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Family as Framework: gendered residential treatment of troublesome youth

Summary

This paper looks at the present social policy emphasis on residential treatment, which, if considered necessary or favorable at all, should be as family-like as possible. Based on an ethnographic study of professional social work in three Finnish reformatory schools, the paper claims that the usage of the term 'family' is highly dependent on each residential culture. 'Family' means a great variety of things. Meanwhile, the familistic approach meets the young female and male residents in different terms.

Introduction

Residential treatment has not been among the most favored topics for social policy researchers or practitioners in recent years. Non-residential treatment for any purpose and target group has been encouraged and debated far more actively than any form of residential treatment. There are, however, some trends taking place in residential treatment which should alert social researchers and practitioners for eager discussion.

In residential treatment of children in Finland, the professional scheme used at the moment more than any other is based on the usage of family as an interpretative frame. In this scheme the family is specified as the main object and tool of treatment - as in many other practices of social support and control (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990:131 - 150). 'Family rehabilitation' has been the focus of residential care since the early 1980s. It is argued that the child may not experience any disruption in his/her relationship with his/her parents during the residential placement and also, that the residential treatment is most efficient through cooperation with the parents. Greater job satisfaction and shorter placement periods, for example, have been reported as outcomes of the familistic approach to residential care. Some doubts have been expressed, however, about the biased use of the approach from the feminist perspective (Forsberg et al. 1991). In this paper I will develop the critical view to the familistic approach to residential care and take it a step further. I will look more closely at the use of 'family' in residential every-day life by using ethnographic data while focusing on residential treatment for troublemaking youth.

The setting: the three reformatory schools studied

This article is based on an ethnography of three state reformatory schools in Finland. The main aim of the study was to learn what types of behavioral problems among juveniles were treated and how they were treated in the setting of the reformatory schools. (Pösö, 1993.) In the field work, carried out over a period of 1 1/2 years in 1988 - 1990, most attention was given to the staff and their activities, and their ways of making sense of residential every-day life through participant observation. As the field work was based on ethnomethodology, the focus was on routines and commonly shared practices.

As a researcher, I attended the daily operations at the institutions for three months, ate in the common dining rooms, slept in the guest rooms, joined the staff meetings, therapy and supervision sessions and visits to the residents' families as well as the residential parties and professional training courses, talked with the young residents and their visitors and had discussions with the members of staff. I also systematically interviewed the members of staff about their therapeutic aims with the youngsters and used some of the residential documents to draw a picture of the history and present image of the institutions. The data is very rich indeed as the institutions made it possible for me to join in as much as I wanted. The analysis is very much a description of my encounter with the field, in which the emphasis has been on looking at practices and themes which were repeated throughout the fieldwork period. The 'ordinary' and what has been taken for granted in residential life have been my main interest in this research.

The study has been carried out in a troubled context, also historically. The first reformatory schools were established at the end of last century. At that time they were run as part of the justice system, but they were transferred to the social welfare system some decades later. As Finland followed the Scandinavian line of treating delinquent children (Dahl, 1985), emphasizing the child welfare system instead of youth custody, the role of the reformatory schools has been to specialize in the treatment of troublesome youth by employing the methods of social work and pedagogy. However, their image has never been very favorable: they were and still are seen as 'the last resort'. Placement in a reformatory school is still often done by the child welfare authorities when there is no alternative. The problematic behavior of the adolescents - minor crimes, truancy, alcohol abuse, conflicts with the family, disturbances at school - cause the school authorities and police to put pressure on the social workers to act; in some of these most difficult cases the solution is to place the child in a reformatory school. It is not only the contradictory image of the institutions or the present emphasis on community care which inhibits the number of placements made by the child welfare authorities, but also the costs: a placement is very costly indeed and public funds for this kind of purpose are limited.

