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Counselling as tool to support intercultural couples in Finland

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<p>This study explores the possibilities and limitations of different types of counselling for intercultural couples awaiting a residence permit in Finland. The process of getting a residence permit takes time and can lead to a particularly significant amount of stress, impacting a person's wellbeing and everyday life. In addition, the partner of the person waiting can be affected by stress as well, changing the dynamics in the relationship itself. An important number of intercultural couples in Finland gives new perspectives and challenges to social services and organizations working within immigration and multicultural fields.</p> <p>Municipalities in Finland are responsible for delivering residence permits. The length of the decision-making process can vary from one city to another. In accordance with the guidelines and actions of Kuljen Rinnallasi, a project created in 2018, by the non-profit organization Familia Ry, this study evaluates the relevance of various counselling methods to support intercultural couples and families, especially the partner with Finnish citizenship, and discusses future perspectives.</p> <p>During the data collection, in every case, one of the partners had applied to the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) for a residence permit. Their partner was always a Finnish citizen, supporting them with available resources. Kuljen Rinnallasi's supervisors have organized group meetings, workshops and individual counselling since the beginning of the project. During the course of 2019, they also decided to launch an online counselling plan chat and to arrange a 3-day long camp in the countryside with workshops designed for the target group. These methods are reviewed and analyzed in this study.</p> <p>Through qualitative research, semi-conducted interviews and participant observation, the results showed that, despite being innovative, online counselling appeared to be challenging, both for the facilitators and the participants. Numerous technical issues and a lack of participation were obstacles for becoming an effective tool in counselling. On the other hand, the get-together activities such as group meetings and the wellbeing and advocacy focused summer camp were successful in many ways, as participants felt welcome in a safe space, with a possibility to share and discuss their everyday struggles during the waiting process, as well as receiving useful tips, ideas and resources to empower themselves and their partner in stressful times.</p>	
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<p>Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitetään erityyppisten neuvontamahdollisuuksien ja rajoitusten mahdollisuutta kulttuurienvälisille pariskunnille, jotka odottavat oleskelulupaa Suomessa. Oleskeluluvan saaminen vie aikaa ja voi johtaa erityisen merkittävään stressiin, joka vaikuttaa ihmisen hyvinvointiin ja jokapäiväiseen elämään. Lisäksi stressi voi vaikuttaa odottavan henkilön kumppaniin, mikä muuttaa dynamiikkaa itse suhteessa. Kasvava kulttuurienvälinen pariskunta Suomessa antaa uusia näkökulmia ja haasteita maahanmuutto- ja monikulttuurisilla aloilla työskenteleville sosiaalipalveluille ja organisaatioille. Suomen kunnat ovat vastuussa oleskelulupien toimittamisesta. Päätöksentekoprosessin pituus voi vaihdella kaupungeittain. Voittoa tavoittelemattoman järjestön Familia Ry vuonna 2018 perustaman Kuljen Rinnallasi -hankkeen ohjeiden ja toimien mukaisesti tässä tutkimuksessa arvioidaan eri neuvontamenetelmien merkitystä kulttuurienvälisten pariin ja perheiden, erityisesti Suomen kansalaisuuden omaavan kumppanin, tukemiseksi ja keskustelemaan tulevaisuuden näkymistä.</p> <p>Tiedonkeruun aikana yksi kumppaneista oli joka tapauksessa hakenut Maahanmuuttovirastolta (Migri) oleskelulupaa. Heidän kumppaninsa oli aina Suomen kansalainen, joka tuki heitä käytävissä olevilla resursseilla. Kuljen Rinnallasiin esimiehet ovat järjestäneet ryhmätapaamisia, työpajoja ja henkilökohtaista neuvontaa projektin alusta lähtien. Vuoden 2019 aikana he päättivät myös käynnistää online-neuvontasuunnitelmakestelyn ja järjestää 3 päivän pitkän leirin maaseudulla kohderyhmälle suunnitelluilla työpajoilla. Näitä menetelmiä tarkastellaan ja analysoidaan tässä tutkimuksessa.</p> <p>Laadullisen tutkimuksen, osittain rakennettujen haastattelujen ja etnografisen havainnon avulla tulokset osoittivat, että online-neuvonta näytti innovatiivisuudesta huolimatta haastavaa sekä ohjaajille että osallistujille. Lukuisat tekniset kysymykset ja osallistumisen puute olivat esteitä tulla tehokkaaksi työkaluksi neuvonnassa. Toisaalta kokoontumisaktiviteetit, kuten ryhmätapaamiset sekä hyvinvointiin ja edunvalvontaan keskittynyt kesäleiri, onnistuivat monin tavoin, koska osallistujat tunsivat olevansa tervetulleita turvalliseen tilaan, ja heillä oli mahdollisuus jakaa ja keskustella jokapäiväisistä kamppailuistaan odottelun aikana. sekä saada hyödyllisiä vinkkejä, ideoita ja resursseja itsensä ja kumppaninsa voimaannuttamiseen stressaavina aikoina.</p>	
Avainsanat	Neuvonta, Oleskelulupa, Kulttuurienväliset Parit, Stressin Lievitys

1 Introduction

Social services offer adapted support to various types of clientele, with a low threshold (REF). Social workers and counsellors get the chance to support couples, with or without children, to help them deal with their issues through different workshops and activities, according to their situation. However, nowadays, the concept of “family” is evolving and does not hold the same traditional and unique meaning as it used to in the past (Segrin and Flora 2005, p.4; Schadler 2016, p.503). Among these new family models, intercultural couples are a common structure (Statistics Finland 2020). The result is a new perspective on how social workers and counsellors need to adjust their methods, attitudes and activities for these couples, within a culturally sensitive approach (Koprowska 2008; Sue 2006). In this specific setting, the Finnish organization Familia Ry was founded in 1988 to work with different families. Nowadays, the organization has peculiarly moved its focus towards families with dual backgrounds. Their activities address strengths and weaknesses within intercultural couples, families and youngsters, by offering social and emotional support, language groups and multiple workshops.

Intercultural families come with needs and each have their own structures of power, dynamics, values and energy (Sue 2016, p.279; p.285). Some of the families coming to Familia Ry are dealing with stressful situations. For this reason, the project Kuljen Rinnallasi was created in 2018, with the aim of supporting intercultural couples in which one of the partners in the relationship is waiting for a residence permit in Finland. This mission is led with expertise within counselling and advocacy in the fields of immigration and wellbeing specifically. It takes into account that some of the clients have to cope with the stress of the waiting process, which might affect their everyday life, their happiness and the dynamics of the family in many ways (Familia Ry 2020). The mission will last until 2021.

Qualitative research is the basic method used for this thesis, more precisely by the collection of narratives through semi-constructed interviews, ethnographic observation of the participants and questionnaires. It explores the current position of professionals and couples regarding the multiple forms of support and counselling offered by the project Kuljen Rinnallasi and assesses the effectiveness of the methods. After discussing with several participants and the coordinators, I have realized that there was a lack of research on the possible struggles that the spouse who has a Finnish citizenship can experience. Literature, social practices and usually common understanding put the accent

on the stress undergone by the individual waiting for their residence permit. However, little attention is given to their partners. A discussion will furtherly open the idea of development for the future of social services in the field of multicultural work and advocacy for our target group. The study will ponder the relevance of possibly integrating online counselling as a regular type of support.

2 Context and background of the study

An in-depth focus on families dealing with difficulties in general was my first idea for this thesis. I was, and still am, interested in multicultural social work and how traumas affect families. Growing up in a family with various types of dysfunctional issues, I started to be keen on learning more about dynamics and interactions in such cases, and how support can be provided.

