

Conflicting or complementing narratives? Interviewees' stories compared to their documentary records in the Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes

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The Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes has interviewed 866 people who claim that they were subjected to neglect and abuse during their time in municipal or state care in Sweden. The inquiry has also examined many of the interviewees' documentary records. This article is based on the interviews and documentary records for 140 individuals and raises questions about the possibilities of corroborating stories of abuse and neglect through documentary records. In this study we found that the interviewees and the records told similar stories about where the interviewee resided during care and the duration of placements. However, in details the sources represented different perspectives on the same individual's history. Important aspects to take into consideration are that case files seldom reveal anything about abuse and neglect, and the tendency of authorities to make only cautious descriptions of suspected abuse. The study also highlights the differences between practices of recordkeeping which mean that some individuals can read extensive case files about themselves while other peoples' care histories have left barely any trace in the archives. In this article, these findings are used to question expectations about the possibility of establishing one 'truth' of abuse in an individual case by collecting 'evidence' from several sources.

Keywords: child abuse; inquiry; foster care; institutional care; documentary records; Sweden

Introduction

The Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Foster Homes and Institutions was launched in 2006. After an acclaimed television documentary in which six middle-aged men recounted tales of systematic abuse, violence and sexual

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abuse at a Swedish children's home, the then Minister of Health and Social Affairs commissioned the National Board of Health and Welfare to examine whether such abuse occurred in more places than in this particular children's home. The Board's report formed the basis of a government inquiry with the mandate to identify serious abuse and neglect in institutions and foster homes. The inquiry commission was led by Mr Göran Johansson. The inquiry published its official committee report on 29 September 2011, by which time the inquiry had interviewed 866 people. The interviewees have told of physical violence with a weapon (44 per cent) or without a weapon (72 per cent); sexual abuse (55 per cent); threats (45 per cent); violations of integrity, discrimination and injustices (85 per cent), labour exploitation (52 per cent) and neglect (87 per cent). The reported events of abuse and neglect occurred between the 1920s and the 2000s.¹

The Swedish inquiry has several similarities with inquiries on historical abuse and neglect of children in state care that have been conducted in other countries.² Set up after media had highlighted serious abuse and neglect, they have mainly been based on the testimony of those who consider themselves victims and have prompted discussions about the need for restitution. In other respects, the Swedish inquiry differs from other similar inquiries. Firstly, the inquiry had the task of identifying abuse and neglect both in foster care and in institutions. No specific institutions had been identified in advance. The Swedish inquiry applied an individual perspective which focussed on the individual's experience of abuse and neglect throughout the whole chain of child welfare services in his or her childhood. The same individuals were able to tell of neglect and abuse both in foster homes and in institutions. The tragedies become especially obvious when we were able to follow how children were moved from one disastrous placement to another. However, it is important to note that not all placements in an individual's care history were bad. Interviewees have spoken of placements where they were treated with respect and affection as well as placements where they suffered from harsh and cold-blooded treatment. Sadly, the darker picture looms large, but we also need to emphasise that care leavers with no experience of abuse and neglect were not invited to tell their story.

The individual perspective is strikingly different from other international examples which have had specifically named institutions as a point of departure. Only occasionally have such inquiries covered abuse and neglect in foster homes even though foster care has been common in these jurisdictions. In the Swedish inquiry 763 interviewees (96 per cent) spoke of abuse and neglect in foster care, highlighting the exposure and poor transparency of this type of care.³

In addition to conducting interviews with former care leavers the Swedish inquiry collected extensive documentary records from the interviewees' case files compiled by child custody boards all over the country. This was done to help the interviewees come to terms with their childhood history, as a part of a restorative process. Many did not know why they went into care, why they were moved from one placement to another, how their foster parents were selected, and so forth. These were questions that arose during the interview process. Although the collecting of records was primarily a service offered to the interviewees, the process of collecting and reading the records gave us insights which form the basis of this article.

No promises of financial compensation were made while the inquiry was under way. When a redress scheme was first proposed in February 2011, considerable public debate ensued. On 10 September the government declared that no financial compensation was to be disbursed. This decision was widely criticised and after three chaotic weeks the

government announced – with the support of the opposition parties – that a financial compensation to the victims would be a part of the redress. At the time of writing it is unclear exactly how the redress scheme for financial compensation will be organised.

One argument for not pursuing a financial compensation was that records available in archives failed to acknowledge that abuse and neglect really had occurred.⁴ This was not new information: it was the lack of – or the bad quality of – records, that raised the need for documenting the abuse through interviews in the first place. Still, the shortcomings of documentary records were used to question the possibility of relying on oral witnesses.

