“A dark chapter in our history”

Historical truth commissions on abuse in children’s institutions as national memory work

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Abstract
The development of the Swedish welfare state is often described as a success story. In the late 1990s, this picture was questioned, especially in a heated debate about the sterilization of more than 60,000 persons. Currently, a core area of social intervention is under debate. In 2006 an inquiry was set up to document child abuse and neglect in institutions and foster homes. Concluding his interim report, based on about 400 interviews, the Inquiry Chair states that the state in many cases has failed its responsibility. Following his recommendations a process of amends is now being prepared.

When reading about the maltreatment, violence and exploitation that have been taking place in institutions and foster homes, it is easy to sympathize with the ambition to collect and analyze people’s memories in order to avoid such abuse in the future. At the same time many questions are to be asked about this project of state historiography. Why was it launched? How is it conducted? What are the possible outcomes?

In this paper, I will examine the Swedish Inquiry on Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes as an artifact of our contemporary historical culture, in which truth commissions and other investigations of historical crimes are central to the re-construction of national identity. A description of the political context will serve as a background for closer analysis of aims, methods and truth claims in the interim report. By comparing the current Swedish inquiry with the ones already completed in Norway, Ireland and Australia, I will discern diverging ideas about historical responsibility.
Introduction

The cultural identity of post-war Sweden has been based on pride in the welfare state, of being “modern”, rational, efficient, socially minded and peaceful, as opposed to chauvinist, traditionalist, conventional, moralistic, conservative, hierarchic and superstitious.¹

In his thesis, Martin Wiklund argues that a social democratic narrative of contemporary Swedish history gained large influence in the late 1950s. In a time of successive social reforms and strong political support, it became possible to describe Swedish history from the 1930s onwards as the steady development from a poor, agricultural society to a prosperous, industrialized welfare state (with World War II put into brackets). Although this narrative changed in the subsequent decades, as new political goals replaced those already achieved, its central tenets remained the same.²

The dominant narrative has been contested. In the 1960s, groups of the New Left contradicted the image of Sweden as a democratic country, gradually approaching the social democratic ideal, describing it instead as an authoritarian capitalist society. When arguing for a future socialist society, they also formed a radically different account of the past. Such transformations can be observed in the writings and statements of other political groups as well. For the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, the conflict between female and male culture was pivotal, which called for a different periodisation than the one proposed by Marxist influenced accounts. When the environmental movement began to voice criticism against one-sided focus on economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, the very notions of progress and development became problematic. As a last example, with the growing influence of liberal ideas in the 1980s, many aspects that were understood as progressions in the Social Democratic narrative were instead portrayed as warnings of collectivist and totalitarian tendencies.³

What enables Martin Wiklund to capture the changing nature of how modern Sweden has been interpreted, is an understanding of history inspired by the German theorist Jörn Rüsen. According to Rüsen, the central function of historical thinking is to give orientation in time. Historical narratives, i.e. coherent and meaningful interpretations of change over time, can be seen as answers to fundamental questions about continuity and change; about how to live and act. From the perspective of the present, we formulate questions to the past, and the conclusions drawn are used to formulate suggestions about the future. Counter-narratives, such as the ones mentioned above, are formulated when a dominant narrative can no longer be used to make sense of new values and experiences.⁴ In other words, engaging

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
with history does not only entail understanding what actually happened in the past. It is also about trying to understand how past events and processes are interpreted in the present.

In recent years, several studies on Swedish historical culture have been published. One of the most comprehensive attempts to discern changing ways of relating to the past is Ulf Zander’s thesis, in which he charts the public uses of history during the entire 20th century. Like in many other countries, the 1990s stands out as a period with renewed interest in, and a changing evaluation of, national history. The common apprehension that Sweden had been a neutral country during World War II and the Cold War was put into question. Furthermore, several debaters and scholars drew attention to what was described as paternalistic traits of the welfare state.6

A well-known contribution to this debate is Yvonne Hirdman’s book *Att lägga livet till rätta*. Studies of the Swedish welfare state, she argues, should not only focus on the actual reforms by pragmatic social-democrats, but also the utopian socialist ideas about inventions that would dramatically change everyday life (e.g. collective housing, communal child rearing). According to her, a shift in mentality took place in the 1930s and 1940s, legitimizing the thought that the state should “put in order” the life of its citizens. Hirdman shows that the enthusiastic advocacy of, among others, Gunnar and Alva Myrdal for intervention in the private sphere was connected to a firm belief in reason and scholarly knowledge. This self-righteous and patriarchal “politics of good will”, she concludes, is still a central feature of the Swedish welfare state.7

