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## Sibling Rivalry and Family Conflicts: Narratives of Finnish Peasant Poverty

**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the culturally shared knowledge and understanding regarding family and kin relations held by the rural poor of Finland. The source material consists of the life stories, and poverty narratives within them, of Finns born between 1880 and 1938, seventy-nine texts altogether. Although all the narrators became financially secure by Western standards later in life, childhood poverty left them scarred. A recurrent focus in their life stories is how meager living conditions led to miserable childhoods and adolescences, a situation reinforced by the existing peasant family economic model. Stories that emphasize this situation are called poverty narratives. In this article I point to themes apparent in these narratives: tensions in the nuclear family, the perception of children as burdens, and criticism of extended relatives. Poverty narratives deal with topics, ideas, and evaluations that are relevant to their bearers; this article therefore provides insight into the linguistic competencies, concerns, feelings, and agencies of the individuals.

THE TOPICS OF sibling rivalry and the dysfunctional family appear in many folktales, such as “Rescue by the Brother” (ATU 312D) and “Prodigal’s Return” (ATU 935). Common features of these tales, collected from different peasant societies over time, are parents neglecting children and family members struggling against each other (Scherf 1974, 81). Topics concerning family and kin issues or relationships between family members are also linked to a number of other types of folklore genres, for example, proverbs, laments, and personal narratives (e.g., Kuusi 1994; Stepanova 2012; Wilson 1991). Contemporary people still tell family stories in their living rooms;

they tell them because relationships with family members, especially between parents and children, are a vital feature of our social networks from the cradle to the grave (Dwyer 2000, 11–12). These things matter to us insofar as the social support provided by mothers, fathers, siblings, wives, and husbands is a central part of everyone's lives.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, most present-day Western welfare societies were at a stage where poverty was familiar to the majority of people. Poor societies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when early collectors documented the folklore of European peasants, had weak social infrastructures, and therefore individuals living in absolute poverty often relied on their closest family members. In many cases, poor people helped and supported one another in cases of illness, childbirth and childcare, and the lending of money. Familial conditions in tales and narratives reflect real social circumstances (Röhrich 1991, 196), and narratives dealing with family tensions were the cultural products of particular impoverished contexts of the time.

This article focuses on the culturally shared knowledge and understanding held by the Finnish rural poor regarding family and kin relations. The source material analyzed consists of life stories from rural commoners born between 1880 and 1938 in Finland, seventy-nine written texts altogether. These narratives reflect the perspectives of nonprivileged people, that is, "the masses," their experiences and points of view. As argued by the folklorist William A. Wilson, I believe that these narratives, although based on people's own lives and history, do not constitute history in the traditional sense. In their narratives, people are not reciting history, but presenting themselves to outsiders—scholars, people in folklore archives, interviewers, and so forth—in order to convey the values the narrators hold dear. Topics dealing with poverty in life stories are carefully selected events from people's own experiences, and therefore the individual stories within the autobiographies have "artistic" power (Wilson 1991, 134). As such, certain family issues within the poverty narratives provide a basis for reflecting upon the oppression that narrators experienced in the underprivileged, often competitive situations within their own families.

Narratives told by the Finnish rural poor provide a window into the linguistic competencies, concerns, feelings, and agencies of individuals who constituted the majority of the population in almost all societies until the beginning of the twentieth century (cf. Dyson et al. 2012, 247). As late as 1950, three-quarters of the then four million

people in Finland lived in rural areas of low population density and small settlements. Small-scale farming, based on dairy cattle and forestry, was a common source of livelihood. Almost every farm had a cow, and rural households were generally self-sufficient (Apo 1999, 23). Located in the north of Europe, three-quarters of Finland's land area is still forest. Long winters, cold weather, and a short growing season were the basic constraints in agricultural production, and many of the smallholding farmers in the hinterlands were in need of the logging industry to supplement their income during the wintertime. The land reforms of 1918 and 1922 secured land for tenant farmers and farm workers, and as a result, hundreds of thousands of small farms were established, which could only support families if they had the extra income from forest work (Hjerppe 2008). Social contacts were close knit, and visits to neighbors for milk, eggs, and butter were frequent. Society was patriarchal in the sense that only men's rights were legally recognized. Although there was a clear division of labor between the sexes, survival in a culture of scarcity required a gender partnership based on shared toil. Men generally worked in the fields and forest—plowing, scythe harvesting, raising horses, and logging, for example—while women were responsible for food preparation and childcare, the running of the household's food economy, and caring for small livestock (Stark-Arola 1998, 87–89; Talve 1997, 173–74). Men and women of the peasant household were so heavily dependent on one another for subsistence and social reproduction in daily life that it often generated disharmony (Apo 1995). Many of the major effects of modernization—such as industrial and economic growth and more extensive transportation infrastructure—were not felt in remote parts of rural Finland until the 1950s and 1960s. The narrators of the life stories discussed here grew up in this culturally and economically underdeveloped milieu.

Besides storying experiences (Shuman 1986, 20; Douglas 2010, 15), narrative culture encompasses the largely tacit, taken-for-granted, and therefore invisible assumptions that people share with others. More precisely, as Charlotte Linde has pointed out, stories provide a bridge between the tacit and the explicit, allowing tacit social knowledge to be demonstrated and learned (2001, 613; cf. Quinn 2005, 3). My assumption is that people who have the same socioeconomic status—for example, individuals living in poverty in a subsistence economy with limited access to proper education—often share understandings of the world that have been learned and internalized

in the course of their shared experiences. Much of what people “remember” as part of their life stories is shared knowledge about the course of life (Rubin 2005, 79). This article treats life stories, and the poverty narratives within them, as representations of shared cultural knowledge—views, opinions, beliefs, and expectations—and the collected data raises the following question: How is the nuclear family narrated in the context of the Finnish nineteenth- and early twentieth-century subsistence economy and absolute poverty? Answering this question will foster a better understanding of the historical shifts in verbal culture. Moreover, such shifts are connected to people’s everyday experiences. These “voices from below” tell us about the textual construction of reality and, therefore, are of particular importance for understanding the lives of the lower class in general but particularly in Finland.

