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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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Keywords: WWII, separation, family crisis, oral history, child transportation, psychological symptoms, childhood experiences

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