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Childhood Homes as Moral Spaces – New Conceptual Arena

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1 Need to reassess 'home' in childhood

In our western cultural imagery, the idea of home is deeply embedded in a static realm of childhood we take for granted: a permanent place of comfort, security, privacy, family and continuity. However, although childhood is seen as 'home-bound', the importance of home decreases as children grow older and reach adulthood. In such thinking the child is regarded as competent, mature and independent when s/he moves from the parental home into his or her first accommodation. A child who stays at home for too long, on the other hand, is seen as problematic; possibly overdependent on home and unable to learn all the skills necessary for an independent adult life. (e.g., Christensen et al. 2000, 142–143.)

Yet homes in present society are no more static than personal relationships, with many children's lives characterised by the existence of multiple homes. As a result of migration, parental divorce or other critical life events within the family childhood homes can become multifaceted and sometimes even contested spaces (Ní Laoire et al. 2010; Autonen-Vaaraniemi 2009; Forsberg & Strandell 2007). Homes speak of gender and generational relationships which are always undergoing change and are sometimes in conflict (Smart 2007, 166). They also speak of more general socio-cultural processes. Studies of refugees, travellers and diasporic communities, for example, reveal the concept of childhood home as "more complex, unfinished, in progress, made en route so to speak". (Christensen et al. 2000, 141.)

Such relationships are naturally reflected in the multiplicity of physical childhood homes. Home may be situated in more than one place at any given time, between different geographic locations. Equally, one can speak about sequential childhood homes, with different homes being associated with different periods in the child's life.

Although the concept of home is widely used in child welfare policies and practises, we do, however, recognize that children's social relations and belonging to the place called 'home' are fluid, contextual and mobile. We therefore challenge the ideals of childhood based on a 'residential fixity of home' and as the only reference point. Evidently, there is a need to reassess the ideas of home that are used in child welfare policies and social work practices with children. Reflecting the ideas of home is important, because notions of home have different implications for the positions of children and some of them can be part of the othering processes of children. Indeed, such a need for reflection goes beyond the Finnish context that provides one of the primary resource bases of this essay.

2 Multiple and sequential childhood homes challenging policy and practice in social work

Some established institutional practices, even some universal welfare services such as school education and public day care often remove childhood from the home: children are asked to

stay 'away from home' to study and play. This does not question home as the standard and stable context of childhood years. Neither does having two home addresses as a result of the parents' divorce/separation automatically question the quality of the child's home in social welfare practices. The earlier approach to divorce, characterised by the ideas of a broken home, has been replaced with a new liberal moral order of joint parenthood across multiple homes.

However, when facing conflicts and tensions between the physical homes, the typical professional strategy seems to suggest that the adoption of one single home cools down the conflict. For example, in her research on step families, Aino Ritala-Koskinen (2001) found that in conflict situations the family therapists consulted used the idea of residential fixity as a solution to provide stability for the children involved. This means a hierarchy between the physical homes: one permanent home is given priority. One could ask whether this norm of one home as an ideal is similar to the nuclear family ideology as suggested by Smith (1993).

Both as an institution and as a practice, child welfare deals with the childhood home in many ways. From the point of view of the notions of home the practices concerning the placement of a child out of his/her home are most interesting. Linguistically, the concept 'out-of-home placement' describes very concretely the controversial norms concerning the sequentiality or multiplicity of childhood homes. The concept, as useful as it may be, is a tricky one as it builds on a binary assumption of homes: you are either at home or out-of-home, as noted especially by Tuija Eronen (2006). It openly ignores the fact that there could be many homes in children's lives. In a way, it also states that children who are placed out-of-home could even be seen as homeless. In practice and on the level of legal principles, out-of-home placements are not, however, meant to make a child 'homeless' – quite the opposite.

Concepts are never innocent; quite the contrary, they contribute to the making of social reality. We claim that the concept of 'out-of-home placement' for its part is a typical sign of the difficulties of addressing the multiplicity of homes, even when the practice is based on multiple homes. It underlines the distinction between home and 'non-home', and in our culture, 'non-home' is something less – very different from 'home'.

We therefore argue that the ideas of childhood homes should be raised as a topic of discussion in the field of Finnish societal child care policy and practices. The current situation is ambiguous. In one sense the notion of multiple childhood homes is tacitly accepted in our society, but the duality and sequentiality of childhood homes seem to be only partially recognised. Although multiple and contested norms related to childhood home exist simultaneously, there is little debate and knowledge on how and according to which norms socially mediated home situations are approached.

3 Homes as (contested) moral spaces of childhood

Lately, morality has been found as a fruitful research approach – also in social research – to the uncertain, complex and contested issues of our time (e.g. Thévenot 2002). One such issue could be 'Home'. If we accept the idea that home is not fixed and static, but also complex and fluid, it is important to ask how home-related interventions and decisions are evaluated, argued for, valued and justified in the context of institutional and professional practices of society. How are the arguments over 'good' or 'bad' childhood homes formed? Paying attention to issues of this kind can be at the heart of the study of morality.

In social work, the moral nature of the work has been recognised and debated, especially in relation to decision-making and face-to-face work, with child welfare being one key area in the analysis (King 1999; Taylor & Whyte 2006; Parton et al 2007). Studying the ways people negotiate moral paradoxes in their daily lives is seen more widely as a lens through which to view the multiplicity and complexity of current societies (e.g. Sykes 2009).

The idea of 'moral space' has been defined by David Turnbull (2003, 3–4) in the following terms:

"On some occasions, we all need to think through what is going on in different places (spaces) in which different matters are prioritised. […] Moral space is what we live in, all of the time, and often without giving it the attention it deserves. It is any space formed by social relationships, agents and events that protect some vision of the good life."

In terms of this definition, one moral space could be 'Childhood home'.

The concept of 'childhood home' tells us about cultural meanings and values and also about changes in them; in other words, it is a space imbued with social and cultural meanings. The cultural meanings of childhood homes are formed in interaction between people's individual perspectives on home and the larger structures of society/world (Aitken 2001, 18).

What interests us here particularly is the social structure embedded in the different institutional interactions between professionals, children and families, which according to our experience are currently framed by a number of hidden or taken-for-granted social codes/norms on appropriate childhood homes. Therefore, moral space here refers to the social evaluation and judgement of (home) places. Public child welfare policy, especially its institutional practices, can be seen as a space characterized by the moral evaluations of social acceptability, as the moral legitimacy of home practices related to childhood.

By addressing the concept of home using the concept of moral space we want to bring this hitherto overlooked topic into the discussion and try to make the implicit knowledge about home more explicit. For example, the notions of multiple and sequential childhood homes are constantly challenged by the notions of fixed and unchangeable homes which, as on-going negotiations, create a certain moral space for childhood homes. The moral space approach can provide a perspective to more nuanced and contested meanings of childhood homes than it is often possible from the more general legal perspectives, or psychological interpretations of child development, or theories about child welfare policies. Evaluating home as moral space in child welfare practices can provide a basis for reflection of the implications of the conceptions of home for particular children (Helavirta 2011). These reflections may open up visions of alternative conceptions of home. Further exploration is needed to assess the plurality of childhood homes faced in actual practices and personal experiences and to move away from abstract ideal or silent practice of home in social welfare work.

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