### Poverty Narratives: A Genre and a Source

In this article, my data consists of three different life-story sources whose common feature is that researchers have specifically gathered them with a wider, usually literary or social-scientific, goal in mind (cf. Plummer 2001, 396). The first two types of life story originate from an autobiographical writing contest, a method that encourages so-called ordinary people, as opposed to celebrities and professional writers, to write about their lives. The autobiographical contests were originally set up through newspaper advertisements; the first one was held for Finnish women in 1991 and the second one for Finnish men from 1992 to 1993.

The Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society and the Kalevala Women’s Association organized the women’s contest, and the data includes 567 life stories in all. Of these, thirty narratives serve as my primary data. The Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, together with the Council for Gender Equality, organized the men’s writing contest. This resulted in 360 texts, out of which forty-four serve as primary sources in my analysis. The participants in both competitions were born between 1900 and 1980, but the narrators whose stories I analyze were born in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Both the calls for texts encouraged people to write about their lives in their own style, “frankly and openly,” and about what it was like to be a Finnish woman or a man (Nätkin 2010, 99). I chose these particular life stories based on the age of the authors—the

older the better—and on the length and depth of their poverty narratives. Simply put, out of the available texts, these authors wrote the most about historical Finnish poverty.

In addition to the texts from the two writing contests, I also examine a third type of life-story material, five transcripts of interviews in which people tell about their lives. This material, taken from the collections of the sound recordings in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, includes individuals who were born in the late nineteenth century. These interviews were recorded in the 1970s and the early 1980s, primarily to document both belief tales and traditional children's lore, which were of great interest to the Finnish folklorists at the time. The narrators were asked first to provide short biographies in order to contextualize the information gleaned from the interviews that followed. The interviewees actively and voluntarily discussed the hardships in their lives, thus providing poverty narratives that resemble the ones in the written contests.<sup>1</sup>

In both the interviews and the texts from the writing contests, the narrators' life stories share a specific set of attributes that enables both sets of data to be comparable research materials. These attributes are as follows: the individuals were born in absolute poverty in remote, rural areas; village life was marked by poor infrastructure and a markedly rural economy; the individuals had to perform hard labor from a young age, in part due to lack of opportunity for a full education; and finally, the individuals left their parental homes early in order to build their own small dwellings and to start families.

The poverty narratives found in the interviews were an unexpected cultural expression for the interviewers from the Folklore Archives, who had neither sought out nor anticipated this information. Nevertheless, they kept listening and left the recorders running, although at times their responses reveal their occasional ignorance of the narrators' experiences or impatience to move forward into a discussion of the desired genres. The life stories collected in the interviews are shorter than the written ones, and, most importantly, they differ in coherence. Unlike the chronologically ordered written narratives, the interviews consist of fragmented narratives in nonlinear sequences, starting sometimes in the middle of the plot and often hopping back and forth along the timeline of events. Coherence as a property of texts is also a cooperative achievement of the speaker and the addressee (Linde 1993, 12), and since the interviewers from the Folklore Archives were not very encouraging listeners during these

introductory fragments, the interviewees likely constructed their narratives to be short and minimal in form.

It is important to specify the genre under consideration in this paper, since there are two concepts intertwined. First, there are life stories, which can be defined in nontechnical terms as the collected personal narratives of what a subject evaluates as significant in her or his life (Titon 1980, 276; Sawin 2004, 13; Linde 1993, 20). The life story is not, however, simply a collection of stories, explanations, and so on; it also involves the relationships between those stories. According to Charlotte Linde, when any new story enters the repertoire of the life story, it must not contradict those already present, which means that the narratives included in our life stories constantly undergo revision to express our current understanding of what our lives mean (1993, 25). Second—and more importantly for present purposes—there are poverty narratives within the life stories of the Finnish poor that portray sequences of events relating to the narrators' personal experience, based on their personal perceptions. An individual's personal perception of how poverty affected the culture of everyday life creates an event out of the raw material of ongoing life. The telling of poverty narratives within the framework of the life story thus extends that creative act into the realm of literary expression, and events become a story. Sandra Dolby Stahl, who has theorized personal narratives as a folklore genre, concludes that narrators have chosen the themes in their life stories and have selected events as materials for a good story (1989, 23–24).

These life stories construct a relationship between childhood and adolescence in the past, and the elderly narrator in the present, and they include many things other than the poverty narratives: reminiscences of marriage, children, education, work, and housing. The length of the life stories in my data vary from just three to more than two hundred pages, with an average of thirty-five. Stories are always related to other stories and other background events and can be understood only through these associations. To understand family tensions in the life stories and within the framework of poverty narratives, one has to read them from the beginning to the end, and appreciate how events link intertextually into coherent meaningful wholes (Linde 1993, 12–13; Oring 1987, 258; Wilson 1991, 141). Therefore, analyzing poverty narratives requires familiarity with the entire life story of the narrator.

