

English abstract

The thesis *A myriad of stories* explores how normality and deviance are constructed and negotiated in stories of children and young people in vulnerable positions, and how the children and young people emerge through the stories. The outset of the study is a problematization of the ways in which the stories told about children and young people in vulnerable positions often are narrowly concerned with risks and problems. Aiming to nuance and break with these problematizing narratives, the analysis presents a myriad of stories.

The empirical material was produced through observations and interviews with 14 children and young people as well as 33 practitioners and family members. The interviews and observations were repeated one or two times over the course of one year. The children and young people were between 10 and 24 years old at the first encounter and lived in different places in Denmark. Some were placed in a foster family, some in residential care, and some of the young people lived in an institution for young people with “psychological vulnerabilities”.

The thesis draws on insights from the New Sociology of Childhood, and the theoretical framework combines concepts from poststructuralist and interactionist traditions. The study focuses on the many small stories being constructed and negotiated in social interactions. The concept of small stories breaks with the conception of coherent, linear and authentic life stories, and highlights the many different, contingent and fragmented “selves” being told and emerging in specific situations. Through the concepts of positioning, position, storyline, longing and belonging, the thesis explores how the children and young people emerge in the stories. Concepts about narrative environment, formula stories, institutional narratives, troubled position and counter-narrative contribute to a further contextualisation of the many small stories. Employing an analytical model inspired by Bronwyn Davies’ concepts of *emergent listening* and *listening-as-usual*, the analyses were produced in a movement between the identification of well-known and dominant storylines and the exploration of other stories there might be around the same child or young person, the same theme or a similar situation across field notes and interviews. Moreover, the analyses explore how normality and deviance are constructed in the dominant storylines, and how other stories trouble demarcations between appropriate and inappropriate, right and wrong, problematic and normal

behaviour. The theoretical and analytical approaches have made it possible to produce a myriad of stories, constituting an empirical and methodological contribution to research on children and young people in vulnerable positions.

The analyses consist of five chapters each with a distinct theme: 1) Being good at “being social”; 2) Emotions and diagnoses; 3) The art of doing things right; 4) Imagination versus “the reality”; 5) “Completely normal, like everybody else”. Across the chapters, the dominant and problematizing storylines have common features. They are stories in which the positioning of the children and young people as “placed in care” or “vulnerable” is the focal point. Stories that risk maintaining an understanding of the children and young people as being different or deviant, and, thus, *doing* childhood or youth in wrong ways. Through a focus on the many small stories, and especially the ones pointing in different directions, a range of other stories of the children and young people come to light. These other stories break with the singular, linear life stories, the individualizing focus as well as the dominant categories of “vulnerability” and “placed in care”.

The task of juxtaposing these different stories reveals that there are other possible storylines and positions available as well as other ways to come into being for the children and young people and, finally, other ways for the practitioners to meet them. The methodological contribution of the thesis is thus the formulation of a way to identify other possible stories at stake in practice, and conduct research that may embrace complexity and break with established understandings. Different stories evoke different understandings of what is rendered as problematic, and whether or not there is a problem at all. They therefore call upon quite different actions. One of the main contributions of the thesis is thus the production of knowledge that challenges the idea of “the true story” about each individual.