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Finnish Social Science
Data Archive
Tel: +358 40 190 1432
Fax: +358 3 343 9088
E-mail: fsd@uta.fi

Autobiographical Narratives on Poverty Experiences

Jarkko Päivärinta

Autobiographical narratives on people's poverty experiences are a prime example of archived data that can be used for varied research purposes. The narratives were originally collected through a writing contest held in Finland in 2006 and were later archived at FSD. Since their archival, several Master's theses and even one theater play have been based on them. More theses are on the way.

Emergence of the idea

The idea of collecting data on poverty through a writing contest was born when Juha Mikkonen met Meri Larivaara and Anna-Maria Isola in an informal event. Juha Mikkonen, a member of the executive



committee of the European Anti-Poverty Network

(EAPN) and Project Manager for the Association for Healthy Lifestyles, says that they and other participants discussed poverty and how to give voice to people affected by poverty.

– We wanted to hear what low-income citizens themselves thought about their situation, how they experienced it, instead of leaving the discussion to politicians and researchers only, Mikkonen recalls.

So they decided to organize a writing contest. Little did they expect that the contest would draw significant media attention and yield no less than 850 narratives.

– Maybe the time was right for a different viewpoint since it had been mostly experts and politicians who had taken part in the discussion of poverty issues, Mikkonen says.

The keen media attention made publishers interested in the writings and part of them were published as an anthology. Another book, containing poetry written for the competition, was published later. In 2009, a theatre staged a satirical play inspired by the writings.

Rich source for analysis

The narratives offer a rare opportunity to study the conditions and experiences of poverty in Finland. They provide a valuable resource for social science research since, in general, it is difficult to get deprived people to participate in surveys or interviews. When Isola, Mikkonen and Larivaara decided to deposit the data at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD), their decision enabled other researchers to study the material from a number of different points of view. Further studies have focused on, for instance, feelings of guilt and shame associated with poverty, poverty experiences of lone women, male poverty, experiences of help and support received and experiences of social workers and social security offices.

The original researchers themselves had not expected the material to be used for so many and varied reanalysis purposes.

– I would like to put together all the research

conducted and edit, say, a collection of articles or a book. But so far, I have not had time, Mikkonen says.

Archiving beneficial to all

Juha Mikkonen thinks that the decision to archive the data has been beneficial.

– I believe that information on the data published on the FSD web site has increased its re-use. To us, it is positive that people re-use the data as we never had any intention of keeping it to ourselves, rather to the contrary. Reuse brings into light also those narratives not included in the anthology, he points out.

Mikkonen also says that the archiving was helpful for organizing the data and monitoring its reuse.

Impact in society

The original researchers' intention was to make the voices of low-income citizens heard. Mikkonen says it is hard to determine what kind of impact the narratives have had but at least the media attention ensured visibility. The present government has included fighting poverty and inequality in its policy program.

– In 2007, we organized an event in Parliament where the anthology was disseminated to the MPs, with a panel discussion. Two panel members are now ministers in the current coalition government, so I would say there are at least two influential decision-makers who have read the book.

More information:

» [FSD2413 Everyday Experiences of Poverty: Self-administered Writings 2006](#)

» Mikkonen, Juha (2011). Social and material deprivation among youth in Finland: Causes, consequences, and coping. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. Social psychology Master's thesis.