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Risk factors and survival routes: social exclusion as a life-historical phenomenon

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Social exclusion is a popular and widely used concept in the social sciences as well as in current European policy rhetoric. However, there is no general agreement on the content and use of the term; it has been used differently and for different purposes in different historical and social contexts. In this article, the social exclusion is understood as life-historical phenomenon. Two cases have been selected as representing the most extreme trajectories based on a larger follow-up study concerning former students of residential institutions for young people with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties in Finland. The cases give us an example of a detailed life-course analysis, with the emphasis on risk and protective factors and demonstrate that the process of social exclusion is a complicated issue that cannot totally be understood by analysing the statistical connections between certain risk factors and the life-course.

Introduction: the different meanings of social exclusion

Social exclusion is a popular and widely used concept in the social sciences as well as in current European policy rhetoric. However, although social exclusion is a central concern of both fields, there is no general agreement on the content and use of the term. In fact, it has been used differently and for different purposes in different historical and social contexts.

Hilary Silver (1994) and David Byrne (1999) have demonstrated how different meanings of social exclusion are embedded in conflicting political ideologies with different understandings of the phenomenon which, in turn, has resulted in different political programmes. By combining their views, one arrives at the following ideal-typical classification.

In the 1) *classical liberalist* thinking, as well as in the programme of neo-conservatism, the emphasis is placed on individual action. In other words, social exclusion is

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seen as if it were the voluntary choice of the excluded themselves, who are not willing, for example, to accept low-wage jobs, and also as the result of available welfare benefits, which are seen as promoting an anti-work, anti-social, quasi-criminal and welfare-dependent 'culture of poverty'. From this point of view, the excluded are seen as the 'underclass', with a culturally and morally deficient way of life. Adopting such a view leads to political programmes in which one of the most important aims is to create incentive systems that make work preferable to benefit dependency (Silver, 1994; MacDonald, 1997; Byrne, 1999).

According to the 2) *solidarity* view, which is a certain kind of combination of different social ideas, such as Rousseau-influenced republicanism, Catholic social thought and Durkheimian sociology, social exclusion occurs when the social bond between the individual and society – known as social solidarity – breaks down. Although this process is usually defined as multidimensional, with various forms of exclusion being combined, exclusion based on paid work is most clearly emphasised. As a result, social exclusion has often been equated with unemployment, at least in the current European policy rhetoric. From this perspective, the excluded people such as the long-term unemployed are viewed as outsiders as well as the 'others'. The political aim adopted by the advocates of such a view is to alter the limiting characteristics of the excluded and enhance their integration into society, with the help of education and training in particular (Silver, 1994; Levitas, 1997, pp. 21–28; Byrne, 1999, pp. 30–43).

In the 3) *marxist* approach, the role of post-industrial capitalism in the creation of contemporary social exclusion is emphasised. The widening income differentials and spatial segregation caused by the demands of a flexible labour market, and the subordination of policies to business interests, are seen as key issues leading to the social exclusion of certain individuals and social groups. From this point of view, the excluded are seen both as outsiders and the subordinated. The marxist view also challenges the idea that the solution to the problem of social exclusion can be brought about by changing individual skills according to the demands of society, and a flexible labour market in particular. In contrast, this approach emphasises the role of those who are doing the excluding (Silver, 1994; Byrne, 1999, pp. 44–59).

Within the context of empirical research, social exclusion has been examined from the points of view of social structure, social groups or individuals. The first-mentioned 'top-down' perspective views exclusion, for example, as an employment crisis or as a crisis of social policy or the welfare state. In other words, the changes in the whole society, which have consequences for some individuals or social groups in the society, are examined (Byrne, 1999; Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001). According to the previously presented classification, the ideological starting point of these kinds of studies, either conscious or unconscious is most frequently marxist.

It is a different matter when exclusion is examined on the level of social groups. Then research tends to be more sectoral, focusing on a specific population identified as being at risk of exclusion such as the long-term unemployed, drug addicts, the mentally or physically handicapped, school drop-outs etc. (Silver, 1994; Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001). In this case, the ideological point of view is usually solidaristic, but can also be liberalistic.