The basic claim of this article is that poverty as a narrative theme within a life story features distinctive schemata that determine the representation and understanding of family and kin. The undesirable aspects of poverty are the very reasons why it has been widely reflected on in the life stories of people who have experienced it. People make meaning in the present from the memory of poverty and family relations because they have experienced economic growth and become financially stable in the course of their lives. From the contemporary welfare perspective or the interview situation, narratives on rural poverty establish some point of personal interest and thus have reportability; that is, they are tellable and retold over the course of time (Labov and Waletzky 1967, 34; Linde 1993, 21; 2010, 39). Negative experiences often demand more storytelling work; it has been suggested that the life story plays a role in repairing identities among stigmatized populations, such as those of transgender individuals (Langness and Frank 1981, 107; see also Olsson 2011, 105; McAdams 2008, 253). I suggest that the life stories of the Finnish rural poor in this article probably have the same reparative function.

I treat the Finnish life stories here as would a “culture reader.” These stories are valuable for the ways in which they reflect culture. Moreover, they offer metacultural perspectives, illustrating how a culture talks about itself, figuratively speaking. Allowing certain kinds of life stories, articulating certain themes, preoccupations, and values, by implication disallows or helps to render untellable other kinds of life stories (e.g., Plummer 2001, 401). Life stories, then, constitute the framework wherein cultural messages, such as those about past rural poverty in the context of the current prosperity, are analyzed. Through a close reading of narratives that speak to both poverty and family or kin I have striven to develop sufficient familiarity with the intertextual referentiality in this body of source material, while cross-referencing this with the established literature on the social-historical contexts of Finnish peasant culture. Together with the primary sources, I provide information on the events and climate of opinion that surrounded rural Finnish society in the past. In the materials that I have analyzed, three core themes associated with poverty and family include family tensions within the nuclear family, the understanding of children as burdens, and criticism of one’s relatives.



## Nuclear Family Tensions

In the rural peasant society of Finland, not only poor families but also better-off families were male managed. While many of the narrators of the life stories discussed here represent the sons and daughters of crofters, smallholders, loggers, and agricultural workers, some of them were orphans or parish paupers who were cared for by landowner households. Therefore, the idea of family must be seen in a wider historical context than that of the isolated nuclear family. Family should be conceptualized not only as people related by means of procreation and origin, including both nuclear and extended family, residing in one household, but also as interdependent individuals working to fulfill psychosocial tasks that help with mutual nurturance and development (Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund 2015). In the same way that the Latin word *familia* denotes an entire household, the Finnish farm family would have included everyone living in a given household, including farmhands and apprentices. Most rural inhabitants, including farm servants, tenant farmers, and itinerant laborers, were dependent upon landowning farms in some respect. Before land reforms, tenant farmers and cottagers lived on land belonging to farmers, and servants and itinerant laborers received room and board from the farm. The *pater familias* was the master of the household, the person who had the authority over wife, children, servants, and all those who belonged to the household (Talve 1997, 170). Although women contributed to the household, its ownership and profit were both attributed to the male master of the household. The poorer a household, the more important was the role of a woman in contributing to the household's living (Apo 1999, 17–18), where children also worked and provided an income for the family. However, no matter how many female or child laborers there were in one family, the house was vested with a master of the household. As a male narrator, Toivo (b. 1913), writes:

When our father died, my mother had to give up the cottage and our mother was thrown aside with her five children and the cattle, as vagrants in a period when no one in the outlying village had much. I guess my young mother had all sorts of thoughts at the time.<sup>2</sup>

Toivo claims that his life was like a short movie about a way of living commonly experienced over the past decades. In other words, his life story reflects what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to as “cohort

awareness” where individual life and historical events converge—in this case, where Toivo and his contemporaries share experiences that poverty narratives depict (1989, 125).

The title of his life story is “Tough Life of Toivo.” Writing in the early 1990s, Toivo describes the old rural society as deterministic and fatalistic. Lacking the protections of social security, such as child benefits, free health care, and education, a widow could not easily afford to maintain a household. Toivo, for example, tells of how he had wanted to attend school, but his mother did not let him go because he was hardworking and she needed him, a man, as her helping hand at home. The narrative also reflects on the fact that if a family’s livelihood was tied to the soil or land ownership, both men and women experienced the limiting factors of patriarchy. Daily work on the farm was usually divided along gender lines, and the labor of both genders was vital to the maintenance of the farm household. Rarely did people transgress the lines of gendered expectation, so for example, after her husband’s death, Toivo’s mother was neither expected nor allowed to do men’s work on the small farm—nor did she want to.

Poverty narratives reflect tensions between many social layers in the family—between husband and wife, between parents and children, and among siblings—bringing out the competitive side of the nuclear family. In poor families, conflicts started from the very beginning of one’s life, stemming from the interface between the limited resources a family had at its disposal and the feelings of family members. A family’s lack of wealth was connected with the unloving and disinterested ways in which parents treated their children. A male narrator, Heino (b. 1930), describes his home as being extremely poor:

We, the children, saw hunger and, during the wintertime, we had to stay on the sleeping loft on top of the Russian oven, while almost naked. I never experienced a thing like love.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, Heino equates poverty with a lack of love. According to anthropologist George M. Foster, people in peasant societies view their social, economic, and natural universes as one where all the desired things in life such as land, wealth, security, safety, and love exist in finite terms. This concept of limited good applies not only to material goods among neighbors, but also to the sphere of emotions among family members (Foster 1965, 296–98). Heino’s point of view supports Foster’s hypothesis.

