

Article:

# Participants' home as an interview context when studying sensitive family issues

by

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## **Abstract**

This article considers the meaning of the participants' home as an interview context when studying sensitive family issues. The article is based on two qualitative family studies by the authors on foster children's perspectives on their home and their family relations and client families' experiences of preventive family support. Both studies address sensitive family issues, in particular Finnish child welfare. The first author's interview data consist of interviews with foster children, social network maps and diaries and the second author's data of interviews with six client families. Most of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, but in the second author's study two interviews were conducted at the university.

In this article, an analysis about the meaning of the participants' home as an interview context is based on the extensive field notes of the authors, as well as wide-ranging reflections and discussions about the interviews. The aim of this article is to offer a fresh insight into interviewing about sensitive family issues at the participant's homes, and the issue of sensitivity is present throughout the article. The comparative aspect is also at the core of the article due to the different focus groups of the two studies: children and adults. The home as an interview context is also compared to other settings in this article, e.g. the university. The main research findings concerned different aspects that the authors found in the course of their home interview studies such as differences between home and university, the possibilities and challenges of home and comparisons of adults and children as focus groups.

**Keywords:** sensitive family studies, qualitative research, interviews, participants' homes as an interview context

## **Introduction**

This article considers the meaning of the participants' home as an interview context when studying sensitive family issues, and the aim of this article is to offer a fresh insight on this subject. The article is based on two family studies, with interview data gathered among foster children and client families in preventive family services. Both studies concern the customers of social work and their perspectives in a Finnish child welfare context. Foster children are already inside the child welfare system and client

families in preventive family services are inside the preventive support system. The interviews were conducted in the participants' homes.

The issue of sensitivity is the key element of the article and is present throughout. Sensitivity can be found in the authors' research subjects, research focus groups and the interview context, while the comparative aspect is also at the core of the article due to the different focus groups of the two studies: children and adults. The home as an interview context is also compared to another setting, namely the university. In this article, analysis about the meaning of the participants' homes as an interview context is based on the extensive field notes of the authors, as well as on wide-ranging reflections and discussions about the interviews. In light of the earlier literature on home interviews, there is good justification for research on what it means to conduct interviews on sensitive family issues in participants' homes.

The authors begin by presenting their studies and describing their methodology and data, then continuing onto discussions about the participant's home as an interview context with reference to previous research literature. Following this, the authors present their main research findings. The article ends with a discussion of the implications of the authors' research findings for using participants' homes as an interview context when studying sensitive family issues.

### **Method and data**

In this article, the authors ask what the meaning of the home as an interview context is when studying sensitive family issues. This article is based on interview data collected in the context of two family studies conducted by the present authors, with both the studies involving sensitive family issues, particularly issues of Finnish child welfare and the home interviews.

In Hämäläinen's doctoral studies about social work, she asks how children in foster care define their home and family relations (see Hämäläinen, 2012). The interviews concerned topics such as children's experiences about moving to a foster home, children's meanings of home and children's meanings of different family relations in both the biological- and foster family. She interviewed 20 foster children aged 8 to 12

years in their own rooms in the foster homes, and none of the foster parents was present during the interviews. The foster homes were in the countryside far from the cities. In Finland, foster children placed in residential care and foster families have generally experienced very little violent behaviour from adults (Ellonen and Pösö, 2010, 34-35). In Finland, foster parents are carefully selected and have a duty to participate in training designed especially for foster parents (Pelastakaa Lapset ry, 2013). The participants were recruited with the help of social services, and social workers contacted the foster parents and biological parents of the possible interviewees and asked for permission. Additionally, Hämäläinen contacted the parents who agreed to participate, and their children were asked to sign a permission release form as well.

Along with social network maps and diaries, Hämäläinen used the focus interview as her main data-gathering method. To obtain social network maps, children were asked to name the most important people in their lives, and as a format for the social network map, Hämäläinen used a picture of an apple tree. Children placed themselves in the trunk of the tree and then began to specify the family relations that were important to them. The children filled in a diary for one week, which had specific questions for each child and also one open question. The challenges noted by Hämäläinen were the sensitivity of the topic, while the unattainability of the foster children's biological parents made it difficult to obtain their consent. In the analysis of the interview data, Hämäläinen used content analysis, in which the researcher searched the data for the meanings of the text and employed thematic analysis to identify themes similar to each other.

