to Sweden, Sara was 10 years old and Samuel was 6 years old. These siblings were transported to the same Swedish town and accommodated by two different families. They stayed with their respective foster families for an equal period of time before returning back to their family in Finland. To protect their anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to tell their story about their experiences as war children. An open interview method with a generative question invited Sara and Samuel to talk about their individual experiences (see Riemann, 2006). Both were interviewed separately. Sara's interview lasted 1 hour and 5 minutes, and Samuel's interview lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes. Neither one felt that the questions were too sensitive. As Portelli (2004) notes, oral history accounts are often the first time a person tells a coherent narrative of his or her life. Thus, the autobiographical narratives of Sara and Samuel that were shared during their interviews had probably not been told in that form before. The interview situation provided a reason for them to construct these narratives. This kind of narrative approach provides freedom to the participants to tell their stories in a personal way and to stay with certain memories for a longer period of time as desired. It also allows them to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and provides the interviewer with possibilities for asking probing follow-up questions (Turner, 2010).

The interviews in Finnish were audio recorded and transcribed and selected extracts were translated into English by the authors. During the analysis, the interviews were divided into themes and then arranged into historical concepts. In the following results section, Sara's and Samuel's stories are reported in chronological order: transportation to Sweden, living with their Swedish families, and returning home.

3. Results

3.1. *Transportation to the foster homes*

Sara and Samuel lived in the countryside of Finnish Lapland approximately 45 kilometres from a larger town called Rovaniemi. In September 1944, they were evacuated to a refugee camp in northern Sweden with their mother and younger sister. One day in November 1944, an unfamiliar person arrived at the camp and asked their mother to send her children to Swedish families in Järvsjö, a city in southern Sweden. Sara stated

Our mother did not want to send our youngest sister because she was only five years old.

The two older siblings, Sara and Samuel, started their journey to their new homes. Their mother's decision was based on the harsh living conditions at the refugee camp that persisted despite attempts at organising the camp as best as possible. The other reason was that, for many years, refugees experienced a lack of food and other necessities caused by a wartime rationing of food supplies and clothes, which was worsened by existing depletions after refugees' long journeys from their homes. In addition, 516 Finns died during the evacuation period, including approximately 180 children. In general, the idea behind of transporting Finnish children to live with Swedish families was to keep them safe and to offer them better living conditions (Paksuniemi, 2014). Sara and Samuel's mother was among thousands of mothers who ended up accepting this opportunity for their children.

Sara and Samuel packed one bag each and left for the railway station where their journey continued by train. They could only have one bag with their name tag on it and a list of belongings. Sara and Samuel were among 2 833 other war children from Finland's Lapland (Salminen, 2007). The children each had a tag around their neck with their name, home address, and the address of their Swedish foster families. The larger group of children had a few adults travelling with them. Children also had the names and addresses of their Finnish mother and father in an envelope with them. When they arrived at their foster homes, they were supposed to send a letter back to Finland so that their parents would know that they had completed the trip safely (Korppi-Tommola, 2008; Salminen, 2007). Sara and Samuel's letter was sent to their mother at the refugee camp.

For Samuel, the separation from his mother was a shock. He described it as follows:

I cried [during] the whole train trip, [and] my sister tried to comfort me. We were so tired! People passing by were so friendly to us: they gave us fruits and candy!

Sara also remembered that the other passengers were friendly to them. She told us the following:

When we arrived . . . [at] the destination we had so many treats with us [that were] given [to us] by the other passengers.

She remembered how she tried to take care of her little brother:

My brother was crying during the whole trip . . . I had to act like a big sister and couldn't cry. I needed to comfort my brother.

In Sara's and Samuel's stories, the journey was a physical representation of the separation experience. They were both scared and felt anxiety because of being transported to an unknown location. They did not know where they were going or what kind of family would be waiting for them (see Alastalo, 2013). The journey was a divider between what was familiar and safe and what was unknown and scary. These kinds of strong dividing memories have also been previously identified in stories of migrants starting school in a new country (Turunen & Perry, 2013).

The mother and father of the foster families were waiting at the Järvsjö railway station to pick up Sara and Samuel. Again, Sara tried to act like a big sister and stay calm to reassure her little brother. She also made an effort to explain to the adults that Samuel was scared and upset and did not want to go with the strangers:

I explained that [it was ok to] go ahead . . . That we . . . [were] going to live with these people for some time. I remember that he just cried and looked back at me when he was leaving the train station with his new family.

Sara and Samuel experienced a separation from each other in addition to a separation from their mother. Their foster families visited each other only four times during their stay. Even though Sara and Samuel were separated, they felt lucky to have each other nearby. In a scary situation the siblings' relationship offered something to lean on.

3.2. Living in a Swedish foster family

Both foster families were wealthy. According to previous studies (e.g. Kavén, 2010; Salminen, 2007) it was common for war children to be accommodated by upper and middleclass families to provide them with the best possible living conditions. The contrast between living conditions in Finland, which had been at war for several years in war, and Sweden was huge: the children were dressed in beautiful clothes and there was a lot of food available.