In this article, social exclusion is examined as a life-historical phenomenon; as the accumulation of different excluding disadvantages in the person's life-course. In this kind of approach, the starting point is usually solidaristic in nature. It has been argued, especially from the marxist point of view, that examining individuals who are excluded or 'at risk' of exclusion does not alter the structural existence of the social boundaries connected with the exclusion of individuals and certain social groups. However, social exclusion can also be examined from the individual point of view in such a way, that the starting point is the fact that individuals cannot have life-courses which are separable from the society of which they are part. This is also the starting point of this article.

Social exclusion as a life-historical process

On the level of individual life-courses, the process of social exclusion can be described as a hierarchical, developmental model (Figure 1), which consists of five stages. The starting point then is life-historical, which means that social exclusion is understood as a deepening and cumulative process that begins already in early childhood, when children are adopting the values, norms and particular forms of action with the help of which they will grow up and integrate into society.

According to numerous studies, one's social background and the life conditions of one's early childhood are strongly connected with adaptation to the school

1. Stage
Problems at school and/or at home

2. Stage
Failure at school and dropping out of school
(Educational exclusion)

3. Stage
Poor status on the labour market
(Exclusion from work)

4. Stage
Being part of a deprived sub-culture
(Uneducated, unemployed, poor)

5. Stage
Being part of a deviant sub-culture
(Criminals, alcoholics, drug addicts:
placed in prison or other institutions)

Figure 1. Social exclusion as a process (Jahnukainen 2001b)

environment and success in school, as well with selection into the different educational trajectories (e.g., Mehan, 1992; Kivinen & Rinne, 1995; Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2001). Thus the problems experienced in one's home environment often lead to a second stage of exclusion, which means failure at school or even dropping out of the educational system after compulsory schooling or even earlier. Dropping out of education, i.e. educational exclusion, is in turn strongly connected with a weak position on the labour market (see Benz *et al.*, 1997; Suikkanen *et al.*, 1999; Gangl, 2003). This is the third stage of the process. Being unemployed for a long time means not only financial problems but also leads to dependence on a welfare system. Simultaneously, the likelihood of joining deviant subcultures with other people in the same kind of life situation increases. Finally, when the last stage of the exclusion process is reached, there will probably be different kinds of life-management problems, such as addictions or physical/mental diseases, which, together with criminal activity, can lead to even wider exclusion and marginalisation. By this stage, the bonds that bind the individual to the society have already been broken in many ways (Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001).

The above-mentioned ideal-typical model can be criticised as being deterministic, as it seems to include the idea that once started, the exclusion process always proceeds along a certain, deterministic pathway. In addition, it can be argued that the model as such is exclusionary because the life-courses of those excluded individuals, who have not had problems in their home environment during their childhood, are ignored. Our point is, however, that the model should not be considered as an empirical generalisation but rather as an ideal-typical description against which the empirical reality can be examined in different contexts (see Weber, 1978, pp. 23–26). In other words, the model should be understood as a research method developed for examining and understanding different life-courses in different socio-cultural contexts. With the help of this model, not only can different risk factors and careers of exclusion be examined, but also different survival routes can be found. In other words, the most important advantage of this life-historical approach is that it enables us to answer the question of why some individuals with such excluding characteristics do make their way into secure, well-paid employment and stable families, whereas the life-courses of others with similar characteristics consist of difficulties such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness etc. (see also MacLeod, 1987; Järvinen, 1996; Jahnukainen, 1997). This kind of approach also raises a question concerning continuities and discontinuities in individual life-courses. With the help of a case-oriented analysis like this, it is possible to determine different life-historical turning points that have changed individual life-courses, and often in an unexpected direction (Rutter, 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Murray, 2003).

