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Chapter 7

The child in the context of home care – Finnish mothers' assessments

Introduction

I do want that the care my children receive is more individual than they can offer at the childcare centre.

This is how a Finnish mother of three reasoned her decision to stay at home in order to take care of her under-school-age children. Despite Finnish families having a social right to municipal childcare services after the parental leave, the mother had chosen home care. She is not alone with her solution.

Caring for small children at home has gained strong popularity among Finnish families. In recent years, the majority of small children have been cared for at home, mostly by their mothers (Finnish Social Insurance Institution, 2012). The situation is compelling in a country where all children under school age have a legally guaranteed place in municipal day care. The main explanatory factor for the phenomenon is the cash-for-care benefit; that of the child home care allowance.

The benefit, introduced in the 1980s, encourages home care arrangements since parents are entitled to receive monetary support if their under-three-years-old child is not using municipal childcare services.

Although home care is popular, we know little about the parents' perceptions of the child in the context of home care. This chapter investigates how mothers construct their view of the child while they reason their home care choices. The discussion of the issue is based on interviews with 17 mothers with home care arrangements. The interviews were conducted as part of the research project *Contradictory Reality of the Child Home Care Allowance* funded by the *Academy of Finland*.

This chapter pays attention to the contradictory nature of the Finnish childcare policies and takes into account that the growing importance of childhood as a social category influences our understanding of child. The chapter highlights and evaluates three culturally important constructions through which mothers make sense of their understanding of the child: a free and unhurried child, a child as a time investment and a child as a source of pleasure. These constructions challenge the prevailing – politically widely accepted – understanding of the child as an active participant in society and as a target of social investment.

The chapter begins with a discussion on the contemporary images of the child. It continues by examining the social political context in which parents make their childcare choices; the Finnish home care policies. Thereafter, the data will be presented. Finally, in the empirical part, the results of the analysis are opened up.

The modern child: active and dependent

Children are one of most treasured beings of our time. Parents are expected to love their children as well as nurture and take good care of them, and societal actors, in their turn, try to generate effective ways to protect and educate children. It has been argued that in modern times, children have become emotionally 'priceless' as they are able to give meaning and fulfilment to their parents' lives (Zelitzer, 1985). Furthermore, being emotionally recognized, children are also valued as future citizen-workers since western societies are keen on investing in them in order ensure economic growth and national competitiveness. In addition to that,

the children are granted new rights and parents are more and more aware of the suitable care arrangements, especially in situations where they cannot look after their children themselves (Wyness, 2006).

Childhood as a social category has gained growing importance. Although children's needs and their rights have been increasingly recognized, contemporary images of children are still contradictory. Roughly speaking, there are two broad frameworks with which to approach children. Children can be seen as dependents who need care and protection or as young citizens who are entitled to respect and participation (Neale, 2004). We often want to protect children from the harsh realities of life, but, at the same time, we are eager to integrate them into society to make sure that their educational needs are met in order that they may develop into responsible citizens. This implies, in effect, that on the one hand children are discussed in terms of social participation but on the other hand in terms of the increasing risks children face while growing up.

Our understanding of the child is multiple and changes according to time and place. As Jenks (2004: 78) argues, the assessments of the child are socially constructed and understood contextually, resulting in the child being presented through a variety of forms of discourse and social constructions. Discourses and cultural constructions, in their turn, present the child in a light of multiple realities. As such, modern childhood is not simple and unified.

In spite of the variety of discourses concerning the child, it has been argued that the discourse on the participant child has become increasingly dominant (Kjørhold and Liden, 2004). This viewpoint especially concerns political argumentation and the institutions of early childhood education. In fact, at the political level, childhood is increasingly defined in terms of social investment as the concept of human capital has been seen as an important resource for ensuring economic growth and national development (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Kjørhold, 2012). Accordingly, within this framework, childhood education is maintained to be an investment in a knowledge-based economy and a means to ensure lifelong learning. Early childhood education is assessed as 'a public good' and access to early childhood education is seen as providing young children, especially those from low-income families and second-language groups, with 'a good start in life' (OECD, 2001, 2006: 12).