In her ongoing doctoral studies in sociology, Rautio asks how expectant mothers and families with small children experienced early support and home visiting as a preventive service (see Rautio, 2012), also using the focus interview as her interview method. The data consist of interviews with six client families with small children (nine parents) and eight family professionals, who also filled in diaries. In the interviews, parents participated as couples or as individuals depending on the possibilities for taking part, with the interviews concerning topics such as parenting, the couple's relationship, family support, home visiting and the social networks of the families. Interviewees were recruited with the help of home visitors, who first asked

permission from the families, and then following this Rautio contacted the families and arranged the interviews according to each family's wishes. In this article, the focus is on the interviews with the client families. Rautio primarily interviewed her participants in their homes in their kitchen, with two of the interviews conducted at the university. A major challenge was to get families to talk about sensitive and private matters, and the interview data were analysed by using a narrative approach that concentrated on the narrative form of the experience.

Both authors chose the qualitative interview as the main research method in their studies, as according to Warren (2001, 83), for example, the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations from what the respondents have to say. Like Warren (2001, 83), the authors' aim was to understand the meaning of the respondents' experiences and their life worlds. Another reason for choosing the focus interview was that it allowed the respondent to talk freely. The chosen themes guarantee that the interviewer talks about the same topics with every interviewee (Eskola and Suoranta, 1998, 88), while with children the half-structured interview makes it possible for a child to talk about important subjects (Munro, 2001, 130). The authors considered that this possibility was available to adults as well, and both authors chose individual focus interviews because of the sensitive topic of their studies.

There are different views about individual and group interviews, as group interviewing may decrease the power between researchers and participants, thus allowing children to create meanings with their peers (Eder and Fingerson, 2002, 183; Lallukka, 2003, 81). Moreover, it can also be useful to sometimes use both individual and group interviews in the same study (Eder and Fingerson, 2002, 192), with adult family members such as parents taking part in interviews as individuals or couples. Interviewing parents together can provide richer and more detailed accounts than individual interviews, though in contrast, interviewing parents separately allows for more privacy for the participants. The distribution of work in the relationship and its dynamics may be more visible when both partners are present. The interaction between family members in the interview situation offers important data. In the participants' homes, which are where their shared experiences exist, the researcher

can feel that s/he is at the core of the participant's private thoughts, (Valentine, 1999, 68-71; Andersson, 2007, 38-40; Åstedt-Kurki et al., 2001, 289-290).

Along with the qualitative interview, social network maps and diaries were used in these studies, although there are other methods that could have been used in studying sensitive family issues, including writing a request in which participants are asked to write about particular issues (see Notko, 2011). Additionally, it is also possible to use methods with children such as photography, in which children can take photographs (Barker and Weller, 2003, 218; Darbyshire et al., 2005, 423, 424; Punch, 2002, 333).

Hämäläinen considered conducting all her interviews at the children's foster homes because of the sensitivity of the topic, but also because of the wishes of the foster parents. Rautio also conducted her interviews at the homes of the participants due to the sensitivity of the topic, but interviewed parents at the university if they so preferred. One reason for interviewing at the participants' homes was that the authors considered that their interviewees had already experienced home visits by social workers or other professional from the field of social work, and were therefore used to it.

### **Sensitivity, family and home**

Sensitivity is present in the authors' studies on many levels, as sensitive research can be defined as "research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it". Telling another person about the intimate or highly personal aspects of one's life can be challenging. If the research process incurs costs to either party, it can be defined as sensitive, and interviews can be experienced as distressing or even traumatic by the interviewee, as well as by the interviewer (Lee, 1993, 4, 97; Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Robson, 2001). Research on sensitive topics can entail risks such as breaking confidentiality when sharing and revealing matters of an intimate nature (Corbin and Morse, 2003; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2009; Glesne, 1999; Hydén, 2008; McCosker et al., 2001), and the authors have also observed these issues in their fieldwork. During their interviews, the authors noticed how the sensitive research topic brought up issues that were private or intimate for the participants.

Both studies, which were conducted by the present authors, concern sensitive issues. For foster children, foster care, home and family relations are highly sensitive topics, as being taken into custody has not only changed their family relations radically, but also forced them to leave their homes. Some foster children consider their foster home as their only home, whereas others consider their former home or homes in this way. This renders the foster home as an even more sensitive setting to conduct interviews with these children because the foster home is a private environment not only for the foster children, but for the other foster family members as well, since it can be very sensitive talking about being taken into custody in the new home around new family members. Similarly, sensitivity was present when interviewing the adult family members of the client families. Being a client of family services and asking for and receiving support, in addition to talking about one's parenting abilities, are particularly sensitive issues when interviews take place in the clients' homes. In both studies, talking about and revealing these very sensitive and private issues to a researcher is clearly a sensitive situation, and in this way is somehow a threat to the participants.