Background for the case studies

In this article, using the case-oriented perspective, two individual life-courses will be examined against the previously presented model. The cases have been selected as representing the most extreme trajectories based on a larger follow-up study

concerning former students of residential institutions (reform schools) for high-risk young people with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties in Finland (Jahnukainen, 2004b). In this longitudinal study, the 1996 and 2000 leaving cohorts of the state-owned residential institutions (reform schools) were followed up until 2002.

According to statistics from 2002, the total number of Finnish children under 18 years of age placed outside their homes was 14,187 (Stakes, 2003), which made 1% of all the child population under the age of 18. The majority of these children were placed in foster homes or in municipal children's or juvenile homes. The reform schools, which have been defined as the final step in caring for 'difficult to handle' young people in Finnish educational as well as in the child welfare system (Pösö *et al.*, 2004), have about 300 students, or only about 2% of children placed in foster care (Stakes, 2003). Placements are made expressly on the basis of the Child Welfare Act, on educational grounds. Thus, the intervention is not correctional in nature, although the aim regarding some of the children placed in reform schools is to interrupt a criminal career. The administrative responsibility for accommodation, rehabilitation and leisure activities is borne by the Ministry for Social and Health Affairs, while the Ministry for Education is responsible for education.

The reform school follows the same national curriculum as all other Finnish comprehensive schools, although it is often adapted to individuals on the basis of an individualised education plan. In line with the overall situation in Finland (see Jahnukainen, 2001a), it is very rare even for reform school students to drop out from the comprehensive school. In contrast, reform school students drop out from the three-year vocational education clearly more often than others of the same age (Toivola, 1988; Jahnukainen, 2004b).

In the original study (Jahnukainen, 2004b) the 52 interviewees were classified into five different career subtypes. For the purposes of this article, cases from the most extreme careers namely, 'the society adjusted pathway' and 'the cumulative risk behaviour pathway' been selected for a closer investigation. The life trajectories of young people classified as members of 'the society adjusted pathway' had developed in a positive way after their release. They had all had successful transitions into adulthood (high participation rate in further education, successful transition into working life, established own family), and they had low rates of adult problem behaviour. Young people classified as members of 'the cumulative risk behaviour pathway' group had had totally different life trajectories: none of them had gained any further education, they had hardly any work experience, and only few of them had had serious relationships or established a family. Instead, they had high rates of adult problem behaviour (high rate of incarceration, problem drinking and drug use).

Case studies

Both cases presented in this article are young men in their early twenties released from custody in 1996. The aims are, with the help of these two examples, both to present the connection between certain risk factors and later social exclusion and to examine the survival routes of individuals with such exclusionary characteristics. The

protective and risk factors (see for example, Murray, 2003) linked to different stages of the informants' life courses are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

Case 1: coping pathway

The interviewee was placed in a reform school at the age of 15 due to difficulties both at school and at home. There were several risk factors in the home environment, which, according to studies, are often connected with later social exclusion. The working capacity of both his parents had diminished, and they were outside the active labour force at the time of the placement. The biological father was an alcoholic, and the interviewee had a difficult relationship with his mother and also with his stepfather. It is worth mentioning that the interviewee has had practically no contact with his parents after leaving reform school.

Before the reform school years, the interviewee had not received any kind of special education, even though he had had little success during the whole of his school career. It could be asked whether the placement could have been avoided if special support had been received earlier. After being placed in the reform school, he spent almost three years there, up to his 18th birthday. During the last couple of months in the

Table 1.   Case 1, coping pathway, protective and risk factors in the life course

Protective factors
Before reform school
None
In reform school

- positive experience of reform school
- participation in the learning-to-be-independent period
- long placement (3 years)

After reform school

- long, supportive intimate relationship
- completion of vocational school
- management of alcohol use
- long career in work corresponding to education

Risk factors
Before reform school

- parents with diminished working capacity
- alcoholic father

In reform school

- committed crimes while in reform school
- difficulties in family unit

After reform school

- no contact with parents
- not involved in post-care measures

Table 2.   Case 2, pathway of accumulating social exclusion, protective and risk factors in the life course