Children are thus assessed as learning subjects (Kryder, 2004). As the life chances and social inclusion of the individual are seen to increasingly depend on the cultural, social and cognitive capital, it is important to educate and empower society's future workers (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Lister, 2003; Strandell, 2012). The institutionalism that is related to the need for a workforce is one of most common characteristic features of contemporary childhood. Furthermore, these institutions are seen as serving the best interests of the child as they are considered a proper place for growing up and ensuring children a safe and qualitatively rich environment for learning and development in their early years (Kjørhold, 2012).

Children are thus increasingly regarded as a participants in and active members of society. Especially within the new childhood research, children are perceived as active actors in a given society and well capable of analyzing the world around them. As Jenks claims: "Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes" (2004: 78). Similarly, The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses children's activity and provides children with the right to participate in society.

Beside such an approach, there is also a tendency to understand children in terms of risks and protection. A fear of cultural disorder accompanying rapid social change is seen to be projected onto children and childhood in the form of protection. This protection serves as a means to legitimate increased control and discipline of children that is spread across all sectors of children's lives (Strandell, 2012; Wyness, 2006). As Wyness (2006: 53–54) puts it, adults' feelings of insecurity are projected onto their children through the mechanisms for controlling them. In a social and moral flux, childhood is formed of moral rescue, a means by which adults try and recapture a sense of purpose and belonging. According to Jenks (1996: 19) the child has become a kind of longing for times past. The trust that has been previously anticipated from marriage, partnership, friendship or class solidarity is now invested more generally in the child.

To sum up, the contemporary relationships between adults and children are dualistic as they can be viewed as reflecting elements of nostalgia as well as futurity. Within the realm of nostalgia, parents try to hold on to a romantic conception of childhood and want to protect the purity of child. Futurity, in its turn, represents

more of a conception of an active and participant child. The services for early childhood education comprise an important form of this futuristic thinking (Wyness, 2006).

Home care policies: the Finnish context

Childcare is one of the most significant elements of family policies in western welfare states. Publicly funded childcare services have been seen as serving various policy aims. First of all, they are assessed as a social policy instrument for increasing employment, especially that of the mother, and as an institutional means for increasing gender equality. Secondly, childcare services are seen as providing children with pedagogical stimulation and care in a safe environment (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandse, 2007; Leira and Saraceno, 2008; Kjørholt, 2012).

The Nordic welfare states have a long history of state intervention in and responsibility for childcare. As such, the Nordic countries can be labelled social service states in which childcare services are universally provided and available for all, and can be used without stigma or loss of status (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1994; Eydal and Rostgaard, 2011). In addition, many Nordic welfare states also provide parents with cash-for-care benefits that enable them to rely on informal care solutions. Such benefits may offer more flexibility in reconciling work and family responsibilities, provide alternatives for the use of services and may provide families with more time with their children. Governments, too, perceive advantages in home care allowances. The cost containment favours home care, assuming that it will compensate for the more expensive institutional care (Repo et al., 2010).

Finnish childcare policies consist of a mix of different kinds of public support. The municipal childcare is a social right for Finnish families having a child under school age. All children under seven years are legally guaranteed a place in municipal day care. The municipal day care is not, however, the only childcare choice Finnish parents can make after the parental leave. Due to a political compromise in 1984, Finnish parents gained the right to monetary compensation if they wanted to rely on informal childcare solutions. The parents were thus entitled to the child home care allowance that enables them to take care of their children by themselves if

their under-three-year-old child does not use public childcare services (Anttonen, 2009; Kröger et al., 2003).

