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Not knowing as a consequence of early separation

An interview study with Finnish war children who did not return to Finland after the Second World War

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Today I will discuss the results of a qualitative study based on interviews with Finnish war children who were evacuated to Sweden during World War II and who did not return to Finland after the war. In this presentation I will focus on the consequences of not knowing about one's early life and of losing one's mother tongue.

Sverre Varvin (2014) has pointed out: To be in exile is to be rootless, to lose something and to flee, to come to a situation where nothing fits together. The basic notions that the exiled person has had for sorting his/her impressions in order to create continuity in his/her existence have disappeared. Losing one's sense of belonging in one's environment and culture is to lose the basis for one's entire existence.

During wartime, 1939–1944, Finnish children were evacuated to Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Of the 70 000 to 80 000 Finnish children who were evacuated abroad, mainly to Sweden, approximately one-third were between two to five years of age at the time of their departure. The transports were carried out for the most part by boat or train and the journey could take between two to six days. The groups were large, around 600 children per transport. There was usually one attendant per 30 children (Kaven 2010). Upon arrival the children were required to spend a certain period of time in quarantine. After the war, 5000 to 7000 of these children did not return to Finland permanently.

In Finland there was a long period of time during which no one talked about the fate of the war children or about other groups in society and that suffered from the war, such as war veterans, war invalids, and fatherless children and so on. Perhaps it is for this reason that there has been very little research on war children, until recent years. The studies that have come to the fore recently are survey studies and register studies on those who returned to Finland. Findings show that they as adults have a tendency to suffer psychiatric disorders, especially depression (Pesonen et.al.2007, Santarvirta et. al. 2015). To my knowledge there are no studies apart from ours with a psychodynamic approach.

So, again, my subject here concerns the Finnish war children who remained in Sweden after the war and who were interviewed by my colleague Sinikka Maliniemi and me in 2007. I am going to give a summary of our results. A question today is whether we can see any trace of the child's earlier life. A Finnish mother has of course been present, even though she does not directly step forth in the war children's narratives. We may not be able to see what the early childhood meant for the individual child but we do know that a disruption occurred and we can

see the defence. The Finnish mother can be seen as a foundation that the interviewees did not talk about explicitly.

Bollas says, “Our internal world is transformed by the mother’s unconscious desire into a primary theme of being with her that will affect all future ways of being with the other (Bollas, 1987, p.3).

This is the shadow of the object as it falls on the ego, leaving some trace of its existence in the adult.” (Bollas 1987, p. 35).

On the other hand Laub & Auerhahn assert that “a trauma can break up family relationships by undoing basic trust and creating barriers against intimacy... trauma disrupts the link between the self and the empathic other.” (Laub & Auerhahn, 1993 p. 283).

Kaplan in turn speaks of generational destruction when family ties are broken (Kaplan, 2009).

Background for the research

Members of the Stockholm branch of the Finnish War Child Association participated in a questionnaire survey about their war child experiences. From those who expressed an interest in participating in our interview study, we selected ten people who were relatively young when they were evacuated. When the evacuation took place, nine of the interviewees were between two to five years of age and one was seven years old. Only the oldest child had clear memories from her Finnish home.

We asked the war children to tell us about their lives. The interviews took an average of two hours. They were taped and transcribed with great care.

When we started planning our research, we thought of course that the youngest children would be the most affected by their displacement. We had decided on Grounded Theory (Glaser 1992, 1994) as our research method – and thus we had no readymade hypotheses. All our results have surprised us even though we, as psychologists, obviously anticipated that the war children would be marked by their separation experience. We also listened to our countertransference feelings, which became an important source for our understanding.

Common features in the interviews

The interviewees’ narratives were often fragmented, showing disrupted thinking. Memory lapses could be observed and they had various somatic reactions such as recurrent coughing and throat-clearing, stuttering, crying or laughing. They spoke of feelings of emptiness, rootlessness and black holes. Sometimes it seemed that the interviewee was not making a distinction between the present and the past. The use of the present tense would indicate that no time had passed and that no changes had been made.

Various early defences such as projection and denial as well as expressions of shame and degradation also occurred. What we noticed first and foremost was the manner in which the interviewees presented their narratives.

Here we picked up signs that indicated traumatization.

