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Respectable families: Discourses on family life, ethnic hierarchies and social positioning

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Abstract

Problem-oriented public discourses about families with an immigrant background shape the ways in which these families are seen in society, as well as the social positions it is possible for them to aspire to. Drawing on an interview data, this article focuses on how family members with an immigrant background navigate their way through problem-centred discourses when speaking about their own family life. The article suggests that the construct of ‘a respectable family’ acts as a way to counter the stereotypes and to claim a more valued position in society, and it can be found in both idealized descriptions on one’s own family and conflict narratives.

Keywords

Immigration, family life, hierarchical differences, social positioning, intersectionality

Introduction

Individuals in Western societies today, regardless of their ethnic and migratory backgrounds, organize their familial relations in diverse ways and seek to portray them as functioning, accepted and respectable (Finch, 2007). At the same time, family life is a recurring topic in heated public debates, in which accepted forms of family life are negotiated and different hierarchies are constructed, questioned and consolidated.

The common imagery of ‘immigrant families’, transmitted in public and media discussions, fictional works and research, tends to be polarized towards two seemingly opposite directions: on the one hand, ‘immigrant families’ are represented as positively cohesive, tightly-knit communities, while on the other hand, the (alleged) cohesiveness is seen as a threat, potentially suffocating individual family members and hindering their full integration into the receiving societies. In both cases, the families are represented in a homogenizing and racializing manner, as a group that is both distinct and different from the families of majorities. The tendency towards emphasizing risks and problems when representing families with non-Western immigrant backgrounds has been cited by numerous researchers in various Western societies (Brune, 2003; Phoenix and Husein, 2007; Vuori, 2009; Keskinen, 2009; Foner and Dreby, 2011). In the Nordic countries, family life forms one of the central arenas around which immigrants’ ability to ‘integrate’ is discussed and assessed (Olwig, 2011: 191–192).

This article seeks to examine the discursive strategies used by individuals categorized as ‘immigrants’ in Finland, when seeking to portray their own families as respectable and worthy. I argue that the discourses on family life do not merely describe an intimate sphere of life, but are a tool for the process of classification, bringing together the intersecting hierarchies of class, ethnicity and gender, and that they are used for claiming respectable social positions (for a similar line of reasoning, see Skeggs, 1997; Berg and Peltola, 2014). While the research location – the metropolitan region of Helsinki, Finland – connects the analysis to the position of the institution of the family in Nordic nation-building, the intersectional theoretical framework applied relates to questions of ethnic hierarchies, social positioning and family life in Western societies more broadly.

Theoretical background and research context: hierarchy-building discourses on family life

The family is, on the one hand, a lived community of everyday life, and on the other hand, an institution regulated by social norms. As lived communities, families are always particular and their compositions vary according to the interpretations individuals make when naming a set of relationships as their family (Morgan, 1996; Finch, 2007). As an institution, the family is a social construct that involves ideals and norms of what makes a family and how the relationships between family members should be organized. Those families that do not conform to the norms face the risk of being defined as ‘problem families’. (Grillo, 2008: 16; Yesilova, 2009.)

Beverley Skeggs’ (1997; 2004) analysis of discursive and processual social class has proved useful in understanding why the normative regulation of family life and public imagery on ‘immigrant families’ holds significance for individuals’ positions in social hierarchies. According to Skeggs, individuals’ social positions are shaped by discursive and moral evaluations of the respectability or worth of their lifestyle, which also relates to the ways of organizing familial relations. White, middle-class family life is seen as legitimate and worthy, whereas the families who fail to conform to this norm come to be seen as questionable and in need of surveillance and control (Skeggs, 1997: 43–52).

The ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ family, which is held up as the ideal in the professional discourses on family, is defined through factors such as family composition, living conditions, income level and social status in a way which actually presupposes a White, Western and middle-class lifestyle. When the problems of family life are seen as being located outside of ‘ordinary families’ – among lower classes or the population with an immigrant background – the normative evaluations of family life build and strengthen the class and ethnic divides. (Yesilova, 2008: 112–

114; Skeggs, 1997: 43–52; Reay et al., 2007.) Through the process of pathologizing non-Western families, the racial and class-related inequalities are dismissed (Brah, 1996: 72–76). The problem-centred representations of ‘immigrant families’ – which most often refer to families of racialized, non-Western groups – both consolidate the White, middle-class norm, and act as an additional tool for pushing people categorized as ‘immigrants’ into the social margins.