The child home care allowance can be characterized as a monetary compensation for not relying on municipal childcare arrangements. In practical terms, it is the allowance that is available for parents after the parental leave when the child in question is approximately 9 months old. As a monetary benefit, the child home care allowance is divided into two different parts, and includes a care allowance and a care supplement. The care allowance is paid separately for every eligible child. In 2013, the monthly amount of the care allowance is €336.67 for one child under 3 years of age, €100.79 for each additional child under 3 years of age and €64.77 for a child over 3 years of age but under school age. The allowance is also paid for siblings if they are cared for in the same way. The care supplement, in its turn, depends on the size and gross income of the family. The maximum amount of the care supplement is €180.17 per month (Finnish Social Insurance Institution, 2013). Many Finnish municipalities also pay their own municipal supplements.

Since the 1990s, more half of the total number of children under three years of age have been cared for at home with the allowance. In the year 2011, the figure was an even 50 per cent. Since the benefit is also available for older siblings, in 2011, 26 per cent of children aged from 9 months to 6 years were cared for at home with the allowance (Finnish Social Insurance Institution, 2012). The popularity of the benefit indicates that it also functions as a kind of measure to extend the parental leave. Concurrently, the popularity of home care means that the enrolment in publicly funded child day care is relatively low in Finland. This particularly concerns children under the age of three years. The situation changes when the children get older and around 70 per cent of Finnish children between three and five years of age take part in publicly funded day care. Even so, the enrolment figures are lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Children enrolled in publicly financed day care institutions by age as percentages of the respective age groups 2000 and 2009.

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
2000				
1–2 years	77	35	37	60
3–5 years	92	66	78	86
2009				
1–2 years	90	40	77	70
3–5 years	97	73	96	97

Source: NOSOSCO, 2009: 63.

Although Finland has introduced the strongest rights for public childcare within the Nordic welfare regime on the practical level, small children are cared for on a full-time basis at home in Finland for the longest time. As such, the main feature of the Finnish policies on childcare as a whole can be characterized by dualism. This is to say that the Finnish childcare policies have both promoted gender equality and cemented the gender division of care (Rantalaio, 2009). This dualistic nature also reflects the ambivalence concerning the proper place for children: are children best cared for at home by their mothers or do they benefit from institutional care? In this respect, the situation has become challenging. Strandell (2012: 228–229) even argues that “a heavy reliance on home care is gradually becoming a paradox in a system that in other respects is giving increasing weight to expert knowledge and increased professional intervention in childhood”.

Data

The aim of this chapter is to capture the social meanings the mothers attach to the ‘home cared child’. These social meanings offer us a venue to make sense of our social reality. As such, the set of meanings brings different aspects into focus, raises different issues for consideration, and, most importantly, they have different implications for what we do or are supposed to do (Burr, 1995). This implies that the ways in which we assess a child are in effect intertwined with and influence on the social practices and institutions concerning childhood.

The earlier literature on childcare choices states that Finnish parents of small children often think that the care they have chosen and the care they rely on in their daily lives is also the best arrangement for their children. Thus parents who have chosen home care see home care as in the best interests of their child. The themes parents relate to home care include, for example, security, stability and peacefulness. Conversely, the parents who rely on public services emphasize the positive and socialization sides of the institutions of early childhood education (Alasuutari, 2003; Kilpeläinen, 2009; Takala, 2000).

It can be argued that the parents' argumentation concerning childcare stem from different rationalities of daily life. Duncan et al. (2004: 263) have maintained that with regard to this, the childcare choices the families make are related to the parents' value systems and are thus most often a complex result of "moral and emotional processes in assessing both children's needs, and the mother's own, and the balance between the two". The constructions of the child play an important role in this decision making, implying that the ways through which children's needs and the nature of childhood is understood influences and are entwined with the care solutions.

The data analyzed in this chapter consists of 17 interviews with mothers who have received the child home care allowance (CHCA) and who have taken care of their children at home after the parental leave. When the interviews took place in 2006 and 2007, ten interviewees were receiving the CHCA and the other seven mothers were in the labour market or studying, but had received the CHCA and recently been at home.

The interviewed mothers do not form a homogenous group. Their socioeconomic background is heterogeneous. There are low-income families, but also families whose annual income rose to over 100,000 euro. Similarly, the educational background of the interviewed mothers varies. There are both academically educated mothers as well as mothers with vocational training. The size of the family also varies between one to four children.