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Protective factors
Before reform school
None
In reform school
- in principle, experience of reform school is positive
- no crimes during placement

After reform school
None
Risk factors
Before reform school

- previous placement in special children's home
- placement in special teaching group
- crime
- drug abuse

In reform school

- short placement
- did not participate in learning-to-be-independent period

After reform school
- no contact with family
- no work experience
- no vocational education
- no post-care measures
- homelessness
- crime
- drug abuse
- no intimate relationship
- criminal friends

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institution, and before moving to his own flat, he was placed in a family unit linked to the school (so-called 'learning-to-be-independent' period). Readjustment to a new situation was not easy, however, and he had social difficulties at the end of the placement. The interviewee has received no post-care services after completing reform school, and this can be seen as a risk factor related to the capability to cope with the challenges of adult life.

Despite some difficulties experienced in other areas of life, the interviewee's experiences concerning the reform school years are positive.

> Well I don't know … on the other hand I'm happy that I was in [residential institution], after all I could be involved in many interesting things there and er … I don't, I don't know what I'd have done otherwise, I can't know what I'd have done if I hadn't been there.

Interestingly, in this case, the problems experienced at home and in compulsory education have not meant adopting an unchangeably negative attitude toward further

education. The interviewee started attending vocational school while still in the reform school, but then dropped out. Dropping out was not, however, connected with motivational problems or learning difficulties. According to the interviewee, it was mainly related to problems in trying to square family life with studies.

Being a young father was not an easy thing to square with the role of student, and at the age of 19, he also started his national service. However, immediately after completing his national service he started his studies again, and after three years qualified as a truck driver (basic qualification in automotive and transport technology). He also started polytechnic studies leading to the degree of Bachelor of Technology in Transport Studies, but at the time of the interview he had discontinued them. In spite of that, he has been employed in his own field for a long time. Currently he has a full-time, permanent job as a truck driver in a large transport company, but he has also worked as a transport organiser.

> In fact I was there … from being a driver I moved in to the, you could nearly say management, I mean I arranged the transports there and I had 25 guys whose jobs I organised every day but about the pay, in fact the thing was that there was no point in doing all that for that amount of money.

Currently, the interviewee lives in a cohabiting relationship and has three children. He started going out with his present partner at the age of 16, which was obviously an important turning point in his life, after which his life-course has moved in a more positive direction in several areas of life. After meeting his life companion, he started to educate himself and was no longer interested in illegal activities. It seems obvious that the family has been an important emotional support in his life-course. According to the interviewee, being a father and a husband has, in addition to keeping him busy, also reclaimed him. His coping career has also been favourably affected by the fact that at no stage has he had an alcohol problem, although this is a rather typical problem among the group of former reform school pupils. Neither has he, according to his own words, ever used or tried drugs.

> Well, let's say … there's no time to hang around in bars. You know, three children and all, the youngest one is just seven months old.

The interviewee had not engaged in criminal activity before reform school, but while there had committed various crimes (such as car thefts, driving without a licence, one robbery and several other crimes against property). Immediately after leaving the reform school, he again committed a number of crimes, for which he received a conditional sentence. At the time of the interview, he still had certain remunerations to pay. It can be said retrospectively, however, that the interviewee was never seriously committed to crime. In his case, it was more like living up to the expectations of his antisocially acting friends of the time.

> Let's say that after I left the reform school then ever since I stopped all criminal activity and I focused on this … So if I hadn't done such things, I'd probably have a house of my own by now and, since I can't get a bank loan because I've still got that money to pay. I have to wait and, in fact, quite soon, after next year, I'll be clean, after that I'll be your ordinary Finnish guy with no criminal record or anything so …

In 2002, the interviewee's life situation was stable: his professional and family life were in balance, and he had a positive view of the future. In his case, the process of social exclusion never reached the third stage, despite the risk factors connected with his childhood. Failure in compulsory education did not lead to the adoption of a totally negative attitude toward education. On the contrary, he has since taken part in vocational education and succeeded in finding his place in working life. The protective and risk factors connected with his coping pathway are listed in Table I.