In Finland, the Nordic welfare model, together with a short history as a country of immigration,¹ have moulded understandings of the diversity of family life in today’s multicultural society. The Nordic welfare model has a reputation for being ‘woman friendly’ and the equality politics are a source of national pride (Mulinari 2007; Tuori 2009). While positive achievements exist (Julkunen 2010), the Nordic discourse on equality may be used in an othering and racialized way: equality is seen as something possessed by ‘us’, modern Westerners, while ‘others’ – those representing allegedly traditional and patriarchal non-Western cultures – are seen as lacking it (Mulinari 2007; Tuori 2009; Vuori 2009; cf. Mohanty 1986; Brah 1996: 72–76). The small percentage of the population that is of foreign descent has fed the myth of Finland as a culturally homogeneous country (Häkkinen and Tervonen, 2004), which still affects the discourses and policies connected to immigration and multiculturalism. Consequently, the ideology and policies of integration, developed to support immigrants in settling into the receiving society, also act as strong tools for defining the norms and cultural values that individuals need to conform to in order to be included in society (Olwig, 2011).

Statistically speaking, households with an immigrant background in Finland are more likely to be in socioeconomically vulnerable positions (Myrskylä and Pyykkönen, 2014), which, as such, implies ‘being at risk’ in their family lives. Yet, in professional and public discourses, even greater attention is paid to the families’ ways of organizing gender and generational relations. When

themes such as dissonant acculturation, upbringing practices considered ‘strict’ or ‘traditional’ and the alleged lack of gender equality are repeatedly brought up, the parents’ ability to lead a family life that provides the desired support for their children comes into question (Vuori, 2009). Phoenix and Husain (2007) state that a great deal of research strengthens the image of ‘problematic immigrant families’ by adopting a problem-centred frame when examining them (also Foner and Dreby, 2011).

Data and methods

This article draws on interview data consisting of 45 interviews conducted during the years 2007 and 2009 with members of families with an immigrant background, currently residing in the metropolitan region of Helsinki. Twenty interviewees were parents (13 mothers, 7 fathers), most of whom had immigrated to Finland as young adults, while 25 were their children of varying ages (12 boys or young men, 13 girls or young women), some of whom were born in Finland, others having immigrated in their early childhood. In terms of ethnic and migration backgrounds, they formed a heterogeneous group: they had moved to Finland for humanitarian, work- and family-related reasons from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Kosovo, Russia and the former USSR, Kenya, Afghanistan and Lebanon. Most interviewees had been living in Finland for between ten and twenty years. Although variously positioned in the racial hierarchies, in Finland they shared a position in the racialized and negatively defined category of ‘an immigrant’.

The social class positions of the interviewees were characterized by ambivalence. Most of the parents had enjoyed comfortable, middle-class lifestyles in their countries of origin, and only one parent described her family background as rather poor. In Finland, their socio-economic positions were heterogeneous, but in most cases comparatively low. Unemployment was relatively

common among the parents: out of the eleven two-parent families, both parents were employed in only four families; and out of the five single-parent families, the parent was in full-time employment in two. Those who were employed worked mostly in low-paid positions in the service sector; three held permanent positions corresponding with their highest educational achievement, and one was in a prestigious specialist position. Thus, most of them had been affected by downward mobility after migration (see Gans, 2009).²

The characteristics of the interviewed group have bearing in the contents of the data and the interpretations available. While researching ethnically heterogeneous group allows pointing out the shared experiences of ‘immigrant Others’, the influences of specific ethnic or cultural backgrounds, in their complexity and diversity, are bound to gain less attention. Coming from middle-class backgrounds, the interviewees may be considered as relatively well resourced in terms of cultural capital, which again influences their experiences and interpretations. The much-debated asymmetry in power relations between a White, middle-class researcher and the interviewees representing racialized minorities, is a further element influencing the research frame (see for example Alcoff 1991–1992).