Hirdman’s conclusions have met large criticism. As political scientist Bo Rothstein stresses, it is a study of utopian ideas. Many of the plans detailed in the book were never implemented. The social policy that actually took form was a more pragmatic one, geared to avoid the infringement on people’s integrity by introducing universal social security systems.8 However, the debate on what is often referred to as “the dark sides of the welfare state” has continued, not least concerning former policies of sterilization.

From 1935 to 1976, over 60 000 persons (mainly women) were sterilized – some by force, many as a result of persuasion. Sterilization could for example be a condition for discharge from different kinds of social institutions. In 1997, a series of articles critical of this policy appeared in one of Sweden’s biggest newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter*. Many commentators thought that journalist Maciej Zaremba went too far

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8 Bo Rothstein, *Vad bör staten göra?: om välfärdsstatens moraliska och politiska logik* (2002).
when implicitly comparing the politics of sterilization to Nazism. However, intense discussions on the rationale for this policy and the nature of the welfare state followed. This provoked an official response: a commission of inquiry was set up, which resulted in an official excuse as well as economic compensation for those who could prove that they had been sterilized against their will. Interestingly enough, the fact that sterilizations had taken place had been known for years; yet the issue resurfaced in a context where the patriarchal and oppressive traits of the welfare state had come to the fore.

Currently, another area of social intervention in the private sphere is under debate. In 2006, following revelations and debate in media, the Inquiry on Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes was set up. Concluding his interim report, the Inquiry Chair established that the state in many cases had failed its responsibilities of monitoring and supervising out of home care. Maria Larsson, Minister of Elderly Care and Public Health, called this “a dark chapter in our history” in a commentary announcing that a process of amends is under preparation.

How is this language of national guilt to be interpreted? From my perspective, the current debate about former child welfare policies can be understood as part of the above-mentioned revaluation of the Swedish welfare state, concerning the tension between interventions in the private sphere and civil rights. In the present paper, I try to further the understanding of this national memory work by studying the inquiry as an artifact of the present historical culture. In doing so, I do not wish to question the experiences of care leavers. However, when the state engages in writing history, there is always reason to ask: Why are these aspects of the past brought to the fore right now? How is the commission carried out? What kind of knowledge about the past will it result in? This is important to examine, since the results of the inquiry will have influence on future child welfare policy, and the upcoming debate on responsibility and reparation.

**Truth commissions**

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a “tidal wave of apologies, truth commissions, reparations, and investigations of historical crimes”. Elazar Barkan suggests that it has become an international norm to engage in such processes after a violent conflict or when a country is in transition from a dictatorship to democracy. This upsurge in processes of transitional justice has been paralleled 

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9 For a thorough analysis of his articles and the ensuing debate, see Åsa Kroon, *Debattens dynamik : hur budskap och betydelser förvandlas i mediedebatter* (Linköping studies in arts and science, 0282-9800 ; 227; Linköping: Tema, Univ., 2001), pp. 133-173.
12 Maria Larsson, 'Vi ska kompensera barnhemsbarnen för deras lidanden', (Newsmill, 2009).
by a large number of scholarly studies. In her influential survey of this field, Priscilla B. Hayner describes a drift from *retributive justice* (focus on punishment of offenders) to *restorative justice* (focus on the needs of victims and offenders to promote social integration). She goes on to conclude that even though gross violators of human rights are still being prosecuted, both in international tribunals and domestically, the number of extra-judicial measures focusing on reconciliation and restitution for victims rather than punishment of perpetrators is growing.\(^{14}\)

Currently, one of the most common ways for states in transition to handle demands for justice for past atrocities is to set up a *truth commission*. This is a temporary body, sanctioned by the state and commissioned to investigate patterns of abuse during a certain period in the country’s history. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee after the fall of apartheid in South Africa is probably the most well-known example, and similar commissions have been operating in many Latin American countries.\(^{15}\)