The data used for analysis was obtained through theme interviews. A theme interview gave the mothers room to express their ideas freely and openly. The purpose of the analysis is to locate the main constructions of the child the mothers rely on when assessing home care. The data was first ordered according to repeated themes, which were used as a basis for distinguishing three broader constructions

of the ‘home cared child’. As such, the analysis was conducted using the tools of discourse analysis. The social meanings are here referred to by different names, such as construction, assessment, understanding or image.

The constructions of the ‘home cared child’

How do the users of the child home care allowance construct the child while they reason their childcare choices? I will answer the question next. The data reveals that the constructions of the child in the context of home care involve the child as protected, invested and emotionally valued.

A free and unhurried child

Not surprisingly, the ‘home cared child’ is assessed as free and unhurried. Mothers relying on the home care solution emphasize that home care arrangements make it possible to avoid the harsh realities of institutionalism in their children’s lives as well as the rush that modern lifestyles generate for families. In this respect it is reasonable to think that the underlying principle behind the mothers’ argumentation is the idea that children ought to have a right to live without the sense of a hurried and scheduled life. Home care as a care arrangement functions as a kind of means to prolong or preserve this kind of carefree and unstructured childhood.

It can be argued that the mothers’ reasoning originates from the notion that the child has to be protected from the rough world “out there”. In the same vein, the Norwegian researchers Stefansen and Farstad (2010) found that families preferring the home care solution are keen on assessing the child as a vulnerable being who needs to develop at his or her own pace in a safe environment until ready for the complex and stressful world. They conclude that the ideas of sheltering, protecting and loving that are often related to home care arrangements correspond with a notion of the world as a complex and harsh place.

The above-mentioned argumentation on the child’s need for an unhurried life is vividly present in the analyzed data. A mother of three argued that children need to be able to live in a relaxed way:

The reason why I stayed at home [...] has been that I think children are small for such short a time and I wanted them to be able to enjoy not having to hurry in their first years.

The interviewed mothers maintained the importance of an unstressed and unscheduled childhood. The argument was made even more legitimate by making contradictions. The mothers juxtaposed a peaceful and restful life at home with the institutionalized childhood, with the timetables and the sense of work it entails. The mother of two favoured and preferred home care for these reasons:

To be at home means that there is a kind of peace and no routines or schedules. In their future life they [children] have to wake up early, they ought to be at school or at work from eight to four. So I prefer that while they are small their life is not regular, routinized and scheduled.

A mother expecting her third child shared the above-mentioned idea. Here is how she described her feelings about home care:

I do enjoy being at home and I do want them [children] being able to grow up in peace. There will be time anyway when they have to take part in a strictly scheduled life in a day care centre or in school.

A free and unhurried child is seen as being able to live her or his daily life without the schedules and routines the modern educational institutions and work-related responsibilities create for families. In that sense, the construction of the free and unhurried child corresponds with the quite generally accepted idea that the children's lack of responsibilities means that children do not work. Contrary to having work-like responsibilities, children are expected and even obligated to play and to be happy (Wyness, 2006: 9).

A child as time investment

The topic of the child as a social investment has been raised to the political agenda. International organizations like the European Union and the OECD argue for universal educational systems that would include education at an early age for children (Anttonen and Sointu, 2006). Nowadays, there are many economical as well as social political considerations that stand for the establishment of care services for small children. The institutional upbringing is seen as increasingly

necessary since children are seen as benefiting from professional care and the elements of social capital it generates (Strandell, 2012).

Despite there being increasing emphasis on the educational needs of the children, the 'home cared child' is not, at least to that extent, seen as a target of educational intervention or social investment. In contrast, the mothers relying on home care arrangements characterized children rather as the consumers of time and primarily perceived them as the targets of the time investment by their parents. In the home care context, the emphasis is put on the family time. With regard to this, it can be argued that the main difference distinguishing the general idea of the need for social investment from the parental time investment promoted by the mothers is the availability of the presence of the parents.