The interviews were individual (24) and pair and group interviews with two or more family members (21), with interviewee preferences serving to shape the composition of the interviews to some extent. The thematic interviews covered the themes of family life and familial relations, values and practices in raising children, everyday life in Finland and social positions in Finnish society, cultural identifications, racism and discrimination, among others. Combining individual and group interviews brings further heterogeneity to the data, which may be seen as problematic, but also enriching: group interviews shed light on the interaction in which ‘a family’ is produced, while individual interviews offered more coherent individual narratives. Also, some

topics, such as heavy sides of parenthood and themes related to sexuality and dating, were often more freely discussed without the presence of one's parents or children.

The descriptions of family life in the interview data are filtered through multiple interpretations. In their everyday lives, the interviewees 'do family' by interpreting certain practices as family practices, attaching special emotional meanings to them (Morgan, 1996). The process of interpretation takes place at the individual (and family) level, but its elements are derived not only from individual and family histories, but also from collectively shared ideas of what it means to be 'a family' (ibid.; Gillis, 1996). The second layer of interpretations occurs in the interview situation, in which the interviewees reflect on their everyday lives and describe episodes which they see as revealing something relevant about their families. The interview is thus one of the social situations in which the family is displayed through narratives and descriptions (Finch, 2007).

In the analysis, I focus on the different qualities that are attached to the community called 'my family' in the interview narratives, and the different social positions the interviewees claim for their families, based on these qualities. I start with how the interviewees conceptualize their 'questioned respectability' in the light of the public discourses, and subsequently go on to analyze the counter-discourses they utilize when claiming the position of 'a respectable family', both within the idealized talk about family life and in conflict narratives.

Questioned respectability of family life

According to a young woman with an Albanian background, people had been surprised to find out that, despite the comparatively high number of children (seven) in her family, her siblings had accomplished a lot in terms of education and employment:

Many people have regarded us as a large family. So that we would go, you know, in a downward spiral (...) Now that my sister is there, in England, (working) in the business field, and my big brother is here, (names a reputable firm), and the other one is, where, all over. [laughs] So, they've been wondering how come we've done so well. There have been a lot of preconceptions.

[an 18-year-old woman of Albanian origin, interviewed with her mother]

The quote shows that the interviewee acknowledged the way in which the quality of family life and social positions are thought to intertwine: a large (immigrant) family is not only defined by the number of children, but also by assumptions about a low social position and the inability to transfer such resources to the young generation that would help them to achieve respectable social positions in society. She sets her own family against such a stereotype, and argues, by virtue of her siblings' employment in esteemed positions, that her family did not fit the stereotype, but was well-functioning and respectable.

In the quote above, it was socioeconomic matters and the family members' positions as working citizens that marked the family out as either respectable or questionable. However, evaluations of the respectability of family life cover a much larger area, extending to themes such as parenting practices and gendered distribution of household chores. Finnish educational institutions, such as school and day-care, played a part in how the normative evaluations were felt in everyday interactions. A mother with a Kenyan background felt that in the daycare centre, her position as a single parent *and* an immigrant causes an intensified need to 'prove' that she is a good mother, thus drawing attention also to how the different categorizations of 'families in risk' act in relation to each other (see also Berg and Peltola 2014):

Mother: I don't know what they expect of a single parent. Like, [being] super-human beings. You, you get criticized. If the kids are not, like, well, they are brought up well, but...

MP: Criticized by whom?

Mother: By friends, families, the environment, society. At the daycare centre. You have to do a little bit extra. Your kids must look healthy, they must look happy, they must look clean. Every day, and especially if you're a foreigner. Because otherwise, people start criticizing here and there. (...) I want to make it clear that no one has anything to criticize when it comes to my kids.

[a mother with a Kenyan background, interviewed alone]

The ethnicized and classed representations of 'a respectable family' and the othering stereotypes of 'immigrant families' were thus strongly present in the interviews, both implicitly and explicitly. While I constantly tried to pay attention to my own discourse so as not to repeat the problem-centred assumptions, the interviewees' acknowledgement of the problematic and classificatory nature of discourses about 'immigrant families' made such a representation a frequent lens through which they compared their families, building on the distinctions.

