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Chapter 8

No Longer Parents or Parents in Need of Support? Views of Child Welfare Experts on Birth Parents

Maija Jäppinen

Introduction

The child's right to live and be raised in the family and to know their parents is one of the central principles of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC 1989). The Family Code of the Russian Federation (1995) emphasises the same principle. Indeed, the child's right to a family – although not necessarily their birth family – is at the heart of ongoing deinstitutionalisation reforms to the Russian child welfare system. While the family policy of the 2000's supported prosperous young families based on the pro-natalist goals of increasing the birth rate (Chandler 2013; Cook 2011), in recent years, as discussed in this volume, special attention has also been paid to children deprived of parental care. In essence, the ideological goal has remained the same: strengthening families. The state emphasises 'traditional' family values and the role of the heterosexual nuclear family, calling such a family the main social unit of Russian society.

Nevertheless, there is a strong moralistic tone in this talk about parenthood, and not all parents are regarded as valuable in their children's lives. This chapter focusses on often-silenced margins of parenthood, i.e. on the birth parents of children who have been placed into alternative care with either foster families or institutions. Their role has so far gained little attention in ongoing child welfare reforms; more focus has been given to developing the foster family system and reforming the remaining institutions into a more home-like condition (Kulmala et al. forthcoming 2020). Work with birth parents has not yet become the object of significant attention either in the reforms or in research on Russian child welfare.

This chapter analyses the views of child welfare experts on the birth parents of children who have been placed into alternative care either temporarily or permanently. These representations are an interesting topic of analysis, because they are closely related to the system's ability – or inability – to develop family support services, preventive work with families and support for birth parents in order to enable the return of children to their birth families after an alternative care placement, which are set as goals in the strategic documents of the reform, such as the National Strategy for Action for Children (2012), National Concept of Family Policy (2014) and the Government Decree #481 on the Activities of Organisations for Orphans (2014).

Drawing from a constructionist research on social problems (Miller, Holstein 1993; 2017), this chapter claims that suggested solutions to the problem of 'social orphanhood' as well as possibilities to develop new methods of working with the birth families depend heavily on the representations which the child welfare experts make of birth parents. Therefore, it is interesting and important to analyse how child welfare experts view birth parents. Are the birth parents seen as important persons in their children's lives even though they have not always been able to give their children everything they needed? Are they seen as capable of change, or regarded as 'lost cases' and do they need punishments or support? The chapter asks: what kind of discourses and discursive strategies do child welfare experts use when talking about the birth parents of children in alternative care and their parenthood? How do they see the role of the birth parents in the lives of these children?

The analysis is based on expert interviews conducted in several regions of Russia with state and municipal child welfare experts, as well as with representatives of non-governmental organisations working in the field of child welfare, in 2015 and 2018.

The Russian Child Welfare System and Birth Parents

To understand the Russian child welfare system, it is important to understand how families and parents with problems are traditionally viewed in Russia. In the Russian legal system, two key concepts organising the state's concern for children in need of protection are when the child/family are in a 'socially unsafe situation' (*v sotsialno opasnom polozenii*) and in a 'difficult life situation' (*v trudnoi zhiznennoi situatsii*). Federal Law FZ-120 'On the Prevention of Child Negligence and Youth Offences' (Federal Law 1999) considers the socially unsafe situation of a child/family as caused by parents who neglect their parental responsibilities in raising their children and who abuse or negatively impact their children. In addition, also included are children with 'deviant', 'criminal' or otherwise asocial behaviour. The legislation underlines parental responsibility in raising and socialising a child; a child's deviant behaviour in turn is framed as a consequence of negligence rooted in insufficient parental care (Prisiazhniuk et al 2015: 24; Kulmala et al forthcoming 2020).

In addition to the above-mentioned concepts defined in the law, the loosely defined but undoubtedly stigmatizing concept of 'unfortunate family' (*neblagopoluchnaya sem'ya*) became widespread in the 1990s. This concept was rooted in the institutional language used by post-Soviet social workers and public authorities as well as in the discourse of wider public. The notion of the 'unfortunate family' lumps together such life situations and categories of families as one-parent families, families with many children and families living in poverty (Yarskaya-Smirnova 2010). As Khlinovskaya-Rockhill (2010, 36-37) argues, in the post-Soviet Russian context, the marginality of these families is not explained so much by socio-economic status, unemployment or other conditions as they would be in many other societies, but by the personal and moral characteristics of the parents, their personal failures and deviancy.