The interviewees might switch to the present tense in the middle of telling something from the past and their narrative was chaotic. We see this as one of the principal trauma indicators in our materia. It was traumatic reactions in the present.

The interviewees did not express feelings of disappointment or come with accusations toward their Finnish parents whereas they might well express feeling betrayed by their native land. Another thing they did not express, what was missing entirely, were thoughts about the significance of their Finnish mother and father. To be sure, the father had been a more distant person since he had been away from home, at the front. The fathers encountered after the war were changed; they were injured by the war in various ways. A common reason that some of the children remained in Sweden was the divorce of their parents.

The move to Sweden was common to all of them but most of them remembered nothing at all from the evacuation itself or the quarantine that followed. We see the absence of a containing adult during this process as a contributing factor to our finding that many had difficulties in thinking about or reflecting on the significance of this crucial event in their lives.

Who is speaking?

A distinguishing feature of our interviewees was that all of them as adults had done well in life and had stable relationships. However, it is tempting to speak of a kind of "normopathy" (Bollas, 1987) since their emotional life as adults was cut off from childhood experiences and they often described their adult life as problem-free. Their narratives included few descriptions of their partners or their own children.

They did not have an emotional connection to their early experiences and the problematic feelings that belonged to them. They had different ways of trying to overcome their insecurity. In effect, all of the interviewees had different "selves" that came forward: the traumatized child and then the adult, the normal, so to speak.

In our material many different voices were heard. Most strikingly, there was a clear difference between the voices in the narratives of childhood versus those of adult life.

It is conceivable that the early emerging experience of a self that had been developed in Finland was difficult to maintain when the child came to a new environment, to a new language and to people who did not know the child from previously. The child's experience of him/herself changed from what had been taken for granted and as a matter of course in the Finnish environment to an existence without roots in the past. Since they all changed language from Finnish to Swedish, the language is also intimately tied to the change.

1. Not to have control

Kirsti had her fourth birthday when she came to Sweden. She had a very good memory and a good power of observation and provided us with details about her life. In contrast to many of the other interviewees, she also had some vivid memory images from her Finnish home. After reading her narrative several times, however, we could

see upon closer examination that she sometimes gave a vivid description of different events in her childhood that she could not possibly have known about when she was a child.

Kirsti tended to disregard the interviewer's comments and presented herself as the one who knew while the interviewer was constantly wrong. This led the interviewer to be cautious.

Kirsti, however, did not remember how it was when she was separated from her Finnish mother. From the crossing to Sweden she remembered the fabric in a little girl's skirt and from the quarantine, she remembered nothing but the step stones in the house where she had been. Beyond these isolated and empty memory images there are the things that were impossible to think about, fragments, as an autistic response to the unbearable. But when she described how it was when her Swedish foster mother came to fetch her from quarantine, she said: "I felt enormously secure, there was a person who after all those weeks took care of me and that's why I talk about my second birth when I'm sitting there in a blanket coming home to Sweden."

She suffered throughout her entire childhood from severe compulsive actions where her fear was that her Swedish foster mother or she herself was going to die. We think we see traces of an unprocessed trauma: the fear that something will happen that in effect has already happened. She is one of the few interviewees who spoke about psychic symptoms. Kirsti was very aware of her fear and pain, but she placed them in the present.

Why was it so important for her to be the one who knew? Was it an attempt to gain control over her helplessness? We believe that in Kirsti we have been able to see reflections of a foundation that was invisible in itself: in her psychic symptoms we seem to see echoes of her experiences in relation to her Finnish mother. In her strong will to be the one who knows, we can see a reaction to how it is to be confused, insecure and vulnerable.

2. Not knowing

One can create illusions about knowing, or one can, as most of those in our material did, make oneself totally uninterested in one's earlier life and its significance.

The interviewees did not think or fantasize about what their experiences during the evacuation could have meant for them, and this formed a void in their life story that each of them compensated for in his or her own way. The lack of interest in those early experiences formed an obstacle toward reflection and mourning in later life.

Bion (1962b) emphasizes: In order for thinking to be developed, a person must be aware of his or her losses, helped by a containing capacity in the object. If the object remains good despite being absent, it is possible for the child to think his or her thoughts and thereby also to mourn, that is to say, something that most of our interviewees were not capable of doing.

