The Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Refugee Children
-An Exploration of Attachment Security in Refugee Children

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Abstract
The aim of the Ph.D. project is to explore the psychological mechanisms involved in the transmission of trauma in non-Western refugee families, where one or both parents have been referred for treatment of PTSD symptoms at 5 different psychiatric rehabilitation centers in Denmark. The primary hypotheses are, that parental trauma disrupts attachment security in refugee children and that trauma communication within the family unit affects the psychosocial wellbeing of the child. A literature review suggests, that both silencing strategies and modulated disclosure can function as protective factors, and the Ph.D. project is intended to explore this puzzling finding further. These hypotheses are explored by using a mixed-methods design, consisting of a parental qualitative interview and questionnaires measuring parental attachment style, trauma and anxiety symptoms and the general psychosocial functioning of the child. The children are asked to complete a doll-play procedure known as The Attachment and Traumatization Story Task, which has been adapted for use with refugee children from a reliable and validated doll-play procedure (Haene et al., 2013).

A priori power calculations show that the study needs to include approximately 32 families in order for the main statistical analyses to be able to find an effect size of $d= 0.50$ ($\beta =0.80$ and $\alpha =0.05$ two-tailed). However, recruiting families for the study has proven to be very difficult. Currently more than 2/3 families who have met inclusion criteria within the past 6 months have declined to participate, bringing the total number of families to a highly unsatisfactory total of 9. In my presentation I will present the strategies used for recruiting families and talk about the major obstacles and challenges, hoping to generate a discussion about research ethics with refugee populations and ways to create an alliance with and gain trust from potential research participants.

References
Promoting better educational outcomes amongst minority ethnic students in Danish schools

Extensive research shows that children with a minority ethnic and migrant background are especially vulnerable, yet resilient. Educational attainment is positively linked with improved socio-economic and social integration outcomes for MEM youth. However, in Denmark, like in other Western countries, MEM students perform significantly worse academically than their majority ethnic counterparts. Extensive research confirms disparate educational outcomes and potential obstacles to achievement in school, but a limited body of research explores the link between what MEM youth need to succeed in school, and how these needs can be translated into policy, and implemented. This study aims to identify what MEM youth cohort(s) say they need to improve their educational outcomes, and how these needs are being met both in and out of school.

Research has shown that education is a top priority for most MEM children. Attending school is also identified by researchers as a protective factor in promoting the wellbeing and integration of young migrants.

A significant body of research confirms lower academic outcomes for MEM youth compared to majority ethnic youth in Denmark. Additional research identifies potential obstacles to academic attainment amongst MEM students, e.g., socio-economic status and level of education of parents, and language spoken at home. Educational outcomes and labour market integration are linked priorities of the Danish government, in its efforts to ensure the sustainability of its welfare system. In response to these challenges, policy initiatives have been developed to address the problem of low educational attainment and elevated school dropout rates.

This research project will explore in depth how one subgroup of MEM youth, namely recently arrived accompanied and unaccompanied minors experience education in Denmark, and how/if their psycho-social needs are met in and out of school. I will look at government initiatives to tackle school dropout rates amongst MEM students, and how students and educational professionals experience the implementation of these initiatives. Finally, I will identify best practices in retaining students at risk of dropping out in Denmark and internationally. The methodology will include in-depth interviews with MEM students, including those at risk of dropping out and dropouts, educational professionals, and other professionals supporting MEM youth. I will then conduct a policy analysis of all relevant policy pertaining to meeting the needs of vulnerable MEM youth and improving educational outcomes. I will look at how knowledge, policy and implementation interact to influence or not real outcomes.

Key words: EDUCATION, NEEDS, MIGRANTS

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1For the purpose of this research, minority ethnic and migrant (MEM) children are defined as under-18 years-old, born in the country of residence or migrated there, living with or without one or two parents with minority background.
Parenting practices and early infant development in immigrant families in Finland

Keywords: infant development, cultural variation, psychological research

Psychological research aims to understand healthy child development. However, the vast majority of studies have been conducted among middle-class families in Western industrialized countries (Arnett, 2008; Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Because infant development is embedded in the early environment and in the experiences that children have, this bias in research greatly limits our knowledge about normative development of the majority of children in the world (Kagitcibaci, 2005). Cross-cultural studies show important variation in the way children acquire for instance motor (Adolph, Karasik & Tamis-LeMonda, 2009), emotional (Keller & Otto, 2009), and cognitive (Keller, 2007) skills. These cultural differences mainly stem from successful adaption into sociocultural contexts. For example, family’s sociocultural orientation, i.e. family connectedness and the importance of interpersonal relationships, is related to the characteristics parents want their children to develop and therefore to parenting practices (Sato, 2007; Keller, 2007). However, besides cultural aspects stressful circumstances and harsh living conditions are likely to affect parental behavior and child development (Punamäki, 2002). Therefore, both parental well-being and culturally meaningful childcare practices are central in understanding normative infant development.

