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INTEGRATION, RECOGNITION AND SECURITY

Discourses on social support by families with a Russian background living in Finland

Abstract

This article analyses the discursive representations of social support received through social relationships by families with a Russian background. As a result of the analysis, three discourses are identified: the 'Integration' discourse, the 'Recognition' discourse and the 'Security' discourse. These discourses define the social support received through informal and formal relationships from different angles, highlighting the complexity and tension between relations. The analysis reveals situations in which social support is lacking and shows how the existence of social relationships does not intrinsically carry positive effects.

Keywords

Migration • families with a Russian background • relationships • social support • discourse analysis

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Introduction

Migration results in huge changes in many spheres of life, requiring extensive adaptation and learning. The social relationships of migrants may break down or weaken if their relatives stay in their country of origin. It is not necessarily easy to become acquainted with members of the majority population due to language barriers and various exclusionary practices pertaining to majority–minority relationships (Reuter & Jaakkola 2005: 27). Migration itself likely disrupts an individual's support network at the precise moment when the need for social support intensifies (e.g. de Leon Siantz 1997). In addition, during the process of migration, a family may undergo a change of roles in which individual family members' former roles must be re-negotiated, adapted and adjusted, and new roles must be learned (Valtonen 2009). The social relationships of migrants have been previously studied either as indicators or instruments of integration (e.g. Berry 1987) with little attention devoted to how these relationships provide resources other than serving to promote integration.

In this article, we analyse how families with a Russian background living in Finland speak about their experiences of social support as received through social relationships. We are interested in the voices expressed not only by multiple combinations of family members together, but also by each individual family member present during the interviews. All relationships present in the stories told by the families are taken into account. Our focus on families with a Russian background stems from the fact that they represent the largest group

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of migrants in Finland since the 1990s. In 2013, more than 66,400 persons whose native language was Russian were living in Finland, whereas at the beginning of the 1990s, they numbered fewer than 4000 (Statistics Finland 2014).

We use the expression *family with a Russian background* to refer to a definition originating from the Emphatos project (Jäppinen *et al.* 2007: 15): a family that includes at least one child under the age of 18 and at least one family member who moved to Finland from Russia or the former Soviet Union and whose native language is Russian. Thus, some of the families interviewed are multicultural families with parents from both Finnish and Russian backgrounds.

Previous research on social support in the context of welfare and the social sphere has typically drawn on quantitative data, aiming at the objective measurement and classification of different forms of support (e.g. Cohen *et al.* 2000; Wu *et al.* 2014). Our contribution instead highlights interviewees' own representations of the social support they receive through social relationships. In our view, interviewees construct and articulate stories of events and experiences as well as of their relationships with other people, institutions and communities.

In the following section, we present our research questions in greater detail. Next, we proceed to the analysis leading to descriptions of three discourses on the meaningful social support that the interviewed families receive through their social relationships.

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Relationships and social support

The connection between social relationships and the well-being of individuals represents a core interest in the social sciences. Nevertheless, the concept of social relationships was not explicitly used in the research field until the 1970s, when the positive effects of social support on one's physical and psychological well-being began to arouse some interest (see Caplan 1974; Cobb 1976). Since that time, many studies have shown that social support affects well-being through a number of different mechanisms (Heaney & Israel 1997).

In most definitions of social support, one of the crucial characteristics is a classification based on the closeness of the relationship. Antonucci (1990) distinguishes between three levels of relationships: the primary level includes family members; the secondary level includes friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbours; and the tertiary level includes acquaintances and formal support such as social and health services. The most important social support is usually received from primary level relationships. Family members are dependent on each other in many ways, and family relationships include elements such as intimacy, emotional closeness and trust (Kane 1988). It seems that family and friends are relatively dependent on each other as sources of social support, but their roles may vary according to age and life situation (Antonucci 1990; Buote *et al.* 2007). Formal social support is also important because close relationships rarely provide all of the different kinds of social support that a person may need during all of life's situations (Kane 1988). In addition, different studies show how the existence of social relationships does not automatically carry only positive consequences. Close relationships may, on the contrary, deplete resources and cause stress even if their intent is supportive (Buote *et al.* 2007; House 1981).