Sensitivity in the authors' studies is also about family issues, as any researcher who studies families faces the challenge of entering and managing an intimate space. Families are generally thought of as one of the most closed and private of all social groups; however, qualitative researchers are well-placed to gain an understanding of the private meanings of families when they enter into their life worlds (Daly, 2007, 73; Liamputtong, 2007, 8: see also Jordan, 2006).

The authors entered the lives of their participants and their families by conducting interviews in their homes, and in qualitative studies of family life, the researcher becomes embedded in the personal worlds of those being studied. Family research has typically sought to respect this sense of privacy and the sensitivities involved in studying people's personal lives and relationships. For example, it is possible that some family members might decline to participate (Gabb, 2010, 461, 465; Adler & Adler, 2002, 519; see also Zartler, 2010, 176; Åstedt- Kurki et al., 2001, 289-290); hence, the authors were bound to respect the privacy of foster children and client families and face the possibility of refusal. Hämäläinen faced three refusals, including

from one couple of foster parents, one biological parent and one child. Rautio gained participants through family professionals, and there was also the possibility of some of the parents refusing to participate without the researcher knowing the reasons. The authors considered that the reasons for these possible refusals could have been due the sensitive topic of the study.

In the authors' studies, sensitivity is gathered around the home. Moreover, since the focus in this article is on the interviews conducted in the participants' homes, it is important to discuss the meaning of home. Home has been considered to be a sensitive interview context that can be understood as a symbol of identity and a familiar place, which represents a continuity with the past that will never be completed. It is where one leaves from and where one returns to. A home cannot just be given to someone; a home has to be adopted emotionally, and only then can it be called home (Granfelt, 1998, 107; Granfelt, 2001, 35). The concept of "home" includes the idea that it is something that everyone should have, with the "feeling of home" also entwined in our memories. It is connected to powerful emotions, and its value becomes especially clear when it is questioned (Vilkko, 2000, 226-227).

In the authors' research, the participants have experiences of situations where the meaning of home has been questioned. This is particularly the case with foster children, but it is also true for client families who have revealed their homes to home visitors. Home is also linked to participants' memories, relationships and life events, and can be considered as a dwelling place or lived space of interaction between people and places, as well as being associated with feelings of comfort, ease, intimacy, relaxation and security. It can also be an expression of one's identity and sense of self, and can be given or made, familiar or strange and a relevant or irrelevant concept. Home can also be an ideological construction or an experience of being in the world; thus it is not just a space, but has a temporal structure and an esthetic and moral dimension (Smart, 2007, 163-166; Mallett, 2004, 84; Douglas, 1999, 263; see also Helavirta, 2011; Högdin & Sjöblom, 2012, 56).

Home as an interview context has been used in other studies, with many of them including sensitive topics. For example, in a study by McCosker and Adams (2001), parents or carers of children with disability were interviewed at home about their



views on short break services, while Resnick et al. (1997) interviewed adolescents at home about their risk behaviours, such as the use of alcohol and drugs, which can be considered as sensitive topics. Similarly, Supple et al. (1999) used home as an interview context to explore the effects of computerized, self-administered data collection techniques in research on adolescents' self-reported substance use and psychological well-being. Siemiatycki (1979) compared mail, telephone and home interviews for household health surveys in his study in order to compare the costs and quality of different strategies. In addition, Picavet (2001) used both in-home interview and mail surveys in his study.

### **The participants' home as an interview context**

The authors of this article want to examine why and how interviews in participants' home settings are important to discuss, as when studying sensitive family issues it is important to consider the interview setting. There has been debate in the literature about conducting interviews in participants' homes, which has centred on both the positive sides and challenges of using the home as an interview context. The authors also want to discuss whether or not to choose participants' homes or some other environment, so the authors compared the home as an interview context to another possible interview context, i.e. universities and schools. Within this discussion, there is also a comparison between adults and children.

### ***Comparing different interview contexts***

Different interview contexts require different considerations. For example, Eggenberger and Nelms (2001, 23) interviewed families in a hospital environment, and argued that participants may not be so open in their answers in a strange environment that includes many outsiders. Both authors consider that interviewing the adults and children in a more unfamiliar environment, such as in a public place or at a university in the researcher's office, would have involved other, different considerations.

In Rautio's study, where two of the participants were interviewed at the university instead of at home, she noticed that these interviews were more formal than those held at homes. At the university, the interviewee was the one who was entering the researcher's domain as a research participant and the environment was probably

unfamiliar or strange. The typical location for the interview was a conference room, which was without the casual and pleasant atmosphere or facilities that are probably more likely to be available in the home environment. The reason why one participant chose to come to the university instead of inviting the researcher to his/her home was unknown to Rautio, although she thought it might have been due to the sensitive research topic because she received such information during the interviews, including the fact that the participant told her that she was separated from her partner at that time. The other participant refused to do the interview at home without giving any specific reason, but during interview the participant talked about the difficulties involved with home visits by a social worker.

