Matching children and substitute homes: some theoretical and empirical notions

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ABSTRACT

Matching describes the process of selecting the substitute home for a child who needs to be placed away from the care of his/her birth parents. However, very little theorizing is done about matching and there is also a lack of systematic investigation into models of practice currently in use. Most importantly, very little is known about frontline matching practices in different socio-historical child welfare contexts. This paper aims to explore the concept of matching by addressing it theoretically and empirically as a decision-making practice in social work. Based on the analysis of phone interviews (49) and focus group interviews (five groups with 18 child welfare practitioners) in Finland, we claim that matching includes a high degree of navigation: decision-making balances between professional discretion, legal norms and principles, subjective views of the children and their parents as well as the economic and bureaucratic conditions of the service provision administration in the municipality. Navigation is shadowed by uncertainty and compromises. The analysis suggests that the notion of matching needs further analysis as it plays an important role in child welfare decision-making. The interplay between frontline practice and the socio-historical context needs to be further addressed.

INTRODUCTION

‘Matching’ as a concept is used both in child welfare literature and practice to describe the process of selecting a substitute home for a child who needs to be placed away from the care of his/her birth parents. Most commonly, matching is seen as a process in which the characteristics and needs of the child are linked with the provision of services (‘home’), which a certain foster family, adoptive family or residential institution could provide.

The existing research focuses especially on finding the ‘right’ adoptive or foster family (e.g. Hill 2001; Sinclair & Wilson 2003; Bifulco & Jacobs 2008; Walker 2008; Laakso 2013). The practical implementations of research suggest, for example, tools to examine the attachment styles of the child and the substitute parents in order to match the styles well (e.g. Bifulco & Jacobs 2008; Walker 2008). However, it is claimed that little theorizing has been done about matching and there is a lack of systematic investigation into the models of practice currently in use (Dance et al. 2009).

For a child who needs protective services, the choice of placement is a crucial decision. The placement is a (substitute) home for the child and home is meant to be not only a physical place to live but a distinctive social, cultural and moral context of childhood (e.g. Forsberg & Pösö 2011). Further, the home and related care and upbringing provided by the substitute parents are meant to be better for the child than those of the birth parents, which increases the moral and political sensitivity of the issue of matching (Bullock et al. 2006).

Front-line decision-making in child welfare is influenced by its socio-historical context (Duffy & Collins 2010). Duffy & Collins (2010) suggest that such macro factors as the legal basis, the historical and
political context of child welfare in society and children’s rights (vs. parents’ rights) should be taken into consideration when studying child welfare decision-making. Organizational and inter-professional contexts as well as service-user movements may be relevant as well (O’Sullivan 2011). These are issues that are often taken for granted in everyday decision-making but which guide decision-making practice considerably as cross-country comparisons demonstrate (Duffy & Collins 2010).

Our study comes from a country, Finland, in which the choice of placement forms varies from residential care to professional family homes and foster homes, and in which the reformulation of the placement policy is topical, as will be described later. The majority of the existing studies of matching, focusing as they do on rather individualistic elements of the child and the carers in foster care and adoption, are not best suited to the Finnish child protection practice. For the placements of teenagers, comprising the majority of children placed into care, foster care is not commonly used, and adoption not at all. Based on the empirical data of phone interviews (49) and focus groups (five) with child welfare professionals, we analyse matching in the Finnish child welfare system. We are interested in what kind of messages this country-based analysis could suggest to the general theorizing of matching. We approach matching as a decision-making practice and argue that the macro factors influencing child-based decision-making should be considered. Before presenting the empirical analysis, we map out the general landscape of Finnish child welfare as well as some theoretical notions of decision-making as understood in this paper.