This view has its roots in the Soviet era, during which the state – at least officially – guaranteed full employment and relative socio-economic prosperity for all families. Thus, family problems were not explained in the light of social problems and inequality, which in official terms did not exist, but by the personal traits of the family members and their moral characteristics. In addition, when unemployment and poverty emerged as explanations in the post-Soviet

discourse, there was a strong subtle classification of these people into different groups, e.g. the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, again with a strong evaluation of their possible immorality, asocial characteristics and other personal inadequacies (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010: 37-38). Accordingly, in the Soviet times, 'working with the family' did not mean supporting the parents, but admonishing them and expecting that, as a result, they would correct themselves. If not, the authorities could use specific sanctions towards these irresponsible parents. (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010: 100).

Scholars classify child welfare systems into child protection-oriented, family service-oriented, and child-focusing (Gilbert 1997; Gilbert, Parton, Skivenes 2011). In a child protection-oriented system (for example, in the USA or Canada), family intervention takes place to protect the child from abuse by their parents or other relatives. This approach is characterised by an emphasis on legal proceedings, little cooperation with birth parents and a large number of cases of forced placement of children into alternative care. A family support-oriented child welfare system (such as in the Scandinavian countries) emphasises the importance of support to solve family problems. Families are offered therapeutic support, cooperation with parents is valued, and the emphasis is on the provision of non-residential services and voluntary removal from the family. In addition to these two, in recent years a child-focused model, which emphasises the child's own agency and participation in the decision-making on their own issues, has emerged in many countries (Gilbert, Parton, Skivenes 2011; Pösö, Skivenes and Hestbaek 2013; Tulensalo 2016).

Based on the above classification, the Russian child welfare system – still with strong path dependencies from the Soviet time – can so far be seen as child protection-oriented. Traditionally, the employees of child welfare authorities have intervened in the situation of problems in the child's life at a late stage, but the interventions are rigid, often based on the child's removal from the family rather than on providing support services to all family members. Parents in such a situation have been more likely to receive condemnation for neglecting their parental responsibilities than be provided with therapeutic support. After the child's placement into alternative care, parental rights may be limited or terminated. In general,

the limitation of parental rights applies, for example, in cases where the parent's mental illness or difficult life situation has led to the removal of the child from the family. The basis for termination of parental rights may be a neglect of parental duties, abuse of alcohol or drugs or the physical abuse of a child (Family Code of the Russian Federation 1995). Of the above two measures, termination of parental rights is most often used (Biryukova, Sinyavskaya 2017).

One of the objectives of the reform, however, is for there to be more cases where parental rights is limited rather than terminated. In addition, as discussed by Jäppinen and Kulmala in this volume, there seems to be a growing new group of children placed 'temporarily' into institutions without the limitation or termination of parental rights. This trend can be seen at least partly as an attempt to preserve relations between the child and the birth parent, regardless of the need for alternative care. Moreover, at least baby steps have been taken to develop support services for families in order to prevent the need for alternative care. The Russian child welfare system differs from many other countries in the concepts used. Children in alternative care are usually called 'orphans', regardless of whether their parents are alive or have had their parental rights terminated by a court decision. Most of these children are 'social orphans', i.e. children whose parents are alive but do not participate in the lives of the children. Social orphans make up about 80 per cent of all 'orphans' in the Russian Federation (Biryukova, Sinyavskaya 2017).

In the current period, new reforms aim to reduce 'social orphanhood'. This should be reached by developing family support services in order to avoid the removal of children from birth families, moving the accent of alternative care from institutions to foster families, and developing forms of support and training for foster families. Key steering documents of the reform, such as the 'National Strategy for Action for Children' (2012) and the 'Government Decree #481 on the Activities of Organisations for Orphans' (2014), speak about supporting the birth parents of children in alternative care to make it possible for the child to return to their family. However, the implementation of this aspect has so far not been given enough attention. Until now, the most significant measures have been concerned with the development of the

institution of the foster family and the creation of home-like conditions in the remaining institutions. Importantly, although the reform strives to decrease 'social orphanhood', the system constantly produces new 'social orphans' through the practice of the termination of parental rights.