This phenomenon can be recognised in several other countries where similar commissions and inquiries have been set up. In this article we particularly refer to Australia, Britain and Ireland, where scholars and public debates have criticised the inquiries for failing to use documentary records to validate the victims' stories.⁵ Although such complementary sources are available, it is a complex task to verify an individual's story of abuse against historical documents which are mainly produced by authorities who failed to acknowledge or prevent such abuse. Sources that represent different perspectives cannot be expected to coincide in one unified narrative. This article addresses some of the difficulties that we – a childhood historian, an archivist and a political scientist in the Swedish inquiry – encountered when we collected and studied the documentary records of the interviewees.

Theoretical starting points

The contested concept of 'truth', as well as epistemological perceptions on representations of reality, has been widely discussed in intellectual debates that followed in the wake of national inquiries. Critics often accuse their opponents of having an improper or naïve understanding of truth and reality.⁶

Mark Smith, a British researcher of social work and a former director of several institutions for children and youth, argues that the investigations undertaken in Ireland and Britain have had a tendency to interpret the interviewee's stories of abuse as actual events and he criticises the inquiries for not having problematised the contexts in which these narratives came about. The victim's narratives have been privileged over other sources. In effect, Smith argues, innocent people have been convicted, urban myths about abuse are spread and claimants associated with criminal organisations have been able to receive money from the redress schemes. The solution, according to Smith, is to include stories from former employees and clients who have different images of the environments in the children's homes and the residential schools. He also suggests that the interviewee's stories should be checked against records.⁷

In Australia, the publication of the report *Bringing Them Home* caused a fierce debate that became highly politicised because it touched upon issues such as the identity of the nation. According to the historian Bain Attwood, the debaters divided on political lines. On one side there is a group of intellectuals and publicists with clear connections to the conservative political establishment that was in office during the 1990s and in the early 2000s. They participated in a campaign designed to disguise the whole notion of the stolen generation. On the other side we find a group of leftist intellectuals often associated with the Labor party. They have wanted Australia to come to terms with its colonial past and recognise the suffering of the Aboriginal population. Both sides have argued that the 'truth' had been kidnapped by 'the others'. The cognisance that a democratic society has to be open to many 'truths' and that there are several ways to tell a story, have passed many by.⁸

The different narratives of the interviewees and the case files represent different perspectives on the same individual story but they can be analysed to broaden the picture drawn from one another. Material from the child welfare authorities may provide information about people and events of which the interviewees were not aware or were silent about. Conversely, the interviewee can tell of matters that the authorities had no knowledge of or at least did not list in their documentation. It is difficult to argue with certainty that one's narrative – the authorities' or the interviewee's – is likely to be more 'true' than the other's.⁹ However, depending on the purpose of study, it is possible to make a stand as to why one approach is preferable. The Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes was charged with identifying past abuse and neglect in child welfare by interviewing people that wanted to come forward to tell their stories; to do so in a way that could provide redress to the victims; and to draw lessons for the future. For such a task the authorities' perspective is not an appropriate starting point. We would argue that no voice is more valid than the other. Documentary records do not provide a singular key to the truth. However, there are instances where the narratives of the case files and the interviewees support each other.

Background

In Sweden, municipalities had responsibility for ensuring the well-being of children. The municipal child custody board was obliged to intervene when the well-being of a child was endangered. Sometimes this has led to children being removed from their birth parents. Throughout the twentieth century most children in municipal care were placed in foster homes. Until the 1940s, there was a great faith in institutions such as children's homes and reformatories, but their importance waned in subsequent decades.¹⁰ From the 1990s onwards the number of institutional placements again began to rise. The reasons for this are complex. Some former foster homes were transformed into small-scale institutions known as the so called HVB-homes (homes for care and accommodation) and there has been a decrease in the numbers of foster homes available in response to the increased privatisation of care.¹¹

The principal organisers of institutions have been municipalities, county councils and the state. Foster care has sometimes been arranged close to the home of birth parents but many children have also been sent to foster homes in other municipalities. As a result several child custody boards could be involved in the placement of a child, particularly the home municipality, which put the child into care in the first place, and the municipality of residence, where the child lived during his or her placement. Responsibility for checking on the child's well-being has shifted over time. Until 1960, the municipality of residence was liable to supervise the foster home. *The Child and Young Persons Act 1960* (Sweden) prescribed that both the municipality of residence and the home municipality had some responsibilities towards the child. After the passage of the *Social Services Act 1980* (Sweden) responsibility was transferred to the home municipality's social committee.¹² Since the responsibility for checking on the child's well-being has shifted, the search for records is quite complicated. Sometimes several municipal archives had to be contacted in order to trace the case record for one individual.

Materials and methods

The Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes has used advertising, websites and care leavers' associations to invite people to come forward to tell their experiences of abuse and neglect. No requests were

sent directly to named care leavers. Those who wanted to be interviewed had to contact the commission themselves. The recruitment process influenced the results in several ways. First, only people with experience of abuse and neglect were invited. It was not the focus of the commission to include general experiences of growing up in care. However, some interviewees have told about homes where they were treated with love and affection alongside places where abuse and neglect was everyday practice. Secondly, it is unclear how effective the recruitment process has been. It is evident, that the commission's recruitment process has been somewhat limited. Given that, on several occasions, new media attention has meant that people with no former knowledge about the inquiry have contacted the commission.