However, when I started my final internship in the organization Familia Ry in 2019, I started to discover immediately their existing projects at the time, and I got quickly in contact with the coordinators of the program Kuljen Rinnallasi (Side by Side, in English). Their activities are designed specifically for intercultural families and couples who are dealing with the stress of waiting for a residence permit in Finland. The two project coordinators were about to launch an innovative online chat, they invited me to join the project and consequently focus my thesis on it. Through various periods of time and numerous encounters, I was able to become familiar with participants and professionals and to develop a perspective about the current situation in Finland.

An important aspect of the research, as mentioned above, is to put the experiences and the well-being of the Finnish partners in the spotlight. Indeed, the unique situation of intercultural couples dealing with this stressful context is a burden for both partners. Nonetheless, it appeared through this research that in majority the Finnish partners were the ones contacting the project coordinators and asking for support. For this reason, a special attention is paid to this target group. In addition, I need to acknowledge that in most cases the Finnish partners in question were women. These aspects will be discussed further in the study.

2.1 Familia Ry

Familia Ry is an organization founded in 1988. Their aim is to support families from diverse backgrounds in difficult situations and create a space to “work together”. According

to their website, “the objective of Familia is to support the two-way integration of people living in Finland. The association works to ensure that equality and non-discrimination are realized in Finnish society” (2020). As mentioned earlier, the organization’s activities consist of several types of counselling (individual, peer support, workshops, etc.) and language courses mostly. The expertise of professionals in the association gives a chance for service users to discover resources corresponding to their specific needs and difficulties. A multicultural framework of experiences and attitudes is delivered to the clients in a welcoming and non-discriminatory environment. “The activities will strengthen social networks of the families. The people close to the family are also included in the activities, because they can be a source of support for the family in a difficult life situation” (Familia Ry 2020).

Among the projects developed by the organization, Kuljen Rinnallasi (Side by Side in English) was designed to offer a targeted assistance to couples dealing with the wait of a permit residence in Finland.

2.2 Kuljen Rinnallasi

This project, called “Side by side” in English can be described as an “English speaking peer support group for intercultural couples in which one spouse waits for residence permit decision” (Kuljen Rinnallasi, 2020).

The project was explicitly created for couples who are in a waiting process. They rest on the Finnish officials’ decision about their situation in the country and this factor can bring out a lot of stress for both partners, even if only one of them is applying for the residence permit. This challenging awaiting can have a systemic and personal negative impact on the individuals composing the couple and their children, if they have any. Stress might trigger tensions in their relationship, their feelings and can possibly provoke the resurgence of past traumas, which might have occurred in Finland or in their country of origin. One important aspect of the project Kuljen Rinnallasi is that the coordinators insist on the fact that they are neither psychotherapists, nor legal advisers. Their activities can respond to the couples’ needs of counselling, social networking, expertise in the field of individual well-being, interculturality, communication between partners and advocacy about residence permit policies.

“In peer support groups we talk about the well-being of the relationship and emotions during the residence permit procedure. We practice calming down and relaxation, sometimes going out for picnics or exercise. The groups are led by trained group leaders. Activities of the group are based on confidentiality” (Kuljen Rinnallasi 2020).

3 Immigration and residence permit in Finland

The legislation about residence permit delivery in Finland can be complex, according to each person’s situation. For instance, a person moving to Finland from outside of the E.U, and planning to stay more than 90 days, will have to apply for a residence permit, instead of only registering for the right of residence (Migri 2020). There are multiple possibilities for an individual to apply for a residence permit, but the focus of the research is the applicants who have a spouse or a cohabiting partner in Finland.

Currently, the Finnish Immigration Service (Maahanmuuttovirasto or Migri) is responsible of taking decisions about permits. Their regulations are presented on their website (Migri 2020), and the applications can be made online or on paper.

There are specific rules for each case. The applicant might have a:

- Spouse in Finland with a residence permit.
- Cohabiting partner in Finland with a residence permit.
- Spouse in Finland as a refugee, application not made within 3 months.
- Spouse in Finland as a refugee.
- Cohabiting partner in Finland as a refugee, application not made within 3 months.
- Cohabiting partner in Finland.
- Spouse who is a Finnish citizen.
- Cohabiting partner who is a Finnish citizen.
- Intimate relationship.

In case the person is has a spouse or a cohabiting partner who already has a residence permit:

“Apply with this application for a residence permit if your spouse is a Finnish citizen. Your husband or wife, your registered same-sex partner or your cohabiting partner who you have lived with for at least two years in a marriage-like relationship or with whom you have joint custody of a child is considered a spouse”. (Migri 2020)

In addition, the Finnish Immigration Service warns that the expected processing time for an electronic application of a first permit might last between 4 to 8 months, the processing of the extension of permit between 2 to 5 months. Also, if the application is sent by paper, the expected processing time is between 6 to 10 months, between 5 to 8 months for the extension of a permit. The fees are respectively 470 euros and 520 euros for an electronic application and for a paper application.

Migri also created a special type of application for persons whose case did not appear in those previous categories (in other words, if the relationship with the Finnish partner has not reached two years yet):

If the grounds mentioned above do not suit your situation, you may apply for a residence permit on other, special grounds. Examples include an established dating relationship with a Finnish citizen or a person who has a residence permit in Finland, and the intention to get married. Becoming a victim of human trafficking is another example of special grounds. However, travel does not count as special grounds (Migri 2020).

The expected time of process is between 3 to 10 months, 1 to 3 months for the extension of the permit. The fees are 520 euros for a paper application (no mention about electronic ones) and 260 euros for the extension. The relevance of mentioning the fees in this chapter comes from the need to understand the financial investment that an application represents for a couple. In addition, the translation of official papers issued by the country of origin of the applicant into Finnish or English needs to be considered.

According to the official statistics published by Migri (2020), from January 2019 to October 2020, 114 549 applications for a residence permit were submitted to their service. Among these applications, 100 187 were given a positive decision, while 14 362 received a negative one.

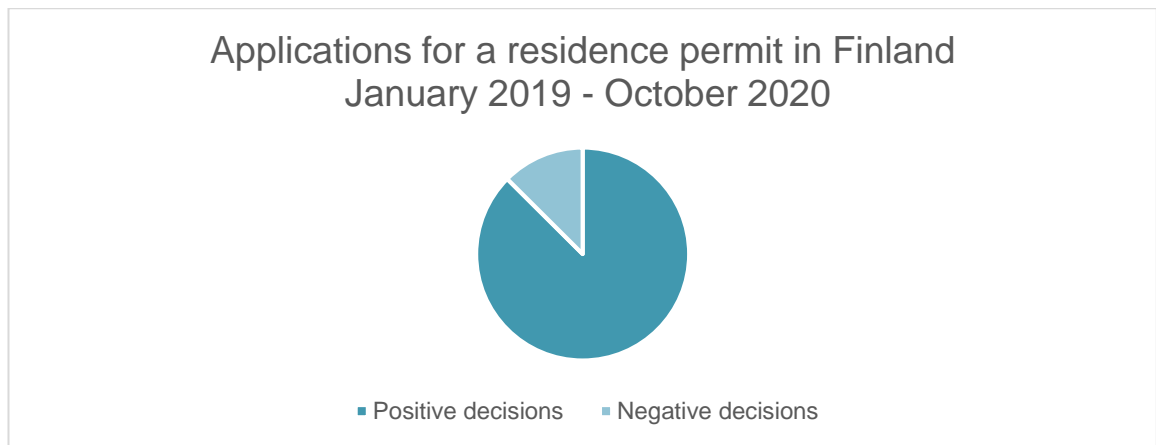


Figure 1. Migri's decisions on residence permit applications (January 2019/October 2020)

