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**Title:** "Cos I'm a Survivor" : Narratives of coping and resilience in recollections of difficult childhood in post-war Finland

**Year:** 2018

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Hytönen, K.-M., & Malinen, A. (2018). "Cos I'm a Survivor" : Narratives of coping and resilience in recollections of difficult childhood in post-war Finland. *Ethnologia Fennica*, 45, 55-78.

<https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.v45i0.65535>



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**‘Cos I’m a Survivor’  
Narratives of Coping and Resilience in  
Recollections of Difficult Childhood in Post-war Finland**

**Abstract**

In post-war Finland thousands of children experienced poor upbringing, neglect and abuse, and had to deal with their experiences without social support from adults. In this article we study how difficult and bitter experiences related to childhood crises are remembered, reinterpreted and reframed in later life and in contemporary Finland. As research material we use both oral and written reminiscences of childhood in the post-war years collected in the period 2014–2016. We argue that in the recollections of difficult childhood coping and resilience emerge as major narrative themes. Although informants in their childhood were forced to suffer in silence, they remember themselves as being resilient and capable of surviving in adverse environments. In their late adulthood public collection of childhood memories has offered them a suitable medium to remember and reframe their experiences as meaningful, by exposing the ‘culture of silence’ which prevailed in the post-war Finland.

Keywords: childhood memories, trauma, crisis, survival, post-war

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ETNOLOGIA FENNICA Vol. 45 (2018), 55–78, <https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.v45i0.65535>  
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## Introduction

In this article we study how difficult and bitter experiences in childhood are remembered and reinterpreted in later life. We use frameworks of crisis oral history and life story research to develop an understanding of processes of remembering and forgetting in life stories (Leydesdorff et al. 1999, 1). Our viewpoint on the crisis oral history is that instead of an individual traumatic event, a crisis may be caused by a prolonged situation where a child is constantly neglected or abused in the living environment. Violence to an individual can cause lasting damage and have an effect on the whole life course of the victim. (Laitinen & Uusitalo 2008, 107–108; Leydesdorff et al. 1999, 9.)

Around one million Finnish children aged 15 or less lived their childhood during the post-war years (c. 1945–60). A great number of these children were at risk of experiencing serious distress and developing stress-related behavioural problems.<sup>1</sup> Especially vulnerable were those children who lived with parent(s) suffering from substance abuse and possibly associated psychosocial problems, and children experiencing neglect and abuse in care, either in foster families or in children's homes or reform schools. Approximately 15,000 children were annually living in foster families and around 5,000 in children's homes and reform schools. The number of Finnish adults suffering from substance abuse has been estimated at around 15,000–20,000, but the actual number is probably much higher.<sup>2</sup> It is safe to say that thousands of Finnish children experienced events and conditions which 'left a mark', and sometimes were 'marked for life'. Individuals living their childhood during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath are now reaching an age when they have a developmental need to look back on their lives (Hutchison 2008, 407; Butler 1974). No matter if they find their childhood experiences negative or positive – or both, as the case usually is – on reaching old age people look back to determine the nature of their lives and to assess whether that life has been a successful one or not.

Remembering and seeking knowledge about abuse and violence can be frightening (Rose 1999, 164–165; Herman 1997, 174–175; Leydesdorff et al. 1999, 13–14). Still, while reminiscing, survivors try to make sense of the reasons why the adults and perpetrators surrounding them behaved and acted as they did, and how they themselves managed to cope with it (North 1998, 24–25; Kelley 1998, 262–263; Malinen & Tamminen 2017, 399–401). In this

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1 We do not claim that all children of the time have traumatic memories, or were at a risk of abuse or neglect. However, the focus of the article is on negative childhood memories.

2 According to a Gallup survey conducted in 1948 six percent of Finnish men drank heavily every second or third day and four percent almost daily. Cf. Kuusi 1948.

article we ask: How people having experienced difficulties in childhood remember and narrate their strength and survival in their life stories? What elements do they find positive and important in their childhood when looking back on it today?

The life history research viewpoint on memories of childhood trauma and personal crisis helps to understand the meanings of childhood experiences for people's later life and life course. As Selma Leydesdorff et al. state, the life story approach works as a way to look at the relation between an individual's experiences and wider public knowledge and representations. (Leydesdorff et al. 1999, 13.) Through construction, telling and re-telling personal (life) stories people make sense of their lives (Sikes & Goodson 2017, 61–65).

The article is based on the oral and written reminiscences of adults recalling and looking back on their childhood and describing their difficulties and coping methods. The materials analysed were collected on two different projects in which we participated, and include both oral and written reminiscences. The materials include narratives about childhood in biological families and childhood in out-of-home care. Although our material concerns sometimes traumatic memories, we focus on the positive elements found in life stories and interviews. Research on difficult childhood often focuses on the experiences of crisis, or events causing trauma (see e.g. Cave 2014; Kennedy 2006; Rose 1999). However, oral and written reminiscences also offer interesting and valuable opportunities to study how respondents tried to find ways to manage their adverse experiences in their childhood on a personal level, and live with painful memories in later life and adulthood (see e.g. Sköld 2015; Sølund 2015).