The effectiveness of the reform is measured not by the breadth of the range of measures aimed at supporting birth parents, nor by the number of children returned after removal to their families, but by the number of children transferred from institutions to foster care (Kulmala 2017; also Jäppinen and Kulmala, in this volume). Statistics show that the return of children to their families is not a priority of the reform (Biryukova, Sinyavskaya 2017). Systematic changes can nevertheless have a positive impact on the development of preventive services aimed at early family support. If successful, these changes may be the first step towards reorienting the Russian child welfare system for providing services to families. As Kulmala, Jäppinen and Chernova (forthcoming 2020) argue, as a result of the ongoing reform one can see that the orientation is shifting toward child-focused and family support, at least at the level of ideas.

Data, Methodology and Conceptual Framework

The analysis in this chapter is based on interview data produced between 2015 and 2018 as a part of an interdisciplinary research project led by Meri Kulmala entitled 'A Child's Right to a Family: Deinstitutionalisation of Child Welfare in Putin's Russia'. The project involved almost 200 interviews with representatives from federal-level, regional and local non-governmental organisations; regional officials; directors of residential institutions for children; and foster parents; and care leavers in several regions of Russia. The empirical data used in this chapter consist of 31 expert interviews with employees of public institutions including child protection services (*opeka*), family support centres (*tseñtr sodeystviya semeynomu vospitaniyu*), and children's homes (*detskii dom*), as well as NGO actors and policy-makers. These were conducted in one region in Central Russia in 2015 and two regions of North-West Russia in 2018ⁱ The first

dataset from Central Russia from the year 2015 has also been analysed in an article on child welfare experts' discourses on birth parents published in Russian (Jäppinen 2018).

Because of the different educational and organisational backgrounds of the interview participants, I have decided to describe them with the general concept of 'experts'. This means that they all hold some kind of expert status in the field of child welfare, but they do not represent a certain profession or a united educational background. Another important choice is to use the concept 'birth parents' instead of 'biological parents', as the latter contains in the Russian context a pejorative connotation, diminishing these parents to being merely transmitters of genes, who have never really taken care of their parental responsibilities. In Russian-language discussions, including the data of this study, these parents are often called 'blood parents' (*krovnye roditeli*), but the concept of birth parents is applied here, because with regard to the concept of the biological parent, it is the most commonly used term in the international literature on children's rights and child welfare.

Theoretically, the analysis is inspired by the ideas of constructionist research on social problems, and especially the ideas of social problems work (Miller, Holstein 1993; 2017). Social problems work refers to activities implicated in the recognition, identification, interpretation and definition of conditions that are defined as 'social problems', and the collective analysis and understandings constructed of these problems, possible solutions to them and necessary changes and procedures. A central idea to this is that human beings interpret and construct social problems through ongoing discursive processes. (Holstein, Miller 2017.)

Accordingly, the data was analysed using the tools of discourse analysis. In discourse analysis, the analytical focus is put on how speech is used to build concepts and ideas about the world around us, and we do not consider speech only as a means of transmitting information (Gee 2010). More specifically, this study relates to the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which suits well to analysis of social problems and discourse analytical examination of professional and institutional power (Van Dijk 2015), in this case on the discursive power

exercised by child welfare experts' representations of birth parents. The child welfare experts of this study hold a remarkable amount of power in how they view birth parents and their parenthood. The way in which they discursively frame birth parents has consequences: the discourses affect decisions taken by child welfare officials as well as service development and delivery. The expert interviews can be viewed as speech acts in which discourses and discursive strategies are revealed.

One of the assumptions lying behind the analytical focus of this chapter is that the ideational changes to the Russian child welfare system has also led to discursive changes among the child welfare experts. At the same time, it is important to remember that the correlation of political trends with wider social assessments and perceptions is ambiguous (Murray, Powell 2009). Changes made to political decisions are not immediately reflected in the mind-set of experts, who are also affected by the most common social attitudes and stereotypes. On the other hand, some of the interviewed experts may be forerunners in their thinking and ways of speaking, and their opinions may be transmitted to higher decision-making levels. When researching child welfare reform, it is important to analyse both the leading political reform strategies and interviews with experts who directly implement these strategies. The article focuses on the views of the experts. The political documents and their strategies for updating the child welfare system serve as the starting point for the analysis, and the discourses used by the experts are compared to the political goals set from above.