In fragile new regimes, a truth commission can be understood as part of the nation-building process. The aim is most commonly to facilitate the co-existence of opposing groups after a period of political violence and terror. Nevertheless, similar processes can be discerned in well-established democracies. In recent years, several inquiries have been made about human rights abuse that is not connected to recent political conflict, but rather patterns of abuse related to state policy. What Hayner terms *historical truth commissions* are temporary bodies assigned by the state to chart “targeted practices that may have affected specific ethnic, racial, or other groups”, in order to “pay respect to previously unrecognized victims”.\(^{16}\) The treatment of indigenous people has been reviewed in many countries, resulting for example in the Australian report *Bringing them home*, detailing forced removals of aboriginal children from their families. In Canada, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is currently carrying out investigations regarding Indian residential schools.\(^{17}\)

The question of liability is a central issue for historical truth commissions. Putting people’s experiences on the historical record is only the first step of the process. In contrast with scholarly historical works, historical truth commissions are often suspected to provide recommendations regarding for example commemoration and the reparation of victims. This makes such commissions all the more controversial. As an example, the extent of the removals documented in the *Bringing them home* report has been disputed. Some commentators suggested that the numbers were exaggerated, and the Minister for

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 17.
Aboriginal Affairs contested the commonly used expression “the Stolen generation”. Although the report was issued in 1997, the official apology that it recommended was not delivered until 2008.

Historical truth commissions have not only been used to inquire into the treatment of ethnic minorities. Last year, Australian premier minister Kevin Rudd issued apologies to two additional groups, namely child migrants from Great Britain and Australians that had suffered from hard work, malnutrition and physical and sexual abuse in industrial schools and foster homes. This was the result of two other inquiries, completed in 2001 and 2004. Investigations presenting similar findings have been made in several other welfare states in the last decade. In Norway and Ireland, extensive inquiries reporting on abuse and neglect has resulted in different kinds of economic compensation. Similar official truth-seeking concerning out of home care for children is right now being carried out in Denmark and Iceland, among others. This should make it clear that the Swedish inquiry can be understood not only in the context of a national debate on the welfare state, but also as part of an international pattern of historical truth commissions regarding children’s institutions.

As mentioned earlier, the recognition and reparation of victims are important features of historical truth commissions. Their appointment sends a powerful message that allegations are taken seriously. In the Swedish case, the overarching aim is described as follows: “to produce a report that provides both redress for the victims and lessons for the future.” At a first glance, this sounds like a reasonable and sympathetic mission. There has, however, been much discussion, about the efficacy of truth commissions. The South African TRC has generated a large number of analyses and evaluations, both positive and negative. To begin with, the concept of truth is notoriously problematic. Furthermore, there is a risk of nourishing false hopes. After all, there are limits to what a commission can bring about. Commenting on the South American truth commissions, Hayner states that the collecting of evidence on disappearances and political murders could be crucial for the families to get acknowledgment and

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21 Socialstyrelsen, 'SOU 2009:99 Vanvård i social barnavård under 1900-talet'.
22 Inquiry Terms of Reference (Dir. 2006:75, p. 5.)
financial support, but that there is no guarantee that such findings will lead to fundamental system change. The same is probably true when it comes to child welfare systems.

In what follows, I will present some preliminary observations on the Swedish Inquiry on Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes, based mainly on its interim report. Some further comments will be made about inquiries made previously in Australia, Norway and Ireland. This is not, however, to be read as a full comparison; parallels to other countries should be regarded as contrasting examples.

The structure of this paper is influenced by the work of Beth Rushton. In her survey article about the workings of truth commissions, she observes that the issue is not whether to learn from the past or not, but what we are learning. Depending on how they are carried out, historical truth commissions can produce very different results, and the outcome is heavily dependent upon the political will supporting them. Hence, as a start, I will be giving some background on the circumstances leading to the appointment of the inquiries in question. Following this, I will compare the terms of references and mandates given, because this determines the workings of the commissions. An analysis of materials and methods used serves to illustrate how these directions have been interpreted. Special attention will be given to the inclusion and exclusion of witnesses and the attitude towards perpetrators. The final part of the analysis is a discussion about the very central question of what truth claims are being made by the commission.