Rautio experienced that parents received her at their homes in a way that was similar to that of a guest or a friend, which is the opposite of what takes place in an interview conducted at a university. At the home the families were the hosts, which stands in contrast to interviews held at the university, where the author was the host. Rautio also felt that the university as an interview context could be seen to be formal and strange by the participants.

### ***Possibilities of home setting***

On the positive side, it has been argued that interviews in the participants' homes are more likely to succeed, because the fact of being invited to the interviewee's home is evidence that the participant is committed to the interview and ready to trust the researcher. When conducting interviews on highly emotional, sensitive or private topics, it is often best to conduct the interview in as secluded a place as possible, such as at the home of the participant (Eskola and Vastamäki, 2001, 28; Adler and Adler, 2002, 528). With this view, the home can be seen as a comfortable place to hold the interview, which is then integrated as part of the home and daily life of the participants (Helavirta, 2007, 634). In their homes, the family members are in their natural environment; hence the researcher has an opportunity to get to know the participants in their normal environment (Andersson, 2007, 36; Åstedt - Kurki et al., 2001, 289; Aldridge & Wood, 1998).

The authors believe that conducting the interviews in the participants' homes provided a chance to obtain more information about the participants and their lives, such as in relation to their interests or hobbies.

Hämäläinen: So do you have something here that you have drawn?

Child: This and this.

Hämäläinen: You like to draw?

Child: Yes I do.

Hämäläinen: And you like dogs, you have many pictures of them.

Child: Yes I have.

Talking with children in their rooms about their interests helped the interaction between the interviewer and the child, as it was easier to start talking about sensitive family issues. At the beginning of all the interviews, Hämäläinen talked about the rooms of the children and the things found there, which helped to shed light on the children's interests, including discussions about hobbies such as music, arts, pets and computer games. The authors had the opportunity to see their participants' home environments and therefore had a chance to gain a richer insight.

Nevertheless, it was not always easy to talk about sensitive family issue at home:

Hämäläinen: When do you see your father?

Child: I don't, he lies in the grave, he died I think in the year...I have it on my calendar.

Child: I have a new way of getting out of this bed, I am able to jump.

In the exchange above, the child changed the subject and started to jump on the bed until we talked about different subjects. Another child in Hämäläinen's study started to cry during the interview when she talked about her father who had passed away, but the child still wanted to continue the interview. Hämäläinen felt it to be a safe environment, as the children were acting naturally in their own homes. Also, when conducting interviews at foster homes, Hämäläinen had the possibility to immediately discuss things face-to-face with foster parents if needed. In this case, she discussed the child's crying with the child's foster mother, and when interviewing participants at their homes, it is possible to cooperate according to each family's or child's wishes.

The authors also noted that the home as an interview context promotes the choice of home-related talk:

Rautio: What kind of a social network do you have at the moment?

Mother: Well, it's not very wide, doesn't have so many strong links, but then there are friends who are also mothers and who live in this neighborhood; there are plenty of them here and I have made contact with them. But many of my old friends I went to school with have moved elsewhere. And then again, our families live further away.

In her home context, this mother emphasized the importance of having other mothers living nearby and having their company and support. Rautio noted that discussing sensitive family issues related to home was easy when the interviews were conducted at the heart of the family home, and that the living environment and social networks are strongly linked to the home. In Rautio's study, the home was also a central topic when discussing home visits. For example, mothers often talked about being at home alone during the day with their child or children, while fathers pointed out that they wondered how the family was coping at home when they were at work. According to Rautio's experiences, participants' homes as an interview context allow for a relaxed atmosphere during the interviews, as well as casual off-the-record conversations with the participants. Hämäläinen also found that with foster children the home environment was a comfortable interview setting, with the children adapting well to this situation. The authors noticed that the possibility of creating a dialogical interview was emphasized in this context.

In Hämäläinen's study, some foster children showed photographs of people who were important to them (see also Andersson, 2007, 41), as family photos can also give more personal information about a participant and create a relaxed atmosphere during an interview:

Hämäläinen: Okay, you have many photos of him, and are those your sisters?

Child: Yes they are.

Hämäläinen: There's your daddy and okay, your mother is not there?

Child: No.

Hämäläinen: It's your sister's mother?

Child: Yes.

Hämäläinen: They have travelled to Italy?

Child: Yes they have.

Hämäläinen: Do you feel sad because of these photos?

Child: A little bit.