In what follows, I will elucidate the two main discourses found in the interview data, namely the discourse of parents as 'no longer needed' and the discourse representing parents as 'in need of support', and the five discursive strategies related to them. In the data excerpts used in the following sections of the chapter, I have used underlining to highlight certain discursive choices made by the interview participants. To protect the anonymity of the research participants and their clients, the exact geographical places and organisations in which the interviews have been conducted are not indicated, and all names and other information possibly leading to recognition have been changed or left out.

The Discourse of Parents as 'No Longer Needed'

In my earlier analysis on the first dataset from Central Russia from 2015, I was surprised by how little talk on the birth parents of children in alternative care there was in general in the data (Jäppinen 2018). Much more attention was paid to training adoptive parents, finding new homes and families for children who are still being raised in institutions, and adoption as the best solution to the problem of 'social orphanhood'. Cases of the return of children from alternative care to their birth parents were constructed as exceptions, as an employee of child protection services (*opeka*) explained:

I. Is there a practice of returning children from foster families to birth families?

E. There are practically no returns to birth families unless someone returns from prison, but this is one out of 300 children. There are one or two children per year. So we know this and we arrange custody for this period. And so, in order to be restored in parental rights... practically no one is restored.

The rareness of the returns of parental rights still in this Central Russian region in 2015 reflects the 'traditional' way of portraying birth parents as a lost resource in the child's life after placement into alternative care. This discourse of parents as no longer needed is first of the two main discourses in the interview data. Next I will present three discursive strategies used by the interview participants within this discourse.

The discursive strategy of representing birth parents as 'former parents'

After the termination of parental rights, parents and parenthood cease to exist both in juridical terms and symbolically. The concept of 'social orphan' applied to these children emphasises this. Literally, an orphan means a child who no longer has parents. Elena Khlinovskaya Rockhill (2010), who conducted ethnographic research in children's homes in the Russian Far East

before the reform in the early 2000s, has called this phenomenon the symbolic death of birth parents. In my data, this also becomes palpable in the discursive strategy of talking about these parents as 'former parents', as a policy-maker did in an interview conducted in 2018:

Contacts with close relatives and former parents are a problem, of course. In my opinion, there is really negative progress in this respect in our region.

There are only single cases in which parental rights are returned.

Nevertheless, children keep the contact. I have talked about this with many people. I see here an exploitative attitude.

By exploitative attitude, the interviewed policy-maker means, in my interpretation, that the 'former parents' do not take care of their children as supposed, but leave their care to the state. Because of this withdrawal from parental responsibilities, they picture it as morally condemnable to maintain contact with the children. In this discourse, parents who do not take care of their responsibilities should just disappear from the lives of the children.

The discursive strategy of viewing contact with 'former parents' as dangerous

In the above citations, it becomes evident that according to the opinions of these interview participants, birth parents should better not participate at all in the lives of their (former) children. Exceptions to this are portrayed as a dangerous to successful transition to alternative care, and keeping in contact was constructed as negative to a child's wellbeing. This was accompanied by an idea that a foster family can completely replace birth parents. In this discourse, the termination of communication with the birth parents occurs in the interests of the child, and the possibility of a child's return to the birth family is seen as a tragedy.

There are these very sad (*pechalnye*) situations, in which, for example, foster parents take the kids, because the child protection services has offered them to these parents, and then in two or three months they are taken away from the foster family, because the birth mother appears and wants a return of her parental rights.

The data excerpt above is from an interview with a foster parents' NGO representative, and looking at things firmly from foster parents' point of view may explain the discursive choice of representing the return of the child to their birth parents as a tragedy. Nevertheless, employees of the child protection services – those authorities preparing the decisions – also often constructed maintenance of contacts between birth parents or relatives and children as dangerous to the child's adaptation to their new family and stability in their lives. Thus, the activity of birth parents and their desire to keep in touch with their children were considered as negative and even destructive for the child. In the following citation, a director of a children's home constructed it as being in a child's best interest to cut their ties with their birth family:

The big task here is how to find an approach to children so that they understand that this is done for their benefit. And we must create conditions so that they are ready to go to foster families and that they understand that the foster family may well replace the birth one. [...] The attitude of relatives of our children is sometimes negative because most children have relatives, [whose] parental rights are terminated, they even come to meet some of them: Moms and dads who are alcoholic and seem to say that they will take the child, but it is clear that they will never take it. They only disturb the further development of the child.