In the narratives, sibling rivalry is presented in terms of unequal food distribution among family members. Liisa begins her life story at the moment when she was born in 1926. Her father worked as a logger, but like most of the workers in forest industry, he suffered from seasonal unemployment. There were seven children in the family, and Liisa tells about the agony produced by her sick and crippled little brother. She relates how relieved she was when he passed away: "That [the death] was a good thing amongst all that agony."<sup>4</sup> Liisa views his death positively, both because she believes it freed her little brother from his pains, and because once he was gone, there were fewer siblings to ask for the love and nurturing they needed from their mother. Perhaps Aila (b. 1912) most explicitly expresses sibling rivalry in her family, in which there was very little to share:

Once I ate the porridge of my little sister, who later died of epilepsy. I knew well that I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't resist my hunger and craving. That really bothered me and still does.<sup>5</sup>

Children living in poverty competed with their siblings in two arenas: parental love and care, and the material goods that parents offered.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Finland consisted of four estates where one's social place was determined by the social class one was born into. Although the life stories under consideration here were expressed mostly by the people who, unlike their parents, had not grown up in the era of the estates, a recurrent theme in their narratives is the belief that one's fate was determined at the moment of birth. A male informant, Martti (b. 1933), writes about his own birth in the following way:

When a newborn arrives, usually people congratulate the family wishing happiness to the entire family. It might be precious for some families, especially if the newborn gets good care, enough living space and a secured future, and the baby will not burden his parents. My own arrival was probably not a very happy event. Who would have had a reason to be happy? Before me, my parents had had seven similar arrivals, so it was possible that I felt like I was just another extra on top of excess for them.<sup>6</sup>

Martti lost his father at the age of five and started to help his mother collect twigs and farm carrots and turnips. In addition to everyday poverty, unfortunately he was also a member of the generation whose education was interrupted by World War II and the bombings between

Finland and Russia. After the war, instead of getting a formal education, Martti, like many other lower-class young men, was advised to seek logging work.

According to these narrators, living in poverty causes hostility within the family. The troubling aspect of family conditions in poverty was that the emotionally closest and dearest people were the ones with whom they had to fight for the same limited resources. One of the narrators writes that his arrival as the seventh child of his family made his seven-year-old elder brother criticize their parents “for reproducing too often,” since those already born did not have enough nutrition.<sup>7</sup> Some of the narrators explain how they used to keep an eye on their mothers’ waistlines and how they met a new pregnancy with feelings of dismay. Elina (b. 1930s) describes her childhood in a big family and observes that the more family members there were, the less there was for each one:

There was always too little food; I could never eat till my stomach was full. I always heard my mom or my stepfather say that I should not eat so much, so that the food should be saved for the younger ones.<sup>8</sup>

In some cases, the parents exacerbated these tensions among siblings and the sense of low worth felt by many children. This occurred, for example, when the parents, unable to nurture all the children to adulthood, sent their oldest children, usually eight to fourteen years of age, to work as daytime farmhands and maidservants (Apo 1995, 217–18). In these situations, children worked under a contract with wages paid in kind, mainly food. Later, from an adult perspective, narrators do not approve of the decision to “send” the children out of the home. The male narrator, Matti (b. 1928), reflects:

I was never told whether they [the parents] just wanted to get rid of me, or whether they actually wanted to arrange a better future for me. My father had written a letter to a family in Helsinki after reading an advertisement in the newspaper. The mother of the family had passed away and the father was alone with two sons, who were the same age as I was. He wanted a new friend for these boys, as if I would become a new brother to them. I don’t remember whether there were other applicants, but I was accepted. Nothing could stop it. I had to go.<sup>9</sup>

Originally Matti’s mother was from the landed gentry, but she could not find a proper spouse from her own class and, therefore, married

Matti's father, whose background was rural working class. Matti was the oldest child of his family and was expected to work from early childhood. He later educated himself as a train driver and became a labor union activist.

Perspectives and goals in the narratives vary depending on the subject. Obviously, for the parents, the idea of changing their children's lives for the better might have motivated their sending some of their children out into the world; therefore, it was represented as an altruistic deed. From the point of view of the child, now the narrator, it was, however, a sign of abandonment and emotional indifference.

As is characteristic of poverty narratives, narrators in these life stories often use poverty to explain unexpected motives and actions. For example, a female narrator, Anni (b. 1938), writes about how her little brother fell from a tree and was unconscious for several hours. However, he was not taken to the doctor because the father believed that the accident was the boy's own fault. In that poor society, it was customary to avoid medical care because it was too expensive or, in remote parts of the country, absent. The next morning, when her little brother finally woke up, the mother of the family was happy "because the doctor's fee was saved."<sup>10</sup>

Along with children, women were under the command of the *pater familias*. After becoming a widow, Anni's aging mother went to the nursing home, and felt guilty for this, remembering her deceased husband's words: "We don't take handouts from the parish."<sup>11</sup> The husband's pride notwithstanding, social security benefits or government-provided pensions were mostly absent in peasant society. The Finnish poor relief system was based upon a long tradition of local administration and local funding in which the local community took care of its own poor, but the state dictated the organizing of poor relief (Markkola 2000, 106). However, poor relief carried a stigma (Gestrinch, King, and Raphael 2006, 22) and was to be avoided whenever possible, as one can recognize in the view of Anni's father. Although Anni grasps the poor man's logic in terms of his strategy to save money, she applies contemporary cultural knowledge to how we should treat elderly people.

## Children as Burdens

According to folklorist Laura Stark-Arola, certain old magical rituals in Finland can be considered contraceptive magic, reflecting knowledge

and beliefs concerning the use of both magical and natural methods for manipulating female fertility. Surprisingly, some husbands performed fertility magic on behalf of their wives (Stark-Arola 1998, 142–44) to alleviate the burden children placed on the family. The poverty narratives portray husbands as regarding the continuous pregnancies more negatively than the women did. A female narrator, Merja (b. 1935), tells of her husband's outburst of rage when he heard about Merja's fifth pregnancy: "Keep in mind, you old hag, that you won't come into this cottage with that newborn baby, we already have too many mouths to feed."<sup>12</sup>

Other strategies to alleviate the burden of children focus on division of labor. According to the narratives, a daughter's role was to perform women's chores, such as nurturing and providing emotional stability. Edith (b. 1934) describes how her mother, on her deathbed, had called the daughters around her and asked them to keep the family together: "That was my mother's will."<sup>13</sup> Folklorist Satu Apo calls those who were expected to assist a mother or a grandmother in helping with the domestic chores "slave daughters" (1995, 211). The slave daughters' duties were to look after the younger siblings at the price of their own futures.