There are no accurate figures on how many children have been in municipal or state care. A figure that is usually mentioned is 250,000 children for the period 1920–95, but it is only an estimate. However, it suffices to note that the Swedish inquiry, which has interviewed 866 people that told of abuse and neglect, in no way can be considered representative for the whole group of children in municipal or state care but it does provide a sizeable sample.

For many care leavers it has been of great significance to acquaint themselves with their history through documentary records. This has been underlined in several reports, not least by the Australian Senate's *Forgotten Australians* report.¹³ For people who have no family photos, artwork, clothing or toys, no relationship with family members that can tell of their history, and only vague memories of all the places where they resided during their childhood, official documentary records may be the only artefacts remaining from their childhood.

The inquiry both invited interviewees to search for documentary records in archives if they had not already done so and asked for their consent to allow the investigators to study their records. Many (67 per cent of the interviewees) have used the opportunity to gain help with accessing their case files and other documents that could tell them something about their time in care. Although some chose to have the records sent directly to them, the majority agreed to the inquiry having access. Consequently, the Swedish inquiry has accumulated a large and unique collection of both interviews and documentary records.

We selected 140 individuals for a detailed analysis of narratives from both the interviews and the documentary records. Our first selection was a random sample, but as the work proceeded we used a cohort sample based on the date when the interviews were conducted. This ensured that the archives would have a fair amount of time to find the records before we started our analysis.

The case file from the child custody board is the most significant source through which to monitor an individual's time in care. Among many things, it should contain a background to the intervention of the authorities and notes from visits and regular contacts with care-givers (institutions or foster homes). We had access to case files from 111 out of 140 individuals. The remaining case files could not be found despite persistent searching. This situation made us aware of the inadequate handling of case files in some archives, a problem that has been noted in several other reports.¹⁴ The absence of a case file of one individual cannot be taken as evidence of false claims of having been in care, as placements could sometimes be verified from other sources such as records from children's homes, medical records from psychologists, verdicts, and so on. An additional reason for attrition was lengthy turnaround times. In some cases we have been waiting two years trying to get the documents required. The quantity and quality of case files varies. This is partly a result of changes over time in terms of reference, but also due to unclear disposal schedules that may have resulted in documents being

improperly destroyed. Our contact with various archives and perusal of files suggests that records are characterised by great diversity, both in content and scope. The original record-keeping differed among social workers, and there is little uniformity in relation to what archives have chosen to preserve.

Results

*Duration and location – information that ought to be in accordance?*¹⁵

Despite the diversity in content and scope of the case files, we assumed that some basic data such as information on the duration and location of a child's placement always would be available. However, it appeared that even this data was not always accessible. Sometimes we were able to deduce when an intervention was started but not when it was closed and vice versa. In other cases it was difficult to follow the child from one location to another. The files are not set up so that you can easily follow a case chronologically.

Despite these difficulties, the concordance between the interviewee's information on duration and location of placement and the information given from the case records is high although exact matches are rare. Names of institutions and foster parents can differ with the official name of an institution being recorded in the case file while the interview subjects use more popular names. Name of the foster parents may also vary, although location was more agreed upon. The case files are specific as to dates, but, so many years later, only 18 out of 111 people had given exactly the same beginning and end dates documented in their case files. Of those, six people had seen their records before the interview and hence their memories were probably influenced by the written documentation.

The total duration in municipal or state care is mostly consistent between the interviewee's narrative and the information given in the case files, although a disparity of one or two years is quite common. Where greater differences emerge they are usually due to placements in an early age, interspersed with returns to the birth home. In such cases the interviewees have had difficulties in distinguishing when they were in municipal care and when they were not. Another example is when an interviewee who had been in foster care was adopted by his or her foster parents. Although, technically, removed from municipal care, for the interviewee nothing was changed and therefore he or she felt that he or she still was in care. Disparities can also be due to missing information in the case files as to when the municipal care ceased, cases where not all responsible child custody boards were contacted, and the lack of preservation in archival institutions.

Many of the interviewees told of being in more than one placement during childhood, the average, calculated as the median, being four.¹⁶ In 37 of the 111 cases there were more placements listed in case files than the interviewees recalled. This suggests that the interviewees understate rather than exaggerate the number of placements. In 19 cases, interviewees recalled placements that were missing from case files. This could be indicative of false information but it is also possible that children were moved without the authorities being notified or registering these transfers. After her father died in 1952, Eva and her brother were eventually placed with their grandmother. In summertime the siblings were sent to live with other relatives whom they remember as abusive. The documentary records indicate that the child custody board knew that the children were moved from one foster home to another, but it did not intervene until 1966. Therefore, the relatives whom Eva told the inquiry about are not recorded in the case file.¹⁷ There are also examples of files that have been culled and which therefore do not contain the child's entire history of care.¹⁸

Is it possible to corroborate abuse and neglect through documentary records?