My PhD research explores parenting practices and early child development among immigrant families that have come to Finland from Middle-East, Somalia, and Russia, and among families that live in the Middle-East. First, I aim to identify universal and culturally salient characteristics of normal and abnormal child development and how they are related to parenting practices in these families. Second, the target is to provide practical information for social and health care services in order to cater for diverse needs of different minority groups.

In this presentation I report the primary results (piloting stage) concerning Middle Eastern mothers’ perinatal well-being and whether war trauma has impact on the family values and connectedness. Second, I report the mothers’ socioculturally relevant parenting beliefs and socialization goals for their children. The data are 43 Palestinian families in Gaza who were studied in their homes.
References


Participatory Action Research with Unaccompanied Girls: Methodological Challenges and Possibilities.

Keywords: youth participation, action research, girls’ empowerment

This presentation discusses the challenges and possibilities of conducting participatory action research (PAR) with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The presentation is based on a PAR with unaccompanied girls in a Finnish reception center. The PAR was planned to develop meaningful free-time activities from the girls’ starting points; something they found relevant and empowering while waiting for the asylum decision. The special status of unaccompanied girls raised many methodological questions: How to awake “conscientization” among the participants whose lives are affected by so many uncertainties and changes? How to avoid labeling the girls as “objects” or “silenced” although they think that they have no decision power, and they evidently have many “silencing” factors in their lives? How to encourage the girls to speak freely and not to associate our project with the asylum hearings? Is an equal subject-subject dialogue possible in a situation like this? How to enable meaningful participation instead of imposing culturally biased definitions of participation on the girls? What if the girls choose not to participate?

These challenges provided me with valuable information about participation and empowerment as the unaccompanied girls view it. Participation should never be mandatory: especially children who have had responsibilities exceeding their capacities can find the freedom of liability empowering. However, many girls used their initiative in realizing and analyzing the project. Through interpreted, non-formal and relaxed dialogue the diverse views of the shared lives could be discussed and taken into account. Assuring the girls that their views were important created eventually a vivid dialogue between us. Letting the girls participate as much or as little as they chose, going in and out of the meetings, was the kind of participation they wanted. Instead of threatening the continuality or the rigor of the PAR, it made the project truly youth-led. The project demonstrated that as a flexible and youth-centered method, PAR can promote culturally sensitive participation, acknowledging the special needs of the unaccompanied minors.
In the presentation I would like to present one article which I have written for my PhD thesis (I have finalized my thesis last week, defense will be later this year). The article is published in European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. I would like to ask the feedback of the other researchers on this article. I am interested to know how they evaluate the method, what the most important results and implications (for research, policy and practice) are according to them. And I am especially also interested in the questions the other researchers might have regarding the study/this article. This could also form a valuable preparation for my PhD defense.

Abstract article

Despite growing numbers of unaccompanied refugee minors (UMs) in Europe, and evidence that this group is at risk of developing mental health problems, there still remain important knowledge gaps regarding the development of UMs’ mental health during their trajectories in the host country and, in particular, the possible influencing role of traumatic experiences and daily stressors therein. This study therefore followed 103 UMs from the moment they arrived in Belgium until 18 months later. Traumatic experiences (SLE), mental health symptoms (HSCL-37A, RATS) and daily stressors (DSSYR) were measured at arrival in Belgium, after 6 and after 18 months. UMs reported generally high scores on anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Linear mixed model analysis showed no significant differences in mental health scores over time, pointing towards the possible long-term persistence of mental health problems in this population. The number of traumatic experiences and the number of daily stressors leaded to a significant higher symptom level of depression (daily stressors), anxiety and PTSD (traumatic experiences and daily stressors). European migration policies need to reduce the impact of daily stressors on UMs’ mental health by ameliorating the reception and care facilities for this group. Moreover, regular mental health screenings are needed, in combination with, if needed, adapted psychosocial and therapeutic care.