Anti-institutional criticism of reformatory centers, also influential in Finland, has been quite severe ever since the 1960s. The actual number of institutions as well as the number of residents per institution have decreased dramatically. Another significant change has taken place in the area of treatment methods: involuntary long-term treatment has been replaced by volun-

tary, interactive and therapeutic treatment carried out over a shorter period of time (appr. 1 1/2 years). Treatment which favors hard discipline and work training has not been appreciated since modern therapeutic methods were introduced in the 1950s. 'In the best interests of the child' is the guiding principle of all treatment. Since the 80s, staff have received more and more training and supervision in family therapy or family-centered social work and the family-oriented approach is still seen as the best way to look after the interests of the children. The strong emphasis on professional and family work methods has made some of the institutions important developers of social work methods in Finland. In this sense, they deserve better than being seen as last resorts.

Interestingly enough, the change in treatment ideology has also had an impact on the composition of the residents: the residents of the earlier reformatory schools were mostly boys (3/4), but now the sex ratio is more balanced. This might imply that girls are placed more easily into family-therapeutically oriented residential treatment than into more discipline-oriented institutions.

Most of the guidelines and training in the family-oriented approach have been centralized for all the state reformatory schools (there were 10 of them during this study) as well as for the two privately run reformatory schools. This means that the staff in the three institutions studied must have been influenced by the same type of ideas and methods. However, the ways in which they had actualized the family-oriented approach differed very much, as the following chapters will show. The differences are challenging because the three institutions studied were similar to each other in many other ways: they were located in Southern and Central Finland and they provided the same type of therapy and school services for a maximum of 28 children from 12 - 18, with the same types of problems: delinquency, school truancy, family problems, running away etc. The structure and educational background of the staff were also much the same. The main externally visible difference was the sex of residents: one of the institutions took in girls only, the second boys only and the third institution boys as well as girls, the majority of residents being girls. The sex ratio was reflected in the sex ratio of the staff: the girls' institution employed mainly women, the boys' institution mostly men and the mixed institution both men and women. During the course of the field work, it very soon became obvious that the sex of the residents was, as a matter of fact, a highly important criterion used by the staff to define and construct the content and aims of the residential treatment and especially the family-oriented approach. Methodologically, this early finding argued in favor of looking at each reformatory school in terms of its own local culture (Gubrium, 1992).

The variations in family constructions

Below I will discuss the variety of the patterns of understanding residential culture and the role of family and family work in it. The starting point for the analysis was the metaphors the staff used as they described their institutions and their work to me, especially when they introduced me to the institution at the beginning of the study. I argue that the use of metaphors is not coincidental: they also construct and reflect residential every-day life. During the field work, the metaphors of 'family', 'home', 'prison or army' turned out to be used particularly frequently and correlated with many other presentations of the institutions as well as with my own interpretations.

Family as an emotional and social unit

What was applied from the family-oriented approach differed very much in the three institutions studied. The treatment policy and practice was based on 'family' most strongly in the mixed institution of boys and girls. The identities of the children as well as their social and behavioral problems and their causes and solutions were placed in the context of family life, and family was also a guideline in organizing the relationships in the institution. In this context, family was seen as the most fundamental form of human life, which is dependent on close personal ties, mutual communication and mutual positive emotions. 'We are like an expanded family here', I was told by the staff when I first went there. The same description was printed in the booklets about the institution and presented to visitors.

More so than in the two other institutions studied, the residents' families attended different forms of family therapy and they were also in close weekly contact with the staff to discuss the treatment of the youngsters. The homes were visited by the staff of the mixed institution too. This meant that even though the youngster had been taken away from his/her home, the family ties were not broken but quite the opposite: a lot of effort was put into improving and strengthening the family ties. Family as a topic was frequently discussed, with the child as an individual seen in the context of his/her family: for example, no case description of a child was made without mentioning the family and the family ties or the lack of them. The regular pattern of introducing a new child to the staff was to describe his/her family conditions in great detail - sometimes in more detail than the child him/herself or his/her norm-breaking behavior. The problems in the family were used to underline the seriousness of the problems and a lack of recognized family problems made the child's case 'unusual' and the interpretation more difficult and out of the ordinary. In cases where a family was lacking, certain substitutes such as boy-friends were used to make it possible to follow the routines of the family-oriented treatment. The substitutes were invited to attend the treatment meetings and they were discussed in the staff meetings.