MATCHING IN THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF FINLAND

The Finnish child welfare system may be described as a welfare-oriented family service with a special child focus, which differentiates it from more protection-oriented child welfare systems (e.g. Gilbert et al. 2011; Pösö 2011). The majority of its services are provided as in-home services, aiming to support children and their families in their own living environment. As a last option, a child may be removed from parental to public care by a care order decision. The parents and children 12 years of age or older may express their disagreement with the care order proposal and/or the choice of the substitute home; in the case of disagreements, the final decision about the care order and/or choice of the substitute home is made by the administrative court. However, only a small fraction of the administrative court decisions deals solely with placements (de Godzinsky 2012, 111).

According to the Child Welfare Act (2007/417), the care order is meant to be temporary, with the ultimate aim being family reunification. Therefore, such an issue as permanency planning, well known in Anglo-American child welfare systems (e.g. Holland et al. 2005), is not characteristic of Finnish substitute care policy and practice.

Children who have been taken into care are placed in family foster homes, residential institutions or ‘in some other way required by the child’s needs’ as the Child Welfare Act words it. The third option refers to professional family homes, for example. The range of options of placement forms means that the matching decisions also include a decision about the form of placement. Roughly half of the placements are in residential care, especially involving young people between the ages of 13 and 17, who make up the majority of the child welfare clientele in Finland (Heino 2009). Residential care is provided to a large extent by privately owned enterprises but purchased by the municipalities (ibid). It is noteworthy that adoption is not included as a child welfare placement by the Child Welfare Act. Domestic adoptions, regulated by the Adoption Act (20/2012), are only rarely used for child welfare reasons (Timonen 2013).

In legislation, the principle of the child’s best interest guides every decision. In the case of placements, the Act expands on this leading principle as follows:

> When a place is chosen for substitute care, particular attention must be paid to the justification for taking the child into care, the child’s needs, maintenance of relations with siblings and other close human relations and the continuation of the care. In addition, the child’s linguistic, cultural and religious background must be taken into account as far as possible. (Child Welfare Act 2007/417)

In addition, the recent legislation requires that foster care placements are given priority over other forms of substitute care, and that the option of kin placement is examined in every case. The latter two norms were only introduced in 2007 by the Child Welfare Act (the obligation to examine the possibility of the kinship placement) and in 2012 by the amendment to the Child Welfare Act (foster care as the first priority). Instructions, other than the legal ones, about the choice of the placement are – and have been – almost non-existent. No research has been carried out about matching before the study by Laakso (2013), on which this paper is based.
The new norm of prioritizing foster care over other substitute care forms takes place in a period in Finnish society when the number of children placed out of their homes is relatively high in comparison with the previous decades in Finland, and with some Nordic and other Western countries (Gilbert 2012; Pösö et al. 2013). Currently, 1.1% of children under the age of 18 are placed in care – and the number has only been increasing since the mid-1990s (Heino 2009; Hiilamo 2009; Pösö et al. 2013). The growth in numbers has resulted in increasing service provision; consequently, social workers are increasingly occupied in finding matching substitute homes for children. The policy message by the national government has emphasized the importance of cutting down the number of care orders as the growth of out-of-home care has increased public expenditure on care (Laakso 2013). This message is echoed at the local policy level where the municipalities, the key agents in implementing child welfare legislation, express their concerns about the extension and costs of substitute care in their own policy programmes (ibid).

Consequently, the decisions on children’s placements take place in a contradictory socio-historic landscape. Social workers are asked to consider the principle of the child’s best interest and still cut down the number of the placements for financial reasons. Equally, they should prioritize foster care although the existing service provision is very much in residential care; they should make the important decisions for children and their families about the substitute homes, but they are not supported by research or training about matching.

Mapping out matching as decision-making

In general, decision-making in social work tends to be described as being characterized by complexity and uncertainty and by a mixture of analytic, rational, intuitive and moral reasoning (e.g. Fook et al. 2000; Munro 2002; Taylor & White 2006; Gillingham & Humphreys 2010; Taylor 2010; Forsberg & Autonen-Vaaraniemi 2012). In regard to matching children and substitute homes, on the one hand, proposals to develop research-based decision-making have been suggested (Walker 2008), and on the other, decisions about out-of-home placements have been described to be at their best when a critical-pluralist approach involving a variety of standpoints and actors and reflective multi-voiced assessment is being applied (Tilbury 2007). The former view underlines the rational nature of decision-making, whereas the latter one underlines the negotiative nature of decision-making.

