

Ulla-Maija Takkunen

## OUTREACH YOUTH WORK

### Finding invisible lonely young people

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*Ulla-Maija Takkunen is a Senior Lecturer, a psychologist, MA, and a coordinator of international affairs at the Department of Social Services, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland. She's particularly interested in disability studies and rehabilitation. In May/June 2014 she participated in the 'From farm to fork: food self-sufficiency as social right' Erasmus Intensive Programme in Ljubljana, organised by Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, where professors and students from ten European countries joined forces to find innovative and sustainable solutions for current burning social issues. In her lecture she pointed out the importance of incorporating young people with diminishing social skills back into society.*

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At your presentation you were talking about the need of finding young people that are kind of invisible, left behind and forgotten in a society, youngsters that nobody really bothers about. Why do you think this is important for social work?

It is very important for two main reasons. On the one hand we're fighting for human values and human rights, but also, on the other hand, because if we count all the expenses related to them, it's very expensive. A person who is lost, left behind or marginalised, is a cost for psychiatric care, prison, lawyers or police. You can count in even suicide, as emergency care and different kinds of services and facilities for this kind of persons should also be taken into consideration. Actually, it's possible to count in Euros how expensive an excluded person is for society.



Photo: Thomas Schulze

So a good society can't afford to eliminate such people?

Exactly. On the one hand, it is a question of human rights, but on the other hand it's a question of money. Because we're losing tax-payers' money and human resources.

Can you tell us more about how did you find hidden young people who are forgotten? What did you do?

Firstly, the general approach was to count how many they are. One person from the Ministry, Erik Häggman, was finding statistics and making comparisons with them. Some people are in psychiatric care, prison etc. and he found that there is a big number of young people who aren't in any statistics. It took him one year to count their number. It was very important for us because our Ministry kept saying that there are not many people who are lost, because our service system is good. So we were thinking that they were inside some kind of services. But when Erik wanted to count these persons, they were not found in any statistics. So it was a very basic thing to get the numbers.

In the first place there were a lot of arguments that he wasn't counting right. The number was big. Of course there could have been some mistakes. So the first phase was to get the numbers.

We wanted to check out the situation in Tampere. Again we were looking at the statistics: how many young people drop out from basic education, how many are in vocational education. We were phoning the headmasters of vocational institutions and asking how many young people are actually there. You know, their names are on the list, but they are not actually there. Then we went to discuss it with fire fighters because they know where young people are hiding or staying overnight, they have to know it in case of fires and so on. We were also discussing it with the police but they don't know as much as fire fighters.

We also talked with social workers, but they're not very good informants because they're busy with clients who are already in the system. They don't know about persons who don't come to their offices.

Then we were thinking that these people do exist somewhere and we thought that they are in the streets or in hidden places known by fire fighters, but then, surprisingly, we found out that they were not in the streets. They just disappeared, they are totally invisible. When I was young, lost young people were in gangs in the streets, but here this wasn't the case. So it's very difficult to find them. But we put a lot of effort to hang around in some neighbourhoods: just standing there and seeing who's coming in and out is important. We were also talking with other young people about who's living where. After all Tampere is a small place so it's not too difficult to find out.

**Can you describe a typical invisible young person?**

They stay at home. At first sight it might not be such a big problem, but after a year or two they begin to be so shy and so isolated, that they don't know anyone. They don't know how to go for example to a swimming hall or a shopping centre or a cafeteria. They're characterised by a total lack of social skills. They know that they are left behind and they become ashamed as they're not involved in any activities. And when they are older, they're slowly forgetting how to behave in a cafeteria.

**They live alone and obviously don't have partners.**

No partners. Maybe only family, mother and father telling them to go out and find education opportunity etc., but this in turn only makes them more and more ashamed. In my mind this is not a psychiatric problem at first. It's a social one. But in the end it becomes a psychiatric problem. In daytime they're so ashamed that they're indoors and alone, that they prefer to live at night. At night at least they have the feeling that there are also some other lonely people somewhere. Their daily routine has been turned upside down. You have to take this into account: if you want to try to find them you have to go out very early in the morning or very late in the evening. During daytime you just can't find them, as they're asleep.

**If I understand correctly, they're not looking for jobs and are just dependent on their family like big small children?**

Exactly. In one Finnish survey researchers were asking young people about the quality of their life. I asked researchers what kind of interviews were they doing and at what time. They were making interviews by phone and in the morning. In that time you don't find 'invisible' young people. If they have a phone, they don't answer. So they are out of the statistics. It is very little knowledge available about these persons. Our street work was carried out in a very small scale. We only discovered that this phenomenon exists. And we went to the Ministry and described what we had found out, and after two years they're now finding more and more money for our outreach youth work. They have also developed better methods than those we were using at the beginning. At the beginning we didn't know what we're looking for. We were looking for gangs and street children. We didn't know that they're actually living indoors.