The purpose of our text is not to claim that talking or writing about painful memories is the only solution to overcoming a difficult childhood. Instead, our aim is to interpret elements of coping and recovery not as the only way of narrating about childhood in the post-war years, but as one of the possible and tellable narratives of childhood. (See e.g. Woodiwiss 2005, 153.)

Our article constitutes an ethnological viewpoint on personal memories; with our analysis of the meanings of crisis in life story interviews and writing we contribute to the discussion of childhood memories in everyday life. No matter if we speak on a collective or individual level, the concept of memory has been and continues to be essential in ethnological research. (Köresaar 2004; Korhakangas 2005; 1996, 11–16.) As the ethnologist Ene Köresaar (2004, 46) puts it, an experience is biographical because one experiences a variety of things over the life course. Also, experiences become biographical when they are narrated as a part of a life story. Here we focus on the ways in which personal experiences in the past are interpreted in the present, and

how new information is sought to reframe experiences and to attach new meanings to them.

### **Materials, methods and research ethics**

The primary research material of the article consists of oral life narrative interviews and written reminiscences concerning childhood in different circumstances in post-war Finland. The materials were collected on two different projects. We use interviews conducted during an official historical inquiry into child abuse and neglect in out-of-home care in Finland, 1937–1983 (hereafter: the Inquiry). The Inquiry was commissioned by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and accomplished by a multidisciplinary research team representing ethnology, history and social work in the University of Jyväskylä. We were part of the research team. In 2014 and 2015, the team conducted 299 oral interviews concerning violent and abusive childhood experiences in out-of-home care. (Hytönen, Malinen et al. 2016.) In this article, we focus on experiences from the post-war period (c. 1945–1960), which limits our analysis to interviewees born before 1955.

We also analyse written materials collected by by Antti Malinen together with the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society. In the collection called “The War that Continued in the Homes?” (2015–2016) Malinen gathered memories of how members of families, and especially children, experienced the immediate post-war years, especially in the family context. The collection received almost 180 responses and 1,406 pages of written memories. Most of the respondents were born between the 1930s and the 1950s.

In Finland and in adjacent countries there is a long tradition of collecting experiences and memories for archive collections through thematic writing campaigns. These collections are widely used in parallel with oral history materials, even though differences in the origins of the materials must be taken into account. (Peltonen & Salmi-Niklander 2007, 5–6; Hytönen 2013b, 89–91; Hinrikus & Kõresaar 2004.) Nordic-Baltic oral history research has a tradition of adapting methods from neighbouring research fields, for example life writing (Jaago, Kõresaar & Rahi-Tamm 2006; Heimo 2016, 40; Hinrikus & Kõresaar 2004). In Finland oral history research is often conducted by ethnologists and folkloristics with extensive knowledge of old folklore and memory collections in Finnish archives. In fact, in Finnish the equivalent for the term ‘oral history’ is ‘muistitietotutkimus’, which could be translated as ‘research on remembered information’ (Fingerroos & Haanpää 2012). Thus it includes both oral and written materials.

It is characteristic of oral history that materials are produced in a dialogue, mainly between interviewer and interviewee (see e.g. Abrams 2016, 1; Kl-

empner 2006; Portelli 2006; Kalela 2006, 83–84). However, written 'remembered information' materials stored in an archive also include features of dialogue. There is a party who asks questions concerning personal memories, and a party who answers those questions. Dialogue increases if participants contact the archive or researcher(s) organizing it. Even without personal contact to the archive, the author usually writes to someone, imagined or real respondent. The folklore scholar Pauliina Latvala describes this kind of writer – imagined reader – dialogue as *layered communication* (Latvala 2005, 67–68). In the written material, the dialogue takes place in a longer timespan than in an interview. When writing about their memories, participants may consider carefully what to write and how to answer the questions asked, whereas dialogue during an interview is more spontaneous. However, this spontaneity is not similar in all interviews, and some writers do not plan their texts but write in a very spontaneous way. (Pöysä 2015, 23–24; Pöysä 2006; Bohman 1986; Hytönen 2013b, 89–91; see also Thompson 1999.) According to Ronald J. Grele (2007, 14), a noticeable feature in an oral history interview is audience. The oral history interview is never just a conversation between two people interested in the past. Instead, both of the participants are aware of the public nature of the dialogue. The same applies to the process of writing down memories for an archive. Informants know that their memories will be used by researchers. Even though they do not know what kind of research their interview or writing will be used for in the future, they have given their consent to the use of the material they produced for the archive. (Helsti 2000, 26–28.)

Often in collections of memoirs and interviews female participants are in the majority (e.g. Pöysä 2015, 22); this is also the case in our materials. However, we did not intentionally choose our informants by gender, but on the basis of their year of birth. As mentioned above, we have confined the material to the childhood in post-war Finland, i.e. our informants were born between 1930 and 1950. As far as we know, our narrators are from different social backgrounds, and place their childhood memories in different locations in Finland. However, the analysis inevitably lacks the impact of social class because we do not always know the current position of the informant. They have chosen themselves what to narrate, and what they find important to tell.