The residents' future family life was given a great deal of attention. Learning 'family-like' life in the institution was seen as the best way to support the future life orientation of the children. With many of the staff living in the neighbourhood of the institution, the resulting close geo-

graphical community meant that the family members of the staff were quite closely involved in the residential life: for example, they visited the institution 'festivities'. Staff members encouraged visits to their own private homes in order to show 'normal' family life, including the habits of home furnishing, and sometimes the residents were allowed to help with baby-sitting or cooking. Due to the blurred boundaries between the residential and the staff's private life, the residential grounds, where the children and residents moved around freely, gave an impression of a large family environment with various contacts and relationships between children, teenagers and adults.

When the plans for the future of the residents were discussed in face-to-face interaction, the role of heterosexual relationships and marriage was discussed. This was done with the girls as well as with the boys. They were both encouraged to get a good training and position in the labour market, but that was not seen as enough: good adult life included family arrangements and ties. If the youngsters protested against that model of adult life, the staff referred to the power of love: their belief was that the protest would change when the youngster finally found the person to love. Since love as a basis for a good family life was seen as important, the family and heterosexual relationships during the placement were also encouraged and discussed. Heterosexual behavior was taken for granted and contraception was openly discussed. During the time of my fieldwork, the heterosexuality standard was slightly questioned only once. That case concerned a youngish boy who did not show any interest in girls. The staff had interpreted the problems of the boy as being of a psychiatric nature, including delayed psychosexual development, and therefore his family background was given more attention than his present or probable future orientation towards heterosexual family life.

Family as a safe home

In the girls' institution, the application of the family-oriented approach was 'family' used in the sense of home. The institution was seen as a place of safety against the cruel outside world to which people were hierarchically and gender-specifically attached. This was often put into words and realized by means of different measures. As the safety of the institution was so important, the doors of the institution were kept locked all day. The institution was situated far away from any main roads, 6 kilometres away from a small village center, in the middle of woods by a lake. Despite the isolated situation, typical for many rural houses, the staff was worried about visitors invading the peace of the institution. They wanted to protect the girls from any threat from the outside world, they said, and that was done efficiently by locking the buildings. Therefore the girls' movements in the residential area had to be regulated by keys and door checks. Additionally, the girls had to have a staff member to accompany them for any longer walk or bicycle ride or swim in the lake. As a matter of fact, the staff even kept an eye on the girls going to the school building, which was 300 metres from the dormitory building. The wards were kept in good order and the staff wanted to be able to keep track of what the girls were doing, where in the ward they were and what the girls possessed in their own rooms - for the safety of the girls, they claimed, to protect them from any possible harm they could cause to themselves. This meant for example limiting the use of scissors, which some of the

girls had used for cutting their wrists. To prevent any further occurrences of that nature, the scissors were kept in a locked drawer in the staff's office and the girls were allowed to use them only under supervision.

Socially, home as a safe place involved a stable division of roles. They were hierarchically organized, emphasizing the role of the staff members, and within the staff there were several sub-hierarchies with the length of work experience having priority over any formal job qualifications (in contrast with the values of the mixed institution). Most importantly, the hierarchies were organized according to gender. The directors of the institution were male - as in the other institutions studied - and they had absolute power to make decisions concerning any matters whatsoever. The girls had to obey the orders of the directors without question and they also had to show their respect for them by standing up in the breakfast room when the directors entered. Among the other staff, the few male members were highly valued and the female members often referred to their male colleagues if they had a conflict of any kind with the girls: the girls were asked to wait for the male staff member to come and decide what to do in that conflict. However, this was also done in order to create a safe atmosphere: when talking to the staff, it was often stated that the male staff members have a calming and balancing impact on the girls - the girls feel safe when there are dominating father figures in the institution.