Case 2: pathway of accumulating social exclusion

The interviewee was taken into custody at the age of 10, at which time he was placed in a special children's home. While there, he completed his compulsory education in a special class for children with behavioural difficulties. He was transferred to a reform school only after compulsory schooling, while he was attending the extra class of compulsory education. While in case 1 the reasons for reform school placement were mainly connected with difficulties in school, in case 2 the placement was linked to breaking a habit of crime and drug use. In the reform school, the interviewee was placed in a family unit and he attended the institution's school. At that time, however, he was already so addicted to drugs that studying was in practice impossible. As a result, the placement remained quite brief, although it could have been possible for him to stay in the reform school's family unit for a couple of years more. However, he was discharged the following year at the age of 17, after some six months' placement in the reform school.

Despite average success in compulsory education, he has not entered further education. However, he has dreamed of studying in the upper secondary school, and during the interview he said he planned to complete it during his prison sentence (he is serving a 5-year sentence).

The brief stay at the reform school was positive in itself: 'I don't think I'd be alive without the placement in reform school'. However, he himself was involved in the decision not to continue the placement.

After being discharged from the reform school, and after seven years spent in various institutions, the interviewee went back to live with his mother. As in the old days, their life together was not a success, and except for the short period living with his mother, he has mainly lived temporarily with his friends or acquaintances. He has not been able to get a flat of his own. He says that his post-care plan has been revoked and he is currently a client of the special welfare office. In his case this means, according to his own view, that he has been excluded from various benefits such as housing benefit.

The interviewee has no work experience, no family, children or longer-term intimate relationships. On being asked about his livelihood he says: 'I've done quite well with crime'. In fact, he has committed a significant number of crimes both before and after reform school. What is interesting is that he committed no crimes during his placement. This may be related to the culture of the reform school and the interviewee's status in the hierarchy among the pupils. While case 1 was first seen by other pupils as some kind of 'nerd' who had to earn the other pupils' respect in order to be

accepted, the 'bad reputation' of case 2 was already well known in advance and he did not have to prove anything to anybody while in reform school. In fact, for the first time in his life, he had a chance to rest for a while, although only for a couple of months.

The interviewee has received four prison sentences for crimes including aggravated drug-related crime and thefts, for which he is serving his current sentence. He also continues to use hard drugs, although he has cut down on them while in prison. During his previous sentence he was in detoxification. One of his problems is that once out of prison he easily becomes involved with drugs again because of his drug-using friends and acquaintances. He has been exempted from national service and he has scant contact with his family: his father and elder brother are both dead, his mother has remarried and now lives further away, thus decreasing the interviewee's possibility to keep in touch with her.

According to the facts presented above, the life-course of case 2 can be seen as an ideal-typical example of the process of social exclusion presented in Figure 1. In his case, the problems faced at home and in the school environment were connected with dropping out of the education system. Also, the other stages of the exclusion process, exclusion from work, poverty and finally prison placement, are included in his life-course. At the time of the interview, nearly all the bonds that once tied him to the society had been broken. The risk factors, as well as the precious few protective factors connected with this accumulating pathway of social exclusion, are listed in Table 2.

General findings of the case analysis

In their pre-placement life-course, there were more risk factors than protective factors in both cases. This kind of situation is typical of young people under child-care interventions, when their families have not been capable of taking care of them for one reason or another. However, the young man on the later pathway of accumulating social exclusion (case 2) has clearly been in an even more risky situation early in his life because of his criminal activity and drug abuse. He has also been placed in a children's home and attended a special class before residential placement. In his case, the accumulation of problems has begun quite early in life.

Both young men have basically good experiences of the residential placement, but the placement was longer for the young man on the later coping pathway (case 1). Although he also had delinquent behaviour and social difficulties during the end of the placement when located in the family unit of the reform school, he was able to benefit from the special services of his placement. In the life-course of case 2, the only supportive factors were linked to the short time in reform school, which, however, represents the last option of institutionalised child care in Finland (e.g., Pösö *et al.*, 2004).