Two things should be noted about the material used in the article. Firstly, the oral material of the article in particular focuses on negative experiences in childhood. Obviously, we do not claim that all children faced difficulties in their childhood in post-war Finland. However, we have collected material about difficulties and focused on them, and this must be borne in mind while reading the materials. Also, it is worth pointing out, that all the informants participated either in the interviews or responded to the call for written ac-

counts because they found their childhood experiences meaningful. Especially for those responding to the call for writing wartime is a significant part of childhood with effects all the way to adulthood.

In this article we argue that by framing their childhood experiences as traumatic, some informants want to bring into discussion the dark aspects of Finnish post-war culture and especially the costs of the so-called 'culture of silence' which forced children living in adverse environments to suffer in silence (Kivimäki 2010, 198, 207–208; Kivimäki & Hytönen 2015). The 1950s has sometimes been seen as a nostalgic era of happy families, and some informants wish to deconstruct this nostalgia. (On nostalgia in memories of post-war Finland see e.g. Koskinen-Koivisto & Snellman 2016; Steel 2013, 251–254; Hytönen 2013a, 7.) However, the role of trauma should not be overemphasized. A large number of Finnish children were able to live their childhood in decent and safe environments (Malinen & Tamminen 2017, 19). Some informants were worried that post-war family life is nowadays portrayed as too gloomy and trauma-centred. As one informant explained:

Nowadays there is a notion that everybody was traumatized after the war and family life was terrible, overshadowed by booze and nightmares [...] This feels almost insulting to us who were living in ordinary, safe families. (Female, born 1940–45, 1285, PJS SKS KRA.)

We read our materials as oral history of a (difficult) childhood. Reminiscence is constant movement back and forth in time: the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, or the process of writing down one's memories and sending the text to an archive, takes place in the present, but the perspective and focus of the participants are on childhood experiences and personal history. Thus memories in the research material are adults' interpretations of childhood happenings produced in a dialogue. (Helsti 2000, 25; Ukkonen 2006, 183–186; Grele 2007.) We lean on an oral history classic, Alessandro Portelli (2006), and underline the interpretative character of both oral and written reminiscence. As time has passed since the actual happenings causing the pain or suffering, the interviews and written reminiscences are more about the meanings attached to those experiences in later life than about what actually happened. (See e.g. Portelli 2006; Abrams 2016, 18–19.)

The process of reading has also been constant movement between the material, our notes concerning it, and interpretations, between research literature, materials and our notes. Themes and quotations in the following analysis are based on our close reading, which Jyrki Pöysä defines as both reading and writing: reading, making notes and commenting, and returning back to read-

ing with interpretations (Pöysä 2015, 30–32). We chose the quotations from the material as examples of the topics we found important in our analysis, and therefore they act as representatives of the material. The aim is to raise discussion about a few central themes recurring in our material. It would be fruitful to analyse the material in greater detail and discuss more themes, but so far we limited the questions to personal strength and resilience of children in their childhood memories.

We address memories of abuse, neglect and violence in childhood as lived experiences of pain. Pain is not (always) physical, but more often emotional pain that stems from negative experiences (e.g. neglect, abuse or violence) in childhood (e.g. Ahmed 2014, 22; Rose 1999). It should be noted that the material consists of life narratives of survivals. Those who did not find a way to cope with their traumatic childhood memories and the pain caused by them are not here to tell about it. As we learnt during our fieldwork during the Inquiry, many people who faced violence, abuse or neglect in childhood suffered from mental problems and from alcoholism in adulthood and died relatively young (Rauhala 1972; Kestilä et al. 2012). As our written materials show, from the viewpoint of children, difficulties like insecurity, violence, fear or neglect also occurred in biological families.

Difficult childhood memories are a sensitive research topic (see Hydén 2008). Therefore special emphasis is placed on research ethics (Abrams 2016, 190–194; Hytönen, Malinen et al. 2016; Malinen 2017). We read the material with respect for the voices of informants. By this we mean that we do not contest their narratives; instead, we give space for their narration, and believe what they say (Abrams 2016, 181; Kalela 2010). Our aim is to use the material in a balanced way and contextualize it appropriately. By well-balanced use of the material we mean that our objective is to understand the data as a whole, and not to emphasize any element above other without reason, even though the material raises many different emotions in us (Klempner 2006; Malinen 2017). A fair context is necessary for decent understanding of the experiences. If it is done wrong, the risk of anachronism increases. As historian Jorma Kalela (2006, 84–85; 2010, 48–50), says, a fair contextualization is a question of respect for informants.

All information that could help to identify informants has been deleted from the quotes. The material concerning out-of-home care has been anonymized, and we will refer to interviewees only by their gender and year of birth to the nearest five years (e.g. Male, born 1940–44). To treat informants equally, written reminiscence likewise uses the gender and year of birth of the

writer to the nearest five years, and with the abbreviation of the archive (e.g. Female, born 1935–39, page number, PJS SKS KRA).<sup>3</sup>

### **Resilient children**

The interpretative character of oral history narratives is evident in discussion about personal survival and strength in a difficult childhood. While conducting the interviews with care leavers, we asked them what they dreamed about when they were children, and what kind of things helped them in their childhood. The answers we received are adults' interpretations; they are reflections on personal character and positive factors in the environment. This interpretation about personal qualities that helped through difficulties is important when a person tells a story of her or his own life to people who understand the social world of the narrative (Steedman 2009, 210).