The treatment practice was highly preoccupied with domestic skills and values as the girls were trained for future home life. To a large extent home life meant living in a home and the girls were supposed to be able to keep that home clean and neat. Specific behavior was seen as a part of home life, too. It involved speaking in a rather low voice, not speaking too much and speaking of appropriate topics. It also meant adopting a certain model of womanhood: being subordinated to a man, but only to one man and to a socially acceptable man. If the girls did not obey those norms, they were punished in a variety of ways, most often isolation in their own rooms. Professionally, what had been adopted from the family-oriented approach was the normative use of domestic order and behavior, not the idea of family as a set of relationships as in the mixed institution. This was visible in the therapeutic sessions and staff meetings, when the family background and conditions were discussed in different terms from the mixed institution: they were not analyzed in psycho-emotional terms but from a normative point of view. The staff were concerned about the appropriate behavior of the parents, especially of the mothers. Therefore, in the therapy meetings the parents' lifestyle was often discussed and reported to other staff. The lack of moral values and upbringing was held to be the cause of the girls' problems. Thus, the improvement in normative behavior and lifestyle would solve most of these problems.

Family belonging to the past

The boys' institution employed 'family' in a very rhetorical sense. The family-oriented approach offered a general plan for staff training and cooperation with outside social workers and welfare institutions, but in the actual residential practice family was visible only to a very small extent. Family was seen as a part of childhood which already belonged to the boys' past

and which was supposed to give way to a more public life. Even in the boys' approaching adult life, family was attributed only a minor role. In the treatment of the boys observed, the adult family life was not actualized in terms of house-keeping skills and domestic morals (as in the girls' institution) or of intimate family relationships (as in the mixed institution) but in certain routine forms of treatment (such as family therapy sessions). Basically, only specific staff members - the female social worker, the psychologist and the medical nurse - wanted to go on with this routine. The wish they often expressed was that little by little the staff would gain insight into the advantages of the family-oriented approach and that was why they wanted to go on with the rather empty routines of familywork. The majority of the staff, however, made fun of family work and wanted to introduce more sports and other physical activities as well as work and discipline related therapy forms. The clash of views among the staff was also reflected in the recruitment of new staff: the male applicants should be tall and strong and experienced in sport and hobbies such as wrestling and car mechanics (and a good record during their period of obligatory military service was highly appreciated too), whereas the female applicants were supposed to be tough enough to cope with the boys and to be ready to adopt the role of an emotional and domestically practical mother figure in the wards. In other words, personal and physical characteristics, rather than formal qualifications, were seen as the main criteria for employment.

In the treatment, family as a topic was only remotely touched upon: the family life of the boys was discussed mainly in terms of rules concerning the behavior at home. In the present and future life of the boys, work and/or crime were thought to be more important and significant than the family. In the staff meetings, the boys' behavior was discussed more than their family backgrounds or the family situation generally. The staff did not want to intervene too much in family life, although contacts with the families were kept up monthly, mainly in order to give and receive reports about the boys' weekend holiday arrangements. The boys' present relationships with other girls or boys were not discussed and any norms on 'good' relationships were not offered. This was also the case when, during my field work, one of the boys became a father-to-be (it was hinted that his more or less stable girl-friend was pregnant) or when one boy had violently abused a girl with his non-residential friends. Even in those cases, the boys' ties with other people were very much left to the boys themselves. According to the staff, the boys had to learn to be responsible for their own behavior. They wanted to teach the boys that responsibility by giving them some freedom (e.g. by keeping the institution unlocked, providing the boys with keys to their own rooms or allowing them to move freely around the residential area as well as letting them cope with their personal relationships according to their own insights), but also punishing them for the abuse of freedom (which most often meant punishing the boys for running away from the institution by isolating them in a special isolation room).

The idea of responsibility the staff expressed ignored human ties, including family ties of any nature. Heterosexuality was, however, highly valued, though in an objectified way: for example, pictures of naked women and pornographic jokes were part of every-day residential life in

the wards both for the staff and the boys. The topic of marriage also turned up from time to time. The boys were, in other words, encouraged to get a job that would enable them to support their wives and families. This means that marriage was primarily seen as a financial arrangement.

This means that the metaphors of 'family' and 'home', which the staff in the two other institutions used to describe the residential environment, were not used here. However, 'prison' and 'army' were referred to by the staff to make sense of the residential life. In terms of the use of language, the reformatory school was constructed as a source of public order and control for the boys.