Political background
In the background chapter of the interim report, the documentary “Stulen Barndom” (Stolen Childhood), broadcast on Swedish television in November 2005, is mentioned as the starting point. In the program, men who had been living in a boy’s home in the 1950s and 1960s told about systematic abuse, including battering and sexual assault. “This was the prelude to a process which resulted in the appointment in 2006 of the Inquiry on Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes.” However, people had been fighting for recognition of wrongs done to them when in out of home care for years before that. Some of them had even organized class actions against municipalities that, in their view, have failed its responsibilities when they were in care. Furthermore, the organization “Samhällets styvbarn” (Stepchildren of society) had been founded already in 2004. The national Norwegian inquiry was preceded by a local one, initiated by the municipality of Bergen in 2001. The setting of a review committee was instigated by media coverage of testimony about

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maltreatment in local institutions for children, as well as some legal cases.29 Their comprehensive report was extensively used by the national review committee with the task of presenting a more general view. By that time, several other local reviews had been completed.30

When presented in 2004, the Senate report on experiences of institutional care in Australia was framed as the third part in a trilogy, referring to the ones made earlier about the treatment of aboriginal children and child migrants. This was by no means the original plan. Even though the local 1999 Forde Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland had established that abuse and neglect had occurred in many of the institutions under scrutiny, there was no national initiative until senator Andrew Murray motioned for it, after lobbying from, among others, Care Leavers Australia Network.31

The Irish “Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse” was launched in 1999, as one of several measures, including a public apology and a special national counseling service. The report in itself gives not much background on its establishment.32 Allegedly, it was provoked by a great number of charges about sexual abuse of children, directed towards the religious orders that ran many industrial schools and similar children’s institutions with funding from the state. Public anger spurred by the simultaneous broadcasting of a documentary series on the abuse suffered by children in a range of different institutions throughout the 20th century, seems to have hastened the process.33

All of the historical truth commissions in question have been initiated as a response to political pressure. The persons concerned have been living with their experiences for their whole life, and their interest groups have been lobbying for years, before media attention made their cause a matter for the highest political level. Nevertheless, the attention on maltreatment in children’s institutions in these countries cannot be fully explained by new knowledge. Speaking out requires an audience. As a matter of fact, earlier inquiries in both Australia and Ireland have identified many of the problems later described in the

33 Mary Raftery, 'The end of a decade of inquiry', The Irish Times, 16/05 2009.
reports discussed in this paper. These reports, however, have lead to little or no political action. In some cases, their publication has been hindered.\textsuperscript{34}

It seems to me that the readiness to listen to this kind of criticism has increased in the last decades. I would suggest that this has to do with a heightened consciousness about human rights in general, and children’s rights in particular.\textsuperscript{35} As noted by Paula Hamilton, “[o]ne of the problems with a confessional model of public testimonies is that it obscures the transformation of a national consciousness which has already taken place to allow their articulation.”\textsuperscript{36} While the reports give evidence of severe infringements on the civil rights of children and their parents, the fact that they are being written indicates that those rights have been strengthened.

**Terms of reference and mandate**

To examine abuse and maltreatment in children’s institutions and other kinds of out of home care is the overarching aim of all the inquiries in question. However, their terms of reference and mandates differ in some aspects. As Rushton points out, “[t]he most serious limitations on a commission’s success in achieving truth are contained within its scope and mandate, which are in large part determined by the political will of the commissioning agency.”\textsuperscript{37}

In the Irish case, there were several open controversies about how to proceed. Like in Sweden, admission was open to anyone with negative experiences of institutional care in childhood who applied before a certain deadline. Since the number of applicants exceeded any expectation, Ms. Justice Laffoy, head of the commission, demanded more resources. When this was not accorded she resigned. After a review of the routines, her successor argued that the scope had to be narrowed, if the investigation was to present its results in reasonable time and at reasonable cost.\textsuperscript{38} Even so, it took ten years to complete the hearings, resulting in a five volume report. In this perspective the ones in Australia and Norway were less extensive; they were both completed within approximately a year. In contrast, the Swedish inquiry has gotten its mandates prolonged several times. The current deadline is in September 2011, when it will have been working for five years.\textsuperscript{39} This makes it rather expensive, compared with other national investigations.

\textsuperscript{34} Penglase, *Orphans of the living : growing up in care in twentieth-century Australia.*, p. 49, Anonymous, ‘Forgotten Australians : a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children / the Senate Community Affairs References Committee’.