When we asked about coping<sup>4</sup> during the interviews with care leavers, the most common immediate reply was: "I cannot say how I survived. I do not know." After first saying that they did not know how they survived, the interviewees usually evaluated their personal characters in a few words. However, the first reaction to the question was often absence of recall. This has not, it seems, so much to do with lack of self-knowledge, but rather to concepts of silence and tellability. (Korjonen-Kuusipuuro & Kuusisto-Arponen 2017, 10–11; Savolainen 2017, 30–31; Rose 1999, 164, 175–176; Robinson 1981, 63; Hydén 2008.) Neglect of children has been a repressed, forgotten topic both on a socio-cultural level and on a personal level. One of the aims of the Inquiry was to bring the topic to the light of day and into open discussion: to recognize society's failures in the protection of children. On a personal level, a difficult childhood in foster care or in an institution has long been a shameful topic with a potential for stigma. Some of our interviewees had never talked about it outside the immediate family, and these childhood memories are not included in family narratives. (About family narratives see Siim 2016.) For many of our informants both in the written and oral materials, no communicative context for telling a narrative of difficulties in childhood existed, and informants did not deem their life narratives worth telling society about (Savolainen 2017, 32; Robinson 1981, 63). In the oral and written materials used in the article, the silence was broken. In the life writings and oral interviews analysed on our research projects, participants had a chance to put into

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3 Quotations translated by the authors of the article and proofread by Virginia Mattila. The code after each quote is an abbreviation for the archive collection in Finnish. PJS= The War that Continued in the Homes, SKS KRA = Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society.

4 The question was usually in one form or another: "What helped you to survive? How did you cope?"

words and describe both their difficult childhood experiences and narratives of strength and survival. Their feelings of pain became worth telling.

Personal qualities have not been important only in childhood but continue to be indispensable when some of the interviewees also struggled in their current lives. Labelling oneself as a 'survivor' helps to construct a coherent life narrative, and to make a distinction between oneself and others, i.e. those who did not survive. "Seven of them did themselves in straight away. But I survived, 'cos I'm a survivor." (Female, born 1935–39.) Suicides or other violent deaths of friends are a concrete opposite of a personal experience of survival and strength. Interviewees know that they possess qualities or strengths that some others do not have. "Well, my own guts. That's one. The tougher you are the better you cope. And like I said, the weaker ones, well they killed themselves. They couldn't stand being placed in care." (Female, born 1950–54.) Usually interviewees characterize themselves with attributes that describe resistance and stamina. A woman born in the 1930s, who was beaten in a children's home first tells about her positive nature and ability to laugh as her resource of energy and survival. However, a positive attitude to life does not exclude stubbornness or a determined nature, as she continues later in her narrative: "And like, there was nothing like what they've got today, all that crisis care and whatnot, there was never them, you just had to get on with it yourself. I've been pretty tough like, to get by." (Female, born 1930–34.) Through comparison to present care of survivors of traumatic events she seems to convince both herself and the interviewers about her strength and capability to resilience.

Imagination, the ability to see other and better futures, was also an essential coping mechanism for some children. (On dreams and future hopes in memories of youth in 1940–55 see Jouhki 2014, 241–243.) A man born in 1945 remembers how his childhood was characterized by the poverty, rootlessness and shame of his parents, who were forced to leave their home on the Karelian Isthmus during the war. As a boy he had only few friends, but even as a lonely boy his imagination helped him to cope with his negative feelings. He continually dreamed of being a pilot and of what he could become as an adult. (Man, born 1945–49, p. 1256, PJS SKS KRA.) Dreaming about better future and becoming an adult with power to make one's own decisions, is one method of survival that constantly comes up in the materials.

Describing a method of survival through personal qualities improves one's understanding of oneself and one's ability to adapt to difficulties and meet them. By resilience we mean capacity of adaptation despite challenging circumstances, and look at it more as a process than as a feature of personality (Masten 2014; Malinen 2017, 26). In these narratives hardly any external

factors facilitated a child's survival. These interpretations underline the narrator's own strength. However, inner strength and emotional toughness are not the only tools interviewees mentioned when asked about coping mechanisms. Some of them underlined the meaning of appropriate behaviour, and the ability to adjust and settle in. Theoretically these interactions can be called protective factors that helped children to overcome adversities in their lives, and defined as one feature of resilience of children. (Masten 2014.)

Interviewer: Now how do you see, like how did you manage, did you have some way, how to manage there?

Man: [sigh] Why, yes, I had... what you had to do was, that no way, you had to not get noticed among them lads, and not let on to the workers at all that you've done bad or something... 'Cos if I'd got into them fights I'd have had to keep on fighting and I've have got locked up and then it would have been that I'd have been there for years. (Male, born 1950–54.)

In a child welfare institution, settling in meant being meek and unobtrusive, so that neither the staff nor the other children paid attention to you. Following the rules meant less trouble.