To what extent can documents corroborate or falsify the interviewee narrative? We have already given examples where not even basic facts such as duration and location of placements could be verified without problems. An even bigger challenge is to use such records to validate claims of abuse and neglect.

We have had access to documentary records (both case files and other types of documents) for 119 persons in our sample. Although everyone in the sample claimed to have been subjected to abuse and neglect during their time in care only 41 out of 119 records noted such treatment. The documents provide us with a different picture of children's placements. This picture is often fragmented. Extensive descriptions of the time in a foster home or in an institution are rare. Instead the documentation primarily focuses on the period prior to an intervention – the problems of birth parents and child. The image of the child, and his or her family, is constructed through the gaze of professionals. The voices that speak in these documents have all been filtered through the pencils of one or more social workers. When a child was eventually placed, a social worker was required to make supervisory visits and document how the child was doing in its new home. Since the 1960s explicit instructions on what these notes should include have been available, specifying such topics as the development of the child, his or her interests and abilities, whether the child had suffered any disease, how the child was doing at school, the overall situation in the foster home and the child's contact with relatives.¹⁹ Such rich documentation has been unusual in the documentary records we have reviewed. The instructions on what to document were not followed in practice.

Even if the social workers carefully wrote down their observations from their inspections it would have been impossible to detect the mistreatment which the interviewees described. At best visits took place once or twice a year and they were often announced in advance. Many interviewees told of how they were cleaned and dressed up before the social worker arrived. Some claim that they were threatened not to reveal anything in front of the social worker. Given these constraints the question that needs to be asked is: how can documentary records be used to corroborate the abuse and neglect of which the interviewees have told the inquiry?

Mistreatment corroborated by documentary records

Of the 111 available records 41 included some note of mistreatment. Our reading of the documents is coloured by the fact that we have been told of abuse and/or neglect by the subject of the record. Our assessment of what can be perceived as documentation suggesting that the social childcare service knew of mistreatment cannot be separated from our knowledge of what the interviewees have been telling the inquiry. While we may have over-interpreted the documents as a result, we have also been more sensitive to notes that, on a first reading, do not seem to matter. Two case files can be used to illustrate this point. Both show that the social workers certainly had noticed that the children had to work but they interpreted the work as a positive experience: 'Gunnar has taken time off from school to assist with bait harvesting, which amuses him more'.²⁰ '[She] loves to help out, peeling potatoes, carrots, cleaning, etc.'²¹ It is our awareness that the respondents claimed that they were exploited as labour in these foster homes, which alerts us to the significance of these notes.

Many of the 41 individuals' documentary records consist of notes that describe poor care. It is expressed in particular by phrases such as 'were remarkably ill-dressed', '[the child] unwashed sat in the sandbox and wept'. In one record it was noted that the sister

of an interviewee was malnourished without any comments as to why this was the case. The interviewee told the inquiry that sometimes no food was served in the foster home. The food she and her siblings received was often inadequate. If she vomited, she was forced to eat her own vomit. In order to satisfy their hunger, the children ate tallow intended for birds or cereal flour from the barn.²²

Notes in several case files indicate that the children have been violated in different ways. Sofi was placed at an institution (known as an HVB) run by a family in the 1980s. Her mother wrote to the County Board – the responsible authority – claiming that children placed in this home were accused of shoplifting if they took food from the refrigerator without permission. The biological children of the family were allowed to snatch food whenever they wanted.²³ Maria's case file noted that she had confided to the school counsellor that her foster mother read all her letters.²⁴ Martin's file contained a letter from a school counsellor reporting that Martin was exploited as labour on the farm, had to endure offensive nicknames and that his foster parents were not particularly fond of him, preferring another boy placed in the same family. However, Martin did not mention the discrimination at the interview.²⁵

In some individuals' records, we have found documents that corroborate various forms of physical and sexual abuse raised by the interviewees. In one example, the social worker wrote that the foster mother hit the girl badly. In another, that the foster father pulled the boy by the hair as if it was something that did not fit. Boris told the inquiry that he was subjected to sexual abuse by the foster mother and that she used to boast and brag that she had taught him in sexual matters. The file shows that his mother had notified authorities that she suspected that her son was subjected to sexual abuse. The documents do not provide information as to what actually happened as a result of the notification. Although Boris was later transferred the notes show that he still had contact with the said foster mother.²⁶