In sociological family studies, it has been stated that to call a relationship a family relationship is to give it a special, most often positive, value (Finch, 2007). Hence, it comes as no surprise that descriptions of one's own family tend to be positive, even idealized. According to Gillis (1996: xv–xvi), we all have two families: *the family we live by* and *the family we live with*. The family we live by is an imagined family; it is composed of the positively loaded images and myths we attach to the concept of a family: continuity, communality, support, reciprocity. The family we live with consists of the lived relationships, and it contains many more changes, negotiations, conflicting interests and disputes than the family we live by (ibid.). Both dimensions are present in our understanding of what a family 'is', and in changing situations and contexts, descriptions of family life draw on both sources. In the next two sections, I seek to grasp, on the one hand, the idealized descriptions of family life and how they are shaped by boundary-making and

social positioning, and on the other hand, how the lived family relationships and conflicts within them were described, and whether or not the conflict narratives caused disruptions in displaying one's own family as respectable.

Idealized family discourses as a way to counter problem-centred stereotypes

MP: What would you say your family means to you?

Son: A to Z.

MP: A to Z?

Son: It is, like, everything. I'd say, the home of my parents, it is, how you call it, a sanctuary, where we go to cry, where we go to offload, where we go to show anger, where we go to do all this. (...) We speak very openly, about everything.

[a 29-year-old man with a Kurdish background, interviewed with his mother]

The quote illustrates the common discourse invited by a question on the 'meaning of family': great emotional significance, and close, open and reciprocal relationships were emphasized repeatedly throughout the data. Such an idealized emphasis is partly connected to the phrasing of the question. While idealized discourses are found both in individual and group interviews, in group interviews their role sometimes got emphasized, which reflects the nature of group interviews as an arena for interaction, where family as a community is constantly 'made'. The abstract, non-contextualized question also invites broad answers, which derive, in large part, from the ideal of the family, or what people think family life 'should' mean.

While the broad, idealized descriptions of family life may, as such, be read as a strategy to counter the homogenizing and problem-oriented discourses about families with an immigrant background, the data include themes through which the interviewees sought the position

of ‘a respectable family’ more clearly vis-à-vis Finnish society, both by utilizing idealized images of family life and by differentiating themselves from groups and individuals whose family life was considered less ideal. Given that boundary-making is central to group identities (Barth, 1969), the central position given to ‘Finnish families’ as a reflection point comes as no surprise. The construct of ‘Finnish families’ in the data was not, however, straightforward, as two seemingly opposite discourse strategies emerged: one emphasizing the similarities between one’s own family and Finnish families, and the other emphasizing differences and differentiation (see also Berg and Peltola 2014: 47).

On being ordinary

The discursive strategy emphasizing similarities drew, by and large, on the idea of ‘being ordinary’: describing one’s own family as non-deviant, ‘normal’ and resembling Finnish families (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003: 42–45):

It may be that there’s nothing special about us. We live, well, we have lots of friends, [...] and I think our life is similar to seventy per cent of Finns who have jobs, who hope to live better, and peacefully, without problems and without stress. Work, family, sauna, sausages. [laughs] Children. Ice-hockey.

[a father with a Russian background, interviewed with his spouse and son]

Similarity constructed by the father with a Russian background above is based on purportedly shared cultural values and practices. However, ‘sauna and sausages’ are not equally desirable or even possible basis for similarity for all, as individuals in different positions in the racial hierarchies face different expectations and stereotyping. A father with a Somali background constructs the ordinariness of his family with a different vocabulary:

We live in peace, with the family. And my wife and I, we cooperate. And, the children go to school, go

to hobbies, and to Quran school. Our life is very ordinary and we get along well here in Finland. We don't have any problems. I don't fight with my wife.

[a father with a Somali background, interviewed alone]

In Finland, as in many other European countries, Muslims are special Others onto whom notions of difference are projected. The negative images connected with Muslims largely concern issues of family life and gender: Muslim families are imagined as unequal, patriarchal and practising overtly strict control over young, especially female family members. (Keskinen, 2009.) Emphasizing the cooperative spousal relationship, children's activities and lack of 'fighting' thus reflects the stereotypes on Muslims and what is needed in countering them.