There wasn't, you just had to keep your head down. Just go along with it and get on with it as if it was nothing in particular, it felt a bit like a concentration camp for children [laughs] when in the mornings you had to line up do it all like. I suppose it was like that at the time, and thinking about it later, well you didn't dwell on it like, for a bit I thought about it but then I thought that's no use. (Male, born 1945–49.)

Staying out of trouble meant not following some of the children who rebelled, started fights or ran away from the institution. A woman born in 1945–49 was sent to a girls' reform school in the early 1960s. She ran away a few times but assesses herself as a kind and good girl among girls with much worse problems. She characterizes herself as a coward, which was in her own opinion her salvation.

It was a stroke of luck – there's no knowing what a bad lot I might have become, my cowardly nature was a piece of luck, I mean being a coward there. I didn't dare join in those big games they went in for. What I had to do [laughs] that's another matter. (Female, born 1945–49.)

Balancing between the behaviour desired by the staff and by the other children was stressful. One should not be too humble, but arrogant and self-confi-

dent behaviour was also a risk. Settling into a group was easier if one had some special talent or position. For example, a woman quoted above got a special task from the staff: her job was to keep up the fire in the boiler of the main house. Due to this special position, she had matches, which other girls did not have. Smoking was forbidden in the institution, but the girls managed to get cigarettes from men outside the institution. The interviewee was warned not to tell the staff about the smoking. Later in her life story interview she says that she also managed because she learnt to steal food for herself and other girls when they were hungry. Her description of power-relations among teenage girls in a reform school reveals a complex network of power, violence, fear and threats. Successfully navigating there demanded social skills, but some were able to use power relations as a coping strategy.

### **Nature and animals as restorative environment**

When pondering the question of survival, many of the participants mentioned nature as a haven of calm and safety. When considering childhood experiences in general in post-war Finland, the meanings of nature and environment are decisive. Childhood memories include many descriptions of relationships with animals and the natural world. As the historian Antti Malinen has shown, contacts with the natural world are seen through work. The countryside was the living environment of more than half of the children in 1940s and 1950s. Thus, animals, landscapes and nature are seen as a part of everyday life, work and way of life. (Malinen 2017.) Children living in out-of-home care also often had a connection with the natural world through their living environment. Reform schools were usually big farms, where the children took part in farm work. Reform schools were often somewhat remote, while children's homes were also located in towns and villages. Also, most of the foster families of the time were in rural areas. The common setting was that a city-born child was placed in a foster family living in the country (Hytönen, Malinen et al. 2016).

In memories of difficult childhood, nature is not only a place of work or free time, but also a place of peace and calm. Usually descriptions of nature are nostalgic, with emphasis on positive memories. (Malinen & Tamminen 2017, 304–305.) As a woman born at the end of the 1940s narrates, she found a hiding place in nature. Her foster-sister was violent towards her, and she felt she had no one to love her. When answering questions on how she managed, she recounted how she repeated to herself that it did not matter if no one liked her. The refuge was found by a lake.

Well I'll say it again, I'm not much of a person so what does it matter if people like me or not. They never liked me. In among the reeds I had this place, like. I used to run

in among the reeds away [from the daughter in the foster home]. There were stones... There was a nice place to sit with me feet in the water. The lapping of water always calms me down. It always calms me down. (Female, born 1945–49.)

The narrator moves back and forth between the past and the present. She describes the way she escaped the violent foster-sister and found a peaceful rock to sit on and listen to the lapping of the waves. She comes back to the present when telling how the sound of the lapping of waves is still important to her. The positive element in the memory, a source of peace, still plays a role in her life.

Similar to the woman quoted above, another interviewee, who was also treated inhumanely in his foster family, reflects on nature as a place of comfort and peace.

Ever since I was a child I have been interested in nature, and where I was sent as a foster child it was nature that helped me out. In those dark moments. There were all these pools, I could always get a rod, dig up some worms and go fishing. There on the shore I would cry like a cat at how awful it was. (Male, born 1940–44.)

In the life stories, nature is a place where children were able to be themselves, admit their weakness and find strength to go on. A man (born 1940–44), who lived in a reform school, also remembers fishing in a boat on a lake as a calming experience. He remembers especially one summer night when he went rowing with a nurse from the institution and with another boy on a lake next to the reform school. He describes the nurse as 'very understanding' and 'very nice'. The boys understood that they were not allowed to leave the institution, and thus they were slightly uncertain if they should go or not. If they had been caught, it would have looked as if they were running away, which would have caused hard punishments for both of them. However, the nurse said that they should go, and the group of three rowed around an island on a calm summer night, enjoyed the light of a Finnish midsummer night, and returned to the reform school. The memory of this rowing trip was still vivid and comforting for him, both because of the kind and understanding nurse, and because of the beautiful experience of the natural world.

Nature offered opportunities for restoration, which many children badly needed. Many of the returning ex-servicemen, but also overstressed mothers, displayed a diminished capacity to cope with the stresses of parenting, and showed a tendency for unpredictable and sometimes aggressive responses to stress (Kivimäki 2010; Malinen & Tamminen 2017, 144–156; Olsson 2011, 114–119). A woman (born 1945–49) was only partially able to anticipate the mood swings of her war veteran father:

Father was on edge, he'd get angry all of a sudden and violent and there was no knowing what set it off. Generally some setback, like if it was poor weather for harvesting and if there was something else that irritated him. (Female, born 1945–49, p. 1228, PJS SKS KRA.)