In Sigrid's case the child custody board got a report from a third party who did not believe that everything was right in the foster home and especially questioned the relationship between the biological son and Sigrid. The social worker noted: 'She does not believe that the biological son is nice to Sigrid, is said to command her to and fro'. This information resulted in a supervision visit after which the social worker concluded that even if the home was 'a bit too proper' to have children there was no reason to believe there was a presence of neglect. Some ten years later, another social worker reported that Sigrid had claimed to have been subject to sexual abuse by said foster brother and that she was beaten by her foster mother. However, Sigrid was left to stay in the foster home for another two years. The documents corroborate Sigrid's narrative in the interview where she spoke of being sexually abused and beaten for her bedwetting. Although third parties such as neighbours and others complained about the foster family to the child custody board, no action was taken.²⁷

Testimonies about punishment have been common during the interviews. The documentary evidence talks mainly about isolation or situations at mealtimes, but there are also records of children having been force fed or not receiving any food at all. Berit told the inquiry that she was locked up as she did not want to eat her black pudding. The documents partially corroborates this narrative but there are also some discontinuities. In her case file the event is mentioned but the punishment for not eating the black pudding is described differently. Although Berit did not get any food at all for one day she eventually was forced to eat black pudding anyway. It says nothing about Berit being locked up.²⁸

The answer to the question as to the extent to which documentary records can corroborate abuse and neglect is complex. Overall, the scale of abuse and neglect is more limited in the documentary records than in the interview narratives. An interviewee may have told of abuse and neglect at several locations, but if there is a record of abuse or neglect in his or her case file this mostly concerns only one location. However, it is not unusual for the record to describe mistreatment that the interviewee did not mention.

Restrained notes

Social workers clearly have been reluctant or cautious in recording suspicions of abuse and/or neglect. The notes become rather unclear and diffuse using phrases such as ‘the situation is not good’; ‘concerned about foster care’; ‘not a pleasant home’. In several cases, the social worker dutifully describes that conditions in a foster home as not considered as good, but there is no evidence that the complaints necessarily resulting in efforts to investigate or modify the conditions. Documentation of the measures being considered is often lacking.

We have identified several cases where the social workers’ doubts were validated by the accounts of the interviewees. In Magdalena’s file a social worker noted that the child’s guardian was concerned about the unwelcoming atmosphere of the foster home. Two years later Magdalena was adopted by her foster parents but the last notes in her file document two social workers’ doubts about the adoptive family: ‘We are both certainly aware of that this foster family is not the best of the families to choose from.’ Magdalena has told the inquiry that she was physically abused by the mother and was subjected to sexual abuse by the father in this family.²⁹ Explicit reluctance to document abuse could also be observed. A social worker, in a letter to the headmaster of Rita’s prospective school, expressed the inappropriateness about writing about what had happened to Rita at her previous location: ‘some sad things happened I’ve been told by [name of a staff member] but I rather tell you in person since I should not write about these things.’ Rita told the inquiry that she was subjected to sexual abuse during said placement.³⁰

The authorities’ response to information on mistreatment

How did the authorities respond to the recorded mistreatment? Five out of 41 individuals whose files note mistreatment were transferred immediately from the placement. Fourteen waited for some time before being transferred and in two cases we do not know what happened because the case files are missing. There were 20 individuals who were not transferred at all, sometimes because authorities ignored the situation or because it was believed that the disadvantages of a transfer would outweigh the advantages for the child. In a few cases the authorities made other efforts such as extended visits.

Authorities were slow to react to evidence of mistreatment. Britta’s file shows that it was six months after the authorities had been notified that something was wrong in the foster home before an inspection visit was made. Although the social worker reported that the foster mother was mentally retarded and that the house was unhygienic and had an isolated location, it was a further two years before Britta was transferred to a children’s home.³¹

Procedures for supervision visits may have hindered social workers from obtaining sufficient information about the children’s situations. Today, an essential part of supervision is the private chat between child and social worker. This was not the practice in the

past. During the the 1960s and 1970s Maja lived 14 years in a foster home where she, according to her own story, was subjected to violence, discrimination and labour exploitation. The authorities made several visits, but they were all announced in advance. The first time Maja could speak privately with a social worker on such a visit was after ten years, a statement that is corroborated by documentation in her case file. The notes indicate that the social worker was concerned about Maja's situation and kept in touch with the foster home, the child and her home municipality. Managers in both municipalities questioned the foster mother but when Maja was invited to move to another foster home, she chose to stay. That Maja herself chose to stay with her foster mother does not mean that her story of abuse and neglect is unfounded. Rather it reveals the complex loyalty of a child to a parent or foster parent. From the records we can discern that Maja hoped that the foster mother would care about her and that she tried to believe the foster mother when she swore that she wanted Maja to stay. The social worker wrote 'Maja is now glad that she returned to the foster home. She thought that the foster mother really showed that she means something to her and it felt all right now.'³²