The most significant differences between these life-courses occurred in the post-placement years. Case 1 has been educationally resilient (see for example, Wang, 1998) and managed to successfully enter vocational education, completed his studies and succeeded in finding his place in working life. Retrospectively, he could be defined as having adolescence-limited problem behaviour (Moffitt, 1993). A highly

important factor in this positive transition into adulthood has been his early commitment to his current wife. The significance of supportive relationships for males at risk has also been found in some previous studies (e.g, Jahnukainen, 1997; Rönkä *et al.*, 2002). The other significant factor worth mentioning is that, although his father was an alcoholic, he himself has never had a drinking problem.

The situation of case 2 has turned in a totally opposite direction. He has never been able to enter further education or the labour market, or establish a more serious relationship. After the short time spent in reform school he returned to his old neighbourhood, started hanging out with old friends and was soon again involved in illegal activities. In this kind of context, with many risk factors connected with social exclusion and no supportive factors related to life management, it is not surprising that he continued his life of crime, hard drinking and illegal substance use, and was finally sent to prison. Retrospectively he could easily be defined as having antisocial syndrome (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) or life-course-persistent problem behaviour (Moffit, 1993). From the sociological point of view, such explanations are, however, not sufficient if the aim is to understand why some individuals with certain excluding characteristics cope well in their adult life, whereas the life-courses of others with similar characteristics consist of serious difficulties in different areas of life. In other words, individual life-courses cannot be separated from the society of which they are part.

It can be argued on the basis of sociological theories of identity formation (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 1999) that life histories and individual biographies can be understood as a lifelong process of learning. Since the social environment and identity are interrelated, different social circumstances make different learning experiences possible. In a certain societal and (life-)historical context, one learns who one is and where one's place is amongst other people. This conception of the self in turn affects one's view of the future. If the experiences concerning the self are positive, and you think you have good chances of influencing your future, you will act in a goal-directed manner and will form a coherent picture of your future possibilities. On the other hand, if you think you have little control over your future, you will probably experience the future in a confused, hopeless and fatalistic manner. The significance of the protective factors examined earlier in this article, and especially the social and psychological support received from the 'significant others' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Collins, 1988) are central in the learning process concerning the self. What we can say for sure about case 2, is that, in his life-course, the accumulation of problems has continued gradually since early childhood, and none of the interventions made by society has managed to break the vicious circle.

Conclusion

This article summarises the life-courses of two individuals formerly placed in residential institutions for young people with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties in Finland. These individuals could certainly be defined as high-risk youngsters (e.g., Bullis *et al.*, 2004). On the basis of results from numerous follow-up studies concerning young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, the prognosis

for their post-placement situation is not good: in general terms, high rates of school drop-outs, high incarceration rates, low rates of employment and low rates of post-secondary school attendance are typical of this very group (Murray, 2003). However, on an individual level, and based on qualitative follow-up studies made in recent years (Jahnukainen, 1997, 1999; Kivirauma & Jahnukainen, 2001; Todis *et al.*, 2001), it is obvious that there are many different kinds of pathways into adulthood. Even in this kind of risk group, life-courses of both inclusion and exclusion can be found.

The case descriptions presented in this article give us an example of a detailed life-course analysis, with the emphasis on risk and protective factors. What we have tried to argue is that the process of social exclusion is a complicated issue that cannot totally be understood by analysing the statistical connections between certain risk factors and the life-course. Our analysis is, however, preliminary in nature, and it is obvious that more profound analysis will be needed, using both quantitative and qualitative analyses, in order to fully understand the process and mechanisms of social exclusion. Meanwhile, the big challenge for societies and experts in different social services is how to intervene in the lives of the risk youths and their families at the right time with the right methods. Although education and other societal services may have a preventive effect (e.g., Jahnukainen, 2004a), it seems, interestingly, that much more power lies in totally non-institutionalised and non-formal factors such as close human relationships.

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