Despite the visible majority of cases being approved to reside in Finland, other numbers can be analyzed and reveal that, according to the applicant's nationality, their chances of receiving a positive decision is variable. For instance, applicants from the Russian Federation are in the first position of the list of individuals from foreign origin to ask for a residence permit. According to Migri (2020), for the period between January 2019 to October 2020, they are 20 064 to apply, 16 782 received a positive decision, while 2304 a negative one, which represents a percentage of 13.73 % refusals. The second most common nationality to apply is Iraqi people. 15 830 Iraqi individuals have applied, 3468 received a negative answer, which is a percentage of 32.39 %. For many Iraqis as well, the case was "dismissed" (906 people in total). The aim of presenting these numbers in the study is to show that according to a person's place of origin, the amount of stress can vary proportionally to the number of positive, negative or dismissive decisions. During the research, a major part of applicants featured in the project Kuljen Rinnallasi were men from Middle East or African countries. The relevance of this information does not affect the outcomes of the study, but partially explains how dealing with the waiting process impacts the couples' hopes and well-being, according to the country of origin. Also, regarding gender differences, men got 17.02 % of negative or dismissed decisions, while women only 9.86 % these past 21 months.

An important information must be considered: "to work in Finland, you normally need either a residence permit for an employed person or some other residence permit entitling you to work." (InfoFinland 2020). This condition may generate extra stress on the individuals and on the couples, mentally and financially for instance. Migri (2020) explains that there are possibilities to work during the waiting process but under extremely precise conditions.

Indeed, in addition to the application, documents need to be shown to the authorities, such as proof of identity, citizenship, and so on. If the individual decides to stay in Finland permanently, another application needs to be done, after 4 years of continuous residency in the country. In that case, the expected time of process is 1 to 2 months for the electronic version, 2 to 3 months for a paper application and they both cost 260 euros (200 euros if the applicant is under 18 years old).

All the instructions and applications can be found online. Furthermore, it seems that the waiting process can differ, according to applicants who have participated in this study. Through their experiences and testimonies, the thesis tries to understand the struggles brought up by a longer wait.

4 Intercultural couples and families

First, the difference between the terms “multicultural” and “intercultural” needs to be discussed. In this work, the focus is put on intercultural families. Schriefer wrote for The Spring Institute (2019), that multiculturalism “refers to a society that contains several cultural or ethnic groups. People live alongside one another, but each cultural group does not necessarily have engaging interactions with each other.” whereas interculturalism “describes communities in which there is a deep understanding and respect for all cultures. Intercultural communication focuses on the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of deep relationships”.

“The disparity in providing culturally appropriate services [...] is likely to become more problematic unless the profession of social work adapts accordingly to an increasingly diverse population” (Sue 2006, p. 4). In her book *Multicultural Social Work*, the author raises the challenge of adopting either “emic” or “etic” perspectives. In other words, is the emphasis put on cultural universality, or on cultural specificities? (p.10). It is crucial to know that cultural backgrounds influence individuals differently. Some cultures influence one’s behaviors more than others and bind the individual into certain patterns. However, in the case of intercultural couple for instance, it can happen that one of the persons adapts different habits and values, might be the ones of the partner, or of the country of residence (Hasanaj 2017 p.174; Gudykunst & Lee 2001, p.81, Segrin & Flora 2005, p.23). The environment plays a major role in one’s development and it is not uncommon for individuals to detach themselves from their own culture’s patterns.

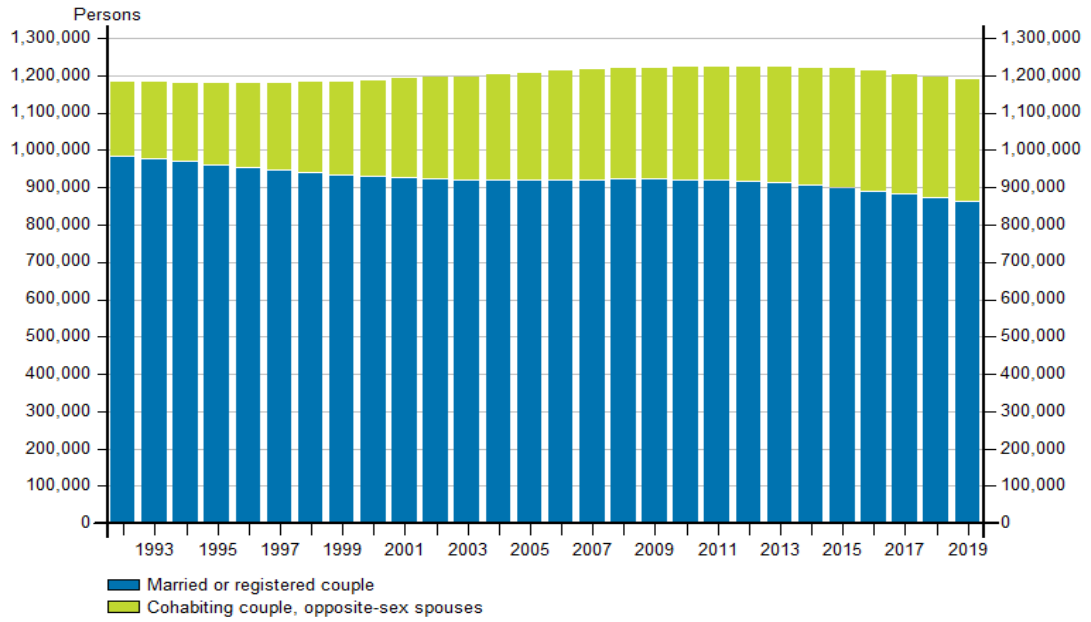
In any case, says Sue (2006, p.4), the social worker needs to be flexible and informed, in order to adapt to each situation with skills and empathy. Every person and family are unique and so are their inner dynamics, values and their combinations. The social counsellor may not base his/her intervention on assumptions and should try to avoid speaking FOR someone. This also raises the idea of power. In other words, does the social counsellor or worker focus on the individual, as a family member or as a cultural entity or all of that? In many cultures, the “self”, the individual, is linked to the family and not put first, unlike many European/western cultures tend to do. It is not the social worker’s role to judge this.

The same thought applies to families with children about who makes decisions in the family and in many patriarchal cultures, the man is the leader and the provider of the family. Again, it is not the social counsellor’s priority to address this matter, but there is a necessity to be aware of those dynamics and be thoughtful when communicating. It is ethically wrong to try to change the family’s values, but it is crucial to know about them and be respectful, as long as no one’s safety is endangered. The social counsellor needs to be conscious of his/her own assumptions, values and cultural background and not apply ethnocentric perspectives on clients, but be creative and flexible (Sue 2006, pp.16-19, p.25).

In conclusion, there are no unique frameworks about interculturality. Not all methods and solutions might work, but it is essential to develop different projects, attitudes and types of support and the worker might have to be creative in order to adapt (Sue 2006, p.27). Furthermore, it is essential that “[w]e should never forget how intimidating it may be for a minority family to come in for services” (Sue 2006, p.14).

Official statistics in Finland have shown the important number of intercultural couples in the country through the course of these past three decades. Since the project, during the time of the study, involved only intercultural couples with heterosexual partners and whose female spouse had a Finnish citizenship, the following charts show the numbers of cases in the country. Statistics Finland is an organization which constantly measures changes in populations in the country and allows us to have a broad perspective on the past and current situations.