In this discourse, adoption was considered the best decision for the child, as the change in family ties became final, which protected the child from returning to their birth parents. Experts also emphasised that another change in family ties after successful adaptation in a foster family could be traumatic for the child.

The discursive strategy of pointing at neglected parental responsibilities

The Russian Family Code is based on the idea of the rights and responsibilities of children and parents. One of the dominating representations of birth parents in the data was to view them as persons who have neglected their parental responsibilities. From a statistical point of view,

'neglect of parental responsibilities' is also the most common ground for termination of parental rights (Biryukova, Sinyavskaya 2017: 372). This discursive focus emphasises that there are no rights without responsibilities and no parenthood without the fulfilment of parental responsibilities. The removal of a child from the family and the termination of parental rights in experts' views seemed to be an insufficient measure applied to parents who neglected their parental duties, and they believed that parents should be punished for this neglect accordingly.

Most importantly, maybe what is missing is responsibility. Today, we just had a reception for citizens in the morning. We talked about the fact that, well, a mother was terminated of parental rights, a father was terminated of parental rights, they continue to party and drink, alimony is some ten roubles a month, let them pay. But we actually created all the conditions for them to continue such a way of life. They do not have a child to look after, to raise. [...] But such parents need not just to be relieved of their parental rights, but some punishments are needed, perhaps up to imprisonment of such parents who constantly abandon their children.

The policy-maker speaking in the above citation constructed birth parents' inability to take care of their children as an active choice to abandon them. This is an illustrative example of a discursive strategy that emphasises how experts hold parents responsible for their decision to neglect the needs of their children and give them to other people to be raised. The key issue in this discourse is the irresponsibility of parents and how they can be pushed to re-take responsibility for their children. One interviewed employee of the child protection services, for example, expressed hope for the emergence of legislation on parental responsibility, thanks to which it would be possible to return most children to their birth parents. Importantly, this would be done with the power of punishment, not by offering support and guidance. This view is very different from a position that emphasised circumstances that have made it very difficult or impossible for parents to care for their children. Such circumstances may be hard socio-economic conditions, addiction to alcohol or drugs, mental illnesses or emotional traumas, due

to which the parent is not able to take into account the needs of the child and form a healthy attachment to them.

The institutional inability to see those circumstances which may have caused a birth parent's behaviour to be labelled as 'irresponsible' complicates significantly the development of support services for birth families. Being able to support these parents in a dignified way would require seeing them as human beings in vulnerable situations, because of which they have not always been able to be as good and responsible parents as expected. Similarly, a possible fear of being punished and humiliated by the service providers does not encourage birth parents to accept the new support services that may be on offer.

Putting the Discursive Focus on Parents' Need for Support

The discourse of parents as no longer needed and discursive strategies to justifying this, which I analysed above, create a rather negative and deterministic view of parenthood after the placement of a child into alternative care. Importantly, along with this discourse, the data also contains more optimistic representations of birth parents. The prevalence of these new views on birth parents in the data seems to grow over time, which signals a gradual change in the representations of birth parents by child welfare experts and the interpretations of possible solutions to the problem of 'social orphanhood'.

The discursive strategy of representing birth parents as a resource in the lives of their children

There exists also such discursive strategy in the data, in which birth parents are viewed as a possible future resource for the child. This resource can be utilised if they receive the necessary assistance to solve their problems and give them the support they need in parenthood. In this discursive strategy, as the long-term goal of the work is set to return the child from alternative care to live with their birth parents, as put by a child protection services representative:

If this is to birth parents, then this is a good indicator if you manage to restore the parents in their rights and return the child – this is good. [...] We try to work with birth parents, to convince them that enough time has passed and the situation has changed – many have begun to work, their lifestyle has changed, it is time to turn to their children, we are convinced that this needs to be done, we help to collect documents to restore parental rights. And we return the children.

Importantly, several experts phrased as an explicit goal that children need to be kept in their birth families or returned there immediately after the crisis has been resolved.