The discursive strategy based on ordinariness clearly sought to dissolve the juxtaposition between Finnish families and non-Finnish families and to position the interviewees' own families outside the problem category of 'immigrant families', among the families considered respectable. Researchers outside of the field of ethnic and migration studies have stated that ordinariness is a common way to describe one's social class position (Kahma, 2010; Savage et al., 2001). Paradoxically, referring to ordinariness helps to strengthen societal hierarchies, as its norms are White, middle class and, in the Finnish context, ethnic Finnish (Reay et al., 2007: 1042; Yesilova, 2008: 113–114). As most of the interviewees had experiences of being categorized as non-Finns, regardless of their own identifications and aspirations, claiming Finnishness did not play a major part in their construct of 'ordinary'. Instead, the class dimension was central, as the absence of financial and social problems in particular was a key building block of 'ordinariness'.

Distinguishing one's family from Finnish families

The other discursive strategy was to distinguish one's own family from 'Finnish families'. While this is, at first sight, contrary to the discourse emphasizing ordinariness, it does serve the same purpose: differentiating oneself from the problem category of 'immigrant families'. When distinguishing themselves from Finnish families, the interviewees described the latter as small units with loose family ties; characterized by a degree of indifference to fellow family members' well-being, a lack of parental authority and excessive freedom afforded to the children. In this juxtaposition, their own families were defined as closely-knit, warm communities, characterized by mutual support and time spent together:

We (the interviewee and her siblings) have been brought up to think that the family sticks together.

What I see, for example, is that Finns move out right away. When they turn 18, they move away from home. And then when they tell me something like, 'I have arguments with my mom', and so on, I can never imagine myself in such a position. (...) I think upbringing has a strong influence on how much you care about your family.

[an 18-year-old woman with an Albanian background, interviewed alone]

Hence, the interviewees themselves evaluated, on a moral basis, the worth and respectability of different ways of living as a family. In the next quote, a young woman of Somali origin complains that she and her family are seen as inferior when any comparisons are made within Finnish society. While the quote reveals the negative experiences of ethnic-based classifications, it also illustrates the tendency to pass moral judgements on other groups' lifestyles and to utilize these in seeking a more respectable position for one's own family (Skeggs, 1997; 2004). Once again, attention is turned towards socioeconomic issues and the position of a decent working citizen:

If you are a Finn, [you can be] a 50-year-old man who has got kicked out of his job because he comes to work drunk, who has alcohol problems, whose family has fallen apart, yet [that man] is in a higher position than you, and even though you really work your brains out, eight hours a day, you still don't get the same respect as him. Not even as a person who has been well brought up, but as him.

[a 21-year-old woman with a Somali background, interviewed alone]

Through such distinctions, the divide between 'Finnish families' and 'immigrant families', implicitly present in public discourses, is perpetuated but the hierarchy connected with it gets turned upside-down. Espiritu (2001) has stated that such a discursive move may be interpreted as an attempt to redefine the moral and social standing of an individual family or an entire minority ethnic group in a situation where the group is in an inferior position both economically and in ethnic hierarchies. Although the tendency to display one's own family as a positive community may be considered, in a sense, universal and common for people across ethnic, class and gender divides (Finch, 2007; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012), people with an immigrant background display their families in the societal context where socioeconomic and ethnic hierarchies make their position marginal, and the problem-centred public discussion marginalizes them, as a group, even further.

Conflict narratives in constructing family life

In everyday life, the ideal of the family does not necessarily correspond with reality as a family is, by nature, a hierarchical unit, and its members are positioned differently within hierarchies of gender, class and generation (Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Connidis and McMullin, 2002). An assumption which is at least implicit in the problem-centred discourses on immigrant families is the susceptibility to conflicts, due to the generational and gender-based differences in accepting the 'new culture' and its practices. Thus, the narratives about friction and disagreement

within families open up another interesting avenue through which one can examine the constructs of family life and the strategies used for differentiating oneself from the problem category.

A respectable family's constructive problem-solving

The most common answers to questions on the causes of disruption between family members centred on daily issues involving household chores and rules set for the children on issues such as curfews, bedtimes, being late and media usage – hence, the same themes that trigger the majority of disagreements in Finnish families (Lammi-Taskula and Bardy, 2009: 63–64). This is how a mother of Kurdish origin described the subjects that caused friction between her and her two pre-adolescent children:

MP: Does anything cause disagreements or quarrels between you and your sons?

Mother: Of course. [laughs] Like, all these videos. I've always tried to maintain the age limits, also on computer games and videos. And then I want them to go to bed earlier, and that causes quarrels like 'How come the other children can?', and I'm a terrible mother when I didn't let them watch (TV) late at night. I'm a terrible mother when I didn't let them watch all the videos. And then, where they go when they go out. I want to know precisely where he is, so I'm a terrible mother again. Some parents don't care, but I call after him a million times.