By withdrawing to natural surroundings she was able to have some freedom from her distressing home environment. According to our research material, it seems that many of the children adopted a behavioural pattern which can be described as continuous observation of their environment. If their parents or the caregivers at institutions were physically and/or verbally abusive, the children tried to develop abilities to look out for warnings signs of mood change. They became carefully attuned to the emotional states of adults. The above-mentioned woman describes how she learned to recognize subtle changes in her father's facial expression, voice, and body language as signals of anger or intoxication:

I developed a good nose and sense of each situation. There were clear signs when Father would be edge and clear his throat, sniff and move restlessly. I was a quiet, sensitive and docile child and I got thanks and approval. I withdrew into myself and took stock of the situation. (Female, born 1945–49, p. 1228, PJS SKS KRA.)

However, constantly maintaining vigilance was taxing, and consumed children's resources (Gottlieb 1997). For children living in difficult home conditions the natural environment offered opportunities for social withdrawal where their privacy and freedom could be realized. A man born at the end of the 1930s explains how he escaped into the forest from the oppressive atmosphere of his home:

For a child the atmosphere was oppressive when there was no way I could do right. I used to go about in the forest a lot and talk to the ants, the little birds and to special trees. (Male, born 1935–39, p. 421, PJS SKS KRA.)

Not only wild, free nature can be comforting environment, but also other types of surroundings. A woman (born in 1940–44), lost her mother to an illness at the age of five. In her teenage years she faced difficulties in her foster family. For a while, she did not know where to seek for help, and blamed herself for her troubles. She derived solace from the memory of her biological mother, who had said a beautiful farewell to her before she died. A safe environment for mourning was the cemetery, where one can cry uninterrupted because it is considered to be a place of mourning. From the viewpoint of strength and survival in childhood memories, her narrative presents a cemetery as a pri-

vate place where the narrator had a chance to think about her life, feel safe, and consider different ways of escaping the difficult situation. Children also created their own special places, 'forts' and secret hiding places where they had their own space, and where they could make up their own rules. Creating special places can also be seen to be linked to children's developmental phases. Especially during middle childhood, children aged six to 12 become more independent and start to create a separate self from the one defined by their parents and caregivers. For children living in insecure environments, these dens and forts not only offered peace and safety, but also, by constructing them, they could develop and gain confidence in themselves and their competencies. (See e.g. Sobel 2002; Hyder 2005, 9.)

In addition to a connection to the natural environment, the relationship to nature also includes memories of animals. As many foster families were located in the countryside, and the reform schools were big, productive farms, memories of out-of-home care often include mentions of animals. However, the animals were often farm animals like cows and pigs, and they are mentioned only in connection with work. Horses are exceptions here. In the 1950s tractors were not too common in reform schools, and often field work was still done with a horse. Therefore there were several horses in the stable, and some boys' job was to take care of them. One narrator (born 1940–44) remembers vividly the stable as a safe place.

What I remember most [about good things in the reform school] is driving horses in daytime and then of course feeding them at night. Like in the daytime, it was one of us to each horse, that sort of a gang. Better that way that somewhere else and I had this gelding called Maksi. I took care of him. [...] And we used to be in the stables in the evenings. We didn't go off anywhere. Or then we'd be in the hayloft and play tunnels in the hay and that. We used to stay there until the order came, they rang the bell and we had to go in and go to bed. (Male, born 1940–44.)

After over 50 years, the narrator quoted above still remembers the stable as a safe and comfortable place. It was a place where neither staff nor other boys were able to find him or his friends to bully him. The description of the stable is vivid and includes a range of emotions like feelings of safety and playful spirit, but also fear of other boys and bullying. (Cf. Chawla 2014.) Another interviewee remembers how a doctor's German shepherd dog in a neuropsychological hospital was the first living creature to teach him that kind, sympathetic animals existed.

Animal companions and pets were also important to children living with their biological parents. When parents or caregivers were not able to provide

their children security, animal companions, especially dogs and cats, provided compensatory attachment by providing unconditional love and acceptance. Dogs and cats are especially interactive with humans, and show responsiveness and proximity-seeking through purring, tail wagging, barking and asking to be patted (Malinen 2017, 27). Animal companions also helped to build up children's self-esteem; for example, children were proud when they were able to take care of their pets or farm animals, to feed sheep, lambs and hens, or learn to milk a cow. (See also Malinen & Tamminen 2017, 302; Kaarlenkaski 2012, 211–212.)

Animal companions and pets were also important to children with few opportunities to play with their peers due to parental restrictions or geographical isolation. A fairly large number of families lived on isolated small farms, where the distances to the nearest neighbours might be as much as one kilometre or more. In these cases children usually spent more time with their siblings or pets.

### **From silent coping to social sharing of traumatic experiences**

One major theme emerging from the Finnish oral histories of post-war childhood is the memory of being discouraged from expressing pain, sadness and anger in the presence of caregivers, whether at home or in institutions. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, the children had to deal with their adverse experiences and related feelings privately, mostly by themselves. Quite often those born in the 1930s and 40s still find it difficult to make sense of their post-war childhood. Experiences of pain are not easy to narrate specifically and precisely. In fact, it has been argued that pain is too personal to be understood at all by others (Ahmed 2014, 22; see also Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003, 331).