Following the latter view, navigation is used as a relevant concept and metaphor to address decision-making in child welfare (e.g. Forkby & Höjer 2011). It highlights the processual nature of decision-making and acknowledges the variety of issues, norms and interested parties (stakeholders) involved, and their interconnectedness. In child welfare, navigation is challenged by the opposing and contradictory views of different parties, the inequal distribution of power between the different parties (children vs. adults; family members vs. experts, Kaltenborn 2001; Mason 2008; Bessell 2011), and the disagreements and uncertainty of the outcome of the decision (Munro 2002). There are also several decision-making contexts (arenas) and there is a long chain of decisions (O’Sullivan 2011). The recent analyses from Sweden, Britain and Finland (Wiklund 2005; Sellick 2006, 2011; Heino 2009; Höjer & Forkby 2011) highlight the emerging notion of ‘substitute care market’, which, because of the reorganization and economization of the welfare services and the increasing privatization of substitute care, reshapes the matching process as the economic values and related procedures are included in the decision-making process. However, regardless of the complexity, contradictions and uncertainty of navigation, decisions have to be made as the avoidance of a decision may be equally dramatic for the child as the ‘wrong’ decision (Hollis & Howe 1987).

In countries with a smaller spectrum of substitute care forms and with a focus only on protecting children from harm and neglect, social workers might not need to navigate as much as they do in Finland. The Finnish socio-historical context of child welfare includes a spectrum of substitute care forms to choose from; a variation of substitute care provision from publically run institutions to private families and enterprises; and services targeting both small children and teenagers, and accordingly, both the issues of neglect and abuse as well as risk-taking and norm-breaking behaviour (Pösö 2011). All these are factors influencing decision-making. In addition, the child welfare legislation requires that the children and parents and other people close to the child are included in the decision-making of the placement, which increases the number of negotiations and steps in the decision-making process. Considering the characteristics of the Finnish child welfare system, ‘navigation’ as a guiding concept is relevant and as such will be used in this paper.
METHOD AND DATA

As social workers and their managers are the key persons in making the decisions about the substitute home placements, the empirical data of this study rest on their interviews. Interview data have been collected during two phases: first phone interviews and then focus groups. Relevant research permissions were acquired from the municipalities to carry out the interviews (Laakso 2013) and the code of research ethics of the Finnish research community was followed (Kuula 2006). Confidentiality has guided the data collection and the municipalities and practitioners included in the study cannot be identified. No information on the children in care was gathered.

First, a geographically representative sample of 57 municipalities out of the total of 336 in Finland was made so that it included municipalities with different substitute care profiles and organizations for substitute care decision-making. The national statistics on substitute care placements and the information provided by the Centres of Excellence on Social Welfare helped to draw up the sample. We systematically excluded from our data those municipalities that had not placed any children into care in the last years. We examined the proportions of foster care and residential care placements in the municipalities and included a mixture of municipalities with different profiles (emphasis either on foster care or on residential care, or a balanced mix of both). In addition, we included municipalities that had created coalitions between themselves and other municipalities to organize the matching services, as well as municipalities that had organized the services themselves. Although the sample is geographically representative and represents the overall profile of substitute care placements, it does not fully represent all municipalities because of the high decentralization of child welfare service provision.

The practitioners in this sample, child welfare managers and social workers involved in substitute care decision-making, were invited to a phone interview. The phone interviews made it possible to include a wider representation of different municipalities as informants as they were more effectively organized in terms of time than face-to-face interviews (e.g. Sturges & Hanrahan 2004; Trier-Bieniek 2012). As result, 49 phone interviews were carried out in 2012. The key questions focused on how substitute care decision-making was organized and how well the present system functioned.