In research on social support, it is crucial to distinguish whether the focus of interest lies on the received or perceived social support, and to acknowledge that the meaning of social support can vary greatly due to individual and context-related factors (Cohen & Willis 1985; Cohen & Syme 1985; Antonucci 1990). Social support is especially crucial during life transitions that involve change or crisis and may cause feelings of insecurity and strain (Viljamaa 2003; Cohen & Syme 1985). Life situations vary in terms of opportunities to maintain existing social contacts and initiating new ones. Constraints may be related to various factors such as distance, economic factors, time and well-being. A changing life situation, such as geographic mobility or divorce, is also often related to a change in a person's existing social relationships (Peplau 1985: 276–277).

In this article, we use the concept of *relationship* in its sociological sense (Antonucci 1990), referring to an interpersonal relationship between parents and children, couples, other family members and kin, friends and neighbours, basic services and the church.

We understand *social support* as a resource provided through social relationships in interactions between two or more people. In our analysis, the concept of resource includes emotional aspects as well as activities and material and instrumental support (cp. House 1981). We focus on received social support depicted in an articulated experience by the interviewees. We are interested in the functional aspects of social relationships, including the source, type and significance of the social support.

Distinct from social capital research in which social capital is often seen as a macro-level network feature that provides resources its members may use (Ellonen 2005), we analyse social support on the level of particular social relationships. Above all, in our approach, social support is conceived as a construction actively interpreted by the receiver in his or her various social interactions.

In our view, the complexity of social support cannot be sufficiently captured through quantitative measures alone. We are more interested in the stories and articulated experiences of support and the meanings attached to this support by the interviewees themselves. Our research objective is to examine how interviewees create representations of the social support they receive through their social relationships. Based on previous research, our premise is that relationships are supportive when they function well and are positively experienced. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that relationships can simultaneously be fraught with tension and cause crises and stress.

Researching discourses on social support

It is widely acknowledged that the needs, sources and meanings of social support are context specific (e.g. Cohen & Willis 1985). Yet, in many studies, scholars adopt classifications of social support from previous research. In addition, most studies on social support are quantitative. We aim to bring a qualitative aspect to the field of social support research, because we understand the concept of social support as multidimensional and, therefore, demanding a definition related to the research questions from each specific study (e.g. Williams *et al.* 2004).

Our aim is to maintain contextual sensitivity to the subject and focus on the meanings that interviewees themselves attach to social support. This means that we are interested in statements concerning social support coming from specific interviewees at a specific time and place. This can be pursued by asking families how they perceive social support. Discourse analysis provides us with the means to examine the complexities and nuances of social support.

Our data consist of 25 family interviews, lasting from 50 minutes to 2½ hours, recorded during the summer of 2012. We reached families through a postal survey carried out under the project 'Empowerment of Families with Children'.¹ The survey was sent to 1000 people living in south-eastern Finland. The criteria for inclusion in the study sample ordered from the Finnish Population Register Centre included moving to Finland from Russia or the former Soviet Union after 1991, Russian as the native language, being the guardian of at least one child under the age of 18 and living in the same household with these children. We sent a separate form asking if the recipient was interested in participating in an interview and contacted families who were interested.²

Both current authors were present during all interviews, which were conducted in either Russian or Finnish based on the wishes of the families. During one interview, we also spoke English. The themes of the interviews included basic information about the family and their experiences during migration and the integration process as well as the construction of family well-being and their experiences receiving basic services.³

In the discourse analysis, we focus on representations. Representation refers to describing issues, phenomena or human beings from a certain perspective when the object referred to is not physically and immediately present, but rather perceived, understood and constructed through representation (Lehtonen 1996: 45). Thus, after defining discourse as a form of representation, it is possible to name different discourses, pointing out their viewpoints and differences. Our basic assumption is that a single phenomenon can be represented differently through different discourses (Fairclough 1997: 77).

In the first stage of analysis, we classified our data according to our research objective, which was to examine how interviewees

speak about the social support they receive through social relationships. We constructed a table of the relationships and the types of support that the families mentioned most frequently. During our preliminary analysis, it became obvious that most relationships not only provide social support, but also carry tension and include weakening elements. We included these elements in our analysis.