Within the poor family neither sons nor daughters inherited anything in most cases since the family property was so small (Apo 1995, 216). Generally, male narrators write about their feelings of bitterness when, after leaving home, their work for the parents' dwelling went down the drain. Unlike women, male narrators placed a high value on ownership and inheritance. After his military service, Martti (b. 1933) felt like doing only trivial work for his mother's small farm because, after her death, the small farm would be divided among eight heirs. Martti dreamed about getting out of the remote village, but he still aided his mother and older siblings because, "My will had been discouraged by the many commanders in the way that I usually automatically obeyed the orders I received."<sup>14</sup> Often those who were the oldest children in their families tell about how they played a losing role when it came to distributing wealth and affection. The question of who among the siblings actually carried the heaviest burden is impossible to answer on the basis of the poverty narratives alone; I assume that the narrators to whom parents had shown preferential treatment do not explicitly tell about it.

In the rural household, the entire family contributed to the household's economic wellbeing through productive activity. Everyone had

tasks on the small farm to contribute to family subsistence (Barclay 2013, 144). If a poor family lost either of its parents, ideally one of the eldest children could substitute for the deceased parent. This is what happened in the family of Elias, a male narrator (b. 1922): “My eldest sister, who was ten years old at the time of my mother’s death, had to look after me and took care of all the chores besides her own school attendance.”<sup>15</sup> Involuntary domestic labor in the home meant leaving school and childhood behind. When the father of Arvid (b. 1930) suddenly died, there were five small children in the family and a sixth one on the way. “Men’s chores” were left to the nine- and twelve-year-old boys, as Arvid describes: “Now it was the eldest of the sons’ responsibility to take care of the family.”<sup>16</sup> His narrative and evaluation at the end of it reflect a gendered division of labor tied tightly to the rural way of life. Arvid was born in Lapland, the most remote and poorest area of Finland where he, in his childhood, learned wilderness survival skills, such as animal trapping and skinning. The nearest school was located twenty-seven miles from his home. His life story consists of a description of uninterrupted work, first in childhood and later as an adult.

The majority of Finns living in rural areas up to the 1930s had no dwelling place of their own. Askel Lilius, a late nineteenth-century economist who investigated the living conditions of the rural populace, writes, “If one asks the landless people in which way they hope their situation to improve, one normally gets the answer: ‘If one could just get to own a cottage’” (Lilius 1888, 25; Timonen 1998, 226). The lack of a smallholding or a house, as well as the process of obtaining one, comprise one of the major narrative themes in the Finnish life stories analyzed here. A cottage was an everyday living space but also an urgent necessity. As such, the images of a smallholding manifested the typical characteristics of a “key symbol” that relates lower-order meanings to higher-order assumptions (Ortner 1973, 1343; see also Stark 2011, 273–81).

Perspectives on the absence of a permanent home are dependent on the narrators’ sex and the birth order. When older children grew up, they became farm hands or maids, because the smallholding could not provide maintenance for them. Leaving home in this way is depicted as a sad occasion. But for some, such as Juha (b. 1926), the departure was predictable and therefore effortless: “I felt like a burden to my mother, and I did not feel like the place was my home.”<sup>17</sup> The attitude of his mother did not change over the years. When Juha,

working as a sailor, made a short visit to his mother after the Second World War, the reunion was not joyous:

My happiness ceased when my mother reminded me that I should have stayed at sea. Why did she think I was going to be a burden to her, when I had not previously asked much from her? That [her attitude] still hurts me.<sup>18</sup>

Juha was born in a small cottage owned by the local municipality. His family household contained his parents and four siblings. On cold winter mornings, Juha's hair froze because the house was so badly insulated. The small dwelling did not have plumbing or a toilet. The walk to collect drinking water was 350 feet, and open defecation was practiced at the local dung heap. Juha's father ended up as a criminal; first he stole a bicycle and then grain. After he was caught and sentenced to three years in jail, the family could not find outside help.

The narrators reflect upon their views and experiences in terms of how these have shaped their understanding of the human condition in general. Contending for limited resources induces guilt. Topias (b. 1914) describes how, during the recession of the 1930s, he had to leave his farmhand job because the farm could not afford him: "The only shelter and support was my mother and home. I went home with a heavy heart. I knew that at my parents' table there was little available and many mouths to feed."<sup>19</sup> In Finnish peasant culture, being independent was not merely a standard practice; it was also a cultural ideal. If a person could not afford full independence from his or her parents, even from relatively early years, it produced feelings of failure and guilt for being a burden (Stark 2014, 33).