Hämäläinen: Okay, on the other hand, it is nice to have the photos, otherwise you wouldn't know anything?

Child: Yes it is.

Seeing photographs was the kind of extra information that is possible to receive when interviews take place in the participants' homes. Wenger (2001, 271) further states that their homes often give clues to the participants' previous lives, with photographs providing a useful point of entry into discussions. Photographs are also sensitive and work as a way to start discussing sensitive family issues.

The authors of this article found that when conducting sensitive family research by doing the interviews at the participants' homes and joining the family for coffee or lunch, it was in many ways similar to paying a visit to a friend (see also Andersson, 2007, 36-37; Ritala-Koskinen, 2001, 89). In both studies, the authors felt very welcome in the participants' homes. For example, in Rautio's study, the interviews were usually conducted in the kitchen, where guests and friends are commonly received, as having a cup of coffee during the interview made for a more relaxed and conversational situation. Like Rautio, Hämäläinen participated in foster families' lunch times together with the foster children, and some foster parents or foster children also presented their home before the interview. Some authors, for example Jordan (2006, 178), take the view that meal sharing is too intimate and unstructured to allow existing norms to be maintained in the presence of an outsider. However, the authors felt that participating in the interviewees' daily lives emphasized the friend-like quality of the occasion, and that this aspect of friendship helps in the interviews on sensitive family issues.

There has been a considerable amount of debate about the issue of friendship between the researcher and the participant (Campensino, 2007; Duncombe & Jessop, 2002, 119; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Goode, 2000, 7; Glesne 1999; Heath et al., 2009; Oakley, 1981). Researchers sometimes wonder how involved they might become with their research subjects, and may even develop friendships with the research participants during a study (Liamputtong, 2007, 86). In some respects, the

role of the researcher resembles that of a family friend (Reynolds, 1987, 89; see also Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, 14-19), and the researcher's presence is invested with an aura of friendship when interviewing in a respondent's home. Some researchers may feel compelled to behave as a friend, and subsequently wonder whether they have lost sight of their professional role. The researcher gets to know the subjects as individuals, and the relationship may develop into a friendship rather than remain a professional association (Adler & Adler, 2002, 528; Johnson & Clarke, 2003, 428; Vetere & Gale, 1987, 80). However, it has been argued that rapport is best established through strong listening skills, rather than by promises of friendship (Reinharz & Chase, 2003, 81). In the authors' studies the authors did not promise their participants friendship or attempt to form such relationships; instead, the authors felt they were close to being a friend.

In the home context, there is the possibility for the participants to ask questions of the authors. For example, in Hämäläinen's study, some children asked why the author was only interviewing children and about her likes and dislikes, while participants in Rautio's study also asked about the details of her research.

In addition to these findings, the authors also see that the giving of gifts between researcher and participant is perhaps more common in home interviews. This can be seen as a reward to the participant, a token of the interviewer's appreciation and as a sign that the interview has ended. (Seidman, 2006, 109; see also Goode, 2000, 8). For example, Hämäläinen decided to give the children small gifts after the interviews because of the gratitude she felt towards them, and the idea of giving gifts occurred to her after seeing the children's home environment, especially after seeing the children's rooms. Interestingly, Hämäläinen also received gifts from the children's foster parents. The families interviewed by Rautio also received small gifts out of gratitude for allowing the interview to take place in their homes and as a gesture of support. The gift offered in Rautio's study was for an adult participant, and was offered not only as a good will gesture, but also for financial support.

In addition to gifts, the authors gave their participants their contact information after the interview in case they had any questions or comments about the research. Researchers may also feel concern about the fate of their participants after the

research is completed, so maintaining the relationship may be both the ethically responsible and proper thing to do (Liamputtong, 2007, 86). Even without having formed actual friendships, upon leaving the field both of the authors experienced a feeling of loss owing to their attachment to the participants.

I miss these children a little, especially the ones I really started to like, now I don't see them anymore and I don't know how they are doing. (Hämäläinen's research diary 27.8.2008)

In part, this sense of attachment has led the authors to wonder about how the interviewees had coped and what had taken place in their lives since the interviews. Wenger (2001, 275) speaks about how the participant may be left alone to ponder the experience, feel a sense of loss and miss the recent interest shown by the researcher.

Lastly, on the basis of the authors' experiences of conducting home interviews, the authors recognize that the home has many possibilities that are different compared to other interview settings. Interviews with participants in their homes are perhaps better retained in the authors' minds than interviews conducted elsewhere. For example, Rautio has continued to wonder how the participating families have managed with their parenting and family life, and Hämäläinen how well the foster children have adapted themselves to their foster family and whether or not they have returned to their biological families.