The war children had lost a vital part of themselves when they changed country and language. In Sweden, there was no one present to whom they could direct their disappointment or anger. The foster parents did not know the

child who came to live with them. They spoke to the child in a new way, in a new language and with a new tone. What had been previously taken for granted could not get any resonance in the new home.

Language

What we believe were the most important indicators for the war children's early experiences were not so much what they said but how they said it. When they talked about the evacuation, it was often a lonely speech. At the beginning of the interview, they often referred to information that they had acquired later in life about their evacuation.

So far we have seen how a past that is in itself invisible is reflected in false security, psychic symptoms and a pronounced lack of interest in the significance of the past. These symptoms can also be seen in the structure and syntax of the language. When the interviewees talked about the evacuation, their language was often chaotic and their language structure collapsed. The trauma was there in the grammar: changing the tense to the present tense, dangling modifiers, unexpected adjectives, unfinished sentences, all of which gave a picture of confusion— just as it must have been for the child. The language conveyed the chaotic, that which could not be remembered but was present nonetheless.

If something in the child's development fails at the time of language learning, says Bollas, words can become meaningless expressions for the child's inner life. They may feel unusable or even dangerous (Bollas, 1987).

The original Finnish language and its emotional anchors were gone. And yet there was something essential present in the interviewees' narratives, something catastrophic that words could not express but that thus made itself manifest in the broken language.

The Example of Ossi

Degradation and Compensation

I will now go over to present an example in a little more detail. This is the beginning of Ossi's interview. Ossi's fate was special in the sense that he as an 8-9-year-old was moved against his will to live with his Finnish mother, who got married in Sweden. At that point he had spent over five years with his foster parents, with the ones who remained his real parents in his eyes.

I: Tell me about your life

IP: Yes, right, I was born in Kuopio and at the height of the war, you can say, to an unmarried mother, yeah, and while bombs were falling I was taken by *Päijänne Railroad to Haparanda, Torneå* and then we continued on to *a delousing camp* and there, by and by, I was placed in a foster family.

I: You were three years old then, is that right?

IP: I was three and a half years old at the time.

IP: And I have a, a first memory of when *I* came along on a kick-sled, and then rode down toward the house, I was sitting on the sled, and who was doing, the whoever was doing the kicking, I mean doing the steering, I don't know, but down there at, down at the bottom of the hill, well, there was this little cabin there, and when we came closer so – so then it was opened and there I remember my little foster brother in his woollen leggings crawling about in the opening of the door there on the floor.

I: But do you mean that this was the first time you went there?

IP: Yes, and it is yeah (*clears his throat*) that cabin that I have, in a precious painting that I got as a gift and a memento after my foster parents when – when, well, my foster father had died, he died last of, last of my foster parents. And it (*cough and throat-clearing*) was so that, you know, I heard people talking at the time about how, I mean – *how this family thought I was a fun and nice little kid*, who was an early starter, who started *to teach* my foster brother some words, a little bit of Finnish, and we had lots in common after some time.

I: How old was he?

IP: He *is* one and a half year younger than me. He, he died in December last year. And, *so now all three of them are buried* outside, yeah, that old cemetery there...

IP: And there was also one of those camps, where we got *scrubbed clean and deloused the way they always did* and, and by and by, we were placed in different foster homes and I came to this particular foster home.

I: Do you remember anything more from the delousing?

IP: From?

I: The delousing.

IP: No, I don't remember anything, absolutely nothing. And, well, I don't have so many memories from my childhood, but, yeah, I mean they're there but they're hidden, but the feeling can sometimes trigger, yeah, trigger, what's it called, I've got some triggers in my personality and they, they awaken feelings in me.

I: What kind of feelings?

IP: What was that?

I: What kind of feelings?

IP: Well, I mean of course *feelings of— of, yeah, of separation and divorce.*

IP: And I remember when I, we were having (*cough*) a Christmas dinner there one time and I was supposed to give a speech for, for my foster parents and thank them for the invitation and thank them for a nice time and thank them for the years that I had spent together with them, and at that point I was you know a grown man but it turned into a total, I mean a total, yeah, catastrophe from the standpoint of the speech because my feelings took over and it turned into just, you know, tears and crying and stuff like that.