Our priority, anyway, is to keep the child in the [birth] family. It is the main thing. (Employee of the child protection services)

[The main priority of the activity is] to preserve the child's birth family. When a child arrives, we not only begin to rehabilitate the child, but we also begin to work with their family – we constantly visit, talk, conduct specialist consultations, try to restore the family, lost connections. (Director of a children's shelter)

This discursive turn is in good accordance with the goals of the reform and the new tasks of the old children's homes now reorganised as family support centres. A major part of the work of these family support centres so far has been, however, done with children who have already been temporarily removed from their families, as Jäppinen and Kulmala discuss in this volume. Nevertheless, the priorities of the work have changed and work practices should include a new element of supporting the birth parents to be able to take care of their children at home again.

The discursive strategy of viewing parents as capable to change if supported

Importantly, parents are more often portrayed by the experts as capable of change – not lost causes, as in the above-discussed discourses. An idea is emerging that child welfare officials

really are responsible for not only saving children from difficult conditions, but also trying to change these conditions by working with birth families.

The next step, if there are kids who enter the institution, if work with parents is organised, but you know also that these parents' attitude is fickle: today I want to return the kids, I'll do everything that it needs. For a week or two they appear actively, do everything and visit a specialist in addiction medicine. They start searching for a job and talk about arranging things at home. We think we might be able to return the children home. And then they [the birth parents] disappear. Next month they drink again. Well, it is understandable, if they have an alcohol dependency: without treatment, as a rule, it is very complicated to manage.

A director of a family support centre drew in the above excerpt a rather pessimistic picture of birth parents, again: they do not engage with the services in the long term, but come and go. This makes working with them very complicated and it is impossible for the children to return home. Importantly, they do not represent birth parent's possible incapability to come to the proposed meetings as a sign of their moral irresponsibility or moral degradation, but as a consequence of alcoholism, which is here constructed as an illness for which they need better treatment than is available in the region.

Until recently, a child's separation from their birth parents has not been seen as a particular problem, because what counts is not just the birth family but a good family (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2010). Now, the worth of the birth family seems to be increasing in the eyes of child welfare experts. Birth parents are more often than earlier portrayed to be important and valuable for the child, regardless of whether they have always been able to act in the interests of the child. The inability or unwillingness of the parent to commit to cooperating is considered not only as their choice but also as a consequence of their personal problems. Experts provide narratives of parents who have been able to improve the situation so that the child can return

home. Seeing hope and recognising examples of change that has occurred seems to be an important precondition for the discursive change.

There are examples, though, when a girl [grown up in alternative care], who has bad relations with her mom, gives birth to a baby herself, and, all of sudden, the mom starts to help her and take care of the baby. Walks often with the baby carriage, helps her, and you think that this is a miracle. God, what has happened with that woman? Well, something has happened.

The expert above wondered, 'what has happened' with the mother, previously labelled as a lost cause, when she is able to take care of her grandchild. This kind of accounts of parents' later ability to change are interesting, because they cannot help but raise the question of whether these parents would have been able to take care of their own children, if they had received the support they needed in a timely manner.

The growing ability of child welfare experts to view parents as in need of support instead of seeing only their failures and condemning them can be of great importance and create avenues for institutional change. This citation from an interview with an NGO expert represents well the changing discourse but also sheds light on the institutional changes affecting the discursive change.

We have projects which focus on raising children, for example [project name] – this is a really useful project for girls, because when they end up in a shelter, not a children's home but a shelter, they most often return home to the mother, who does not take care of them (*imi ne z анимаetsya*). And there are some everyday skills, [...] well, for example, you need to change your underwear every day. Which they just do not manage. [...] One and the same child may leave and return [from and to home] five times in two years. [...] There is practically no work with the birth families. Not because the system does not want to, but because it is not capable of doing so. The same mothers, I see them regularly, who come to the shelter for known reasons:

they cannot raise children. Practically no one works with them, there are no hands for that. [...] We are now working on an idea to create a project. We already have mentoring for care leavers, but we would like to provide mentoring for these mothers.