Thus the mothers interviewed underscored the value and importance of the time parents are able to devote to their children. The family time and the parent's volition to allocate their time for their children were seen as essential by claiming that it positively influences the children's development and their future lives. In that way, the home care was seen as a means to ease the social problems for the children as well as the families. A mother of two assessed the time investment as follows:

Interviewer: You said that being at home is an investment in the future. What do you mean by this?

Mother: I think that in this way children will grow up as well-balanced. They get a nice start for their lives. Such as an unhurried and peaceful life at their own home. And lot of presence from their parents.

A mother of two commented on the idea in the following passage:

There has been a lot of discussion about the social problems of children. It may be related to the busyness of the parents. Parents do not have time and willingness to invest in their children. I do not mean that they should take their children to amusement parks and so on, but what I mean is that they should just spend more time with kids and they should just live ordinary life with them. [...] I mean time for those small children.

Today there is a lot of discussion about the quality of the time parents are able to spend with their children. In the home care context, the issue is not only the quality of the time but also the flexibility of the time. The mothers at home argued

that home gave them an opportunity to spend adjustable time with their child. This is how the mother of two evaluated her mornings:

We have our peaceful mornings. Although we have kind of woken up, we still lay in bed and she [child] comes next to me with a book. Then we read together and get up when we want to.

As such, the time investment generated by home care was seen as a possibility to be flexible for the child's initiatives for doing things together. Once again, this can be juxtaposed with the cultural expectation of the everyday realities of working mothers. 'Peaceful mornings' or 'a possibility to stay in bed with a child as long as wanted' hardly belong to the commonly shared images of the practices of reconciling work and family.

If the 'home care time' is assumed to be flexible enough, it can also be assessed in psychological terms. As such, the psychological knowledge about child development produced by professionals frames our understanding of the child and the child's daily life. The positive aspects of home care are often linked to attachment theories, which define the best interests of children as having a stable and secure care relationship. In that way, the time devoted to the child is seen as a kind of precondition for creating a good psychological relationship between the child and the parent. A mother of two emphasized that aspect and reasoned as following:

I think that there is no need to rush back to work, because the more time you devote to your children the better you get to know them and the more time is devoted to care the better the relationship you have with your children.

A mother of three, in her turn, stressed the importance of professional knowledge on the developmental stages of the child and the need for parental care it entails:

I have read and listened to the experts in education and have on the basis of their views and of course also on the basis of my own common sense reached the conclusion that the first three years are the most important for self-development and that, thus, for that time it is also best that one of the parents is the primary carer in order to create attachment.

A child as a source of pleasure

It has been argued that in these modern times and in contemporary societies individuals possess more freedom to choose their way of life since the traditional social structures have lost much of their influence. Simultaneously, this tendency has meant that each individual must construct their own life trajectory, resulting in more pressures for self-reflections and evaluations. In effect, in cultural terms, individuals are even expected to assess their life choices and to interweave the different kinds of structural premises of life, such as social benefits, into their life stories (Saaristo and Jokinen, 2004).

As such, modern mothers at home not only take into account the best interests of the child but also pay attention to their own life path and well-being. This explains why the arguments for home care often involve elements of the pleasure the home care generates for the carer. As argued by Repo (2009) elsewhere, the discussions on home care often comprise an idea of individual familism that seeks to describe childcare arrangements as a field of individual choices and gaining individual pleasure. According to such a view, through home care, mothers get a chance to enjoy their children, and their children get a chance to enjoy the presence of their mother.

In this framework, the child is constructed as a source of pleasure and joy. Despite approaching the child as an object of educational needs, attention is paid to the satisfaction the company of child brings forth and the happiness that monitoring the children's development produces. The enjoyment of being there with a child can be a central motive for choosing home care, as the following quotation shows:

Interviewer: Could you be more precise and explain why you thought that being at home was such a self-evident solution?

Mother: It was just because I wanted to be together with my "star" and with my "treasure" at home as long as possible. I wanted to enjoy my child.