[a mother with a Kurdish background, interviewed alone]

Such small squabbles were regarded as an unavoidable part of ordinary life for any family. These narratives did not create a contradiction in relation to the positive image of a respectable family, but actually reinforced it by further demonstrating the constructive values of the speaker and how the close relationships within the family remained, regardless of the occasional disagreements. For the parents, they also helped to construct the image of respectable parenthood: a certain degree of assertiveness in setting limits and understanding the children's attempts to test

these limits were considered an integral part of the role of an attentive parent. Boundary-making by defining some ‘other parents’ as morally questionable also play a part, as illustrated in the quote when the mother refers to ‘some parents’ who ‘don’t care’ (Berg and Peltola, 2014). Here, the discourses used by the interviewed parents were very close to the familist ideals of parenting as ‘love and limits’, commonly repeated in the professional discourses in Finland (Yesilova, 2009: 187–189).

Issues concerning the children’s and young people’s school life – homework, exams, punctuality, future plans – were also a recurring theme in quarrels and negotiations within families.

Mostly (the quarrels are) caused by the children, and their schoolwork. [laughs] I mean, we have quarrels because I’m strict about this. Just a while ago I told (my son) that I wanted him to go to upper secondary school, to continue there. (...) I keep asking, ‘Do you have homework? Don’t you have exams or anything?’ This is different (in Finland), and it causes quarrels. I shout, and my throat hurts [laughs]. But he is okay really. He has quite good grades.

[a mother with a Kurdish background, interviewed alone]

This reflects the ambivalent social positions of the families, and the importance attached to formal education (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011): most of the parents shared a middle-class background coupled with a financially vulnerable situation, and saw education as a key to ‘the better future’ they envisaged for their children. Some parents also mentioned that investing in education was a tool for combating ethnic-based discrimination (Vincent et al., 2013). However, education was not only a tool for achieving one’s own success, but a means to contribute to society and to be ‘a decent citizen’. While the young people did not always share their parents’ views on the preferred educational path that should be taken, they very much shared the ideal of an educated, respectable taxpayer-citizen.

Conflicts interpreted as culture-related

While the small everyday arguments were framed as ordinary matters, concerning all families with a respectable lifestyle and values, another set of arguments was given culture-related interpretations. In these cases, the importance of home and family, respecting parents and boundaries of approved ways of life were negotiated, in many cases within a longer timeframe. The parents – often the mothers – were worried about the cohesion of their family and whether their children had learned to appreciate the family in a societal environment that they considered much less family-centred than the one from which they had originated:

Mother: Parents are so important (...). They (the children) need to understand these things; they should help their parents, should help their brothers and sisters. (...) I always talk about this with them, but no, they don't, it's hard for them to understand, to absorb. They say, 'Why?' I say, 'What do you mean, why? This is what is needed.' (...) This is something negative (in Finland); you can't do anything about it, with the children.

MP: So this is one of the things that causes disagreements here at home?

Mother: Yes, for sure. But, you can't... they are children, what can we do? Then my husband asks, why should we get angry with them, as they were born here and they go to school and, all their life, everything, so it's hard for them to know other things. Although we speak about it every day.

[a mother with an Arab background, interviewed alone]

Also some boundaries, such as restrictions on alcohol use and forms of dating – which mostly concerned the young generation – were often discussed through a cultural, or religious, lens. While the appropriate ways to act were interpreted in highly various ways by the interviewees with different backgrounds, again a common way to construct the difference was vis-à-vis the Finnish families.

Such negotiations illustrate the importance attached to the continuity of practices interpreted as cultural, and the many sources the interviewees drew on when defining what ‘a respectable family’ meant to them. However, in interpretations of such negotiations, there was an important generational difference. From the parents’ point of view, they stemmed from their children adopting ways to act and think that were ‘too Finnish’. The young people, for their part, did not see themselves as trying to be ‘like Finns’ or abandoning the cultural values cherished by their parents. Rather, the disagreements emerged from a different interpretation of the limits of behaviour of a good family member. When the disagreements concerned the young people’s activities outside of home, they also related to their search for approval in both Finnish and multicultural peer groups, which did not always have much place for differing lifestyles and opinions. Hence, the arguments intertwined with the situational interpretations of decency and morals.