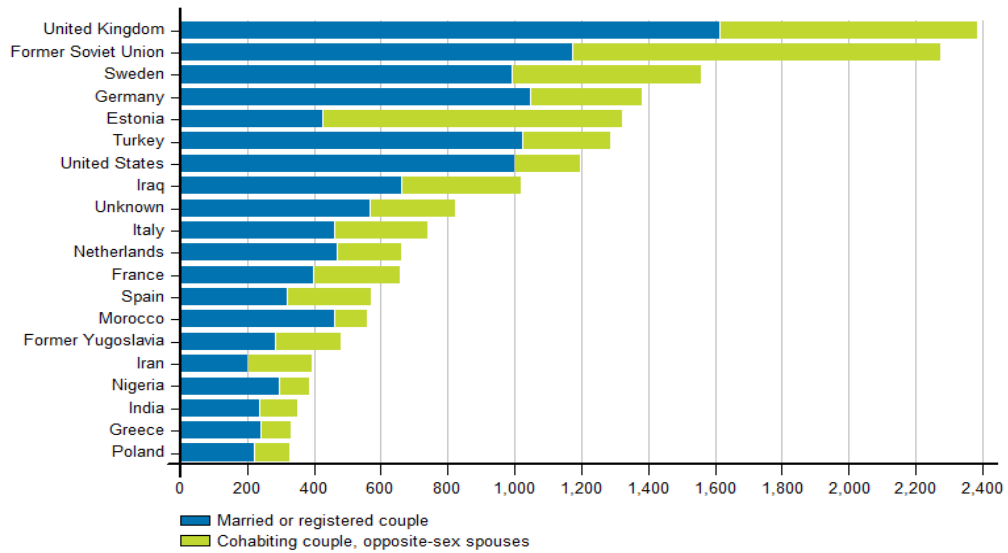
**Marr. & cohab. spouses with for. backgr. of women with Finn. backgr. 1992-2019
TOTAL**



Statistics Finland / Families

Figure 2. Married and cohabitating spouses with foreign background of women with Finnish background 1992-2019 TOTAL (Statistics Finland 2020)

**Married and cohabiting spouses with foreign backgr. of women with Finnish back
by man's background country 2019**



Statistics Finland / Families

Figure 3. Married and cohabitating spouses with foreign background to women with Finnish background by man's background country 2019 (Statistics Finland 2020)

5 Different types of counselling

5.1 Online counselling

By using a platform that guarantees everyone's anonymity, facilitators and participants can discuss their concerns, expectations and feelings within a synchronous focus group (Liamputtong 2011, p.151).

During the online sessions, facilitators use multiple skills to assist the participants. In this setting, social pedagogy is a crucial contribution. Social pedagogy is a discipline that holds several concepts and elements which can enhance the communication between professionals and participants. Although it was aimed at children and young adults in the early years of its development (Hämäläinen 2013, p.75), other clients can benefit from its fruits nowadays (Schugurensky & Silver 2013, p.9). The challenge for a social worker or counsellor is to understand the opportunities provided by social pedagogy to support adults, and especially couples in critical situations. This matter will be discussed further.

In the project Kuljen Rinnallasi, individuals participated in online discussions that are facilitated by professionals. These types of virtual discussions are called "synchronous focus groups" (Liamputtong 2011, p.151). It suggests that "all participants are online at the same time and the transmission of texts between them is instantaneous" (p. 151).

According to Liamputtong (2011), there are several advantages to the use of online group chats. For instance, "in virtual focus groups, the voice of each participant will be heard because they do not have to wait for their turn; they can jump in any time". Furthermore, organizing these discussions are usually inexpensive, they can be joined by people who cannot physically attend live meetings and a variety of information is provided in a short amount of time. If the discussion is asynchronous (which is a method that was tested by Kuljen Rinnallasi also), participants have more time to formulate their thoughts, questions or answers which can alleviate the pressure of writing fast during synchronous chats (p.152).

However, Liamputtong also admits that challenges occur. Either monologues or dittoing for example can be problematic in an online conversation, mentioned as "domination of one part" (p.155). The discussion is usually oriented towards one pre-agreed topic but can easily derive to another one (hence the responsibility of the facilitators to bring the discussion back to its purpose). The main difficulty though will always be the lack of

physical, visual and verbal interactions, which can lead to misunderstandings, disagreements and even conflicts (p.155).

5.2 Focus groups counselling

“The rapid spread of focus groups corresponds to a new interest, in many social science fields, in shared and tacit beliefs, and in the way these beliefs emerge in interaction with others in a local setting” (Macnaghten and Myers in Seale & al. 2007, p.65).

Focus groups have the advantage of welcoming the participants in a determined space. According to Macnaghten and Myers (2007), it is advised to find a neutral setting, although this task is almost impossible, since no place is fully considered as entirely neutral (p.67). In some cases, the focus groups (or workshops) of Kuljen Rinnallasi were held in the building where the organization Familia Ry has its offices. According to the needs and the number of people, the session would happen in different rooms each time. The projects coordinators would also invite external facilitators to discuss topics from another angle.

“A group can provide prompts to talk, correcting or responding to others and a plausible audience for that talk that is not just the researcher” (Macnaghten and Myers, p.65). This cited text reveals the importance of interactions between peers during focus groups meetings. The facilitators bring knowledge and a professional framework, but an essential part of the communication relies on the participants’ experiences and their willing to share them together in a safe space that includes people who have similar situations.

5.3 Family communication

As stated earlier, “the concept of family is elastic, according to culture and perspective” (Koprowska 2008, p.112). The author mentions also the impact of child abuse trauma on adults, the isolation of people in gay or lesbian relationships, who refuse “an arranged marriage in favor of a love match” or who decide to live with a partner with a different background (cultural or religious for instance) and finally the intergenerational influences.

All these elements need to be considered when counselling any type of family. Kilpatrick & Holland (2009) gathered the work of several experts of social work and families to contribute in their book *Working with Families*. The goal of this holistic book is to assess and address the level of needs of each family and adapt the interventions according to

this evaluation. “These differences indicate a need for multiple methods from which the family practitioner may select and apply an approach on the basis of how well it fits the needs and issues a specific family is currently facing” (Kilpatrick & Holland 2009, p.25).

The literature about family communication and counselling is broad. Nonetheless, it is possible to get an idea of the requirements and methods that are commonly used in social work. Koprowska (2008, p.109) gives an overview of main principles that can be applied to different forms of families:

- “Build a working alliance with family members;”
- “Prepare family members for the work they will do;”
- “Respect members’ knowledge and expertise about themselves;”
- “Use your observation and understanding of verbal and non-verbal interactions between family members;”
- “Manage structure, not content;”
- “Mobilize the family’s resources to help themselves”.

She adds that “everyone in the family is affected by current circumstances, and everyone can help to change things” (p.112), which is also a statement shared by Saltzman (2016) about the Focus Family Resilience Program: “[m]ore important in this framing, each family member also has a part to play in the family’s healing or return to better functioning” (p.649). These elements emphasize the implication and participation of every family member who can have a role to play in the well-being of the family. For this reason, also, the FOCUS program provides guidance to the parents about normal recognizable signs of distress and trauma in their children as well as suggestions about what they can share or not with them. The program pays great attention to the narratives of everyone, even of the children, and enhances empathy, listening skills and understanding.

The context may be different in case of a group meeting. Koprowska (2008, p.118) insists on planning carefully the meeting and clarifying goals and the group’s “structure, processes, rules and skills needed [...]” (p.118). In the case of a peer support meeting, the same preparation is necessary, boundaries and openness must be expressed beforehand. The group must be a safe space where every individual can express him/herself, in an empathetic context.