Sara moved in with a family with three children of their own. The family owned a large clothing store with several compartments and many employees. Samuel's family owned a gold shop where the father worked daily the mother was a housewife. They had two children of their own. Adaptation to the new family took a while. Samuel recalled

I cried . . . [with] sorrow and missed my mother in Finland. Therefore, I relied on my new Swedish mother. I wanted to be close to her whenever possible.

Children who are under eight years of age seem to feel homesickness more strongly than older children (Murray, 2002). Sara was ten years old and did not feel as homesick as her brother, who was only six.

Neither Sara nor Samuel could speak Swedish when they moved in with the Swedish families. Samuel pointed out that it was a big problem at the beginning. He explained

I didn't understand where to go . . . , when [it] was the meal time . . . , [or the] other activities that we did together as a family. So I tried to look at the children of the family and I did the same [things that they did].

On many occasions, such as when the family's mother needed to leave home to do errands or when translating a letter from Finland, the family used an interpreter. Samuel learned Swedish eventually, but he was bullied at school before that. Swedish was so crucial for Samuel that after a while he forgot the Finnish language. Eriksson-Stjernberg (1996) explained that some war children forgot their mother tongue because it was the language of the mother who abandoned them. However, in this study, the age of the child seems to be the correct explanation rather than any feelings of neglect.

Contrary to her brother, Sara learned Swedish fairly easily. She was older than Samuel and did not forget the Finnish language. Even though Kuusisto-Arponen (2011) points out that moving to a different linguistic environment causes problems, Sara did not remember any negative feelings. According to Smeds (2002), friends are a significant factor for children learning a foreign language. From the beginning, Sara played with Swedish children, and this may explain why she learned Swedish so easily. Conversely, Samuel felt insecure at first and it took some time for him to start to play with the other children.

Sara and Samuel's family sent them letters and cards from Finland. Sara could respond to them, but Samuel, who did not know how to write yet, asked someone to write for him. Mail from Finland played a significant role in their lives. They both had kept the letters throughout their lives and still had them during the time of the interviews. The letters were cheerful; their mother, aunts, and uncles wrote to them with the intention of encouraging them.

Registration to a local school was the foster family's duty. Some organisations like *Centrala Finlandshjälpen* aimed to provide Finnish teaching in larger locations where the number of Finnish war children was high, such as the capital city of Stockholm (Salminen, 2007). In Järvsjö, this was not possible. Instead, the Sara and Samuel went to two separated local schools where teaching was in Swedish. They both enjoyed the school. They felt that it brought structure to their lives. At first, the language barrier was a problem, but when they learned Swedish they did better at school. Sara and Samuel shared this experience with other war children (see Smeds, 2000).

Samuel recalled

My Swedish sister and brother were at the same school and they helped me during the breaks. And there was a Swedish girl in my class who started to help me, and I even played with her with my sister and brother during the evenings.

Sara was a 'teacher's little helper' and had small duties. For example, the teacher noticed that she was really good at mathematics and let her check other children's notebooks.

Their friends were mostly local children, but at Sara's school there were some other Finnish war children. Samuel did not have any Finnish children at his school, so he did not stay in contact with the Finnish language. This might

partly explain the fact that he totally forgot the Finnish language. Learning the language was an important part of the process of ‘fitting in’ to their new environment (Turunen & Perry, 2013). For Samuel especially, it also meant a deepening chasm from his connections with his mother.

Even though school was fun, the families were friendly, and the living standards were high, Sara wanted to return to Finland as soon as possible. She said

I wanted to [go] back to Finland all the time! Even . . . [though] I had fancy clothes, a nice family in Sweden, friends, and liked school I missed home and [my] mother so much.

As previously noted, Samuel’s experiences were different. Gradually, he forgot his Finnish language and his family. He wanted to continue his life in Sweden. He explained

Since I got used to living with my new family, learnt the Swedish language, and forgot all about Finland, I wanted to continue my life there. It was a huge shock for me that I had to leave my Swedish family; they were the only family I remembered.

In one of her letters to Finland, Sara told her mother that Samuel used to live in Sweden. She wrote to her family after a visit to Samuels’s house:

Everything is all right with Samuel! He seemed to enjoy himself.

One explanation for the different experiences of these two children is their age. Sara, who was older, remembered her family in Finland, while Samuel had forgotten them (see Murray, 2002). The other explanation relates to the language issue (see Kavén, 2010; Kuusisto-Arponen, 2011). Samuel had forgotten his mother tongue and could not read the letters from Finland nor write back to them—he was drifting further away from the things were related to his home.

3.3. *Returning to Finland*

The Lapland War ended in 1945 and war children started being transported back to Finland. Because there were many children, the process took time. After living over two years with their Swedish families, Sara and Samuel received permission to return back to Finland in December, 1946. Going back was a shock for Samuel, and sending him to Finland was a hard decision for his Swedish mother. She could not even take Samuel to the railway station, because it was too difficult. Instead, she had her sister bring him. Samuel told about arriving to Finland

My Finnish mother and uncle were waiting at the railway station. I didn’t recognise them, and of course I didn’t want to go with those strangers. I didn’t understand any Finnish, so it was really difficult for us all.