Within migration studies, the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001) has been influential in intergenerational relations research, and the concept of ‘dissonant acculturation’ in particular has gained a strong foothold both in academic and professional discussions (Waters et al., 2010). The interviewed parents quite often used discourses that may easily be conceptualized with the idea of dissonant acculturation – the children outstripping their parents when it came to knowledge of the culture and workings of the receiving society, leading to friction between the generations. These experiences were intertwined with their socioeconomic positions, class backgrounds, experiences of racism and exclusion and gender-based ideas on care responsibilities. Thus, it is important that the question of ‘dissonant acculturation’ is not understood only as culture-related.

Generational differences in speaking about themes that may be conceptualized as dissonant acculturation also broaden the understanding of the phenomenon. The young interviewees were reluctant to interpret dissonant acculturation as a source of conflict between themselves and their parents, although they acknowledged the situation and were well aware that it was often connected with different problems in the public discussions (see Orellana, 2009):

Son: Since I was small, I've been, like, responsible (for the family). (...) I know how society works and how you fill in forms and stuff like that.

MP: That must have been hard, at the time, if you were the one who always had to find out (about things); you didn't have a big brother to turn to...

Son: Yeah, no. No, no. I wonder about that at times. For example, my younger brother will turn 20 soon, so I was, like, I was half his age, I think, when I acted as an interpreter for the first time. (...) But I don't mind. I've grown up with it and I think it has benefitted me more than done any harm. So, it hasn't, in any way, taken away my childhood. Many people might think like that, but it's been an experience. Now I know much more about many things.

[a 25-year-old man with a Somali background, interviewed alone]

A typical way for the young interviewees to interpret the arguments they had had with their parents was to see them as a phase, often connected with adolescence, in which the parental advice was of no interest, although their own judgment was not sufficiently developed to enable them to take full responsibility for their actions. When making such an interpretation, the young interviewees often represented their former selves as immature, and their parents' views as reasonable and responsible:

Son: When adolescence started, at that time I couldn't quite accept things, like, it was the age at which I started to argue with them all the time, and to be ungrateful. But, with time, the faster you grow up, you realize how wrong you were, and how much you have to thank them for. And still have.

MP: So it was harder during adolescence?

Son: Yes, harder. But that's the way it is for every child, I think.

[a 16-year-old boy with a Somali background, interviewed with his sister and parents]

This interpretation also applied to conflicts which were explained as culture-related: as adolescence had taken place in a post-migration context, the rebellion within it became particularly intertwined with values and practices seen as cultural. Explaining away the conflicts with adolescence reveals that the young people did not wish to represent their families with discourses often used around immigration, but emphasized that they had rebelled *just like any other young people*. This brings us back to the claim of 'being ordinary'. However, their current position was simultaneously described through distinction, as ending the 'childish rebellion' and 'learning to respect the family' were connected with maturing, and as something which differentiated them from young Finns.

Loyalty towards one's parents thus remained a central characteristic in the young people's discourses, even when speaking about conflicts and difficult family situations they had faced (Lahelma and Gordon, 2008; Prieur, 2002: 59). Smart (2007: 154) has suggested that familial relations are *resilient* by nature: the relationship and the loyalty tied to it are not easily severed, partly because family members may be dependent on each other, but also because the family is such an important part of one's sense of self. The young people often framed the narratives about conflict situations in such a way that their parents' point of view appeared just as understandable and valued as their own. The narratives about conflicts and quarrels may in part be read as a continuation of the positively charged 'family speech': through such narratives it was possible to show that the family community remained functional and decent in conflict situations as well.

Discussion

The ethnicized and classed discourses of family life carry meanings for the social positionings of both individuals and groups. ‘The respectable family’ that is constructed in the Finnish professional and media discourses is, by and large, both ethnically Finnish and middle class. Families with an immigrant background are excluded from this category by means of homogenizing and problem-centred representations. Such representations may be read as an intertwining of class and ethnicity: questioning the functioning of non-Finnish families is, by the same token, an evaluative statement about the worth of the lifestyles of these families (Skeggs, 1997), and thus they are discursively positioned lower in the hierarchy when compared with families that are part of the majority.

