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**Effectiveness of open care in child welfare. The critical factors and mechanisms.
ongoing dissertation research.**

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The child welfare statistics collected by the National Institute for Health and Welfare show that in Finland the number of children who have been the subject of child welfare interventions in community care is increasing continuously. In Finland, there is an emphasis on prevention and early intervention in child welfare services. For example, the National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care (in Finnish known as KASTE) states that “The number of children placed in care outside the home in relation to the age group will begin to decline”. However, there is very little research concerning the relevant factors and mechanisms through which the children and their families who are receiving support in open care could be helped.

This study focuses on the effectiveness of the open care in child welfare. In Finland the child welfare services consist of three areas. These are the universal basic services delivered for all people living in Finland, the preventive child welfare services and the child-specific and family-specific child welfare (this consists of an investigation of the need for child welfare measures, the provision of support in open care, emergency placement of the child, taking the child into care, substitute care and after-care) (Taskinen 2007). According to Child Welfare Act (417/2007) The municipal body (social workers) responsible for social services must provide support in open care without delay in two cases: firstly if “the circumstances in which the children are being brought up are endangering or failing to safeguard their health or development; or the children’s behaviour is endangering their health or development”. (Child Welfare Act 417/2007.)

The research tradition in Finnish child welfare evaluation has been mostly qualitative with constructivist orientation (e.g. Oranen 2006, 7). There are some Finnish literature reviews (of international studies) concerning the effectiveness of family interventions (Westerman et.al 2005) and demanding work with babies (Bardy & Öhman 2007). There are Finnish studies concerning for example the clients in open care (Heino 2007; Huuskonen & Korpinen 2009) and of the profitability in child welfare (e.g. Rousu 2007), jus to mention a few. The main

shortcoming in Finnish child welfare research is that there are not many statistical researches of the effectiveness of open care in child welfare (Eronen 2007).

The aim of this investigation is to supplement the knowledge base and conceptual understanding of the factors and mechanisms contributing to the effectiveness of the support in open care and by this to contribute the improvement of the effectiveness of open care (Weiss 1998, 4). The main research question is:

What are the critical factors that contribute to the enhancement of the life situation of a child who is in open care in child welfare and through what kind of mechanisms do these factors impact?

The the effectiveness of open care can be defined and measured variously. One option is to define the effectiveness as client outcome: as enhancement of a Childs life situation from the condition which the child entered open care that is consequence of the support in open care (Rousu 2007, 246).

The science philosophical orientation in this study is critical scientific realism. The reality is seen as real, and stratified into three levels: real, actual and empirical (Bhaskar 1975). It is suggested that reality is relatively open, thus not open nor closed, and that the use of causal explanations is thus possible also in social sciences (Töttö 2004). I prefer generative causality. I apply the principles of realistic evaluation method, first composed by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley (1997) and further developed by Björn Blom and Stefan Morén (2010) as The CAIMeR-theory. Urie Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development together with the principles of risk and protective factors are considered as a theoretical frame of reference of this study. This means analyzing risk and protective factors at the level of a child, at the level of his or her family, and at the broader societal level (Pecora 2006, 28). Scholars have used ecological theory for example for evaluation of residential care (Palareti & Berti 2009).

Social work researchers are recommended to consider hierarchical statistical modelling as SEM (Guo & Perron & Gillespie 2008) or its bayesian equivalent (Gill 2007), when appropriate to contribute the knowledge base in social work. The choice depends on the definition of the concept of probability which I am just considering. This study examines the utility and suitability of this kind of hierarchical statistical modeling in studying the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of support in open care – although it is not the main research question of this study. This is still a new kind of methodological endeavour in Finnish child welfare research. The data consists of two national surveys and an individual level

retrospective follow-up data of the children who have been in open care in child welfare. The first national survey will yield information of the open care services repertoire and availability and another is a national survey of Finnish child welfare social workers. The data analysis is mostly quantitative, but appropriate qualitative methods are also applied. Data will be analysed with SPSS program and with a suitable SEM program.

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