### ***Comparing adults and children***

The interview context with children and adults has also been debated. The authors of this article want to compare how children and adults differ or whether they differ as focus groups. In the authors' opinion, children and adults differ as focus groups in certain ways, though both groups demand a sensitive approach when being interviewed them. In a sensitive family study, the researcher must consider the difference between children and adult interviewees and what the special considerations are that need to be taken care of with regard to these different groups. For example, in a study by Resnick et al. (1997, 824), who conducted in-home interviews with adolescents, the adolescents' answers to the most sensitive parts of

the study were protected from parental and interviewer influences by using earphones and laptops.

The in-home interview setting carries risks for young respondents, as in addition to the interviewer, the respondents' parents, siblings or other adults would often be nearby. The home as an interview context can have an impact on adolescents and make them more cautious in revealing, e.g. illegal activities (Supple et al., 1999, 483, 484-489).

Punch (2002, 322, 323, 338) has explored the ways in which research with children is similar to or different from research with adults. According to her, there has been a tendency to perceive research with children as one of two extremes: either the same or entirely different. Discussions about research with children have tended to particularly focus on ethics. Punch criticizes comparing research with children to that with adults, since there is a danger of bracketing all children together as a group who are in opposition to adults. It is too simplistic to consider research with children as being either the same or different from that with adults. Instead, it should be seen as being on a continuum where the way that research with children is perceived moves back and forth along the continuum according to various factors such as the individual children, the questions asked, the research context, the children's age and the researcher's own attitudes (Punch, 2002, 322, 323, 338).

The social context is also an issue, particularly when interviewing children (Morgan et al., 2002, 9). Children should not have to travel too far for an interview because any tiredness felt by a child can make an interview difficult, though in contrast this has been seen as being less convenient for the interviewer, who must travel to where the subject lives. A good interview environment is pleasant, warm and kind, and in research with children it is important to create a natural context for the interview (Aldridge & Wood, 1998, 25-28; Jordan, 2006, 171; Wilson & Powell, 2001, 37, 29; Eder & Fingerson, 2002, 181-183).

Interviews conducted in children's homes when the parents are not present may be preferred (Scott, 2000; Barker & Weller, 2003, 219), as such interviews can give



children the opportunity to talk about their toys, photos and drawings. Visits to children's homes can vividly reinforce their comments about the adequacy of both private space and free time. The researcher is also able to use visual elements and to find appropriate questions there. For example, having toys around during an interview can be useful, although this can also be distracting (Larsen, 2011, 50; Mayall, 2000, 132; Scott, 2000; Aldridge & Wood, 1998, 43-46).

The home as an interview site has its special qualities not only with children, but also with adult family members. Interviewing adults about sensitive topics can be easier when conducting interviews at home since it allows family members to talk freely about their affairs when the researcher is placed in the role of a visitor (Åstedt-Kurki et al., 2001, 289-290). As in Rautio's study, she had the possibility to offer help to the parents with regard to childcare if they wanted to, and some of the families took advantage of it. She noted that it was good to have this kind of possibility; in this way, parents were more able to concentrate on the interview itself and could more openly discuss sensitive issues adult to adult.

Different interview contexts such as a school or the home constitute a set of positions from which children and adults can "speak". From a methodological standpoint, school and home pose very different challenges with respect to data collection (Christensen, 2004, 170; Mayall, 2000, 123, 127). Interviews held in schools are problematic because school is organized and controlled by adult teachers, which may suggest that there are both right and wrong answers (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, 184; Punch, 2002, 328; see also Darbyshire et al., 2005). A central location such as the participants' work or school may encourage them to attend the interview, although the venue may affect the participants' behaviour. For example, in a school setting children may behave like pupils in a clinical setting; participants may be affected by any anxieties that affect them when they are in a patient role (Gill et al., 2008, 294). Conducting interviews in participants' homes can be considered to be easier since a cooperation with parents works better than with teachers. On the other hand, school has been seen to be an easier place for children to participate in research (Barker & Weller, 2003, 213, 216; Powell & Smith, 2009, 134).

Similarly as with children, there is always a possibility that adults do not want to be interviewed at home and would preferred to be interviewed elsewhere, e.g. at a university. Universities or other authoritative environments can nevertheless be experienced differently and as being unfamiliar by the participants, and can therefore have an impact on the interviews (see e.g. Eggenberger and Nelms, 2001, 23). In contrast, Pirskanen (2011, 60–61) did not recognize that the interview location had a big impact on whether an interview was successful or not, although when interviewing adults at home she noticed that the participants had a certain inhibition when being interviewed compared to being interviewed in a public place.