Following on from the phone interviews, five focus group interviews were carried out in 2012 with 18 practitioners, experienced social workers and their team leaders. Here the focus was more on the decision-making as part of case work. The choice of the focus groups was guided by the phone interviews so that the focus groups represented different municipal or inter-municipal organizations of substitute care decision-making in different parts in Finland. The focus groups were self-organized – the social workers formed groups of people who, according to their view, were the key persons in matching in that particular municipal context. Participation was voluntary. The use of self-organized groups is seen in the method literature as a good basis for focus group interviews (Bloor et al. 2001; Morgan 2002). The groups thus consisted of the key social workers and their team leaders or managers who worked together and thereby shared the same institutional knowledge, together with two interviewers (except one focus group with only one interviewer). The norms of confidentiality of the focus groups were discussed at the beginning of every session.

Considering the fact that child welfare and substitute care in particular are a topically contested policy issue in Finland, the study is obviously of very sensitive nature for child welfare practitioners. This may have influenced the nature of the interview data through social and political correctness (e.g. Alastalo & Åkerman 2010): it is likely that the interviewees did not present all the failures and weaknesses of their decision-making. Focus groups as a data collection method could have supported this tendency as well (e.g. Barbour 2007). Therefore, the nature of the data informs about such decision-making practices that the professionals find important, possible and correct to talk about in a current context. We treat it as a characteristic of our data.

The phone interviews, mainly in quantitative form, and the qualitative focus group interviews are used thematically in the analysis so that the focus is on those parts which inform about the practice of matching. The full analysis is presented elsewhere (Laakso 2013). The overarching question ‘how matching is addressed as a decision-making practice’ guided the thematic reading of the data. In the first part of the analysis, the focus is on the arenas (e.g. O’Sullivan 2011), which are considered when choosing a substitute home for a child. The data-driven analysis demonstrates that the legislation is an evident arena but not the only one, and that the arenas are to some extent contested. The second part of the analysis looks at the obstacles in decision-making practices that challenge matching in its ideal form. This is called
‘compromised matching’. The presentation of the results rests on the full interview data although the extracts, demonstrating the nuances of the themes, come only from the focus groups.

**NAVIGATIONS TO MATCH THE CHILD AND THE SUBSTITUTE HOME**

According to the interview data, child welfare legislation, professional norms and customs as well as the administration of the substitute care services comprise the main decision-making arenas among which the social workers navigate. In more concrete terms, the social workers consider the needs of the child, the norms of a good placement, the child’s and his/her parents’ views and opinions and service provision and related administrative regulations, and make the decision after considering them all. In the first part of our analysis, we describe these arenas.

**The child’s needs**

In Finland, children of a wide age range are taken into care for a variety of reasons. A neglected baby has different needs for substitute care than a rebellious teenager, a fact often emphasized by our interviewees. They equally emphasize the individual differences among children in terms of personality, health, social relations, language, among other issues. In summary, the social workers consider that it is the individual nature of children’s needs that must guide the decisions in a case-based manner.

When the social workers describe their assessment of children’s needs, they do not refer to any structured assessment tools. Rather, they speak of how their understanding of a child’s needs is based on knowing the child personally and weighing different factors in his/her situation to map out his/her major needs. The two following extracts highlight the individual approach in the assessment of needs. The latter extract also demonstrates that the understanding of needs progresses from health and educational needs to a fulfilment of the characteristics of the child’s personality.

You can’t probably make a checklist like, you’ve ticked ten boxes out of fifteen, so this one’s going to an institution or something like that. The deliberation always starts from every child’s and family’s situation and from all that. They are general guidelines, but there are so many exceptions that you can’t really find anything common easily. (Social worker, group 2)

So I think that in the best case I choose the child a place that doesn’t only meet their needs somehow, how should I put it, but I can also choose a place which fits their personality and where they’ll be taken in as exactly the person who they are. (Social worker, group 4)

**Norms of a good placement**

The norms of a good placement are set by child welfare legislation as described in the earlier section of this paper. Likewise, the principle of the child’s best interest is mentioned by the social workers as the leading principle guiding their decision-making. When the informants in the phone and focus group interviews were asked on a five-point Likert scale how well their decision-making served this principle, the overall answers were positive: the decisions serve a child’s best interest well (26/49) or very well (7/49). None of the informants used the negative options. These positive answers inform us that social workers refer to the child’s best interest principle as a normative standpoint in their decision-making and do not express any major concerns about matching from this point of view.