\textsuperscript{36} Hamilton, ‘Sale of the century? Memory and historical consciousness in Australia’, p. 144.


The question of resources is not the sole factor determining the exclusion or inclusion of witnesses. While the Swedish commission is mandated only to document negative experiences, the Australian one is supposed to give a more general picture of life in the institutions. Consequently, they accepted submissions from people relating both positive and negative memories. Submissions could also be given by (siblings, partners, relatives) by former staff or neighbors or behalf of associations that have been involved in child welfare. Such differences will obviously have great influence of the final results.

Another important consideration for truth commissions is the degree of openness. Public access to the process can be instrumental in gaining acceptance for the results and recommendations made. On the other hand, this could put informants in a difficult situation, and having to appear in public could be repelling. In Sweden, much emphasis has been put on keeping testimonies confidential. Irish witnesses could choose between giving testimony before the Confidential Committee, where hearings were to be conducted in an informal and sympathetic atmosphere, or the Investigation Committee, which was of a more judicial character. The latter had the right to cross-examine witnesses, and the power to demand those charged with criminal assaults to appear.

A related dilemma is how to treat perpetrators of abuse. To “name and shame” is sometimes demanded by victims, but since truth commissions have an ambiguous status this could create problems. In Ireland, the process was stalled for several months because of a lawsuit from the Christian Brothers, who didn’t want elderly or deceased brothers to be accused of abuse without having the possibility of defending themselves. This led to an amendment of the Act, implying that the Investigation Committee “could no longer identify a person it believed had committed abuse unless that person had been convicted by a court.”

In some truth commissions, public demands for justice have been met by stressing the responsibility of the state. The main conclusion in the interim report is that the social childcare services has failed in their supervision and monitoring responsibilities. In the words of the Inquiry Chair Mr. Göran Johansson, the witnesses had suffered “neglect and abuse at the hands of society”. In line with its mandates, the interim report of the Swedish inquiry contains little discussion about the guilt of staff or foster parents, neither does it discuss the nature of particular institutions.

Anonymous, 'Forgotten Australians : a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children / the Senate Community Affairs References Committee'.
Verdoolaege, Reconciliation discourse : the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
Socialstyrelsen, 'SOU 2009:99 Vanvård i social barnvård under 1900-talet'.
Rushton, 'Truth and reconciliation? The experience of Truth Commissions', (, p. 3.
Socialstyrelsen, 'SOU 2009:99 Vanvård i social barnvård under 1900-talet'.
Acknowledgment of the failure of state policy is important for victims, and further their claims for compensation. Nevertheless, too much focus on assuming guilt for what they have suffered could hinder an understanding of why this all could happen. As Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone writes, commenting on the South African TRC:

*To think historically implies different orders of causality to those assumed by a model of guilt and reparation. It requires attention to politics and economics, to ideology and culture; it identifies problems which should be addressed through policy rather than therapy.*

From this perspective, a narrow focus on individual perpetrators and/or failures of the state might divert attention from the broader historical context. In order to understand why so many persons have bad experiences from their time in care, one has to examine the society in which this took place. In its current set-up, the Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse is not able to ask questions about the reasons why children were made wards of the state, the aims and economy of institutions and the over-confidence in institutionalization. That would be another way to learn from the experiences – but this would entail a more serious challenge to practices still in place.

**Material and methods**

One of the main purposes of historical truth commissions is “to document practices that are largely unknown to the majority of the population.” This makes the aspect of public recognition of the testimony made by victims important. The possibility of telling one’s story is often mentioned as part of the reparation in itself. Many Australian care leavers have stated that speaking out, after many years of silence, was a relief. Some of the Swedish informants have, according to the interim report, expressed similar feelings – especially those who had tried to draw attention to abuse earlier, without being believed. For these people, it seems that the opportunity to give testimony has served its purpose.

At the same time, the belief in the healing potential of telling stories can turn out problematic. As observed by Paula Hamilton, relating comments from people who gave testimony in the *Bringing them home* inquiry, “speaking out is a double-edged sword.” In an evaluation made after the Norwegian inquiry, several participants said that the interviews and media coverage had been a mental strain. Traumatic memories can be reactivated when talking about this kind of experiences. Based on this,

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51 Anonymous, 'Forgotten Australians: a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children / the Senate Community Affairs References Committee'. p. 5.
53 Schaffer and Smith, 'Human rights and narrated lives: the ethics of recognition'. p. 65.
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interviewees of the Swedish Inquiry are offered a limited number of psychotherapy sessions.\textsuperscript{56} It could be asked, however, whether this is enough and if the risks taken are justified by the potential outcome.