The NGO expert above pointed out that the structures of alternative care have changed as a result of the reform to favour temporary, short-term placements with children's shelters instead of permanent placements with children's homes and the termination of parental rights. After the acute crisis, these children are returned home to their mothers, but nothing has changed, because no one works with the mother, which is acutely needed, as nothing will change if the birth parents do not get support. The tone with which the NGO expert speaks about these mothers and their inabilities is still rather paternalistic. Nevertheless, the discursive turn to portraying birth parents' incapability as something to be solved by teaching them parenting skills, mentoring and providing support is a major one, as often it is an NGO that is developing new services to work with birth parents (Kulmala et al. forthcoming 2020).

Supported by whom?

As shown above, a gradual discursive change towards emphasising birth parents' need for support is taking place. In terms of neo-institutional theory, one could say that ideational change has happened, but change in institutional practices is still underway. In the excerpt above, an NGO expert said: 'there is practically no work with the birth families. Not because the system does not want to, but because it is not capable of doing so. [...] Practically no one works with them, there are no hands for that'. Similarly, in the excerpt above, in which the family support centre director discussed the inability of parents with alcohol dependency to engage with the support services persistently, the root problem was the unavailability of good-quality treatment of addictions.

Sadly, in those speech acts in which the experts construct birth parents as capable of change and worthy of support, they also claim that the system is incapable of supporting them. Despite the growing understanding that birth families need to be supported, there is still uncertainty about who should provide this support. Often, the role of family support centres is emphasised. This is quite natural, because the task of supporting birth parents has been given to these centres in the strategies steering the reform. Family support centres are usually formed on the basis of old children's homes, and they seem still to be more used to working with children removed from families than with parents.

Nevertheless, family support centres should take on this task, and also a broader role of coordinating other needed services for birth parents, for example, ensuring that parents get help in the health care system. Some experts emphasised the importance of multilateral cooperation in organising support services. One director of a children's home described a positive example of such interaction:

Work with the birth family is carried out both by the child protection services and the juvenile commission to a greater extent, but we are also working. Because we have such cases when, thanks to our interaction with mothers whose parental rights were terminated, they were restored. We are ready to meet parents here – please come, but not all parents can or want to do this because of their dependences and illnesses. But in general, we have such cases.

As shown above, much responsibility for changing the situation lies with the birth parents themselves. The children's home director constructed it as a question of parent's will and motivation as to whether they want to engage with the offered support. This is understandable: no one can be changed from outside without their own motivation. At the same time, quite often the parents are still left alone with a demand to change the situation in six months to prove that the child can return home, and this is a problem.

For example, a care leaver at the age of sixteen or seventeen gives birth. There is only wind in her head. She is told: 'Place the child [in alternative care] for half a year, while you get on your feet'. She places them, and after one and a half years returns and says, 'I'm ready [to take care of the child]'. They say: "You have to prove that you are able to take the child. Prove that you are capable. Show us facts.' She, if no one helps her, cannot understand how to do that.

The example points out, first, how temporary placements are used in situations in which it would be more humane for both mother and child to be provided with some kind of family rehabilitation for them together to enable early attachment. Second, the example strikingly shows how the burden of proof of the changed situation is placed on the birth parent. She has to prove that she can now take care of the child, but no one provides any support for that care or even assists in showing the evidence of her capability as a parent.

To conclude, many of the interviewed experts note that the system lacks skills, methods and resources for working with birth parents. Although the discursive change of talking about the need to support birth parents seems to be underway, to have real effect on how birth parents are treated in the child welfare system, it needs to be accompanied by the wider development of work practices. In addition, the accent on supporting birth families should be moved to the earlier stages and not started only after the child has already been placed into temporary alternative care. If there are no concrete services and working methods available, this may again reinforce the representations of birth parents as incapable and impossible to change, and children may end up in traumatising spirals between repeating temporary placements with institutions and returns to home, where nothing has changed.

Conclusions: Discursive Strategies used in Representing Birth Parents either as not Needed or as in Need of Support

In analysis above, I have specified two discourses, namely the discourse of parents as no longer needed and the discourse representing parents as in need of support, and five discursive strategies related to them. The discursive strategies to convince that the birth parents are no longer needed in the lives of children placed into alternative care included representing birth parents as 'former parents' and thus no longer needed, viewing contact with them as dangerous to child's adaptation to a foster family, and pointing at their 'neglect of parental responsibilities.' The discursive strategies used for strengthening the discourse that represented birth parents as in need of support, included viewing birth parents as resource in the lives of their children, and emphasizing their capability to change if supported.