5.4 Stress and everyday life of couples

Stress is a subtle element to measure. In the case of individuals waiting for a residence permit, we can understand that the length of the process for instance can affect individuals, couples and families over time due to the uncertainty of their situation, the consequences of a potential negative decision from the Finnish Immigration Service and sometimes a lack of support and resources to rely on. The perceptions of people can vary through a certain period of time, as well as their emotions and their management: from hope and faith to anger, frustration and even hopelessness at times. Stress can have a potentially dangerous impact on the individual's wellbeing, mental and physical health and on interactions and communication between the person waiting for the decision and their partners, relatives or other social connections.

In *Basic Concepts and Models of Family Stress* (Malia 2007), stress is described as a complex process that affects individuals, but can have an even bigger impact on the family dynamics, as such: "However, at the family level, the process gets much more complicated because, in addition to the group trip through the process, each individual member has her or his own private process spinning out- often on a very different time schedule than others" (p. 144).

5.5 Social pedagogy in context

According to Hämäläinen (2013, p.76), "social pedagogy concentrates on questions of the integration of the individual in society, both in theory and in practice. It aims to alleviate social exclusion. It deals with the processes of human growth that tie people to the systems, institutions and communities that are important to their well-being and life management". In that perspective, and given the previous reflections about interculturality, a link can be made between these two elements. Intercultural couples and families might in theory benefit from social pedagogy applications.

Hämäläinen adds that social pedagogy is "neither a method, nor a set of methods" (p.77), but more an orientation. Social pedagogy is often considered to be particularly focusing on children and young adults as clients. However, Schugurensky & Silver (2013, p.9) contradict that statement by affirming that "indeed, today social pedagogy has a lifelong perspective, and therefore includes all age groups". Their article presents a historical and geographical background of social pedagogy and questions the current application

of the movement. They review ten different articles gravitating around the same topic as this thesis: understanding if social pedagogy is relevant as a tool nowadays.

As mentioned above, social pedagogy is more a perspective that the social worker or counsellor adopts in his/her client work. According to Storø (2013, p.107), “social pedagogic practice is diverse, complex and contextual”. Supported by this affirmation, this thesis will examine different ways of applying social pedagogy in the context of intercultural families dealing with stressful situations and trauma.

“From a social pedagogic perspective, learning and education enables families and family members to cope with social change and transitions in the family life course. Social work should support families in doing so. This is especially true for family support services, family counselling services or parental education” (Euteneuer & Uhlendorff 2014, p.704). Their article *Family Concepts: A Social Pedagogic Approach to Understanding Family Development and Working with Families* is a vast guide about how to apply principles of social pedagogy to social work with families and their focus was put especially on transitions, which is the case for intercultural couples waiting for a residence permit decision for example.

Many concepts are beneficial and relevant to the project, such as empowerment, well-being, common third, etc.

6 Research

Based on these findings about intercultural families and couples, counselling and social pedagogy, it is possible to assess the current situation in Finland and reflect about potential developments or improvements in social services for families. This theoretical background gives ground to the idea that online counselling could be an ideal tool used to support intercultural couples, especially in case one or both partners are not residing in the country at the time. The focus of this study is the evaluation of supports offered to the Finnish citizen partner especially. In all the cases that we have encountered during the process, Finnish women were the ones seeking help and counselling. It is essential to address this phenomenon and discuss its implications.

6.1 Qualitative research

This study is based on three main research methodologies: participant observation, narratives collection through semi-conducted interviews and questionnaires. These perspectives derive directly from qualitative research approach, which fits to the type of results I wanted to get from the study. Indeed, in the case of the project Kuljen Rinnallasi and the types of assistance that they offer to their target groups, thoughts, emotions and personal experiences play a wide role in the interactions between the professionals and the participants, may it be while the activities are happening, or afterwards (clients' satisfaction, professionals' need for development, etc.). As Seale & al. (2007, p.5) discuss the ongoing change of principles and methodologies of qualitative research practice, they point out that "Culture and social structure are not just "there", so to speak, to be documented for the power of their influence on our thoughts, feelings, and identities. Rather, while there is no question that they figure significantly as categories of everyday life, they enter into our lives as practical anchors for ordering them in some way or other". In other words, despite the obviousness of what qualitative research represents to elaborate a study about social issues and inner concepts such as wellbeing, stress or frustration, it still remains a reliable source of data collection to develop new perspectives on structural phenomena.

6.2 Participant observation

Participant observation is a methodology deriving from anthropology and ethnography (Shaw and Holland 2014, p.182) and holds a unique load of obstacles and positive outcomes. Participant observations, also known as ethnographies (Silverman 2013, p.49), are "based on observational work in particular social settings". And if initially anthropological observations were supposed to require a totally distinct cultural environment from the researcher's one and last for a long period of time to be considered as valid, according to Silverman "[b]y contrast, non-anthropologists are more likely to study particular milieux or subcultures in their own society" (p.49).

The challenge arises from the idea that the notes taken during participant observation is technically almost impossible to code and be turned into data. Yet, Silverman argues that "[a]ll of us "code" what we hear and see in the world around us" (p.51). In some similar way, Shawn and Holland (2014) state that regardless of the observer's role (participant or not), the notes taken during observation, added to an interactive exchange

with the participants observed, are enough to create an effective understanding of a social context (p.191).

6.3 Narratives through semi-structured interviews

Although, the narrative method brings out some interesting viewpoints from the participants and might help to discover implicit issues that can result from social structures and inner conflicts, it has its limitations that must be addressed here.

“Narrative analysis, for me, is not only a way of finding out about how people frame and report their experiences, but is also a way of generating knowledge that disrupts old certainties and allows us to glimpse something of the complexities of human lives, selves and endeavors” Andrews & al., in Seale & al. 2007, p.103).

I saw the narrative method as an ideal means to collect data for this research. The reason for that choice is that narrative methods can be a tool to research intervention processes and their evolution (Shaw & Gould 2001, p.144). In other words, it gives the possibility for the clients to express their own feelings and experience during the process and their ongoing perception of change, if there is any.

6.4 Research questions

After the review of the research context, several questions raised. In order to offer appropriate solutions to intercultural couples dealing with the stress of waiting for a residence permit, it is fair to wonder what the benefits and limitations of online counselling are. Considering the different types of counselling and supports available, how effective are focus groups meetings and workshops?

Through the discussions with participants, an important question about the resources emerged. What are the existing resources and challenges for a Finnish partner in this unique setting?

Regarding cultural sensitivity, is there a challenge for professionals and partners with a Finnish background to understand the struggle of applicants for a residence permit and how appropriate is it to offer counselling in this condition?

Finally, is there a possibility to develop further types of services specifically designed for intercultural couples in Finland?

More research questions will be raised during the reading process and collection of data.

7 Data collection

7.1 General aspects

During the online counselling process, I was not permitted at first to participate directly and interact with the participants. However, I was planning to be present during the sessions and supposedly have access to the chat logs, defined as “archives or transcripts from online chats and instant messaging conversations” (Wikipedia 2020).

I was also allowed to participate to every meeting and workshop organized by the coordinators, and especially to the summer camp, which was a fantastic opportunity for me to meet new couples, get familiar with their circumstances and collect data.