Historically, the majority of an inheritance was divided among the male heirs. The system did not exclude daughters, but they received a share half the size their brothers received. Both the administration of a woman's share and the ownership of the property earned or inherited by a wife were turned over to her husband (Gaunt 1987, 135; Apo 1999, 18). This may be the reason Finnish women's narratives concerning money differ from those told by men: daughters were expected to hand over their earnings to their parents without open bitterness. Although the eldest son usually inherited the smallholding, all of the siblings took part in paying back the mortgage. Female narrators seldom criticized this practice. The actions of people in



their personal lives strengthened the cultural model of patriarchy, in which the man possesses the economic and material wealth. For example, young men could decide where to spend their small earnings, while unwed daughters were expected to support their parents and younger sisters.<sup>20</sup>

The lower social position of females in the peasant community was considered natural, and in some cases it was said “to be a girl’s role.” Olga (b. 1902) observes that because she was the eldest child of her family, she ended up looking after the younger siblings at the price of her own freedom. Olga was never outdoors away from her nursing duties; in her narrative, she looks out from the window and sees how her brothers play freely. This motif is familiar from a number of magic tales; a father is not willing to let his daughter live her own life and confines her, for example, into a tower (Scherf 1974, 84). Olga ends her narrative: “I often wondered why I was born as a girl.”<sup>21</sup> However, she feels guilty for complaining, because everything in her childhood was “quite fine,” in principle. She had a mother and a father and, therefore, an ideal unbroken family and, for that matter, a “lack of nothing.” Olga’s gender and birth order still defined her life after childhood, because her father willed the small farm to the eldest son of the family, and therefore, “The rest of us had to leave the cottage with empty hands.”<sup>22</sup>

### Criticism of Relatives

The notion that relatives outside the nuclear family cannot be trusted is common in Finnish proverbs such as, “A relative is a stinging nettle”<sup>23</sup> and “One good friend is better than nine relatives.”<sup>24</sup> Such proverbs reflect attitudes toward the fundamental concerns of everyday life (Obelkevich [1987] 1994, 212). Likewise, the poverty narratives usually portray relatives other than closest family members in a negative light.

Negative attitudes appear mostly in contexts where a family gives a child away into the foster care of a kin-group member because the immediate family is unable to provide for all of its members. Narrators engage kinship in terms of a dialogue between good and bad. They criticize the way poorer or younger relatives were “assisted” by being compelled to work for kin-group members, and how this assistance was not considered altruistic. A male narrator, Theodor (b. 1924), describes his childhood as a foster child and the fights he endured in

school as a result. Theodor was placed under the guardianship of his aunt. Finally, one day his uncle got tired of the endless negative feedback from the school where Theodor had been fighting once again:

They [the foster parents] decided to send me to another place as a foster child. Because I was a nephew, my aunt had taken me in to raise me for one hundred marks per month. Those were the most embittered tears I cried when I heard what was going to happen to me, but nothing helped, neither my prayers nor apologies.<sup>25</sup>

None of the narrators represented their foster parents in a completely positive light. All in all, foster parents were not considered part of the family. Anthropologist Marianne Gullestad has noted a similar attitude in Norwegian autobiographies; kinship is interpreted as a close and necessarily biological connection (1996, 75–76). The shared normative family model includes the parents and the children. Orphans or single women with children represent an anomaly (Frykman and Löfgren 1987, 163). If the narrators' lives could not match the conventional family model, stigma followed. The ambiguous role of orphans and single mothers in the peasant culture is a recurrent theme, not only in personal narratives, but also in the wide range of folklore genres.

Many of the negative feelings toward foster parents stem from the harsh treatment narrators suffered as foster children in rural peasant culture. Often a foster child was in a position similar to that of a farmhand or a maidservant, as in the following example. Paavo's father had recently died, and the rest of the family had to leave the big farm where the father had worked as a farmhand in exchange for living in a small house:

My family was divided. My mother had to leave the dwelling with two younger sisters of mine. The older one was three and the younger one only a few months old. I was able to stay on the farm and finish my schooling. That was how the farm master could employ a new farmhand. I had already taken on some small duties before, turning the light on at the hennery at five o'clock in the morning. I was even paid for this, one hundred marks per year. The farm had a disagreement with the dairy, and for this reason the milk was separated at the farm. It was my duty to rotate the separator. I barely managed to finish before going to school, but sometimes I had to run in order to get to school on time.<sup>26</sup>

At their most positive, as in the above, narrators depict in neutral terms their foster parents or the farmers who raised them.

In addition to ill treatment by mercenary relatives, connections to stigmatized relatives added to the burden of poverty. The narrators considered kinship in terms of economic and social dependencies. On the concrete level, *social* meant face-to-face interaction, and on the symbolic level, it meant sharing a similar eminence or reputation. In the context of “folk psychology,” kinship as a concept consists of domain-specific expectations (Boyer 2009, 292). A category of kinship includes people in the same household and village who are thought to share similar features. Guilt by association—particularly kinship—is a prevalent concern in the poverty narratives. For example, Edith tells how she once visited a neighborhood and mentioned that the two village fools were her in-laws. This provoked laughter among the neighbors, but Edith’s parents were not amused when they later heard this. As Edith tells it:

At home I was being admonished for—my sister told our parents what I had said. “The other village fool is mad, and she is only a step-aunt to us, so it isn’t worth telling everybody that she is a relative. We already have enough suffering in this poverty.”<sup>27</sup>

Narratives about one’s own life express sociocultural ideas and norms; people avoid the topics and singular words that evoke unpleasant associations. Often illnesses, death, or bodily secretions, for example, are not discussed collectively or publicly where embarrassment would be too great for a speaker (Fromkin and Rodman 1993, 304–5). Members of the kin group who did not represent the norm were kept away for fear of the stigma that might stick to the rest of the extended family. In poverty narratives, losing such social respectability would have doubled the burden that the poor family was already carrying. Edith’s example also reveals how the distinction between better-off and ill kin members was sustained, since these ill members could not be exploited materially or socially like the wealthy and able-bodied.