In the same vein, a mother of three stressed her ability to receive some rewards while being at home with her kids:

I feel that it [being at home] is most the valuable thing I can even do, but it's also the best that I can get. I do not believe that I can receive something more valuable or better while being at working life.

Home care solutions are often reasoned as the mothers' own choices. This implies that the mothers at home seldom perceive themselves as victims of gendered care structures but emphasise their own agency as a carer and their chance to spend relaxed time with their child. Home care is assessed as a kind of common interest for mothers and children. However, what is interesting here is that this common interest quite often reproduces the traditional gendered care practices (Repo, 2012).

Discussion

Strandell (2012) argues that in modern times the relationship between the child and the interests of the State has become more direct and intertwined. Simultaneously, this means that the best interests of the child is less mediated by family concerns. There are growing demands for expert knowledge and an institutional upbringing is seen as necessary for child's basic individuation process. This, in its turn, suggests that public day care with professional personnel is more than a mere supplement to home care. As such, within this framework, home care cannot compensate for the professional education.

The above-mentioned ideas challenge us to consider the role of public support for prolonged home care and the implications that long home care periods may have for the child's development. We can ask: Is the State support for home care actually in conflict with the best interests of the child, especially when it is also created to be an alternative for not using childcare services? Is the 'home cared child' a disadvantaged child in a society that emphasizes increased educational intervention and intrusion into the child's life?

When it comes to the opinions of the mothers at home, the answer to these questions is "no". According to the interviewed mothers, the 'home cared child' is doing fine. She or he enjoys the lack of responsibilities related to the institutionalized childhood, as well as the rush of the modern lifestyles of working parents. The child cared for at home is, in effect, very advantaged due to possessing a lot of family time and emotional attention. And most importantly, the child is generating pleasure and happiness for her or his carer.

The image of the ‘home cared child’ produced by the interviewed mothers is overwhelmingly positive. Although the mothers also highlighted the demanding aspects of home care, such as monotonous tasks, the need for constant surveillance of the child, as well as the lack of adult company, they assessed the home care arrangement as being beneficial for the child on the whole. In the long run, the ‘home cared child’ will grow up as a well-balanced adult.

There are huge gaps how a good childhood can be interpreted in a modern society. The differences in interpretation can be explained by the use of cultural frameworks, within which the best interests of the child are articulated. The ‘home cared child’ is predominately assessed through the discourses that stress the aspects of developmental psychology, the value of family time and the risks children face while growing up. The child is seen as a protected and dependent being. In the context of early childhood education, the child is reflected in futuristic terms within the framework of participant and learning subjects. As the study by Stefansen and Farstad (2010) shows, the parents preferring institutional care wanted to equip their children with skills and experiences that they could use and take advantage of later on. With regard to this, cultivating and teaching was seen as presenting a kind of necessary precondition if the child is to make use of the possibilities and challenges she or he will be offered “out there” later in life.

It seems that a discourse that favours home care intensifies a cultural idea of children as developing and vulnerable, and is thus the opposite of an assertion of the idea of an active child that represents children as competent and autonomic beings with participation rights. In real life, these cultural constructions overlap and cannot be presented in their pure forms. The parents and pedagogies have to take into account both elements of the children’s lives and they have to make a balance between respect and protection. Having said this, it is still important to assess how social political structures influence the constructions of the child and the daily life choices of families with children. There is thus a need to consider how the Finnish cash-for-childcare schemes could be developed in a direction that would more explicitly realize children’s rights to be cared for with protection and to participate with respect (Repo et al., 2010).

The dualistic nature of the Finnish childcare policies implies that the quality standards of care and the principles of early childhood education mainly concern children attending regulated public services, but seldom for children cared for

informally at home. This is why Karila (2009) claims that the Finnish childcare policies are actually creating different childhoods and educational polarization among children. The children's own views are also often excluded from the considerations of the care. In the future, it would be important to know what meanings the children themselves attach to the care they take part in.

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