Apart from the reparation aspect, oral sources are needed since archival material from the institutions is often lacking or incomplete. The interim report of the Swedish inquiry builds mainly on about 400 testimonies, while archival sources play a lesser role. When completed, the inquiry will draw on interviews with more than one thousand persons. How are these unique life stories collected and converted into general conclusions about abuse in the societal child care? This question is inspired by detailed anthropological and linguistic studies concerning the everyday work of the South African TRC.\textsuperscript{57} An in-depth analysis of the truth-making process would require ethnographic observations and access to primary material, but since the hearings of the Swedish inquiry are confidential these preliminary comments builds only on what can be read in the report.

When a person has been accepted, he or she is given a date for interview. Interviews are most commonly carried out in the commission’s office in Stockholm, but could also take place in a hotel, or in the person’s home. They are semi-structured, i.e guided by a set of questions but with space for digressions. To start with, interviewees are asked about their present situation. After that a timeline is drawn, in order to keep track of places where they have been living during their childhood. The interviewees are invited to make some general comments about their time in those institutions and/or foster homes, and then to tell in great detail about the neglect and abuse they have experienced. It is the actual acts that are documented, not the person’s feelings about what happened. Towards the end, however, some questions are posed regarding strategies for coping with the situation.\textsuperscript{58}

The interviews are recorded and documented in an abstract, which is sent to the interviewee for amendments and approval. Following this, the information about different kinds of maltreatment, neglect and abuse is entered in a special database.\textsuperscript{59} How, then, are these data organized and interpreted? The interim report is dominated by a number of chapters containing highly detailed accounts of neglect, maltreatment, physical and emotional abuse. Every such chapter begins with a definition of the abuse in question and numbers of how many of the 404 interviewees that have experiences in that category. This is followed by detailed descriptions of the terrifying methods of institutional staff and foster parents, illustrated with citations from the interview abstracts.

\textsuperscript{56} Socialstyrelsen, 'SOU 2009:99 Vanvård i social barnavård under 1900-talet’. , p. 50.
\textsuperscript{58} Socialstyrelsen, 'SOU 2009:99 Vanvård i social barnavård under 1900-talet’. , p. 135-146.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 135-146.
The mandate of the inquiry is to chart and document abuse, but this can be done in many different ways. I find that the present concentration on establishing “the hard facts” leaves the reader without a sense of context, a problem described by Hayner in relation to other truth commissions:

“A few people closely involved with past truth commissions have begun to take a critical look at the standard information-management model of a modern truth commission, which is based on detailed tabulation of specific acts via a database, and have begun to ask whether this approach allows a commission to answer some of the questions that it may want to ask.”

A similar kind of database-driven approach seems to govern the work of the Swedish inquiry. Setting the database up has demanded quite some time and resources, and once in place it influences the process. For example, the formulations in the interview abstract are being adapted in order to facilitate the treatment of data. As pointed out by Janis Grobbelaar, a sociologist who reacted to the lack of clear questions and methodological considerations within the South African TRC, handling interview data in this way results in an “acontextual logical positivism, where one focuses on acts, [...], but does not ask why and how.” Databases are of great help, but only when one knows how the material will be used.

**Truth claims**

Truth commissions are investigating highly contentious matters, and their results can be expected to provoke fierce debate. How, then, are their results to be understood and evaluated? In its final report, the South African TRC distinguish four kinds of truth:

1. Forensic/factual truth, based on the ‘legal and scientific notion of corroborated evidence obtained through impartial and objective procedures’;
2. Personal/narrative truth is the ‘culmination of individuals’ subjective stories to provide a multi-layered set of experiences’;
3. Social/dialogue truth is constructed through discussion and debate at the collective level about the facts; and
4. Healing/restorative truth places facts in context ‘in an attempt to acknowledge individual experiences’.