However, the other legislative norms of good placements are contested by the interviewees. The social workers repeatedly criticize the norm to prioritize foster home placement as the first option. Their reasoning is that it is irrelevant in some cases as foster care does not meet all the needs of children as demonstrated by the following extract of a focus group discussion agreeing on the limits of foster care.

...now for everyone you have to first look into the foster home, it’s based on some kind of woolly idea of that nurturing force of family, that all children, even though it’s really based on the fact that it’s so much cheaper. Then you close your eyes and imagine that that’s this thing taken care of, when really the situation is that the children we put into care at the moment, every single one of them, ... , I mean all of them have at least some kind of trauma in the background. (Social worker, group 1)

Further, the social workers say that it is difficult to find a good foster home for a delinquent and violent boy, 16 years of age, for example. As the teenage placements make up a considerable part of present child welfare (Heino 2009), the challenge to find a good foster family for teenagers is therefore a relevant concern.

In some cases, the norm to investigate the option of a kinship placement is also seen as irrelevant. The social workers recognize kin support as important, but they also say that they sort out the kinship support already before the care order is ever actualized. Now it was a new procedure to follow, often delaying the
process unnecessarily against the principle of the child’s best interest. It is a new task that includes a lot of work and expectations for accountability; in fact, it is seen as an extra decision-making process as demonstrated by the following focus group extract.

Social worker 1: There can be so many different reasons, based on which you can’t consider kinship placement, that you find something in the background, something like, something like their own history as clients in child welfare for example . . . when we’re talking, say, about grandparents, if it’s been like that with their own child. Or you discover something else from the background little by little, some kind of substance abuse problem, for example, even if it was already a while ago, or some kind of psychological problem or something, and sometimes you have something so obscure that you can’t really put your finger on it, and that’s why it’s so challenging, to see where it comes from, and yet we have the, we might have the feeling that maybe it doesn’t answer the needs, maybe the resources won’t be enough. This must be made visible, these things. It’s a terribly long process, when you’re going through the discussion and these things.

Social worker 2: It feels like you almost have like a double care order decision-making process. (Group 2)

Despite the criticism, the social workers follow this new regulation. The procedure may not, however, influence their own reasoning of the substitute home best suited for the child.

The views of the child and his/her parents

According to the Child Welfare Act (2007/417), the parents and the child (12 years of age or older) have the legal right to disagree with the proposed substitute home. As presented by our data, in the social work practice, other kinds of agreements are as equally important as the formal agreement: both the child and his/her parent have to feel that the substitute home is a good place for the child. The social workers address such issues as feelings, experiences and impressions as in the following extract.

In a way then when the child and the family go there to get to know the place, you aren’t talking about if the place is otherwise suitable anymore but just what impression the child and the parents get themselves. (Team manager, group 5)

The social workers explain that it is crucial that the child and, most importantly, his/her parents feel positively about the placement. If they are not positive, the substitute home is unlikely to function well for the child.

I thought that the child’s best interest and the future are always fulfilled when you look at . . ., when the parents can accept where the child is put into care, that’s somehow a totally different situation than if there’s, if there’s for example friction or some kind of mistrust, between the substitute home and the parent. (Social worker, group 2)

An important part of the decision-making process is that the child and parents are given a chance to familiarize themselves with the substitute home. This is done by organizing visits to the placement option.