In this article, I have shown that individuals who are commonly categorized as immigrants in Finland reflect on the implications of these classifying discourses, and actively seek to counter them and position their own families among those who are categorized as respectable in Finnish society. The focus has been on the ways in which the interviewees themselves represent their families and how the othering and classifying stereotypes are questioned in order to claim more respected social positions.

The data and the focus of the research set certain limits to the applicability of the observations discussed here. Firstly, the middle-class backgrounds of the interviewees have significance on the ways they interpret their experiences and the resources they have for combatting the negative stereotyping – and thus also on the interpretations available for me, the researcher. Secondly, my own position as ‘an outsider’ representing the mainstream Finnish society has shaped the interview situations, possibly contributing to interviewees’ desiring to emphasize the positive elements in their family life. Thirdly, the focus of this article has been on ‘the respectable family’

constructed within Finnish society. This doesn't mean, however, that the Finnish society was the only reference point for the interviewees. Situationally, the criterion of a respectable lifestyle was also shaped by the ethnic or religious communities in Finland and transnationally.

According to my interpretation, a fairly large proportion of interview discourse on 'the meaning of my family' touches upon the family as an imagined community (Gillis, 1996: xv–xvi). This, however, does not mean that such statements are untruthful or of little significance; ideals and imagining is what gives family life its significance (ibid.; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). Even the idealizing discourses on family life – whether at an individual level or in public discussions – should be taken seriously in research because they help to define the borders of a respectable lifestyle and have consequences for the social positions of individuals.

In many studies on migration and family life, themes considered at least potentially problematic – discontinuity, the need to reorganize familial relationships, dissonant acculturation, conflicts – have been explored (Foner and Dreby, 2011). Following Foner and Dreby (ibid.), I suggest that such emphasis is partial and misleading, as the themes of loyalty, continuation and reciprocity are left largely unexplored. I argue that the loyalty which supports familial relations does remain a central element in the narratives about family life, even when conflicts and difficult feelings are reflected. Hence, the conflict narratives do not automatically contradict the construct of a respectable family. An additional theme that might be worth to reflect on in further studies is whether the problem-centred discourses of 'immigrant families' actually hinder the possibilities of those individuals categorized as 'immigrants' and really living in difficult family situations to speak out about their experiences, as there seems to be a great reluctance to position one's own family within the problem category and therefore to accept its inferior position in ethnic and class hierarchies.

While some studies within the field of migration research have explained the tendency to emphasize the importance of family through cultural factors, or with concepts such as ‘communal cultures’ outside of Western societies, it is worthwhile noting that the positive, even idealized, discourses are also commonly found among the majority populations in Western societies (Finch, 2007; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). The historically built constructs of the family are bound to influence the ideals, expectations and experiences related to family life, but still it is not necessarily always fruitful to perceive – or research – Western families and non-Western families as profoundly separate and different communities (Carsten, 2004).

Clearly, there is a great deal of variation between different societies, both in how families and familial responsibilities are understood, and in how the societal organization assumes certain tasks as being the responsibility of an individual, a family or the state. The family in many non-Western societies is responsible for important tasks that are at least partly considered the responsibility of the welfare state in the Nordic countries. Hence, at the practical level, the importance of family for the well-being of an individual is emphasized in many of the societies the interviewees originated from (Olwig, 2011: 180). However, the juxtaposition of an ‘individual’ Western lifestyle with small nuclear families and a ‘collective’ non-Western lifestyle with a large number of family members may be misleading considering people’s everyday realities, where both individuality and collective relations are present at the same time (Carsten, 2004). All too often, such a juxtaposition also serves to reinforce the ethnic hierarchies and divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

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¹ In comparison to other western European countries, the percentage of residents of foreign descent remains low (5.5 per cent of the total population; 13.2 per cent in Helsinki) – yet the share has increased sixfold in two decades (Official Statistics of Finland 2014).

² The socioeconomic positions of the interviewees were well in line with previous studies, which show that unemployment, marginal positions and insecurity are more common among the population with an immigrant background than in the population as a whole (Forsander, 2013). By and large, the interviewees embraced the adult worker model, which has a comparatively strong foothold in Finland as in other Nordic countries, to which end finding employment was a strong preference for all the parents.

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