During the next stage of our analysis, we concentrated on those themes and expressions that appeared repeatedly in the data in discussions on different social relationships. This helped us to identify the most obvious discourses that emerged from the data and to conceptualise the key features of different discourses. During the analysis, our interpretations of the data were guided by the research questions, findings from previous studies and the central theoretical concepts of this study. Thus, analysis proceeded from a data-oriented close reading to an identification of the discourses informed by theory.

In our view, discourses on social support are broad constructions containing representations of different relationships and the types of support that the relationships produce. As a result, we identified and named discourses focussing on integration, recognition and security. These discourses are partly overlapping, and they cover phenomena of different levels. These features are visible in the analysis and the results, because our aim was to maintain data-oriented approach and avoid forcing our data to a certain pre-determinant frame, where discourses are totally separated and forced into similar shape. In the following sections, we discuss these discourses in detail.⁴

Integration discourse

The interviewees presented themselves as active agents who construct their integration into the new society. During our analysis, we distinguished four different segments of integration by applying the definitions of Katisko (2013: 114): the economic, human, cultural and social segments. Segmented perspective on integration gives the change to see integration in a multidimensional way, because according to this view, it is possible to integrate differently in different segments (Liebkind *et al.* 2004). The representations produced by the families and viewed in light of these four segments constitute the integration discourse.

Examining the economic segment, employment came up most frequently. Employment was represented both as a primary goal and as an instrument. As an end in itself, employment was conceived as a major part of a meaningful life, whereas, as an instrument, it was represented as a gateway to social relationships with the majority population, better living conditions and economic security in general. Even though in this discourse, families highlighted their own active roles, the social support they received was seen as crucially important:

We have agreed with my husband that regardless of the fact that we have bad situation with the money, it is possible for me to study, so I could get a job. I will work hard and finish my education. Then it is possible to relax a little bit. His support is crucial to me, I do not know if I could do it at all, if I did not have it. He supports me in different ways; he takes care of children, prepares meals for the family... I can trust that everything will go on smoothly. (Alina.)

Most of the parents were obligated to re-educate themselves in Finland, either to validate their degrees previously earned in Russia

or to acquire new professional skills. Interviewees emphasised the importance of support from a spouse during their studies leading to potential employment. Spouses were represented as facilitating education by providing practical aid, for example, by sharing family responsibilities such as childcare and household duties; by giving concrete guidance with their studies, helping with homework assignments and teaching them Finnish; and by providing emotional support, encouragement and expressing appreciation.

Authorities were represented as occupying the role of supporting economic integration in general. For example, courses organised by the Employment and Economic Development Office (TE Office)⁵ were seen as a form of support that enhances integration. Simultaneously, basic services, such as personal employment services were described as confusing, fragmented and unclear. These challenges caused delays in families' access to necessary services such as validating the parents' degrees, starting educational training and obtaining placement in kindergarten for children to allow them to start learning Finnish. Most interviewees experienced non-supportive attitudes from authorities who were presented as people who do their jobs but do not show a caring attitude. Caring was defined as a friendly attitude, an effort to explain the educational and employment possibilities clearly and a willingness to provide guidance on how to proceed in obtaining one's own objectives:

I will tell you about this time when I went to the TE Office and they asked me what I want to study. I said, 'This and this.' They said that the course will start then and then. I asked if I could go to that course. They said, 'I do not know. Just leave the application and go away.' They tell you things, but they do not care. (Igor.)

Learning Finnish language was often mentioned as a central part of human segment. Language skills were represented as an instrument for employment, using basic services, making contact with the majority population and gaining a sense of coherence in the new society. Competence in the Finnish language was described both as an overall resource and as a specific means of self-expression (see also Tarnainen & Suni 2005: 9). Interestingly, many interviewees emphasised that sufficient language skills are also a part of good parenting since they enable one to defend a child if necessary, for example, when facing conflicts in school or kindergarten or when handling official matters with teachers and other authorities.

Social support that helps an individual obtain language skills was received from Finnish neighbours and friends. These relationships were also identified as providing emotional support in the sense that they gave families a sense of acceptance and of belonging to Finnish society:

When we moved to Finland, (name of the city), an older woman lived next door. She came to talk to us. We did not have any belongings. She brought us her own carpets and dishes. It was really wonderful. She is a good person, like a grandmother. When she noticed that I did not speak Finnish, she said that she would teach me. She came almost every night, sometimes brought some pastry with her, we drank some tea and spoke Finnish. She was wonderful. She came when we thought we were all alone in Finland. (Elizaveta.)