Surprisingly, poverty narratives include few examples of people aiding others, whether kin members or neighbors. When helping others does come up—such as in cases of bringing up younger siblings after the death of parents and grandparents—aid is interpreted as an inevitable duty, not a question of choice. Helping others is not a negative life event; on the contrary, it is a good deed, and

therefore it probably does not require reflexivity (McAdams 2008, 253). Furthermore, giving money or food to someone—to a relative, a vagrant, or a neighbor—is also missing from these poverty narratives. The reason for this might stem from the genre. Poverty narratives highlight personal agony, but they also represent a situation based on reality in which the poor could not help others because they had nothing to give.

## Conclusion

One might claim that life stories reveal more about the present than about the past because they are told in light of known outcomes (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, 127). Decades later, at a time when they have left poverty behind, the narrators discussed here reflect on their childhoods from adult perspectives. Personal memoir becomes storied when it is put into a wider historical context.

In the life stories of Finns born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, narrators tell at length of how they lived under the continuous threat of poverty and how the lack of technology made everyday life a struggle. Although all the narrators became financially secure by any Western standard later in their lives, childhood poverty left them with scars. Most of the narrators accepted poverty itself as inevitable—livelihoods produced little, wealth was understandably scarce. What they did not accept, however, was their parents' unequal treatment of siblings. A recurrent theme in these poverty narratives is how meager living conditions produced miserable childhoods and adolescences, which were reinforced within the existing peasant family economic model.

A poor rural family was a production unit in which all the members of the family constituted a workforce. Usually the oldest son inherited the small farmhouse, and the rest of the children had to leave the house. This bred bitterness. However, narrators seldom questioned this system. It was considered a normal part of life, and narrators, such as Olga, Elias, Martti, and many others more or less accepted the unequal and asymmetric treatment of the siblings. According to the narratives, the family hierarchy was maintained by patriarchal discipline, and children knew their place in it, which often resulted in emphasizing the importance of the two-parent family. These narratives about the family reflect the nature of the social structure in the

poor smallholder family in Finland. As we have seen, these narratives revolved around three recurring themes: family tensions, the perception of children as burdens, and criticism of relatives.

According to my analysis, tensions inside the nuclear family begin very early in one's life. Narrators viewed their economic, social, and cultural prospects as always being in short supply. Members of poor families desired not only material goods, such as nutrition or basic care, but also emotional support. In this respect, the findings resemble the notions of "the world of limited good" introduced by George M. Foster (1965). Finnish children living in poverty competed with their siblings for their parents' love and care, and for material goods. Some narrators claim that children of poor families were encouraged to fulfill different social roles even within the same family unit, with younger ones better off than older ones. However, sibling fights were the most common issue in a family. Also, while competing for an equal share of limited family resources and parental attention represent cultural universals found in all human societies, favoritism varies, depending on the society and its structure. What was surprising in the Finnish peasant and logging contexts was the explicitly competitive dynamic among the siblings: sisters and brothers were characterized only in terms of limited resources and the competition for them. Narrators depict childhood and youth mainly through the lens of family conflicts. Stories set later in life once narrators overcame poverty, rarely mention siblings.

In the past, poverty was the main reason for abandoning children, a well-known motif in fairy tales such as "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327A). Indeed, some of the narrators in this study were orphans or raised as foster children. A foster child was usually given to a kin-group member who looked after the child, and, therefore, relatives supported each other in the context of crisis. In spite of this show of support, however, none of the narrators depicted their foster parents in a positive light. On the contrary, they recalled bad experiences more often than good ones. If he or she were old enough, oftentimes a foster child would be treated as a domestic farm servant. It is interesting, indeed, how strongly narrators stressed that foster parents were not a part of "the real family."

Life stories and the poverty narratives embedded within them communicate topics, ideas, and evaluations that are relevant to their bearers while at the same time reflecting shared cultural knowledge. Many themes previously expressed in orally narrated tales have been

carried over by the next generation into newer narrative contexts and a different cultural environment. Life stories portray problems and anxieties concerning poverty and its social consequences openly and straightforwardly. They offer a way to reflect upon and grapple with the kinds of unfair treatment and subjugation people experienced in the underprivileged, often competitive contexts of their own families and closest social groups.

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## Notes

1. All the materials are stored in the Finnish Literature Society's Archive Materials on Traditional and Contemporary Culture (previously known as the Folklore Archives) in Helsinki. The references that follow the poverty narrative texts presented in this paper indicate their location in the manuscript collection. The first part of the entry, "SKS," refers to the Finnish Literature Society (in Finnish: *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura*); the second indicates the specific archive, "KRA" for the Archive Materials on Traditional and Contemporary Culture or "SKSÄ" for the Sound Recordings Collections within the Archive Materials on Traditional and Contemporary Culture; the third part refers to the specific collections, "Mies," for the men's life stories or "Sata" for the women's life-story collections. The final portion of the entry, the numerical code, refers to the assigned page number of each life-story manuscript. SKSÄ materials have a code referring to the tape and the year when the interview was done. All translations from the Finnish are by the author of this article.