Another way to illustrate how different authorities have responded to information on mistreatment is to compare records that have documented the same location. Kristoffer and Bengt, two men born in 1960s, lived for four years in the same foster home. They were placed in the foster home by two separate municipalities and therefore the documentation was kept by two separate child custody boards. Kristoffer and Bengt were interviewed by the inquiry independently from each other about one year apart. There is no evidence that these two men have any contact with each other, yet both have told us they had to endure physical and mental abuse in the foster home.³³ According to his case file Kristoffer stayed for 14 years in the home. He has described the life in the foster family as 'a prison with rules for everything'. The foster mother had rules for every detail in everyday life, ranging from how a game would be played, to how to govern body functions and body postures. Kristoffer told the inquiry that he was allowed to take a bath only twice a year and he stated that he was exploited in hard manual labour. He also said that he was kicked and beaten by the foster mother on a daily basis. Bengt lived eight years within the same family. He told the inquiry about similar abuse and neglect. But Bengt but did not provide such detailed accounts of neglect, and did not talk about regular physical violence.

The two men's narratives thus contain both similarities and differences. When we compared their case files the picture became even more complex. Kristoffer's case file contains very sparse information about his long time in this foster home. There are no notes of visits or other contact with the foster home. The only document available is the form documenting the basis for the approval of the foster home. More documentation on this foster home can be found in Bengt's case file. Among many records there are notes from supervision visits, from contacts between social workers and Bengt's school, and from various contacts between the home municipality and the municipality of residence. Although Kristoffer's story could not be supported by his own records, it can be corroborated by the documentary records in Bengt's file. Kristoffer told the inquiry that one day two women from the child custody board came to see him in school, probably after someone had reported the foster parents. He took the opportunity and told them everything and recalls that he asked to be transferred immediately because he feared the reaction of his foster mother. He also asked the social workers to help the other boy living in the home but their response was that they could do nothing for Bengt since he was placed by another municipality. During the interview Kristoffer emphasised that he felt that this answer and the fact that he was left to stay in the home for another month was

an incredible betrayal by the authorities. There is nothing in Kristoffer's file to corroborate this account but Bengt's file does record his removal from the home. At this point, Bengt had lived in the foster home for about four years. Two months after his custody board became aware that another board had moved a child from the foster home, a supervision visit was conducted, documented in Bengt's case file. After the visit the municipal authorities with the support of a child psychiatrist concluded that there was nothing to fault in the foster home. Therefore there was no reason to uproot Bengt. Two years later, a social worker in the residence municipality writes:

They [the child custody board that removed Kristoffer from the foster home] believe that kids are exploited and do not receive adequate care in this foster home. However, for Bengt's part I think that this is his home – largely because he does not know of anything else.³⁴

More indications on mistreatment were to come, without any response from the municipality. One of his teachers reported that she felt that the 'home was beneath contempt', noting that Bengt differed in relation to peers in terms of dress and hygiene. He also seemed aware of his situation because he had said that he did not want someone else to go through a 'similar damn childhood'. Bengt, however, stayed in the foster home until his majority. While this case illustrated the problems involved in attempting to verify a person's story against his or her documentary records it also illustrates that the same location can be described differently by different people and documented in different ways by different municipalities, and that knowledge of neglect during the placement may have different consequences for different children as a result. It also shows that children have different understandings of what constitutes mistreatment, and suggests that their understanding in adulthood may be different again.

Discussion

The starting point for several inquiries of abuse and neglect of children in state care has been to make previously unheard stories known. However, when these narratives have challenged the national self-understanding or when financial compensation to victims has been discussed or perpetrators have been identified, critics insist on victims' stories being tested against documentary evidence and other testimonies.³⁵ Redress schemes in some countries underline the importance of documentary evidence.³⁶ However, when compensation claims are put into practice, official records seem to be subordinated to the personal stories. This became evident when the Swedish so-called Restitution Commission spoke to Norwegian and Irish redress boards. In both Norway and Ireland, the standards of proof in redress cases have been less exacting than in other civil cases.³⁷

The value of documentary evidence has also been highlighted when the national identity is called into question by a compilation of personal stories. The *Bringing them Home* report caused a public debate on Australia's colonial past. The conservative anthropologist Ron Brunton wrote a scathing criticism of the inquiry commission's methods and conclusions. Among other things, Brunton felt that the commission did not sufficiently explain which historical records and files that had been examined, arguing that information as to how many of the confidential cases or submissions were checked against records was missing in the report. According to Brunton, an appropriate standpoint would have been to devalue testimonies from people who did not give the commission permission to get access to their records.³⁸ This requirement is reasonable only if one assumes that it is likely that the authorities' documentation embodies

an inherent truth about ‘how it really was’ and that people who do not permit access to their records have something to hide.