The feeling of not being understood is one reason why difficult childhood memories are often untellable, even to one's immediate family. They are often excluded from the family stories that bind family members together through storytelling (Siim 2016, 74; Finnegan 2006). As Pihla Maria Siim (2016, 75) points out, negative stories concerning the personal histories of family members are usually told only in certain contexts, and not repeated as often as more positive ones. They are told in confidence and only to the immediate family circle. (See also Sølund 2015, 39–40.) It seems that for some informants also public sharing of experiences has provided way to give voice to their previously silenced experiences. Thematic writing campaigns such as "The War that Continued in the Homes" or Inquiries not only invite people to share their experiences; those also facilitate discussion on sensitive topics and open up new discursive spaces.

Since the 1990s there has been growing public interest in the human consequences of experiencing war, genocides and human disasters, including failures in education and upbringing, and both of the previously mentioned projects reflect this interest. When collecting materials for the Inquiry, we noticed the strong impact of questions asked in an interview. As all participants knew that the topic of the Inquiry was neglect of children, hardly any positive experiences of out-of-home care were related spontaneously. We had to expressly elicit positive things if we wanted to hear them, but many of the participants were prepared to tell us mainly negative things as suggested in the call to attend for interviews. (See Swain 2015, 22–24.) Kate Douglas has noted that autobiographies of childhood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem to challenge the prevailing idea of the mid-twentieth century as a 'golden age' of family. Many recent autobiographies offer not only nostalgic, but also more diverse representations of childhood, including themes like poverty, violence and abuse. However, Douglas underlines that these autobiographies do not only re-construct the so-called mythical childhood. They also reflect current ideas and interests regarding childhood. (Douglas 2010, 41–42, 170–172.)

In our research material the informants have chosen to recount very sensitive information regarding their family relations and life and examine the dynamics of post-war family and institutional life. It seems that the so-called 'culture of silence' was felt to be especially harmful for young children. For example, if children were left alone with their conflicting emotions, and the behaviour of the adults was left unexplained, the children had rationalised events by themselves. They had little chance of seeing or understanding the real reasons, and they often blamed themselves for the adults' behaviour, and carried feelings of guilt and shame for years or even decades. The need to understand caregivers' past behaviour is especially great when children were neglected and even abused by those expected to give them security, warmth and even love.

In the Finnish post-war families the 'culture of silence' emanated not only from the parents' need to forget and to adjust to new social contexts, but also from their belief that disclosing nothing about the horrors of the war was crucial to their children's normal development. Due to this 'culture of silence', their parent's experiences of the war and its aftermath remained blank in the family record (see e.g. Kivimäki 2010, 198, 207–208; Kivimäki & Hytönen 2015). The same applies to children living in out-of-home care. There was a tacit agreement, both in the families and institutional settings, to leave difficult experiences unspoken and to keep them detached from everyday life. (E.g. Haikari 2009, 101; Vehkalahti 2015, 234.) Children in turn often became sensitive to their parents' need to keep silent. No explanation was provided

for the incomprehensible and sometimes frightening conduct of fathers, for example their nightmares.

In the foster homes and institutions children were even less able to tell anyone about their experiences or make sense of them. If, for example, inmates in reform school verbally criticized the violent behaviour of a staff member, this could often lead to further violent acts and experiences. When leaving care foster children and former inmates of reforms schools were in a better position to disclose and share their experiences. However, as the Inquiry reveals, many of those leaving 'care' felt unable to disclose their experiences of abuse, possibly due to the stigma relating to their past and the associated shame. All this means that typically children and young people placed in residential institutions had to deal with their emotions privately, by themselves.

In their effort to understand what happened to them and their families during the Second World War and its aftermath, the former children have since the early 1990s gathered and shared stories about the lives of their parents and families. When we conducted interviews during the Inquiry and collected written materials on a later project, all the participants engaged with us voluntarily. Many of those contributing to the "The War that Continued in the Homes?" collection explained how by turning to new studies on the trauma of war they acquired a new understanding of their veteran fathers' behaviour and symptoms. (Eg. Female, born 1940-1944, 184; Female, born 1935-1939; Female, born 1950-1954, 428; Male, born 1945-1950, 734.) Respondents were profoundly interested in research that helps them to understand the education and care they received in both their own homes and in institutional environments. The same applies to care-leavers who were interviewed during the Finnish Inquiry. Many of them described how a new cognitive understanding had helped them to view their parents and even those who mistreated them in institutions in a new light. This has even enabled some of them to forgive their childhood abusers.

A significant number of respondents in the "The War that Continued in the Homes?" collection have been able to come to terms with their often conflicting and painful childhood memories (Malinen & Tamminen 2017). Most of the respondents framed themselves as resilient children and adults who have managed to overcome traumatic childhood experiences. It is interesting that in our material there are only few mentions of how respondents processed their traumatic memories in later life. For some of the interviewees of the Inquiry an opportunity to tell their life story had a therapeutic meaning, and others had talked about their childhood with a therapist or dealt with their memories through writing. Some of them found it important to talk about

their experiences, some did not find it necessary at all. (See also Hytönen, Malinen et al. 2016.)