Previous studies have shown that a person's own ethnic group plays a major part in providing support after moving to a foreign country since it offers the opportunity to speak one's native language and to receive peer support from people who are or have been in a

similar situation (Liebkind *et al.* 2004: 97–100). Interviewees also spoke about emotional and practical support received from their own ethnic group; but, generally, Finnish friends were represented as more important in terms of integration into Finnish society. Usually, one friend was represented as an important person who made a significant difference during the integration process. For a young person, this may have meant that he or she had to choose between Russian and Finnish friends:

At that time, I had to make a decision: Do I continue that small life in that small circle that speaks Russian, or do I go outside to find new friends? So, I decided that because of the language and life management, I had to leave those (Russian) friends. It was not easy. Sometimes, I still reminisce about it, but it would not have been possible to keep those friendships equally, because they never came with me anywhere, even if I asked them. But, they maintained that circle [...]. That decision was about language. Yes, language is important. I think that language skills are key to all of this. (Venera.)

The most visible cultural factor that families brought up during interviews was the difference between the basic service systems in Finland and Russia. While Finland was perceived as a welfare state, families found the Finnish basic services fragmented and confusing. After moving to Finland, families had to conduct their official affairs with a number of different organisations and they had to face many challenges such as lacking a shared language with authorities and the absence of interpretation services. In addition, all of the interviewees stated that they possessed insufficient knowledge about their rights and the services available to them, whereas authorities in many cases were perceived as unable to address the needs of families and, in some cases, their behaviour was viewed as indifferent or prejudicial. Our findings concerning challenges faced in the use of basic services agree with results from previous studies (e.g. Hammar-Suutari 2009; Heino & Kärmeniemi 2013; National Audit Office of Finland 2014).

Spouses who were either Finnish or had lived in Finland longer helped the migrant spouse to navigate within the system. The happier the description of the marital relationship, the more likely the spouse was to provide assistance. However, reliance on the spouse did not always carry positive effects. In the worst cases, this reliance facilitated various forms of abuse and led to an increased vulnerability. This was particularly evident in cases where the female spouse had acquired her residence permit based on marriage:

When we moved to Finland, of course, I trusted him. I could not speak Finnish, and he did not speak Russian and he did not speak English. When some papers came by mail, my husband told me to sign this, this and this paper. As a result, I signed them all. Later, I found out that they were maternity benefits for my younger and older boy. I found this out when I left him. A bankcard came by mail, but it also went to him, because I did not understand. When I was here, I did not have any money. He did not take me to the TE Office. I did not know, for example, that I could go on a language course. I did not know any of these things. (Valentina.)

According to research conducted by Pöllänen (2013), most of the women with a Russian background married to Finnish men, who she interviewed, were satisfied with their marriages and described their husbands as nice and kind. Yet, different kinds of violence and abuse also occur in some cases. The need for social support is high in such situations.

In relation to the use of basic services, support received from Finnish friends or those Russian friends who had lived in Finland longer than the interviewees was also identified as crucial. This was especially the case when the entire family were migrants. Support received from friends included conveying information, interpreting and providing practical help such as accompanying the migrant to meetings with authorities. Often, these types of support concerned the family as a whole. From the perspective of social integration, Finnish friends played a significant role among interviewees. However, particularly in multicultural families consisting of one Finnish and one Russian spouse, the relatives of the Finnish spouse were considered important.

Social integration was represented in an extremely harsh light, especially in terms of racism. Racism was represented as explicit acts such as name-calling, acts of violence and vandalism targeted at the interviewees' property. Respondents described it as being manifested in more implicit ways as attitudes, discrimination during job interviews and hints or gestures used by the majority population to exclude migrants. According to previous studies, racism decreases integration into Finnish society (e.g. Harinen 2005). First, it limits a person's self-determination. Second, it excludes a person, shutting her or him out from mainstream society by creating different barriers (Kivijärvi & Heino 2013: 224):

Well, of course, children are mean. But, at that point, I did not realise before it was targeted at me. There was spitting and calling me a whore and the lock of my bicycle was unscrewed so that many times, I fell in the thicket and these kinds of things [...]. Yes, it was quite a hard time. Indeed, I have to say that I have cried many times and many times, I was leaving home with my bags packed because I thought that I cannot take this anymore. I do not want to. I do not deserve this. (Venera.)