The variety of the micro-level applications of the family-oriented approach described above shows that 'the family' can reach far beyond the actual existing family, either the nuclear family or any other type of family form, to symbolize the organization of the architecture and residential every-day life and to regulate the topics for professional case analyses. In addition, it can be used as an inter-professional label to create the modern image of residential treatment. The constructions of the family varied mostly according to the local residential culture. Therefore, the staff could view masculinity, for example, within or outside the family context. Hardly surprisingly, there was more stability in all the institutions in binding femininity with the family than masculinity, but even then the local culture was to adjust the content of the family.

Normalizing family life

The reformatory schools have traditionally been single-sex only. It has been said that male delinquent behavior differs so much from female delinquency that separate institutions and treatment programmes are needed. Quite recently, a new argument has been introduced saying that male or female-only institutions are abnormal as most of human life is based on the co-existence of the sexes. The residential life should be as normal as possible and therefore the two sexes ought to stay in mixed institutions.

This emphasis on the normality of mixed institutions has served as one of the guiding principles for reorganizing care in the Finnish reformatory schools since the 1980s. Nowadays, most of the institutions welcome both girls and boys, the single-sex institutions studied here being among the last to change their policy in this respect. During the period of my fieldwork in the late 80s, they made their final decisions about becoming mixed institutions. The normality they wanted to acquire through this change was described as regular family life: in normal families both sexes live together. This situation should be reflected by the institutions. What this idea of normality as a part of family life meant can be analyzed with the data from the different staff planning and training sessions concerning mixing the two sexes in one of the institutions which I was able to attend during the field work. That the data has a specific value as gender was explicitly discussed there and was not hidden as was otherwise the case, and therefore will be presented here.

In terms of accommodation, the two sexes staying together involved some changes in the use of residential space. The staff made plans to guarantee single-sex toilet and bathing facilities. However, these were seen as the easiest part of the changes required. The provision of new leisure activities and professional services was of a more complicated nature. To some extent, the demand for a new type of leisure activities was seen as a positive challenge. In the boys' institution it was thought that the girls would like to have more cultural activities and therefore the present emphasis on sports would be reduced, whereas in the girls' institution the boys were thought to prefer sports activities and therefore, the present indoor culture would be changed. This also means that there were certain stereotypes of girlhood and boyhood - the girls were cultural (meaning that they liked listening to music, dancing, reading) and that the boys were physically active (meaning that they were more outgoing and active). According to the staff discussions, it would be positive if the girls adopted something from the boys' activities and vice versa. At the same time, the fact that the existing residential cultures quite strongly supported - and even determined - girls being more culture and indoors orientated and boys being physically active was not regarded as a problem. The impulse for change was seen to come from the new sex and the challenge for the staff was to adapt to the new demands.

The residential staff regarded the new demands placed on their professional skills as the most difficult task in the process of 'normalizing' residential life. It was not only leisure activities but the whole way of being and behaving which was seen to be different concerning the new opposite sex. As girls are more cultural, they were felt to be more talkative too and to need more personal attention, discussion, supervision than boys. In addition, their problems were seen to be more in the psycho-emotional domain. Boys, on the other hand, were described as 'easier' in terms of psychosocial treatment. They did not talk so much and if they did, they used straightforward formulations, and they wanted to have their own privacy. Boys were not thought to be eager to discuss their personal problems. What the 'new' staff had to come to grips with was the functioning of the justice system, as most of the problems of the boys were of a legal nature. It was hoped, however, that the girls being softer and more cultural, would encourage the boys to distance themselves from criminal subcultures. In the understanding of the staff, the girls could teach the boys non-criminal attitudes and values, and were more efficient in that than the staff could ever be.