There are different ways to organize these visits. Some social workers take the parents first. Their argument is that the parents’ attitudes are crucial: if the parents are not willing to let the child stay in a certain substitute home, their negative attitude could destroy the placement. Therefore, the child is taken to visit a substitute home only if the parents have expressed their positive attitude. If the child dislikes the place, the process continues to find other substitute homes. Other social workers organize these visits in a simpler manner: the whole family or only the teenager are taken to visit the place. Sometimes, because of the shortage of time and other resources, the visits are not organized at all, but the child is taken directly to the placement if a formal agreement exists.

Service provision and related administrative regulations

After the social worker has made a decision on the form of the placement, s/he has to find out the availability of the placement. The municipalities in our data have different procedures for foster and residential care.

When the social worker is thinking of a foster home placement, she has to consult the body which keeps a regional register of foster families. This body may function within one municipality or serve several municipalities; further, it may be a part of the local administration or a service purchased from a non-governmental organization or, recently, from a private agency. This body suggests suitable foster homes with adequate training and experience based on the social worker’s description of the child’s needs. It is, however, common that the social worker may make the final decision of the foster family according to his/her judgement.

In the case of a placement in residential care, the larger municipalities have teams that specialize in residential institutions by monitoring their quality and, most importantly, organizing the competitive bidding required by the public administration. In small municipalities, the same processes are carried out by social workers. In the competitive bidding, the quality of residential care is assessed in accordance with the
costs. The local authorities then rank the residential services according to the results of the bidding and the social worker is supposed to use the services at the top of the list. The top choices provide best quality in relation to the costs. The decision as to how quality is defined and how costs and quality are weighed is made by each municipality.

Despite these regulative conditions, the social workers claim that they have a way to escape some of the administrative rules and follow their professional discretion instead: they consult the lists and foster care agencies but do not follow them if their practice experience suggests otherwise. In practice, the social workers’ own experiences and colleagues’ statements about different placement forms and substitute homes mattered most. This is demonstrated by the following extracts:

Social worker 1: In a way foster care is simple for us, I mean we have a list, where you have A, B, and C, so – list A, professional family homes; list B residential institutions, list C; special residential institutions. Then they’ve been simply listed by price per day.

Interviewer: So listed by the competitive bidding, yes.

Social worker 2: . . . in a list, yeah, the shared competitive bidding of 13 municipalities. And the instructions are simply that you start calling places from the top of the list, looking into them. (Group 1)

For me, it means almost the most that I know the place, that I have experience of some place. That I have, perhaps, that I have placed or someone else from our team has placed a child in some place. That’s maybe the most important thing for me. And then I ask, do you know if they have someone leaving that place, that do they have room, then you call to see what the situation is. (Social worker, group 1)

This is called ‘social workers’ collective memory’ by Forkby & Höjer (2011) in their Swedish study looking at child welfare placements in the era of new public management. Similar to our study, in their study the social workers also found ways to circumvent administrative rules if the social workers’ professional judgement so suggested. However, it is obvious that the administrative regulations require social workers’ attention and time and thereby shape and indirectly determine their practice.

COMPROMISED MATCHING

In the analysis above, we have seen that when the social workers make decisions about a child’s substitute home, they navigate between different decision-making arenas. When matching is done in its most ideal form, all arenas are considered and the decisions are under the full control of the social worker. This is not, however, always the case. The social workers have to make compromises and weigh some arenas as being less important than in the ideal matching. We call it compromised matching.

The reasons for compromised matching are related to the availability of substitute homes and children’s and families’ opinions and wishes. When the matching process was challenged by the availability of the substitute homes, the social workers mention the following kinds of situations:

- All the places were taken up in a good substitute home, and therefore, the child was placed in a ‘second-best home’,
- The costs for the substitute home providing some specialized care were too high for the municipal budget and so the substitute home chosen did not provide all the services the child needed,
- The good substitute home hosted pets but the child was badly allergic to animals and could not be placed there,
- An experienced and specialized foster parent became ill, and therefore, the child was placed in the only foster family available,
- The residential unit run by a private agency became bankrupt and closed down suddenly and therefore the child’s placement plan was changed.