7.2 Online chats

The project launched an advertisement about an upcoming online chat discussion in the course of spring 2019. The idea was to gather participants willing to share their experiences about their situation, anonymously and synchronously. By using a platform designed to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality, individuals would be able to interact with each other, discuss various matters regarding waiting for the residence permit, on different levels. The topics would include stress and its effects on the everyday life of the couple, and at least two facilitators from the project would be managing the discussion if needed, by proposing a topic to talk about and make sure that the rules of good use of the chat would be followed by all.

Several participants registered as soon as the advertisement was published on the different social media platforms used by Kuljen Rinnallasi. A date and time were set, and each participant received a link towards the online chat platform to be able to log in, choose a name and engage into the discussion. The chosen language of use would be English to be certain that everyone could share and understand, even people who are not comfortable with the Finnish language. However, participants could always decide to

express themselves in their mother tongue if needed, and with the tools available nowadays, such as online translators, it would be possible to get a rapid and more or less accurate translation of their text, in order to continue the discussion nonetheless.

The first online meeting was scheduled for April. The initial plan was to have a meeting every week, always at the same time, to create a routine for the participants. Unfortunately, technical problems appeared, and it seemed that no one was able to connect to the platform for these meetings. Although the facilitators worked heavily on the resolution of the issues and tried to require technical support from the organization managing the chat platform. Eventually, some of the online meetings happened, but no engaging results emerged from this method. The logs were not accessible afterwards, and some of the participants simply quit the project.

After this unfortunate turn of events, the coordinators of Kuljen Rinnallasi decided to try another method in the spring of 2020: the creation of an asynchronous online chat. In this setting, a platform was available for a 2 weeks period, both by participants (again, with a log in link and their anonymity preserved) and the discussion would be ongoing. This time, facilitators were present 2 hours/ a day, at pre-determined times to answer questions, regulate the chat and encourage participation.

The advantage of this system was that only one facilitator at a time was required and that participants could access the chat at any time, according to their possibilities. Topics of different kinds could be discussed, only during the two hours with the presence of a facilitator certain specific subjects would be submitted by the coordinator. The rules of the asynchronous online chat were the same as the previous one and each person was required to show respect and to avoid discriminative and hateful speech.

The participation to this asynchronous online chat was not significant either. Some people would log in at different times of the day, then log out again, without contributing at all. Others would ask a question, get the answer they needed and leave. However, I was one of the facilitators in charge of the chat for a couple of hours, a few days during the period, and I got to discuss in-depth aspects of this participant's situation, with a couple of other individuals adding their own experiences or offering peer support to that main participant. Some technical issues appeared again, but I still gave a great insight on how synchronous online chat can bring a platform for users to write about their concerns and to give others a sense of being present. An important aspect, mentioned earlier in the theoretical background of the study, is the use of emojis to express feelings.

During the brief synchronous exchange, participants were making great use of the emoticons available on the platform such as smiley faces, angry or sad ones especially. Even if a few participants were concerned about the speed of their writing, it seemed that everyone was patient enough to wait for the person writing to finish their sentence.

The facilitators of the counselling sessions have prepared already a template of the rules, instructions and introductions that will be written during the first online meeting with the participants (see Appendix 1). The first session was planned already for the end of April, and a couple of others in the beginning of May 2019 but were cancelled due to technical problems with the online chat. The participants had all received the virtual invitation to join the chat, unfortunately, it was impossible to click on the link and start the discussion. For that reason, it became essential to review the limitations of online counselling and analyze the risks taken by the social counsellors if they decided to rely on this method for their counselling program.

At the end of the online chat projects, the facilitators allowed me to ask questions to the participants on their thoughts about their situations, their expectations regarding the project and their difficulties with the lack of cultural sensitivity from authorities, relatives and so on. Interview questions were designed by me, in a semi-conducted way, and the project coordinators sent the questionnaire to the participants in order to collect their thoughts and ideas. Regrettably, none of the participants returned the questionnaire. This was a massive issue to get a feedback on the effectiveness of the chat and the project itself and forced me to focus other types of counselling instead.

7.3 Focus group meetings and workshops

During 2019 and 2020 also, focus group meetings were organized by Kuljen Rinnallasi. Each meeting had a different theme, related to both the possible challenges encountered by the couples and some strength-based resources that would be available for them.

The participation was free of charge and the presence of both partners was not required. At the meetings, the Kuljen Rinnallasi were usually serving coffee, tea and snacks, and made sure that a cozy atmosphere was set, in order to give a chance to everyone to feel welcome and comfortable enough to share their narratives, listen to the facilitator(s) and discover possible benefits from the meetings.

Among the different topics proposed for the focus group meetings, well-being and self-care were important ones.

7.4 Summer camp

In June 2019, the project leaders started to advertise on social media and in Familia Ry's offices about a summer camp that would take place outside of the capital area and that would be designed for intercultural couples in August the same year. The aim of that camp was to gather couples and professionals for a few days, to participate in workshops related to their situation and create a bond through common activities such as sharing meals, taking saunas and simply spending time together. I was invited to join this camp and to take part in some of the workshops, while also giving a helping hand to parents who were coming with their children.

Seven intercultural couples joined the adventure, the two project leaders of Kuljen Rinnallasi, and some volunteers who helped organizing and/or facilitate workshops. The camp was free of charges for all participants, the accommodation and the food were provided by the Church Congregation of Raasepori, a city located south-west from Helsinki. Some families came with their personal vehicle straight to the location, while others travelled by train. A charter bus was booked in advance to pick up participants from Karjaa's train station and drive them to the premises for the weekend.

The program of the two and a half days had been sent in advance to all participants. Here is a concise version of the activities for the weekend (meals and breaks have been removed from this schedule, to focus on the workshops).

Table 1. Kuljen Rinnallasi summer camp's program for intercultural couples.

	Friday 16.8	Saturday 17.8	Sunday 18.8
Morning	-	Intercultural relationships - Anita	Own resources and strengths in the relationship - Sanna + Wiam

Afternoon	-	Spiritual and cultural duality in a relationship - Amira + Fanni	Advocacy and social visibility + feedback for the camp - Sanna + Wiam
Evening	Arrival and getting to know each other evening	Sauna	

The workshops, as shown in the previous table, were held by different facilitators in order to give several perspectives and resources to the participants. According to Macnaghten and Myers (in Seale & al 2007), one-on-one interviews can bring up a vast, extended type of narrative, which was on my focuses during the camp, especially in calm settings, after the workshops. Despite this statement, the authors also admit that “[...] they can also put a great deal of pressure on the relation between interviewer and interviewee; interviewee can wonder just whom they are talking to” (p.65). This is a situation that occurred then, while I was interviewing the participants with semi-conducted interviews. My presence at the camp was justified by this study, but the question still remained on how to create a trustful bond between the interviewees and me, while the language barrier was also limiting in a certain way with some of the participants. However, I was able to collect some interesting narratives about their everyday stress and their coping mechanisms for instance.

7.5 Narratives

A conversation started naturally with N., 26 years old, who cohabitates with her companion with an Iraqi background. She was willing to open up about their difficulties and here are some of her statements:

We are under a lot of stress in our everyday life. I didn't imagine it would be like this. The application of my partner was rejected 3 times already. There is one which is under process right now at Migri. We are waiting for the decision in the upcoming month, hopefully.

The conversation got more personal and she gave also an insight about other issues that pile up with the stress of the waiting process.

I must deal with physical illness also. It is not easy.

Spirituality is a major topic for her. This can be the case for other intercultural relationships and might become a challenge if a conflictual disagreement on spirituality emerges. N. spent time talking about her faith and about how her partner's conversion to Christianity was a relief for her. It seemed that their common interest in religion and their commitment was a way to cope with their stress. However, N. stated also that his choice became problematic in his country of origin and with some of his peers in Finland, which led to additional tensions in their everyday life.