Sara tried to explain to Samuel that it was their mother and uncle. The family’s home in Finland had been destroyed, so they had to live in a small barrack with other people until their home was rebuilt. The children’s living conditions changed radically. Samuel recalled the following:

There were four families living in one room with a kitchen there were about 12 to 14 people in a small space.

Another challenge for him was that he neither understood nor spoke any Finnish and could communicate only with Sara. Gradually, Samuel learned Finnish again. Sara also had difficulties adapting to life in Finland, but her Finnish communication skills made her readjustment easier as compared to her brother. She explained

Normal living in Finland was odd, but when I got back to my mother it was so wonderful!

The children and their family were encouraged to keep in touch with their Swedish families, and so they did. Sara and Samuel both continued communicating with their Swedish families until adulthood. They also visited their foster families many times later on. This shows that the connection was deep, and living with the foster families had been a significant period in their lives.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have pointed out several aspects of recalled separation experiences in childhood. As Finnish war children, Sara and Samuel experienced two separations. First, they were first separated from their family in Finland. Then, after settling into Sweden, they were separated from their Swedish families and sent back to Finland. Additionally, they were separated from each other in Sweden, even though they kept in touch and were allowed to see each other.

Samuel, who was younger, found it difficult to be separated from his Finnish family and later wanted to stay with his Swedish family. Samuel forgot his mother and relatives in Finland, but Sara remembered them during their stay. She was eager to return to Finland and her mother. This indicates that the effect of childhood separation can be stronger if a child is fairly young. Sara had and could keep her memories about her home and mother. She was also able to communicate with her Finnish family during her stay in Sweden. Conversely, Samuel could not read or write because of his young age and therefore was not able to read the letters from home or to write back. This resonates with previous findings that younger children felt separation more strongly than older children. This was pointed out in several studies, such as by Kuusisto-Arponen (2011) and Murray (2002). Language is one way that people construct their reality and understand the world (Czarniawska, 2004; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2004). This may be one reason why younger children might be less capable of sustaining their memories about their families. As Bluck and Habermas (2001) have indicated, the capacity for autobiographical remembering and organising autobiographical information emerges at the age of 5 or 6.

Both Sara and Samuel felt that language barriers were an issue at the beginning, but after a while they both learned Swedish and could communicate. Sara was also able to communicate in Finnish with other war children and with her Finnish family. Samuel had no connections with the Finnish language and therefore he forgot it. He had a difficult time returning back to Finland. Similarly, previous studies indicated that language barriers add another burden to the separation process. Some children, like Samuel, were bullied because of it (Kavén, 2010; Paksuniemi, 2014; Salminen, 2007; Smeds, 2002).

Even though the movement of Finnish children to other countries during wartime has been criticised (see e.g. Kavén, 2010; Salminen, 2007), this article points out that these two former war children's experiences enriched their lives in many ways. Additionally, they managed to keep their connections with their Swedish families throughout their lives. Living in Sweden was challenging, but it became a remarkable time for them. Close connections with their foster parents helped them to cope with their separation from their own family. This study also clarifies that, with war children, their age seems to correlate with their sorrow and agony. The younger the child was, the stronger they experienced the separation (Pesonen et al., 2008). On the one hand, this eased the process of connecting with their foster family, but on the other hand, it facilitated the process of forgetting their Finnish family.

According to the results of this study, it is evident that even in very similar circumstances individual experiences can vary significantly. As Jensen and Shaw (1993) have indicated, children's cognitive immaturity, plasticity, and innate adaptive capacities may mitigate the war effects in low-to-moderately intense wartime settings. It can result in self-protective, adaptive, cognitive styles that allow for effective functioning after acclimatisation. These two stories of former war children are among 70 000 others. Previous studies have showed that not all experiences have been this positive (see Kavén, 2010). Sara's and Samuel's stories prove that wartime experiences have been significant in their lives and include some self-defining memories that have lasted throughout decades (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Turunen, 2012).

Despite the fact that this study concentrates on historical childhood memories, the findings can be used when planning and executing child refugee policies in the present. Even today, there are wars happening in several countries and millions of children have to leave their home countries to start their journeys as refugees. For example, in 2011, there were approximately 17 000 unaccompanied refugee children globally (UNHCR, 2012). Informed by this study, recommendations can be made that children should be precisely informed about where they are going to be transported and what kind of circumstances they will encounter—ignorance seems to increase their agony. It is also important that children have the ability to maintain their connection with their mother tongue. For Sara and Samuel, it was a relief that they knew each other and could rely on each other. Significantly, they were also able to share their experiences later on and reminisce about their time in Sweden.

These results promote an understanding that even if refugee children are provided good and safe living conditions in the receiving country, feelings of missing their homes and parents can be strong. The younger the children are, the more likely they are to adjust to the new country, but leaving again can be more difficult. Even today, the transportation of refugee children is being organised; therefore, it is a topic that needs to be studied globally and from different perspectives. This article provides a retrospective view of this field of research. In its own way, it helps to promote the well-being of refugee children today.

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