Our qualitative study of the documentary records of 140 individuals indicates that it is problematic to check the interviewees’ stories against their records. We have found examples of both wrongfully eliminated case files, massive files of genuine notes and files with fewer comments and observations. The opportunities to prove or falsify the abuse or neglect mentioned by the interviewee are limited. The authorities whose voices are heard in the case files have been cautious in their descriptions of suspected abuse and, at times, markedly reluctant to document mistreatment. The voices heard in the interviews with the victims and in the case files where social workers described their situation represent different perspectives on the same story. The interview narratives, however, contains detailed information and descriptions that would, for various reasons, have been impossible for a social worker to reproduce, not least because he or she, at best, visited the child a few times a year.

In Sweden, the so-called Restitution Commission has developed a proposal of financial compensation to victims of severe neglect and abuse in municipal or state care. According to the proposal the compensation would serve as recognition that the victims have been subjected to ‘unjustifiable hardship’. The Restitution Commission has worked closely with the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes and has therefore been informed of the opportunities and constraints we have observed in the possibilities to corroborate a story of abuse and neglect from documentary records. As a result, the Restitution Commission proposed that a relatively low standard of additional proof will be required from those applying for compensation. The supporting evidence to be presented should be sufficient to allow that it ‘it may be suspected’ that the person has been exposed to severe abuse or neglect.³⁹ The final decision as to whether there will be any compensation and what requirements will be demanded of applications is still to be made.

However, the question of corroboration is not only interesting from the point of view of compensation. It also says something about how a society chooses to respond to traumatic narratives. The question can be reversed: ‘what can documentary records really tell us?’. For historians, who traditionally have been working with documentary sources, in addition to traditional criticism of said sources it may be useful to ask how documentary records are valued by those about whom they were written. The understanding that history contains multiple narratives is important. However, this understanding may come as a shock to people who choose to access their case files. To see descriptions of oneself or the conditions under which one lived that do not conform to one’s own memories can be incredibly stressful. Here there await major challenges for archive administrators as more people decide that they wish to search their history as a part of a redress process.

Endnotes

1. SOU 2011:61, *Vanvård i social barnavård*, Slutbetänkande av utredningen om vanvård i den sociala barnavården [Final report from the Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes], Fritzez, Stockholm, 2011, p. 136.
2. Since the 1990s abuse and neglect in institutions and in foster homes for children in out-of-home care has been reviewed by inquiries and truth commissions in the following countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, Norway, Iceland, Britain, Denmark, Germany and Sweden. State or regional commissions have interviewed or set up hearings with people that claim to have been subjected to abuse and neglect while in care.

3. Abuse and neglect in foster care is overlooked in the majority of the seven regional Norwegian inquiries, the Icelandic inquiries as well as in the Danish Godhavn inquiry. Abuse and neglect in foster care is mentioned but subordinated to institutional abuse in the Irish CICA Report, the Welsh Lost in Care Report, the Australian Bringing them Home Report as well as in some regional inquiries in Australia on abuse of children in State care. See *Rapport fra Granskingsutvalget for barneverninstitusjoner i Bergen*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Hordaland, Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad og Bjørke, Bergen, 2003; *Barneverninstitusjoner benyttet av Oslo kommune 1954–1993*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Oslo og Akershus, Oslo, 2005; *Rapport fra Granskingsutvalget for barnevernsinstitusjoner i Rogaland*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Rogaland, Stavanger, 2006; *Omsorg og overgrep. Gransking av barnehjem, skolehjem og fosterhjem benyttet av Trondheim kommune fra 1930-årene till 1980-årene*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Sør-Trøndelag, Trondheim, 2007; *Rapport fra Granskingsutvalget av barnehjem i Kristiansand*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Vest-Agder, Kristiansand, 2007; *Rapport fra Granskingsutvalget for barnehemmene i Finn-mark*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Finnmark, 2008; *Gransking av skole- og barnehjem i Aust-og vest-Agder*, Rapport till Fylkesmannen i Vest-Agder, Kristiansand, 2009; *Könnun á starfsemi Breiðavíkurheimilisins 1952–1979*, Reykjavík, 2008; *Áfangaskýrsla nr. 1. Könnun á starfsemi Heyrnleysingjaskólans 1947–1992, vistheimilisins Kumbaravogs 1965–1984 og skólaheimilisins Bjargs 1965–1967*, Reykjavík, 2009; *Áfangaskýrsla nr. 2. Könnun á starfsemi vistheimilisins Silungapolls 1950–1969, vistheimilisins Reykjahliðar 1956–1972 og heimavistaraskólans að Jaðri 1946–1973*, Reykjavík, 2010; Rytter, Maria, *Godhavnsrapporten: en undersøgelse af klager over overgreb og medicinske forsøg på børnehjem 1945–1976*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense, 2011; CICA (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse), *Commission Report*, vols I–V, Dublin 2009; R Waterhouse, *Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Care in the Former County Council Areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd Since 1974*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 2000; HREOC (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission), *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From their Families*, Sydney, 1997; Tasmanian Ombudsman, *Listen to the Children: Review of Claims of abuse From adults in State Care as Children*, Hobart, 2004.
4. The Minister of Children and the Elderly in the news program *Rapport* broadcast 10 September 2011. See <http://svt.se/2.22620/1.2530019/fosterhemsbarn_nekas_ersattning>, accessed 26 March 2012.
5. Richard Webster, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn: The Making of a Modern Witch Hunt*, The Orwell Press, Oxford, 2005; Mark Smith, 'Historical Abuse and Residential Child Care: An Alternative View', *Practice*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, pp. 32–36; Mark Smith, 'Victim Narratives of Historical Abuse in Residential Child Care', *Qualitative Social Work*, vol. 9, no. 3, August 2010, p. 315; Ron Brunton, 'Betraying the Victims: The Stolen Generations' Report', *IPA Backgrounder*, vol 10, no. 1, February 1998, p. 5.
6. Smith, 'Victim Narratives', p. 306; Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, ch. 3; Rosanne Kennedy, 'Stolen Generations Testimony: Trauma, Historiography, and the Question of "Truth"', in Robert Perks and Alistar Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London & New York, 2006, p. 508.
7. Smith, 'Historical Abuse', 'Victim Narratives'.
8. Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, pp. 58, 184–90.
9. Kennedy, 'Stolen Generations', p. 511.
10. Marie Sallnäs, *Barnavårdens institutioner: framväxt, ideologi och struktur*, PhD Diss., Stockholm University, Stockholm, 2000, p. 121; Astri Andresen et al, *Barnen och välfärdspolitik: Nordiska barndomar 1900–2000*, Institutet för Framtidsstudier, Dialogos förlag, Stockholm, p. 184.
11. Sallnäs, *Barnavårdens institutioner*, ch. 6.
12. SOU 2009:99, *Vanvård i social barnavård under 1900-talet*, Delbetänkande av utredningen om vanvård i den sociala barnavården [The second interim report from the Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes], Fritzes, Stockholm, 2009, pp. 64–7.
13. Community Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians who Experienced Institutional or Out-Of-Home-Care as Children*, first report 2004, ch. 9.