So I have this with me and I believe, I don't know when I am going to be rid of it either because, just that that thing about leaving something and losing something that's called *loss and grieving in the theory of attachment*, it's lying there like a, *a hidden trigger package* that gets hold of me sometimes and I noticed it a week ago, or, yes, it was about a week ago, I think, at Midsummer when I was given a thank-you speech at my job, I got overwhelmed by the same thing.

I: So all breaking points like these are in some way sensitive, is that right?

IP: No, yes, in any case breaking points in the sense that...that something new, *the old is not there any longer*, but something new is coming instead, to that extent you can call it a breaking point.

I: Yes, right, I see.

IP: And that is a little embarrassing actually, don't you think, but I remember that dinner, there was an elderly lady, an old acquaintance of the family, of my foster parents, who said, we were a little bit away from the others at that point so she exchanged some private words with me and said, that was the most powerful thing I've ever experienced. That's what she thought.

I: Well, mm, yes, mm. Do you think this has been some sort of torment for you your whole life, a fear for you that you might, in some way, expose this feeling?

IP: *No, I haven't felt anything like that at all.*

I: Not at all?

IP: Not in the least.

I: I see.

IP: But on the other hand if we're using words like these, well, there has been, when we get into a little other dimensions, this particular thing that I have felt an enormous emptiness in myself, in my person, you know, and... yes, as I said I was born out of wedlock and when my mother at last did get married, she wouldn't let me, I didn't get adopted, she refused to let me be adopted by my foster parents and at that point I was forced to move over to the home that she created in Sweden.

I: Mother??

IP: Mother moved to Sweden and got married to a Swedish fellow and then when the adoption question came up I have been told that my mum refused the adoption and instead I had to leave my foster home and move to the home that she *created* and that was of course *once again a huge new breaking point* for me as I say... and *emotionally I was of course very hungry* there because I didn't get, you know, the same things as I got from my foster parents, the love and warmth and kindness and closeness and, yeah, empathy, were not up to the level I was used to.

I: After all, your mother didn't know you so well.

IP: No, she didn't know me at all and I didn't know her ... so it happened *once again, a kind of situation where I had that feeling of emptiness all inside me.*

Discussion around the interview

We see Ossi's trauma and his defence right from the start, in his first statement. He begins with the difficult part, the primary trauma, *the breaking point, the uprooting from Finland*. What he says at the start contains two factual errors: the cities are in the wrong order and there was no Päijänne Railroad. Why does he give these details? It is probably because he wants to give the impression that he knows that which he does not know. He needs the feeling that he is basing things on facts and that he is in control. Here we can see the trauma and the defence simultaneously.

The continuation follows the same defence pattern:

"... when *I* came along on a kick-sled ..." Here he first sees himself as bigger than he was, but it seems as though this picture is also an early memory fragment.

The painting, a beloved and valuable gift, becomes as a compensation for childhood's littleness and helplessness.

People said that he was "a fun and nice little kid". He describes himself through the words of others, distanced from himself.

Everyone is dead and buried – except for him.

He describes different affective states, but isolates and compensates for them quickly. His language breaks down and he uses distancing psychological terms.

“...so it happened once again, a kind of situation where I had that feeling of emptiness all inside me.” So he knows that he has experienced this earlier.

“The old is not there any longer,” he comments.

“I came to the home that mother *created*” – in some part of him he can sense that she has had an ability to create.

“Emotionally I was of course very hungry...” He makes this statement but at the same time he describes it in psychological terms, indicating that the affect has been isolated.

Ossi was able to maintain his balance through projections and idealizations. He divided up his world into the good part and the bad part. So what about his mother then? He senses a deprivation and a sorrow. But the mother whom he met again as an 8-year-old is the one toward whom his anger was directed. The one that he consciously missed was his unknown father, not his mother.

The Finnish mother/the past in the child's mind

In the terms of Bollas, each mother and child develop in the early stages their own private way of communicating that will always have an imprint on the child's continued existence. The mother stands for continuity and regularity (Bollas, 1987). But in our material she did not represent such a stable foundation. I have attempted to show here that the narratives made manifest by the war children reflect a broken connection to their Finnish heritage.