Y. converted to Christianity when he came to Finland. Since then, he has been rejected by his family members and friends.

We started dating a few month ago, but we knew each other from church where I am actively participating. When he got support from the church and converted to Christianity, we were not dating yet. Unfortunately, when his conversion and our relationship came out in the "public" eye (officialized), we both faced a lot of judgments and rejection.

Now, we are dealing with threats from Y.'s country of origin for his conversion and relationship. People have been calling from Finland to his family in his home country and now they are threatening him and me as well. It is dangerous.

When she mentioned the Finnish Immigration service, she said that she was feeling hopeful but that there would be no other trial from her part.

If the application is rejected one more time, they are ready to move abroad if needed.

Social resources are essential for N., she finds support from her peers at the church's activities, from friends, her dogs and from some of her family members.

We live together at the moment at my mom's place. Y. is a great support for me. When she got sick, he cared for me and that's how we started to date. He also gets along very well with my mum. Also, our dogs (especially one of them) is a great support for both of us.

Reflecting on what other types of support could be useful for her and her partner, as well as other intercultural couples, she mentioned the importance of peer support.

I wish that couples would get more support, but also more individual support, like counselling or therapy. She was very happy to meet new people, who face the same situation, to talk about this matter, but about other things as well.

During the next day, I had the chance to have lunch with another participant and decided to ask more about her situation. She was not very eager to talk, but she still gave me a glimpse of her couple's unique case. N. is a woman who decided to enroll to the summer camp when she heard about it, while she had only known her partner for a few months. She was willing to help and assist him as much as she could.

I have a 7 months old baby, but I got her with a previous partner. He didn't stay during the pregnancy and he does not me, nor my baby. Both my ex-partner and S. are from the same African country.

Now, I am is with S. and we have met 4 months ago. That was not planned, but I want to deal with it anyway, and support him as much as possible. He takes care of the baby like his own.

The brief conversation with N. was interesting enough to make me wonder about the power of support and encouragement in difficult life events. When I observed N. and S. interacting together, especially with the baby, it was clear that they were empowering each other through their relationship, by being both "available" for their partner. I did not ask further questions to N. after our conversation.

A couple of participants were willing to share their story with me. M. (Iraqi, male, in his thirties) and K. (Finnish, female, about the same age). They were not married at the time but had shared a few years together already. M. was applying for the fourth time.

It is already his fourth application and it is a lot of stress. Luckily, he is able to study and work because he is paying for his own studies.

This was a new perspective, since usually, the applicant does not have the right to work or study during the process, only under very specific conditions. In M.'s case, because he was an exchange student at the time he came to Finland. In the course of the conversation, I asked what helped them to keep on going, in their everyday life.

We try to keep a positive attitude no matter what. Many aspects of this process are frustrating.

K. brought up the specific settings in which she feels the most affected by their condition.

I get sometimes affected by the stress, especially when a letter comes home, or if we see the police the police somewhere.

However, they mentioned their social environment as a great support and were talking about their future together.

I would like to travel to Turkey to meet his family, it can be a safe place there to do that.

All the discussions that we have had together with the participants gave me perspectives on various topics. Some were more focused on the positive aspects of their lives, such as their existing resources, their future, their faith and so on, others were visibly frustrated about their position and unable to open up to me.

7.6 Observation during the workshops

I was able to attend to some of the workshops. As seen in the program above, they were sources of knowledge for the participants, safe spaces for discussions and development, along with exercises to strengthen the partners' bond for instance. Unfortunately, due to my responsibility of taking care of a couple's child during the morning and some part of the afternoon, I was only able to collect sufficient data during the workshop on advocacy. Nonetheless, the information compiled then, gives a relevant insight on the needs of people waiting for their residence permit and the possible evolution of services, both social and administrative ones.

A question asked by the facilitators was the starting point of this workshop: "What are the things that need to be changed in Finland, regarding the process of getting a residence permit (policies, legislations, attitudes...)?"

Several ideas were discussed by the participants, here are some examples:

- The time of the process: especially for families, it seems very long. Usually it should take about 9 months, although in reality, it can take more than a year to

get a decision. It should be the same process and time for every nationality (as mentioned earlier, it can require a longer wait according to where you are from).

- The administration should take decisions more individually and not just “copy/paste” the answers. There should be a justification of the decision, if negative or dismissed.
- The process is unfair. People with Finnish partners do not realize how hard it is. There is a need for equal treatment.
- Economical aspect: if the process would go faster, then applicants could become an active part of the society faster: going to work, to school, being able to pay taxes, etc. It would benefit everyone. “In some other countries, you can work while you are waiting for the permit, why not here?”
- The applications cost a lot and sometimes you need to renew them several times, trying different sorts of permits (work, family, studying...). This can financially impact the couples.
- Authorities and their practices: it “feels” like the answer to every question is always “no” when you need extra information (in Kela for instance). Then you must find it yourself from another source, and if possible, prove the authorities that what you have asked for it is indeed possible. Also, it can be challenging trying to contact some authorities and talk with employees.
- Every process seems to be a difficulty: registering a new name, getting married, after the birth of a child... It also depends on the country of origin and on the city where the application is sent.
- Racism/discrimination: in cases of discrimination, it can be intimidating to complain, because a complaint could slow down the residence permit process. Especially when a lot of time and energy was already spent for the application. A feeling of despair and frustration can occur.
- Police can be threatening, intimidating and sometimes it feels they want to push people to do mistakes in order to arrest them.

During and after the workshop a certain tension was present in the room. A shared feeling of frustration and visible anger for some participants was floating around. I do realize that this type of observation cannot be accounted as a valid data per se, however, it is still an important detail to mention in a study that places stress at the core of its research.

The coordinators of the project asked all participants to give their feedback about the camp. In total, twelve persons responded. For instance, to the questions "Was the program useful?", 11 stated that yes, it was.

Very. We got a lot of tools for a relationship- Especially in a relationship where it comes from different cultures it is really useful to have a third party to help / give tools.

It was, it did good to actively think about things about the relationship and religion and I think things will be easier to discuss after this.

Really. Got to think about things more. To recall what is important to another in a relationship, in terms of foundation.

To the question "Did you miss something?" most reviews are positive, and in some cases, participants regretted that the camp lasted only two days and that time went so fast.

The camp could be longer, we have enjoyed it so much. The weekend went fast and there was a lot going on, so a longer camp could work for that too.

One question asked what the best and worst part of the whole experience were. In most cases, apart from the beds provided in the premises, there were no negative reviews. Most of the participants mentioned the quality of the workshops, the benefits they got from peer support and the good atmosphere.

Best was the activities that made me open up with my partner. Worst - very short.

Group discussions, the fact that they met couples in the “same” situation. Good team spirit and instructors. All in all, warm-heartedness comes to mind on top of this. You are doing important work! Thank you!

Got to talk to my partner, peace, appropriate pace in the program, food sauna, and framework.

Finally, at the end of the experience, participants and professionals seemed to have created a bond, and most of them are still in contact nowadays. Recently, an unformal meeting was organized to talk and share a happy moment together.

7.7 Peer support volunteer training

In fall 2020, a training was organized for volunteers who would like to become peer support persons in the project. The training was opened to everyone interested in the topic of interculturality and residence permit application. It was held both in the offices of Familia Ry and online, so participants would be able to join the training from their own location.

Among the different topics addressed that day were essential instructions about where to get information on residence permit regulations, understanding of one’s own limits and well-being and discussions about the necessary skills to be an effective peer support volunteer.