The discourse analysis of the interview data has revealed an interesting interplay between discursive change and institutional change. On one hand, discursive change – change in ideals and representations – is a precondition for institutional change. On the other hand, certain top-down institutional changes have forced experts to change the ways in which they view birth parents. The discourses are seen here as reflections of the representations of birth parents in the changing child welfare system and the positions that are constructed to them within it.

Based on this data it is not possible to make strong claims on how much the child welfare reform has influenced on the change of these discourses, or to measure how much change in the discourses has occurred. Importantly, the discourse representing birth parents as in need of support, which challenges the old moralistic and deterministic talk of birth parents as incapable of change and no longer needed, seems to be more common in the second dataset from 2018 than in the first dataset from 2015. This would speak for the strengthening of the support-focused discourse as a consequence of the reform and institutional change. Nevertheless, mind-sets still need to change to enable effective and respectful work with birth families. As the experts of this study note, the question of resources, methods and knowledge base for supporting birth parents is still open.

Towards Supporting the Participation of Birth Parents in the Lives of Children?

An interesting aspect of discourse analysis is to analyse what experts do not speak about. In the first dataset from 2015, there was practically no talk in the data about the participation of the parent in the life of the child, if there was not seen to be a realistic chance of the child returning to the birth parents (Jäppinen 2018). In a simplified way, one can say that in the eyes of the interviewed child welfare experts, the role of parents was to provide protection and care, and if they did not cope with these roles, they could disappear from the life of the child. This is one of the issues that seem to be changing. In the 2018 data, there are promising examples of experts encouraging parents to spend time with their temporarily placed children, as we also see discussed in the chapter by Jäppinen and Kulmala in this volume, and some experts emphasise the importance of birth parents for a child and maintaining connections even if they grow up in long-term alternative care. This might be connected to the strengthening role of attachment theory in the knowledge base of Russian child welfare. At the same time, the idea of supporting ties with the birth family is complicated when it is combined with the understanding of foster care as almost adoption-like. This is an issue that needs to be solved if the system aims at promoting both fostering and the return of children to their birth families.

By definition of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC 1989) and the Family Code of the Russian Federation (1995), the starting point of the child welfare system is the principle of protecting the interests of the child. The needs and wishes of the parents are secondary to the interests of the child. There are situations in which it is better for the child to be brought up outside the birth family until adulthood. It is important that the child develops an attachment to their foster parents based on safety and stability. Communication with their birth parents is nevertheless important for the child, even if they are brought up in a foster home for a long time (Hämäläinen 2012). Internationally, one of the requirements for foster parents is often their willingness and capability to maintain communication between a child and their birth parents, as well as the understanding that a child can belong to more than one family at the same time (Buehler, Cox, Cuddeback 2003; Buehler et al. 2006; Orme et al. 2007;

Schofield 2002; Valkonen 2008). In the future, it would be interesting to study how such skills are supported in the training of foster parents in Russia.

According to the ideas of social problems work, which have guided this chapter, representations of certain social problems influence what kind of solutions and service designs are seen as suitable for addressing them. When it comes to the case of birth parents of children in the child welfare system, there seem to be promising baby steps towards working with them and seeing their role in the lives of their children, even during an alternative care placement. The discourse representing birth parents as capable of change and in need of support – instead of suggesting cutting the ties to the child or punishments to birth parents – is challenging the persistent discourse, in which birth parents are portrayed as lost causes and not needed in the lives of their children anymore. At the same time, much remains to be done before supporting birth families becomes a priority in political programmes, or before the attitudes of specialists at the local level change in full accordance with the goals of parental support for possible family reunion, as designated in these programmes. The old representations of birth parents as morally suspicious have to change to enable work with them and, even more importantly, concrete methods and practices need to be developed to work with birth families – and preferably at an earlier stage. In addition, families and parents must be able to trust that they will be treated in a respectful and dignified way if they contact support services.

To enable this, it would be important to direct research and practical interest towards collecting and analysing positive experiences of work with birth families and developing new methods for the effective support of such families. Moreover, the voices of birth parents should be included in further discussions about reforming the child welfare system. Their experiences would be valuable in developing family support services to prevent the need for alternative care as well as in developing meaningful ways to sustain family ties during placement.

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