Despite these observations, is there still some way to find traces of the past? Trauma makes a person forget and dissociation becomes a protective technique, while early age also sets obvious limits to memory. Unformulated experiences of abandonment and disappointment can turn off the need to know about one's past. Nevertheless, we can still assume that the early relationship to the mother and what happened in the past should be discernible in some way in the war children's narratives.

Botella (2014) has posed the question of whether the early mother might be like a strange figure that does not emerge as a specific representation, but rather as a tendency toward various actions and dreams. The mother shows up as a formative principle, not as a specific content. This principle, I think, can be discerned in the war children's narratives. The content is less important; what counts is that the affect is repeated independently of the content that conveyed it.

Leena (or "the weeper", the constantly crying child) was evacuated as a 2-year-old. Leena was in never-ending conflict with her Swedish foster mother, but never mentioned her Finnish mother and did not describe her. She had in any case been told that she at first could not fall asleep if she did not get something from home to have beside her. The new toys she received meant nothing to her.

Leena's narrative of her life was chaotic and she could not possibly remember what she felt or thought. The red thread in her interview was her sense of being an outsider and being insignificant as well as her attempts at compensation. In many ways, she managed well and got the education that she wanted to have. But every success she described was accompanied by a disparaging comment – "Oh, well, I guess it wasn't much of anything." She had a hard time feeling anything other than the injustices and disappointments that she had experienced with her Swedish foster mother.

In Kirsti's interview, we can sense her loss. In Leena's interview, we meet chronic disappointment and the feeling of being worthless. In Ossi's interview, we can see how he struggles with the feeling of humiliation.

We observed that both Kirsti and Ossi rebuked the interviewer from time to time during the interview. Leena in turn omitted certain details that could have helped us to better understand what she was talking about. It was as if she took on a teasing tone and left the interviewer bewildered. We experienced these tendencies as a kind of hostility. We can understand them as responses to the interviewer's intrusion into their lives, as a transference reaction – or as a no! Maybe we interviewers on those occasions picked up their feeling, something of their anger that belonged in the past but that was brought to life during the interview.

Many thought that Finland was a strange country, and the interviewees mentioned various strange or threatening and mysterious events in Finland. Were they actually saying that something incomprehensible had happened in their lives? They talked about their perceptions of Finland, for example: "It was felt that Karelian mothers were unfit and therefore their children should be taken away from them," said an interviewee who had previously described in much detail how his Karelian mother was forced to send him away to save his life. If the interviewer had ventured to say that perhaps he had such perceptions about his own mother, he would most probably have said that he did not understand what she was talking about. But the interviewer heard his anger.

When it comes to the past, the trauma and the Finnish mother's significance are thus present in most of the interviewees as a negation: their indifference to the past, the lifelessness of their language, in grammar as well as in their feeling of emptiness and lack of mourning and reflection.

Traces of their early life, the foundation, were not visible or present in their explicit narrative of their lives. However, I have tried to show that such traces are implicitly present in the narrative's form or, often, its lack of form. It is possible that what we see here is what we have called normopathy, an expression to the effect that

everything was “so right” when the war children described their adult lives. Normopathy is also in line with the lack of contact that the war children expressed toward their origins, their early life. If you do not know your history, you do not know who you are, but you can create an image of yourself as the person you wanted to be. In our interviewees, we can see that an early childhood trauma breaks the course of development and forms a void that is always present.

“Are adults allowed to treat kids that way?” asked Leena, as she described how it was when her Swedish younger foster brother was born and took her place. Her Finnish mother, who in her own way, at least from the child's perspective, abandoned her, was no longer present as a person for Leena to direct her disappointment toward.

In Mikael Enckell's latest book *Okändhetens följeslagare*, where he, to be sure, has a wider perspective, he says that “the tendency to induce both one's public and one's personal history to remain silent has many consequences. For example, it becomes more difficult to listen to the polar opposite : to the soul's love for its past, to the person one used to be, to the figures who populated that world and to the processes now taking place as a result of what took place back then.”

There is conceivably a use for knowledge about the Finnish war children's fates, given that the Nordic countries and especially Sweden, also in recent times, have accepted a large number of refugees, including unaccompanied minors.