Key words

Longitudinal follow-up study, psychosocial well-being, daily stressors

Reference article


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The main research aim in this study (2009-2013) has been to evaluate a group based early intervention for newly arrived unaccompanied minors (boys) aged 15-18, mainly from Afghanistan (74%) and Somalia (22%) at a transit reception centre. Earlier screening for this group has been difficult, largely due to poor reading/writing skills. "Behandlungszentrum für Folteropfer Berlin" have developed a computer-based self-screening (MultiCASI), using «touch screen»-computers. In this manner, “Self report instruments” can be installed in different language versions, and sound files are added. All items can be answered by directly touching the screen, as written and audio versions appear simultaneously, and can be repeated by touch. All participants can be tested in the same way, no matter their reading abilities.

In order to validate the use of MultiCASI, 160 participants have been diagnosed according to the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI). This has been done simultaneously with the 3 month self-report test (Instruments tested: HSCL-37, and PTSS-16).

Another important part of this study has been the follow up at four test points; the latest at approximately 2 years after arrival to Norway. The data are being completed now, in September 2013, and the workshop in Copenhagen would be an excellent first opportunity to discuss the results of the longitudinal study. We also plan to compare our findings with the results from the group in Ghent.
Irmelin Kjelaas, Telemark University College/Norwegian University of Technology and Science.

Title of PhD-project: Professional communication and children’s participation

Key words: interaction, children’s participation, framing

This PhD project describes and analyzes communicative encounters between unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and social workers in an institution run by the Norwegian Child Welfare. Eight interactions are chosen as the primary data set, these eight being a part of a larger ethnographic material. Four of the interactions are formal and manual based and four are informal and improvised.

The focus of the project is on children's participation in the interactions, as participation and participant-oriented care and communication are key principles in psychosocial work with children, and is seen as particularly important in the work with vulnerable children, such as unaccompanied minors. Participation is however, challenging to achieve, especially in interactions where the interlocutors have very different backgrounds, experiences and communicative competencies (Linell 2011, Keselman 2009, Aronsson 1998).

Most of the research done on children's participation is based on questionnaires, interviews and document studies, and relatively few studies are looking at how participation is managed in actual communication at the micro level (Hall 2001). The starting point for this study however, is that participation must be done practically and actively in actual conversations with children: "[i]n this version of client participation, the nature of the talk itself is the solution: solutions do not come from grand plans but from the everyday comings and goings" (Foucault 1981:12). Thus, participation must be examined in its interactional construction and manifestation.

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One central aspect of the interaction and one of four main analytic categories in my project is framing. The concept of framing refers to various material and communicative premises that structure the interlocutors’ expectations of what the interaction is about, what the participant roles should be, what contributions are relevant and adequate and so forth. In my presentation at the workshop I would like to present some conversation excerpts, and discuss the framing of these and the consequences this might have for the unaccompanied minor’s interactional participation.
According to the Swedish Aliens Act (SFS 2005:716) asylum seekers may be granted residence permits on the grounds of “particularly distressing circumstances” (Chapter 5, Section 6). Awarding someone a residence permit in line with this provision means that the Swedish Migration Board (SMB) does not primarily consider the asylum seeker to be in need of refugee status or protection. Rather, in accordance with the legal preparatory work, this provision is linked to a joint assessment of a person’s personal circumstances, such as health issues or an “adaptation” to Sweden, thus to be used as a “last resort” in exceptional circumstances.

As part of my thesis project, I am currently processing SMB-decisions where unaccompanied minors have been granted permits due to particularly distressing circumstances. The aim of this part-project is to explore how the SMB constructs meaning in asylum decisions, when explaining why a child’s circumstances are “particularly distressing”, while simultaneously not considering the child entitled to formal refugee or protection status. What descriptions are made of these unaccompanied minors’ life situations in Sweden? Since it is a provision of “last resort” I am mainly interested in decisions that articulate what makes a case “exceptional” in relation to for example health issues or “adaptation” to Sweden. Qualitative text analysis will be applied (cf. Silverman, 2006). I am currently thinking about how I can do justice to this quite sizeable set of data containing several hundred decisions.

Keywords: public decision-making, childhood

References