In summary, the integration discourse consists of economic, human, cultural and social segments. The economic segments included employment and language-learning support within the spousal relationship as well as informational support from authorities. Tensions in this segment were linked to power relations in multicultural marriages and a lack of caring and supportive attitudes among authorities. The central element of the human segment included language-learning skills supported by spouses, friends, neighbours and authorities. The cultural segment was mostly represented as knowledge of the system provided by the spouse, relatives and friends. The weakening element of this segment consisted of the confusing and fragmented ways in which services were organised. The social segment included social acceptance from friends and relatives as well as random encounters with majority population. Explicit and implicit manifestations of racism threatened integration in this segment.

Recognition discourse

Recognition discourse focusses on attitudes and encounters. The concept of recognition is usually understood to contain, at a minimum, a subjective and an intersubjective aspect. The subjective aspect is described by attributes such as love, respect and appreciation - in other words, attitudes. However, attitude by itself is insufficient because of the demand for intersubjectivity. This means that recognising someone, first, by considering another human being as a person through love, respect and appreciation, and second,

expressing this in such a way that the person understands and accepts this attitude. (Ikäheimo 2003: 127–128; Honneth 2001: 115.) Recognition is manifested in communication, which does not necessarily have to be verbal. Because recognition requires a response from another, the recognition *per se* and its manifestation in communicative acts are inseparable (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 247).

In the context of this study, family relationships were represented as reciprocal relationships that produced social support in the form of love. Particularly in parent–child relationships, love was represented as unconditional and as a source of meaning in life:

So, my human encounters happen mainly with my child and my mother. I give my child love and he gives me love and joy. And, my child gives me this feeling that, even though life goes on, it does not go on uselessly. There is a person who grows, who develops, who is also dependent on me and whom I support. And, my mother, of course. Mother supports me in everything and I also support my mother, so there is a reciprocal relationship. (Ludmila.)

According to Honneth (1995: 95), love consists of both affection and strong ties between the members of a small group of people. Love is related to needs and feelings since they are affirmed only when they are responded to. Love may also be defined as caring for the well-being and happiness of another person for the sake of that other person (Ikäheimo 2003: 131–132). All of these aspects of love were observable in our data.

In general, our interviewees described migration as being in many ways a time of crisis in terms of their sense of recognition, including recognition as an equal member of their community, as a professional and as a person with dignity, in general. According to Taylor (1994: 35–45), modernity has brought with it a struggle for recognition. In Taylor's view, in pre-modern societies, recognition is tied to pre-determined social categories that are taken as given and accepted without any problematisation. A parallel process can be discovered within the context of migration, where moving to another country usually means losing certain kinds of recognition, such as recognition as a professional:

When you move, the first year or two, there is this kind of euphoric period. At that time, it is enough that they say that we exist. Problems start after the third, fourth or fifth year. Approximately after the fifth year, you understand that you are in bad shape. You stay here, but you are a complete zero. Because, when you move as an adult, you already have an education in your own country and then you have to be this kind of apprentice, something like a schoolboy. It is quite a big deal to an adult person. (Tamara.)

In multicultural marriages, there is a risk that recognition among the relatives of the Finnish spouse will not be unconditional since the shared history of Russia and Finland includes wars and the displacement of people living along the border region. Recognition becomes extremely important when the right to be recognised is questioned. When a person is not recognised as a member of a community, she or he is not considered as having equal value and rights compared to other members of the community. Non-recognition is considered to create a threat to the integrity and dignity of a person (Honneth 1995: 107–109, 192). In our data, non-recognition was visible in educational settings, work environments and random encounters. Some respondents mentioned not being recognised by one's own ethnic group as well as by the majority population. The

reason for moving (e.g. on what grounds the person received his/her residence permit) greatly influenced the level of recognition among the person's own ethnic group. In some cases, especially Russian women, were not recognised as members of their own ethnic group by other women if they had married a Finnish man:

For two years, I took Finnish language courses, but I could not take it anymore. It was like a war there at the course. Those (Russian) women counted how much money I received from KELA (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland⁶) and things like that. When I came, they asked, 'Do you have a Finnish or a Russian man?' When I said that my husband was Finnish, they said, 'Ah-ha! You do not belong to our group.' It is like that. I know for sure that there is a lot of talk and, unfortunately, not everyone can understand that, well, maybe from the TV, that racism can also be present inside a small migrant group. It is a part of every group. (Sofia.)