**If you manage somehow to find them, what's the proper way to get them out?**

The answer is always: go where they are. Stay for a while inside with them and say: follow me, come out. Seat down and discuss and make a contact. The process might be sometimes

slow. And show respect for the person, don't blame them: 'Now, finally, I've found you and you have to change your life style!'

**This might be the first time that they experience somebody is paying attention to them outside family.**

Yes. We have found something important: when we're trying to find a person and then we finally find him or her, we should not give him or her the address where to go. This is not the way. In the first phase you need just to be together with the person. You know, seat together and have a cup of tea.

**Without judgements, of course.**

Yes. Only later you can ask, would you like to go out with me. First nurture trust. In the end it's not very difficult to get them out if you're doing it slowly enough. But make sure you attend an activity center together. For example, you can say, tomorrow at ten o'clock I'll come and we'll go there together. And stay for a week together and then find more contacts. Sometimes social workers try to change a person too early, but in that case they lose the person.

**It means that social workers should have excellent social intelligence. They should be very sensitive. It's a delicate question, not to be too interfering but at the same time you need to be very welcoming. It's hard, isn't it?**

It sounds easy and in a way it is, but at the same time it's quite difficult. It's easy to make a mistake.

**It's easy to have I-know-better-attitude. So you have to be humble and very understanding. How do you prepare social workers for such a tough job?**

A good question. They have to be educated. Well, not all of them. I know very good social pedagogues who don't have a proper formal education, but they are such good personalities. But it's better to have education. The more you know, the more humble you get, since you learn to know that there could be so many layers in life. You never know what will happen.

**Do you have any figures about how many young people are there successfully 'dragged' out from their little holes and doing better freed from isolation?**

In the first phase when we were counting how many people 'disappear', we found out that around every 18<sup>th</sup> young person is 'missing'. It's a lot of people. I don't have statistics how successful our work has been. But I know that the statistics do exist because the Ministry is counting it and I know the programme is successful. That's the reason why they're giving us more money.

**Are we talking more about young men or young women?**

Predominantly men. It's a bit funny: the situation is the same in psychiatric care and in prisons. The missing persons are men.

**Would you relate this group of people with higher suicide rate?**

Yes. Young men tend to kill themselves more often than women.

**How do you explain such an asymmetrical balance between young men and young women?**

It has been discussed in Finland, that in our education system girls are doing better. It's a lot of reading and writing and girls are just better at it. Our vocational schools used to be more practically oriented than they are now. In old days the students were just repairing a car and that was it, but nowadays they are first making a written plan, doing some practical things and then again writing a report. Reading and writing abound. It's excellent for those who can read and write well, but for the others who are less skilful, well, they suffer. Also they are the ones with working class identity: they think that they should have a job, work hard and earn money. It's a part of their identity and if they're unemployed it's a problem for them. More academic types care less about it and know that they can just hang around and be artistic.

**Young men that you're describing are getting socially extremely poor, with less and less social capital.**

In Finland, we were the fastest county in Europe in terms of moving from farmhouses to factories and cities. For women in the house, for mothers, it's not such a big change: they're in the kitchen cooking and taking care of children and older people and household tasks. But for men it is a very big change. On farms they were farming and in their leisure time fishing and hunting. But after they'd moved to the city center of Helsinki, for instance, they find out that there's nothing to do compared with the old-fashioned way of life. They don't go to concerts or get busy with handicraft. The process happened so quickly in Finland.

**When was this industrialisation taking place?**

It began in the sixties when it became obvious that it's extremely hard to survive on land. A lot of people found the solution in moving to Sweden. In the eighties and nineties we got a big depression. Many people had already moved to cities but then many became unemployed and the situation got even worse for them. Women can always do something in the house, but if men don't have anything meaningful to do as they lost their jobs in the factories and are without money and have only their free time, in their block of flats they can only watch TV. They're not talkative, they don't get involved into political discussions with neighbours. There are a lot of lonely men! And when they're raising their boys, they're their role models. It might take one generation before they learn how to live in a city and find different activities.

**For the end, maybe just a short comment on the Erasmus Intensive Programme in Ljubljana that you have participated in?**

I think this is the best I've been to, even if it's a more classical model, without role plays and fancy ideas. I've been thinking about what has made it so good. I think it's the mentality. We've seen the same things in very different aspects and layers, so the people got many ideas. It's giving freedom of thought and creating space in our heads, giving us food for thought. If you use only certain methods, you're putting people's thoughts in one box. It might be good for children and some university students, because you have to develop your ideas in a certain way, but at the same time it means less freedom. In the classical model that you have been using, you get more freedom, you can think about your own thoughts. And students have been thinking really a lot.

**Borut Petrović Jesenovec**