



UNIVERSITY  
OF TAMPERE

# The very first months in care

Tarja Pösö

School of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
University of Tampere, Finland



## Background: the 'black box of care'

- We know a bit about
  - how decisions are made about taking children into care
  - how the placements are matched with the needs, interests and rights of children
  - and about the challenges of leaving care
- But we have very little research about children entering care
  - Going into care means going into somebody's 'home' and learning to leave there



## Existing conceptualisations

- Research: steps of adaptation (steps of crisis)
- Practice:” learning to know”



## The research project

- Child welfare care orders as interventions – a process view from the inside, 2013-2015
  - The view from inside:
    - Institutional: social workers and substitute carers
    - Lived experience: children in care
  - Process
    - Time in care during the first year after the care order started



# Research design to unfold ‘time in care’

1. Social workers’ knowledge about children who were taken into care
  - all children who were taken into care over a certain period of time (6/8 months) in 2013 in two Finnish municipalities: 37 children
  - Data collection (survey) at two points: 6 months and 12 months after the children entered care
  - Participatory research: workshops between the researchers and social workers (13)



## ... design

### 2. Children's lived experiences of care

- Interviews at two points: 6 months and 12 months after the children entered care
- Children were asked to choose either the researcher (8) or the social worker (9) as the interviewer
- The majority are over the age of 12

### 3. 'Substitute carers' – 16 interviews

- 9 foster carers, 7 staff members from residential institutions



## Children in our research when six months had passed since the care order

### Age:

- 0-6 years: 3
- 7-12 years: 12
- 13-17 years: 17
- Over 17 years: 5

### Gender:

- Girls: 16
- Boys: 21

### Care order decision:

- 25 voluntary care orders
- 12 involuntary care orders

### Forms of substitute care:

- Foster care:7
- Residential care:16
- Professional family homes:6
- Own home: 3
- Other: 3

### Out-of-home placements before:

- None: 3
- 1-2: 16
- 3-4: 12
- 5-6: 6



## **Time as an interpretative practice**

- Instead of measuring time, we look at the interpretative nature of time: how do different parties recognise and address time when they describe the first months in care?



## **Children's time during the very first months in care**

- A Scheduled life
- B The present is interwoven with the past
- C The future is in the present



# Children's lived experience

## A. Scheduled life

- “What is an ordinary week here like, what does it involve?”
- I'll go through it day by day. On Monday, I go to school and after school I coach aesthetic group gymnastics, I have training with them on Mondays from four to six, so that yesterday I went there straight from school. On Tuesdays, I'm in school, then there's cleaning our own rooms, then other stuff. On Wednesdays, there's school as well and then cleaning the communal areas, so that it always varies what we do then, so there's Hoovering, mopping the floors, and so on. Oh, and on Wednesdays I have training as well, and on Thursdays I have school and training, and on Fridays there's school and then usually in the evening I hang out with my friends. So quite often I'm in town all evening, so that I leave school, I come here, and then I leave, I don't know, maybe around four, to go into town, and then come back. At best I can stay out till midnight.” (Girl 17 years/2)



## Scheduled life

- Girl: Everything's so like, you have to do everything at the same time every day. You're just stuck here and you aren't allowed to do anything. So you just sit around here.
- (Girl, 15 years)



## **B The present is interwoven with the past**

- Boy: I've got to say that I wouldn't necessarily be even on Earth anymore if I'd kept on going down that road. That I wouldn't necessarily have stayed alive much longer anymore if I'd stayed there. It was so close then that it's totally certain that I wouldn't be here anymore if it was up to that.
- Interviewer: You think that life would be totally... totally different from what it is now?
- Boy: Yeah, I would've croaked at that point if I'd stayed there, so..
  - (Boy 13)



## **The present is interwoven with the past also**

- by having the previous customs and relations in the present

“ I can’t go to bed if I haven’t spoken with my parents. And I (have to) (-) just say, or wish them good night. And then I’ve also had a habit since I was little to always tell my parents that I love them before I go to bed. If I don’t say that, I can’t sleep at night.” (Girl 14 years)



## **C The future is in the present**

Concerns about what will happen in the future

“I don’t have any other worries apart from whether I get to go home again. Nothing else”

(Girl 14 years)

Concerns about the label or stigma which being in care brings with it

“- I’ve got a feeling that I’ll stay in a children’s home for the rest of my life. That’s the sort of feeling I have.

- The rest of your life?

- Even if I didn’t stay here for the rest of my life, I feel like I’ll be in a children’s home for the rest of my life.”

(Boy 16 years)



## **In sum: Time as a lived experienced**

- Time is a complex mixture of present, past and future for children
- ‘Time in care’ does not necessarily start from the moment of the care order
  - Previous placements
  - Other previous experiences
- Children’s temporal agency is an important finding



## Professional time

### Social workers' point of view

- Professional ambitions to learn to know the child are hindered by the organisational arrangements
  - The very first months in care is a transition period of tasks between different child welfare teams
  - 'Organizational silence'?
- Respectful distance to the child and his/her time in the new (substitute home)
  - Giving the child the opportunity to learn to know the new place and its people, to adapt and to attach



## **A comment by a social worker**

”””It feels bad that one has to answer that one does not know the child. In this situation, when the client has not been transferred yet, it is evidently normal.”



## **Substitute carers: plans and surprises**

- Navigations whether they should provide a ‘home’ or ‘service’ for this particular child
- Learning to know ‘the personal child’ and the service conditions
  - Balancing between the formal and informal requirements



## Conclusions

- For children, the first months in care reflect a juncture of the present, past and future – attention to children’s temporal agency
- For practitioners, the first months in care make a distinctive transition period
  - Professional and organisational interests clash
- For substitute carers, the first months mean to learn to know a stranger who has a formal and informal position
- As sum: it is an extraordinary period of extraordinary childhood



## Reference

- Pösö, Tarja, Helavirta, Susanna & Laakso, Riitta (2015) Time in care: the first months in care. Families, Relationships and Societies.
  - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14501122985334>