Even though on many occasions, interviewees did not receive personal recognition, they said that they felt recognised in Finland on a general level in terms of trusting that all people are equal. This form of recognition includes trusting that you and your family will receive equal treatment from societal institutions, and that this treatment is based on human rights and guaranteed by law and the rules of the welfare society:

In Finland, there is this kind of thing that it is not allowed to bother one's neighbours or bully anyone. So, I do like the Finnish idea of equality. I do not really know if it is real or apparent; but, even though I stand in line at the store and some drunken person is talking to the cashier, everyone is standing in line and smiling, because we all are equal regardless of our thoughts about how he should live. This is Finnish freedom. Everyone can be left in peace. (Valentina.)

Interviewees said that the value of every individual is recognised in Finland through social security, laws and general courtesy, and that everyone could live in peace and trust that, no matter what happens, everyone will receive some kind of justice. It is unclear whether this notion represents real recognition or an expression of courtesy and tolerance. According to Forst (2007: 235–237), tolerance means respecting someone's basic moral rights because there are no options, but still maintaining that someone is unwanted and unequal. In this sense, tolerance is not complete recognition.

The recognition that families received from authorities was limited as represented in their responses. According to Metteri (2012: 237–238), interpersonal recognition and societal recognition are intertwined in encounters between service users and authorities. According to her definition, interpersonal recognition is formed when authorities take into account service users' own definitions of their situations. Societal recognition contains the realisation of social and economic human rights according to the situation of the service user (*ibid*).

The interviewees also recounted stories about authorities who really cared, observing that it is extremely important to gain recognition from authorities in a foreign country. As in integration discourse, racism was represented as the denial of a person's human dignity and the right to membership in a society.

According to our analysis, recognition discourse includes elements of love, community membership, professional acknowledgement and human rights. The element of love was

strongly represented in parent–child relationships as feelings of reciprocal support. Tensions in this element were related to longing for one’s parents living in Russia, as well as difficulties in combining childrearing with work. Community membership included approval and practical help from relatives, friends, neighbours and the family’s own ethnic group. Tension was mainly caused by racist acts. Professional acknowledgement was usually lost during the course of the migration process and support from authorities was important in the recognition of one’s skills and competences. The human rights element was tied to trusting the notion of equality for all people, while support provided by society through laws and social security was emphasised.

Security discourse

Security can be explored on the basis of three different kinds of needs: people need to protect themselves against dangers; they need to have continuity and order; and they need inner mental and spiritual balance. These needs exist on the micro-level as needs for confidence, reliability, trust and predictability in life. On the group level, they manifest as, for example, a need for family security (Niemelä & Lahikainen 2000: 22). In the security discourse that was visible in the speech of our interviewees, social support provided by social relationships was described mainly through two kinds of social relationships: family and authorities.

Support from the family was presented as the primary type of support. Above all, this support provided a sense of security, and a feeling of being able to give and receive love. Feelings of continuity and trust were often mentioned as provided by one’s family members and as being extremely important, particularly in the context of migration:

My parents helped me a lot in the beginning. It was important to be able to talk about my sorrows and worries at home and to cry on my mom’s shoulder that I have no friends [...], because if things were very bad and I felt bad, I could always talk about it at home and cry in my mom’s arms and get comfort. (Evgenija.)

A person’s sense of security is closely connected to her or his community and interaction with that community (Giddens 1991: 45–57). Getting used to a new situation such as migration to a new country, involves the experiences of accepting the situation and being in control, experiences that a family as a community can provide. During the interviews, family was described as the source of basic security:

Family is security. Family always comes first. You work for the family. You have to build your own work and relationships so as not to make the family suffer. That is important to both of us. Our sons get food and education and clothes when needed, and, only after that, we sometimes buy something for ourselves. All of the children are important. We have never separated his children from my children. If one of them needs help, we go there. I or he (speaker’s husband). It does not matter. Just like our mothers, there is no difference. If his mother needs help, we go there; if my mother needs help, we go there. We have never said that ‘it is your problem’ That is family security - a wall to lean on. (Alina.)