14. Marie Sallnäs, Bo Vinnerljung and Pia Khyle Westermark, 'Breakdown of Teenage Placements in Swedish Foster and Residential Care', *Child and Family Social Work*, vol. 9, 2004, p. 145; *Forgotten Australians* Report, p. 262; Carol Brennan, 'Facing What Cannot be Changed: The Irish Experience of Confronting Institutional Child Abuse', *Journal of Social Welfare & Family Law*, vol. 29, nos 3–4, Septemeber–December 2007, p. 247.
15. The information gathered by the inquiry on individuals' personal circumstances is confidential in accordance with Section 3 of the Swedish Secrecy Ordinance. The materials collected are confidential for 70 years. The names given in the text are fictitious.
16. SOU 2009:99, p. 154.
17. Id. 1002, female born in the 1950s.
18. Id. 916, female born in the 1970s.
19. Socialstyrelsen [The National Swedish Board of Health and Welfare], *Råd och anvisningar i socialvårdsfrågor*, no. 137, 1961, p. 49.
20. Id. 887, male born in the 1950s.
21. Id. 434, female born in the 1960s.
22. Id. 868, female born in the 1940s.
23. Id. 937, female born in the 1980s.
24. Id. 936, female born in the 1950s.
25. Id. 444, male born in the 1950s.
26. Id. 977, male born in the 1970s.
27. Id. 993, female born in the 1950s.
28. Id. 921, female born in the 1950s.
29. Id. 991, female born in the 1970s.
30. Id. 973, female born in the 1940s.
31. Id. 38, female born in the 1940s.
32. Id. 439, female born in the 1960s.
33. Id. 152, male born in the 1960s; id. 229 male born in the 1960s.
34. Note from a social worker in the case file of id 229, male born in the 1960s.
35. Webster, *The Secret*; Smith, 'Historical Abuse', 'Victim Narratives', p. 315; Brunton, 'Betraying the Victims', p. 5
36. For instance: The Residential Institutions Redress Board, *A Guide to the Redress Scheme under the Residential Institutions redress Act 2002*, 3rd ed, Dublin, 2005, paragraph 36; Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, *Review of Government Compensation Payments*, Canberra, 2010, p. 23.
37. SOU 2011:61, pp. 125, 128.
38. Brunton, 'Betraying the Victims'.
39. SOU 2011:9, *Barnen som samhället svek – åtgärder med anledning av övergrepp och allvarliga försummelser i samhällsvården*, Betänkande av Upprättelseutredningen [Report from the Restitution Commission], Fritzes, Stockholm, 2011, p. 167.