Researchers should not assume that children or adults automatically prefer their home environment as the best place for an interview, as not all children want a researcher to intrude into their private room. Some children prefer to be interviewed in a more “public” space in their home such as the living room or kitchen, while other children may feel more relaxed in their bedrooms surrounded by their own belongings. Moreover, some rooms are adult-centred, such as a living room (Punch, 2002, 328; Eriksson & Näsman, 2010, 4; Punch, 2007, 9-11). For example, Helavirta (2007, 635) noticed that the only closed and private room was the parent’s bedroom; thus, the children did not take her into these rooms. Conducting interviews in participants’ homes can be subject to the impact of family interactions when the researcher is not present, and children are likely to talk about their experiences of being interviewed with other family members (Punch, 2007, 8-11). First, during the home interviews, the authors noticed that different rooms had a different status, and only certain rooms were made available for the interviews. Rautio noted she only had access to the living room or kitchen, whereas Hämäläinen conducted her interviews in the foster children's own rooms and was also allowed to visit living rooms and kitchens, while the other family members’ rooms were more private (see also Helavirta, 2007, 635). The authors considered this to be due to both studying sensitive family issues and entering the private homes of the participants.

When comparing children and adults, the authors concluded that there are certain differences with regard to being close to a friend or a friend-like visitor. The authors’ research experience suggests that becoming friends with one’s participants is probably more likely with adults than children. For instance, Rautio noticed that

similarities with her adult participants such as age, gender and interests underscored the feeling of being a friend-like visitor. With adults, the researcher can share the same kind of experiences about things, have something in common, try to get to know each other or even make friends with each other on some level, but Hämäläinen saw that becoming a child's friend can be more unlikely without these common things to share.

### ***Challenges with home***

The authors now turn to the challenges faced in interviewing about sensitive family issues at the participants' home. A challenge for the home interview is entry into the intimate sphere of others, even if the visit is only short-term. Interviews conducted in the participants' homes are also more costly since the researcher incurs travel expenses (see e.g. Siemiatycki, 1979). For the researcher, conducting interviews in participants' homes demands a certain sensitivity, and also involves a number of ethical considerations (Bramhagen et al., 2006, 31). The researcher's social position as a guest in a family's home has to be negotiated, as does the researcher's presence in the home setting. The researcher's role must be simultaneously balanced between acceptable social science practice and comfortable interactional behaviours with family members (Mayall, 2000, 127; Jordan 2006, 172).

Conducting interviews in participants' homes also involves other challenges encountered in sensitive family research. For many families, it can be difficult to minimize the members' feeling that they have to put on a good face, as both children and parents may wish to present the researcher with "a harmonious happy family". It has been the subject of debate as to whether a happiness barrier might exist between the researcher and the participants which limits the information received (Jordan, 2006, 173-174, 178; Mayall, 2000, 131; Andersson, 2007, 109; Kortteinen, 1982; Roos, 1987; Åstedt-Kurki et al., 1996; 509). Families may have a need to display their family to others, which is a process through which individuals express to the audience that what their family is doing is what most families do (Finch, 2007, 67). Hämäläinen noticed that some of the foster children talked about their former homes and difficult parent relations in a positive and somehow embellished way, while at the same time telling about the unsafe things they had experienced. Some children were more open and critical. Rautio's interviewees were open, but there is

always a possibility that participants may talk about certain topics whereas others may stay hidden.

Entering the private homes of families, while has similarities with paying a visit to a friend's home and has many positive possibilities, resembles home visits made by social services or other authorities. Both the studies included issues of Finnish child welfare, which emphasizes the possibility to intervene in certain situations. Hämäläinen et al. (2011) consider the issue of intervention when conducting interviews on sensitive family issues, noting that in research with families with children, the researcher as intervener potentially arises. If the parents or children were to reveal worrying details, the researcher would have to inform the social services. The authors noted that the possibility of intervening is emphasized not only when conducting interviews on sensitive family issues, but particularly when doing so in the participants' homes. The reason for this is that the researcher is able to observe the environment regardless of whether they want to or not.

The authors have found that it is sometimes difficult to separate interviews conducted in foster homes and in the homes of client families in the preventive family support system from home visits made by the social services. Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008, 16-17) also discuss the problem of the role of the researcher and that of the social worker, with both authors thinking that intervention could be a possibility before commencing the interviews. In Rautio's study, this was because the parents were clients in a preventive family support system. Despite the support already received, the possibility remained that these parents might need more support and intervention in the future. However, Rautio felt that the home as the interview context might contribute to a more relaxed situation and make the parents more willing to open up about even the most sensitive or difficult issues. On one occasion,, she faced a situation where the participant revealed information that merited intervention, with her conclusion being that it was triggered by the interview context. She had to intervene in this situation by contacting the relevant preventive family support service (Hämäläinen et al., 2011).