The reasons for compromised matching related to children’s and parents’ opinions include the following:

- A parent informed at the last minute of his/her unwillingness to see the child in a foster home and therefore the child had to be placed in residential care.
- The young person did not turn up to visit the substitute home before the final decision and his/her opinion could not influence the decision.
- The young person ran away before entering the substitute home and hid away for so long that the care order had to be terminated.

Such factors are difficult to foresee. Yet, they may change the whole direction of the matching process. Their existence highlights the uncertain nature of matching: the decision-making is subject to a variety of uncontrollable and unavoidable factors, events and human behaviour (as known in child welfare decision-making, e.g. Hollis & Howe 1987; Munro 1996).

Most importantly, the uncertainty is also related to the care process, which the placement in the substitute home starts. This uncertainty is highlighted by several descriptions of the social workers when they express their concern about the actual day-to-day
quality of the substitute home, which they, after all, have very little knowledge about. It is stated that even the most established and good substitute homes may change their practice and they may hide practices, which the social workers could not see at the moment of decision-making. As a result, the decision is always overshadowed by the uncertainty of what the substitute home really is like for each individual child.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of Finnish matching practice highlights that matching includes social workers’ navigation between different arenas and voices as well as their interrelations. Decision-making balances between professional discretion, legal norms and principles, subjective views of the children and their parents as well as the economic and bureaucratic conditions of the service provision administration in the municipality. Case-based discretion plays an important role. Navigation is overshadowed by uncertainty and the final decision of the substitute home may be only a compromise because of the limited availability of substitute homes or the agency of children and families involved. The outcomes of the decision are also seen in the light of uncertainty.

The intensity of navigations, the number of options and parties involved and the administrative conditions may be specific to Finland. They may not be found in countries, which mainly only use foster homes as substitute homes. We do, however, suggest that even in the latter case, the socio-historic context plays its part (e.g. Duffy & Collins 2010). If high-quality foster care is seen in terms of strong parenting as suggested by the US and Norwegian scholars (Berrick & Skivenes 2012), one should explore the views of parenting in society and culture and how these views are interwoven in decision-making. Gubrium & Holstein (1990) argue that the very notion of family is contested and practiced differently in different contexts. The assumptions of home, parenting, childhood and public care and their interrelations are not universal and free of contexts, and therefore, the notion of ‘strong parenting’ is far from being static or taken for granted.

Consequently, the view on socio-historical contexts suggests that the individualistic approach to matching, focusing only on the characteristics of the child and the substitute home, is too narrow to cover matching as a theoretical notion in general. Indeed, when studying children placed in public/state care, the very notion of ‘public’ or ‘state’ should not be ignored in its variation. The theorizing of matching should thus recognize the differences in child welfare policy and practice in different countries, and based on that recognition, include the dynamics of the social, political and economic preconditions in the conceptual layout of matching.

The practical implications of the expanded theoretical notion of matching could be manifold. The attempts to establish research-based tools for social workers should be encouraged further. However, our analysis and its theoretical implications suggest that there can be no universal tools for matching as the child welfare contexts differ greatly and as there are several society and culture bound issues to consider. Based on further theorizing of matching, it would be especially important to introduce also reflective tools to assess the quality of matching from the point of view of successful placements. Yet, the uncertainty of decision-making can hardly be fully excluded from practice.

Meanwhile, there is a need to explore further how the very existence of compromised matching and the recognition of the child’s best interest as the leading principle can both describe matching practices in the Finnish context. This finding may suggest that the principle is not followed and fulfilled in every child’s placement. However, it can also suggest that the principle is originally addressed in a compromised way in practice. Although the social workers tend to find ways to circumvent administrative regulations and new public management procedures, these may indirectly influence the understanding of social work assessment and guide the social workers to balance between the costs of the placement and the child’s best interest. In other words, there may be a compromised view on the principle of the child’s best interest. Both interpretations encourage a critical exploration of matching.

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