The model of two sexes living in the same institution is based on an understanding of quite rigid divisions of sex roles and, more particularly, of gendered forms of delinquency. The 'normality' of the mixed institution, in other words, reflected and also reinforced the general gender differences. What was most striking, however, was the way these differences seemed to be hierarchical: in the frame of residential care, the traits connected with boys and male troublemaking were seen as 'easier', 'less demanding' than the female traits. The girls as residents and troublemakers were described to be more difficult and demanding for the staff to deal with. At the same time, the girls were given not only the role of a resident but also the role of a client: in the 'normal' atmosphere of a mixed institution the girls would be hierarchically lower and less visible but useful for the rehabilitative purposes of the boys.

Based on the previous ethnographic observations, the interpretation of the normality constructed by introducing a mixed-sex residential policy could be critically assessed, as it seems to encourage a very oppressive view of womanhood and a hegemonic view of masculinity. The tendency is known also in other studies of the topic (e.g. Hudson, 1983; Ferrari-Bravo and Arcidiacono, 1989; Davis, 1989; Kersten, 1989). In the present social climate, regular family-life as an expression of normality used as a guideline for organizing residential treatment is therefore quite alarming: it does not only involve certain professional methods, techniques or frames used by the staff for analyzing the youngsters' behavioral problems, but also reinforces a whole set of gender differences and hierarchies. Ever more unfortunately, that set of gender differences is very rigid and reflects ancient patriarchal family patterns.

Family as a source of social control

The rhetorical emphasis on family-like residential treatment is not a new phenomenon. For example, David Rothman describes it as a central part of the debate about asylums in the United States in the last century (Rothman, 1971: 218, 234 - 236) and Nicole Hahn Rafter (1985) placed it in the specific context of women's prisons. What makes it worth pointing out now is the way in which it continues to apply: it is taken for granted that children, also teenagers, need family-oriented residential care (and preferably home care instead of residential care, e.g. Gottesman, 1991, xiv; Walton & Elliot, 1980) and in the case of residential treatment being actualized, it should be as 'home or family-like' as possible (Davis, 1981; Higgins, 1989). To some extent, the rhetorical emphasis has also become reality. However, from the point of view of the Finnish reformatory schools, familistic residential care is problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, familistic residential care is based on an idealistic assumption about the family and family life as it seems to ignore many forms of violence and abuse in the family. Additionally, heterosexuality and hierarchic gender differences as a part of family life are taken for granted. It also marginalizes those children who do not have any families or whose families are not cooperative for their own reasons (such as those in my data with serious mental or alcohol problems). Even more seriously, it ignores the potential of residential treatment itself as the institution has to be like a home and the residential relationships should be as in the family.

Secondly, familistic residential care in terms of social control treats girls more harshly than boys. As a matter of fact, in the study discussed in this paper, the family-oriented approach intervened in the most private thoughts and feelings of the girls but left most of the boys' personalities quite untouched. One could even argue that the family approach simply had very little to offer the boys. On the other hand, the familistic approach obviously strengthens the general impact of family as a source of social control over girls.

Thirdly, familistic residential care widens the objects of social control as not only the trouble-making child is the target. In the practices studied, the family members, especially the mothers, were 'naturally' included in the residential treatment. This should not merely be experienced as support, as the position of women as mothers in child care is a very complex one (O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995).

Most importantly, familistic residential treatment attempts to treat youth troublemaking as a family problem. Nevertheless, the treatment is based more on common-sense theorizing of family than on a comprehensive knowledge of the different traditions of family research. Therefore, the view on family problems is a strikingly normative one. It does not encourage any other traditional explanations to emerge. It means that troublemaking which is not seen as a cause of family problems is explained only vaguely. In those cases, the explanation of a 'lack of will' is introduced. As the previous chapters have shown, this means that the practical interpretation of troublemaking employed in the boys' institution is the boys' lack of will, defined more in terms of a criminological explanation, whereas the other two institutions present it more as a family problem.

Concluding remarks

As a source of social control and treatment for children with behavioral problems, the family can be a very powerful tool for the staff dealing with such children. This is so well-known and familiar to most of us that we easily agree with the superiority of the familistic approach to residential care, even in the anti-institutional professional discourse. However, family is not a socially innocent or harmless framework for any practice. Only if we recognize the gendered implications of the family approach can we use it to promote the best interests of girls, boys, mothers and fathers - in or outside the residential context.

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