In Hämäläinen's interviews, the foster children were child welfare clients, as they had been taken into custody by the social services and were living with a foster family.

Even so, problems can also arise in foster families, and intervention remains a possibility among foster children. Sallnäs et al. (2004, 143-144, 148) identified several reasons for the interruption of placements, such as foster parents wishing to end the placement because of discipline problems or social workers suspecting maltreatment of the child in foster care.

The authors promised their participants confidentiality, but they were aware that they would have to break it if they learned that a child was endangered (see also Burgess et al., 2010, 3; Gabb, 2010, 466; Punch, 2002, 46-47). Punch (2007, 9-10) notes that families that are dealing with specific problems might not be willing to voluntarily allow a stranger into their homes to interview their children, arguing that researchers should decide before the fieldwork begins whether they can offer full or partial confidentiality to their participants. The issue of intervention is also discussed in several other studies (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, 55; Glesne, 1999, 119-120; Hurtig, 2003, 58; Laakso, 2009, 89; Pösö, 2008; Reeves, 2010, 320), including one by Ryen (2011, 420), who argues that if the researcher breaks the participant's anonymity, the participant will no longer be able to trust the researcher. She says that researchers should be very careful in such situations.

The authors were aware that when dealing with sensitive family issues in the home interview context, the possibility of intervention by the researcher is continually present. Consequently, the authors had to decide how they would act should such a situation arise. In their view, the researcher cannot avoid these questions when studying sensitive family issue in the participants' homes.

## **Discussion**

In this article, the authors have considered the topic of conducting interviews on sensitive family issues in the participants' homes, with the aim of this article being to offer a fresh insight into this subject. The analysis about the meaning of the participants' home as an interview context is based on the extensive field notes of the authors, as well as a wide-ranging reflection and discussions about the interviews. Issues of sensitivity and comparativity were present throughout the article, and a number of issues related to the meaning of home as an interview context in studying

sensitive family issues were noted, such as comparing home to university, the possibilities and challenges of home and comparisons of adults and children.

The main research findings concerned different aspects that the authors found over the course of their home interview studies with the foster children and client families of the preventive family support service. In concluding their findings, the authors want to emphasize the sensitivity and safety of the home as an interview context. For children, the home in particular provides a safe environment to discuss sensitive topics. Similarly to adults, the home is a familiar environment, and interviews can be held from the families' own starting points. For both groups, the home allows sensitive talk in a sensitive environment.

The home as an interview context is often a suitable method when studying sensitive family topics, though not in every case. The familiarity and effortlessness of the setting is one advantage for the participants, with the authors' experience in the field supporting this notion. After all, what place is more familiar than one's home? However, although the family and home belong together, studying sensitive family topics in the participants' home environment, as in the authors' studies, also has a more problematic aspect since the researcher can face situations that raise the issue of intervening. Hence, researchers dealing with sensitive family issues should consider whether, and for what reason, to choose the home or another location as an interview place.

The researcher also needs to consider the challenges of the home as an interview setting, and understand that the home is a particularly sensitive interview context for the foster children and client families. The researcher must recognize that the core of the sensitivity is the participants' home, which is entwined with sensitive family issues. As a main challenge, the possibility of intervening was raised in the authors' studies, and talking confidentially about sensitive family issues to a strange researcher becomes a problem or a threat if the rapport is broken. Furthermore, intervention is perhaps more of a possibility with children than adults.

Based on their research experience, the authors pondered how much training researchers should have on how to study sensitive family topics, especially when

conducting interviews in participants' homes. In researcher training, there should be discussions about the considerations linked to adults and children as focus groups. How do they differ when being interviewed about sensitive family issues at their homes? No unambiguous answer exists to these questions since the home has multiple meanings for the interviewee.

In accordance with Hämäläinen et al. (2011), who consider that the private lives and experiences of families and family members should be made more visible and understandable, the authors believe that conducting interviews on sensitive topics, particularly in the participants' homes, can achieve this objective and yield more profound information about the participants, even though there are challenges.

In summary, participants' homes as an interview context when interviewing about sensitive family issue includes both possibilities and challenges for the researcher. The authors' studies show that it was meaningful in terms of where the interviews were held. In sensitive family research, the participant's home is an ambivalent context that includes many positive aspects and many challenges, in addition to being a contradictory context because of the sensitivity involved. It is a unique context in which to conduct interviews on sensitive family issues because every participant and their home is unique. Lastly, the authors conclude that studying sensitive family issues at participants' homes supports the sensitivity and ethical aspects of the study.

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