Forensic and personal truth relates to the actual findings of the commission, while social and healing truth has to do with the process of acknowledgment and reconciliation. In the Swedish interim report, it is stated that what is documented, compiled and conveyed is the personal or narrative truth: “To ask and listen has been the attitude of the interviewer, not to question or examine.” Moreover, personal narratives are described as attempts to recount past events in a meaningful way, according to present

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60Hayner, *Unspeakable truths: facing the challenge of truth commissions.*, p. 80f.
opinions and knowledge. In a following discussion about the trustworthiness of oral sources, a different attitude can be discerned. The question of whether interviews are reliable sources or not is discussed according to traditional criteria of source criticism like dependence and tendency. The conclusion drawn is that even though long term memory is unreliable, these interviews are useful as sources since memories of traumatic incidents have proven more likely to be remembered in detail than other, more ordinary events. What is lacking in this line of argument is what questions the sources are supposed to give answers to. Source evaluation must be made in relation to the kind knowledge that is sought after.

As related earlier, what is mainly presented in the interim report is which kinds of neglect, maltreatment and abuse the interviewees have been subjected to. On the other hand, there is little evidence of how they experienced this. Such a quantitative analysis of the interview material, in which citations (written in the third person) are only used as illustrations, is at variance with the ambition of describing the narrative truth. In my perspective, this attempt to document neglect and abuse as neutral, objective facts, take away the meaning of using interviews. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli has put it like this:

*Autobiographical discourse, [...] is always about the construction and expression of one’s subjectivity. To ignore and exorcise subjectivity, as if it were only a noxious interference in the pure data, is ultimately to distort and falsify the nature of the data themselves.*

A different way of presenting the personal narratives of informants was chosen in the Australian case. Several of the report’s thematic chapters contain extensive, verbatim quotes from the submissions (written in the first person). This is described as “a deliberate effort to give as many care leavers as possible a direct voice in the report by using their actual words.” It is stressed, however, that the choice of quotes is “highly subjective”, and that submissions must be read in their totality for a fuller understanding of the treatment experienced while in care.

How to analyze and represent personal narratives in an ethical way is a central theme of discussion in the field of narrative studies. When it comes to truth commissions, this question is even more important, since such commissions are intended to promote restorative truth by the acknowledgment of individual experiences. In the introduction to the Swedish interim report, however, it is noted that since the commission has taken testimony only from people with negative experiences, the findings cannot be regarded as representative for everybody who has been in out of home care. While this is perfectly right, it is a comment made in relation to the forensic or factual notion of truth. Undermining

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65 Ibid., pp. 331-342.
the value of the interviews in this way, instead of discussing what kind of knowledge and generalizations can actually be drawn from them, risks hindering the attainment of social or dialogue truth. This is a clear example of the conflicting aims inherent in truth commissions.

Conclusions
I have described the current criticism of past practices in out of home care as part of an ongoing revaluation of the welfare state. In this context, testimonies about neglect, maltreatment and abuse gained public attention through the media. These allegations were handled by the appointment of the *Inquiry on Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes*, which I have interpreted as a historical truth commission.

When compared with similar commissions in Australia, Ireland and Norway, the Swedish inquiry stands out with its directives to focus exclusively on individual’s negative experiences of out of home care. Although its findings could easily feed into the criticism of the welfare state, such a mandate also opens for the standpoint that the events documented were exceptions, not the general rule. In contrast, countries that have chosen a broader mandate, including for example the financing of institutions, have framed such abuse as “endemic” or “features of the system”. This is but one example of the prime importance of mandates.

The workings of the Swedish commission have not been subject to open controversies. This is probably due to its non-adversarial design. The commission is only allowed to consider statute-barred crimes, and has no judicial powers. Instead of focusing on perpetrators, or the responsibility of individual organizations, victims are put center-stage. The aim to provide a sympathetic forum for testimony about hardships experienced in institutions and foster homes is logic in a framework of reparation and redress. However, this could prove counterproductive if the tension between factual and narrative truth is not addressed.

The rationale of setting up a historical truth commission is a notion of national guilt. As observed by Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, “[i]deas of restitution and reparation […] all draw on a sense that the present is obliged to accommodate the past in order to move on from it.” This historically specific way of thinking about the use of history seems to have gained force in the last two decades. In relation to this, I have argued that a one-sided focus on the issue of responsibility could hinder understanding of the historical context in which the neglect and abuse of children took place.

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