In this training, it was interesting to see again that all the participants were women (11 in total, plus 2 coordinators), from different backgrounds and with different interests. Some of them were themselves directly concerned by the challenge of being into an intercultural relationship with a partner who was (or still is) waiting for the residence permit in Finland. A common sense of partnership emerged from the training and the feedbacks about the session were positive and engaging for future collaborations with Kuljen Rinnallasi.

8 Discussion

In the process of this study, I got the opportunity to meet dozens of people who are dealing (or were dealing previously) with a great load of stress in their everyday life,

relationship and family system. Their situations were unknown to me before the start of the thesis and I had no idea that the regulations in Finland would have such an important impact on one's life, let alone, their partner's. This eye-opening experience rose questions and proved the relevance of conducting a study on this topic.

Regarding the existence of counselling for intercultural couples, such as the ones provided by Kuljen Rinnallasi's coordinators, the feedback from the participants showed how much their support and expertise are valuable and needed. Hogan (2007, p.39) reminds that "facilitation work across cultures is stimulating and challenging but can be very demanding and tiring. Keeping a heightened sense of awareness and being ready to adapt to cultural issues makes more mental and emotional work". Resources are multiple. Throughout the research, it appeared that not many participants, especially the Finnish partner, had the opportunity to rely on their relatives or closed ones for support. Their families or friends were described as reluctant to understand their situations and, in several cases, even turned their back. During the discussions, especially in the focus group meetings, the statement "I can only rely on myself" came up numerous times. In that context, the fact that Kuljen Rinnallasi concentrates on the participants' well-being is a crucial example of what can be done to relieve the individuals' stress.

As stated earlier, advocacy remains another essential aspect of the work done by social services. Indeed, it appeared that a great load of frustration and hopelessness comes from the attitude of the authorities towards the applicants and their partners. An important part of offering support is to empower the participants by giving them the knowledge they need to have to face administrative obstacles, as well as organizing events to raise awareness regarding the difficulties existing in Finland. In that sense, trainings for peer support volunteering can be considered as a tool to reach more people who would like to be active and supportive of the participants' cause.

During the summer camp, most participants gained support and knowledge both from the workshops and from the time spent together with peers and professionals in the free time. Some of the participants were originally from the same country. The Finnish partners also bonded through the sharing of their personal experiences. In *Effective Group Discussion* (1998), Brillhart and Galanes defend the fact that intracultural communication (i.e. discussing with individuals from the same culture) relies on granted behaviors during interactions, while intercultural communication can bring up misunderstandings easily (p.85). This is a reminder for both professionals and service users that expertise and support from a stranger, who might have a different cultural background than yours, can

be useful but that it is necessary to check once in a while our own systems of communication and understanding of culture variabilities.

Finally, despite the non-conclusive results of the online chat project launched by Kuljen Rinnallasi in 2019, their efforts paid, and another similar program was created in 2020. Unfortunately, I did not take part in that one and cannot argue whether it was effective or not. Nonetheless, even though the first trials proved to be a problematic experience, it can be argued that online discussions can still be a useful tool in counselling. As stated earlier in the study, nothing can completely replace the benefits of physical and verbal interactions in a focus group for example, but having the possibility to be in contact with participants living far away and in need of support remains an essential mission for social counsellors.

9 Conclusion

This research was a multi-conceptual work aiming to find links and connections between methodologies, ideologies and practices. In an era where the virtual and the reality are deeply connected, the idea of developing even more culturally sensitive and effective methods for social counsellors was at the center of the research. Indeed, education and practice provide social counsellors already with several methodologies to face various situations in their professional activities. However, society is in a state of constant change and it is crucial to adapt to new challenges. Peer support, advocacy, trainings, focus group methods and even online chats proved to be adequate tools to support intercultural couples, especially the Finnish partner. Most of the participants rely on any kind of assistance available, if someone is present and ready to listen to their struggles, as well as being there in more cheerful moments, when the residence permit of their partner's is approved, for example.

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Instructions for the first meeting online and introduction

RINNALLASI -VERTAISRYHMÄ CHAT 07.05.2019

The first meeting:

I INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome to Kuljen Rinnallasi -peer group chat. This is the first time we meet, so let's all introduce us properly. There are two facilitators here, Wiam and Sanna. There is also a student from Metropolia College, Julie Furter. She will observe the chat, if none of you objects. Julie is writing her thesis on social work.

We will introduce ourselves first:

2. My name is Sanna Rummakko. I work as a project manager of Kuljen Rinnallasi -project. I have worked with refugee and migration issues for more than ten years in different NGOs in communications and project positions. At the moment I am most interested in facilitating group activities for intercultural couples. It is a new activity also to me and I am thrilled about our first group chat.

Wiam: introduction

This is a very diverse group. Some of you are Finnish spouses, some foreign and there are also couples among us.

3. Introductions of the participants:

Please introduce yourself to the group the way you want. You can for example tell how you have become interested in this group and what you expect from it. Please remember that you yourself decide how much of your life situation you will share. You can tell your name and location, but that is not mandatory or required.

II THE RULES OF THE GROUP CHAT

This is the first time we gather as a group, so it is important to set some basic rules for our meetings. Amie and I are going to give you some suggestions for ground rules and then you should give your own comments on them. You are free to object, if you think some of the rules we suggest are unnecessary or harmful. After we go through our suggestions, you are free to make your own suggestions for rules according to what you think is important.

Suggestion 1: CONFIDENTIALITY

Everything that is told in the group, stays in the group.

- Do you think confidentiality is important and if yes, why?
- What does confidentiality mean (entail or include)?
- What can you say and what you cannot say about this group to outsiders?

Suggestion 2: RESPECT FOR OTHERS

Respect has to do with for example how we talk to each other in this group; are we judgmental or approving, do we really pay attention to what others are saying and how do we encounter people who may be very different from us.

- What does respectful behavior mean to you? How would you define it?
- What makes you feel safe and respected?
- We may have differences of values, religion, and lifestyle of cultural background. How do we encounter differences?
- Do we make assumptions on other people and what are they based on? Do we for example assume that if someone talks about a spouse, that person is of certain gender, religion or certain origin?

Suggestion 3: FREEDOM TO CHOOSE WHAT YOU SHARE

Freedom means that each of us here can choose how much of themselves they will share to the group and us as organizers do not force anyone to open up more than they wish. This is certainly also a personality type question; for some people it is more natural to be open minded than it is for others. It is also a question of life situation; how much of it is very sensitive information at a given time.

- How do you see this question in your own case; is it easy for you to be open or does it take more time for you to open up?
- Do you think this is an important issue for you? If yes, for what reason?

Suggestion 4: THE LIMITS OF THE PEER GROUP ACTIVITY

Peer group activities are made for and useful for providing new social contacts and sharing opportunities to people in a certain life situation. However, being in a peer group

cannot solve all problems. For example, we are not lawyers and do not give legal counseling to people who are struggling with bureaucracy. We can talk about that life situation in general, but to solve legal issues you need a specialized lawyer.

We are not doctors or medical professionals either. If you for example need help with a serious mental health issue, like anxiety or depression, you should seek medical help. Of course sharing experiences and talking about them can help a lot, if you are for example depressed, but usually professional medical help is also recommended.

SUGGESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS FOR RULES

If you think something important is missing from our suggestions, you are welcome to bring up your own ideas for rules of the group.

- What are your expectations of the peer group?
- What themes do you hope we talk about in the future meetings?
- What are the main challenges you are facing at the moment in your life / your relationship?
- How does the insecurity related to the residence permit process affect your relationship?