2. SKS KRA. Mies 1155: *Kun isä oli menetetty ja koti menetetty, ja äiti viiden lapsen ja karjan kanssa oli vailla kotia, kulkurina ajalla, jolloin ei ollut häävisti koko peräkyläläisillä. Oli siinä varmaan nuorella äidilläni monenmoiset ajatukset.*

3. SKS KRA. Mies 2037: *Kotini oli äärettömän köyhä, me lapset jouduimme näkemään nälkää ja talvet jouduimme istumaan uunin päällä miltei alasti. Sellaista kun rakkautta en saanut osakseni ollenkaan.*

4. SKS KRA. Sata 19418: *Se oli hyvä asia surun keskellä hänen pois pääsynsä.*

5. SKS KRA. Sata 12742: *Kerran söin pikkusiskon, kaatumatautiin kuolleen, vellin. Tiesin hyvin, etten olisi saanut syödä, mutta en voinut nälälleni ja halulleni mitään. Niin se harmitti, että vieläkin harmittaa.*

6. SKS KRA. Mies 1443: *Oma maailmaan tuloni ei varmaankaan ollut kovin iloinen tapahtuma. Kenelläpä siitä olisi ollut syytä iloita. Vanhempani olivat jo ennen minun syntymääni saaneet kokea tuon asian seitsemän kertaa, joten on mahdollista, että tunnuin heistä aivan ylimääräisen ylimääräiseltä.*

7. SKS KRA. Mies 2043. The narrator uses the term "excessive whelping": *liiallinen penikoiminen.*

8. SKS KRA. Sata 6596–97: *Ruokaa oli aina vähän, koskaan ei saanut syödä vatsaansa täyteen. Aina kuului äidin tai isäpuolen suusta, että sitä ei saa syödä, vaan se on jätettävä lapsille.*

9. SKS KRA. Mies 1421: *Minulle ei koskaan kerrottu sitä, haluttiinko päästä pojasta eroon vai haluttiinko minulle järjestää parempaa tulevaisuutta. Isäni oli kuitenkin lehti-ilmoituksen perusteella kirjoittanut Helsinkiin erääseen perheeseen. Siellä oli äiti kuolulla ja isä oli jäänyt kahdestaan ikäisensä pojan kanssa. Pojalle haluttiin ikäistään kaveria, ikään kuin veljää. En muista, oliko pyrkijöitä useampia, mutta minut hyväksyttiin. Eikä siinä mikään auttanut. Lähde: minun muistoni.*

10. SKS KRA. Sata 337: *Taas oli säästetty ainakin lääkärin maksun verran vähistä rahoista.*

11. SKS KRA. Sata 340: *Hän muisti Heikin sanat: 'Meillä ei oteta rahalappuja kunnasta,' kun kunnanlääkäri oli ehdottanut hänelle suonikohjuleikkausta kunnan kustannuksella.*

12. SKS KRA. Sata 17023: *Paina mieleesi akka, että tähän mökkiin et tule sen lapsen kanssa, on tässä ihan tarpeeksi suita syömässä jo.*

13. SKS KRA. Sata 218–19: *Se oli äidin testamentti.*

14. SKS KRA. Mies 1456: *Tahtoni oli monen käskijän toimesta saatu nujerretuksi niin, että tottelin useimmiten aivan automaattisesti saamiani komentoja.*

15. SKS KRA. Mies 4179: *Vanhin sisareni, joka äidin kuollessa oli kymmenvuotias, joutui ottamaan minusta hoitovastuun ja huolehtimaan myös perheen taloustöistä kansakoulukäyntinsä ohella.*

16. SKS KRA. Mies 7744: *Nyt täytyi vanhimpien poikien ottaa perheen huoltaminen vastuulleen.*

17. SKS KRA. Mies 11282: *Tunsi olevani äidille taakka enkä tuntenut paikkaa kodikseni.*

18. SKS KRA. Mies 11307: *Iloni lopahti, kun hän huomautti: olisit vaan ollut siellä merillä. Minkähän takia hän luuli, että tulisin hänen vaivoikseen, kun en ennenkään ollut häneltä paljon pyytänyt. Se sattuu minuun vieläkin.*

19. SKS KRA. Mies 5438–39: *Ainoa tuki ja turva oli enää äiti ja koti. Astelin sitä kohti raskain askelin. Tiesin, että vanhempani vähäisiä pöytään pantavia oli monta suuta ottamassa.*

20. SKS Sata 14454; Sata 144987; Mies 16117.

21. SKS SKSÄ 288.1984: *Minä monesti ajattelin, että miksi tähän minun tyttönä piti syntyä.*

22. SKS SKSÄ 288.1984: *Me toiset saatiin lähtiä kaikki ihan tyhjin käsin.*

23. *Sukulaine poltta ko nukulaine.*

24. *Parempi hyvä ystävä kuin huono suku.*

25. SKS KRA. Mies 11978: *Päätivät toimittaa minut toiseen paikkaan huutokaupattavana. Kun olin täden siskonpoika, oli hän ottanut minut hoitoon 100 mk kuukausi. Elämäni katerimmat itkut itkin, kun sain kuulla, miten käy, ei auttanna itkut, rukoukset ja anteeksipyyntö.*

26. SKS KRA. Mies 13397: *Perhe hajosi. Äiti joutui lähtemään talosta muualle kahden nuoremman siskoni kanssa. Siskoista vanhempi oli kolmevuotias ja nuorempi vasta parin kuukauden vanha. Minä sain jäädä taloon ja käydä kouluni loppuun. Sillä tavalla kiinnitettiin taloon rengin alku. Olihan minulla ollut jo kaikenlaisia pikkuhommia. Kanalan valojen sytyttämisestä aamu kello viisi, sain jopa palkkaakin. Sata markkaa vuodessa. Talo oli riidoissa meijerin kanssa ja maito separoitiin kotona. Separattorin kiertäminen tuli hommakseni. Kyllä sen ehti nipin napin tehdä ennen kouluun menoa, mutta joskus joutui juoksemaan, ettei myöhästynyt.*

27. SKS KRA. Sata 219: *Kotona sain kovan höykytyksen, sillä sisareni kieli.— Kettukahana on hullu, eikä se ole kuin tätipuoli, ei sitä tartte kehua sukulaiseksi, on tässä köhyhydessä kärsimistä muutenkin.*

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