### **Sometimes a small light is enough: coping with crisis**

In this article we argue that remembering painful childhood memories is a part of our informants' current self-concept in their (late) adulthood, when they feel a need to make sense of past, difficult events. Many of them do not wish to forget the childhood pain, but to understand and accept it. People with difficult childhood experiences use reminiscing as a way to reframe and resolve past events. In our case study the conflicting and painful memories were located in the experiences of Finnish post-war childhood. Thousands of Finnish children experienced poor upbringing, neglect and abuse, and had to deal with their experiences without social support from adults. Yet a significant number of respondents were able to reframe or attach positive meanings to their conflicting childhood memories in at least three different ways:

Firstly, it seems that most of the respondents studied framed themselves as resilient children, who had inner strength and capabilities for self-mastery and adaptation. For many informants it initially seemed difficult to define the precise element that helped them through difficulties. When asked about it, they described their mental strength, resilience, courage and stamina. In addition, especially in children's institutions, it was important to learn the right kind of behaviour: to adapt oneself, to be quiet enough but at the same time tough enough. To have a hobby or a friend, in the best cases a trusted adult, is important when participants look back at their childhood. From a methodological viewpoint it is noteworthy that in oral interviews participants often find it difficult to describe their survival strategies. As described above, many of them first reacted to question by saying they do not know or remember. When responding to a call for theme writing, participants have more time to consider what they wish to tell. Thus coping mechanisms are also described more reflectively in written life narratives.

Secondly, we considered the meaning of the natural world and animals in reminiscences of survival. Adults typically believed that children adapt successfully to even the most drastic life changes and difficult living conditions due their natural resilience (Kavén 2010). Quite often children and young people experiencing adversities in childhood had to deal with their emotions privately, by themselves. Yet as our materials show, children claim to have found peace, restoration and warmth by interacting with nature, companion animals and pets, which as protective factors back up children's resilience. (About resilience see Masten 2014.) Connecting with nature and seeking comfort from company of animals is also a way to narrate oneself as an active agent in one's

own life. Nature offers a way to find a ray of light even in the middle of dark experiences, but one needs to be active to see it. According to our material, interaction with nature is a feature of children's resilience.

Thirdly, one major theme emerging from the reminiscence collections was respondents' need to understand their parents' past behaviour. This was naturally especially important to children who were neglected and even abused by those who were expected to give them security, warmth and even love. When reminiscing about their childhood in late adulthood it seems that these former children wanted to contextualize their adverse experiences by trying to learn more about the lives of their caregivers and childhood environments, and even seek forgiveness. The respondents were especially eager to share their experiences on 'culture of silence' and burdens of coping by themselves.

The reminiscence of the pain, as memories usually are, is a constant movement between past and present. Focusing on pain does not mean underlining its power, or giving it too much room. From the perspective of the cultural study of crisis, we have shown that the concept of coping is important. Instead of taking part in what Sara Ahmed (2014, 33–34) calls the 'fetishisation of the wound', we argue that narratives of healing and recovery do not mean forgetting the pain or its causes. Silence does not mean forgetting (Savolainen 2017, 31; see also Kirss, Kõresaar & Lauristin 2004), and even though painful memories are rarely recounted to outsiders, they still have a powerful role in the current lives of many of our participants (Hytönen, Malinen et al. 2016, 139–159). Furthermore, we suggest that research on difficult childhood memories and life stories including traumatic childhood could also pay more attention to narratives of resilience and ways of coping. The focus on pain and the cause of trauma is important, but as our analysis shows, interesting aspects may emerge including positive elements. The whole picture appears more complete if both positive and traumatic memories are given space and are deemed worth recounting.

We propose that the need to comprehend the precarious, violent or abusive environment, which is clearly described both in the written memory materials and explained during interviews, can also be interpreted as a way to reconcile a difficult past. Through their narratives, survivors try to make sense of the behaviour of adults in their childhood. Harm done to a child in the past has also its present and its future. By better understanding of the ways they themselves managed to cope with it, many informants also reconstruct understanding of themselves as children. Through analysis of positive aspects in narratives of a difficult childhood, it is possible to increase dialogue between past and present in personal life stories.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our special thanks to the research team of the historical inquiry into child abuse and neglect in out-of-home care in Finland, 1937–1983. We also wish to thank anonymous reviewers for their comments and questions.

The research was funded by Kone Foundation (Hytönen) and Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in History of Experiences, University of Tampere (Malinen).

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### Research Material

#### Interviews

*Lastensuojelun sijaishuollon epäkohdat ja lasten kaltoinkohtelu 1937–1983. [Historical inquiry into child abuse and neglect in child protection institutions and foster homes in Finland, 1937–83].* The research material is stored at the University of Jyväskylä, Department of History and Ethnology. At the time of writing this article, the process of storing the material in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive, Tampere, is ongoing.

#### Written materials

Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society.

Perheissä jatkunut sota? [The War that Continued in the Homes?] (2015–2016) (PJS SKS KRA)

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