For a few of the families that were interviewed, this sense of security was present in their representations of church and religion. They

described security as originating from both their belief in God and from good experiences during discussions with priests and other members of the congregation. A sense of security may change dramatically depending on the actor and the specific political and cultural contexts. This is referred to as contextual security. During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the interviewees trusted Finnish society:

And, then, in 2001, we had difficulties and he (speaker’s husband) decided to leave. It was a very hard time. And, his mother threatened that they would take away my child. I want to thank Finnish society. Even though I was unemployed, I had the chance to receive free legal guidance and I contacted social services and they gave me concrete advice and calmed me down, saying that my child would not be taken away. (Ludmila.)

The Finnish welfare state and its basic services created security for these families. The provision of security is indeed supposed to be the constitutive premise of the modern state and the basis of its foundational contract with its subjects and citizens. Here, security was present in both aspects: as a recognition and as a feeling. Families articulated that security in this context signified the protection of individuals and families against a variety of threats as an assurance or a guarantee. It was also described as a feeling of confidence or a feeling of freedom from danger, anxiety or financial worries:

If we talk about Finnish authorities or the entire system, sometimes my Russian friends ask me if I want to go back to Russia. I do not. I feel warmly about the thought that if something terrible happens to us, my husband gets ill or I lose my job, we shall not end up on the street. We shall not freeze there. We shall not be hungry. This feeling of security is important. Even though I have never asked for help from these organisations, I know they exist. (Alina.)

On a general level, it is noteworthy that the security discourse was easy to identify in the interview material. When we asked questions regarding the well-being of the family, the interviewees wanted to talk about security. Sometimes, these two concepts were used as synonyms (Niemelä & Lahikainen 2000), and this conceptual closeness may have affected the number of references to security in our data as well. The elements of this discourse included the sense of security and contextual security. The sense of security was described as a feeling of love, continuity and trust that arose from the foundation of a secure parent–child relationship. It was also related to mutual support among relatives, faith in the guidance received from religious contacts and freedom from financial stress, thanks to support from the authorities. The component of contextual security was represented as acceptance and equality in all of the encounters a family had with the outside world, especially encounters with Finnish society. Tensions in both these components were caused by experiences characterised by misunderstandings and unmet needs.

Conclusions

The objective of our study was to examine how families with a Russian background represent the social support they receive through social relationships. Families used discourses that simultaneously reveal many aspects. First, they make the families’ representations of the perceived social support visible. Second, they contribute to our

understanding of the tensions in social relations within the context of migration and highlight situations where social support is lacking. Third, since discourses are related to other social practices, they can help us view Finnish society and the basic service system from the perspective of families with a Russian background.

The three discourses revealed several different types of tension. Most formal and informal relationships may provide indispensable social support to families, but social relationships may also be a source of harm and trouble. Recognising these tensions can be useful in improving the functioning of basic services, understanding multicultural marriages and preventing racism.

Discourses represent and organise different meanings that individuals attach to a social support and provide specific descriptions of perceptions and experiences. While both formal and informal relationships (see also Nordberg & Wrede 2015) were discussed in this research, the primary benefit of these results is widening of our general understanding of the migrant families' points of view as well as an ability to better target formal social support in the context of migration.

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Notes

1. This project was implemented in 2011–2014 and coordinated by the University of Helsinki, Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education, Kotka Unit.
2. Migrant family members had moved to Finland during 1992–2010.
3. By basic services, we mean social services, health care services, migration services, childcare and education services as well as admission of social benefits.
4. The names appearing after interview excerpts represent aliases, which are used to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.
5. The TE Office is a public municipal organisation which provides personal guidance in job seeking and information about the job market for persons who have a residence permit in Finland or who are planning to seek employment in Finland. Additional services for migrants are organised by the TE Office, such as an integration plan and integration training. All services are free of charge (Ministry of Employment and Economy 2013).
6. KELA is a public, municipal organisation, which provides benefits and services relating to different life situations including childbirth, education and training, sickness, unemployment and retirement (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland 2014).

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