Review article

The ideological underpinnings and political usefulness of residential care for children and young people

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Introduction

This review takes a close look at three studies exploring residential care for children and young people and the mechanisms that lead to children ending up there. The studies examine three different national settings – Japan, Russia and China (Goodman, 2000; Khlinovskaya Rockhill, 2010; Wang 2016) – exploring the specific historic, economic, political and socio-cultural forces which have shaped the emergence and development of children's residential care in each country and to which they also respond. Spanning roughly two decades between them, all three studies are concerned with specific and concrete cases (Lund, 2014: 225), focusing on real events, each at a specific place and time in history. Ahead of their time, the three studies connect research foci on children and young people with more far-reaching phenomena, with the insights these connections have to offer enabling a better understanding of the human condition more generally (Spyrou, 2018: 2). All three studies demonstrate how research into residential care for children and young people can serve as a magnifying glass on the wider social, political and economic processes in a given society, as well as on the prevailing value systems that inform conceptualizations of children, childhoods, gender roles and the ideal family.

The three studies have not only been chosen because of their high quality, but also because the kind of research which they represent is quite rare – perhaps because conducting it requires a specific combination of formal conditions and a researcher equipped

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with particular knowledge and skills. First of all, field access for research into residential care for children tends to be very difficult, and the amount of patience, tact and tenacity required to be able to access the field at all might be hard to come by, especially in the face of looming deadlines and limited funding. Secondly, once the researcher enters the field, navigating it comes with its own set of challenges (Meichsner, 2020), so the temptation to give up halfway through, before the fieldwork is finished, can be hard to resist. Thirdly, to analyse the data at a complex level, the authors of these studies required not only excellent knowledge about children, young people, families and related policies, but also intimate knowledge of the society in question, its underlying structures and burning problems at the time of the research. This is undoubtedly a tall order. Fourthly, to be able to switch between different levels of analysis, as each of these authors does, requires rather sophisticated analytical skills, which take time and experience to develop. Finally, the subject matter is highly sensitive and ethically complex to write about, and few researchers may therefore be willing to approach it. In that sense, it can safely be stated that the studies presented below bear witness to the research abilities, ethical awareness and intimate knowledge of the respective countries of each of the three researchers.

Japan: Residential care in a strong economy

Goodman's (2000) anthropological study of youth state care in Japan (*yôgoshisetsu*) sets out to look closely at these institutions and the changes to their role in Japanese child welfare. It also seeks to explore social exclusion in Japan, to describe the Japanese child protection system and to place it into its social and historical context. The resulting account has two particular merits which are still significant 20 years after its publication, offering useful insights as a basis for contemporary research on institutional childcare. Firstly, the study highlights that institutional childcare requires an enabling context in order to emerge and persist over time. It demonstrates this through a combination of different research methods and types of data, as well as through a research focus which pays attention to both micro- and macrolevels of analysis. The study's other merit concerns methodological aspects, namely its empirically-grounded rationale for the choice of the research subject and the awareness it raises about the difficulty of obtaining valid numerical evidence on institutional childcare.

The empirical rationale for the research was derived from the fact that Japan was at the time of the study not only the world's second largest economy, but also had the highest figure of longevity, the most highly educated and literate population and comparatively low divorce rates. The lowest rates of infant mortality, lone parent families, serious crimes, and illegitimate births in OECD countries, as well as a decreasing juvenile delinquency rate (1985–1995), can be added to this list of impressive indicators which would not strongly suggest extensive need for institutional childcare. This is all the more intriguing as these figures remained stable in spite of trends suggesting the opposite, such as increasing urbanization, changes in family structure, a rapidly ageing population and a recession during the 1990s leading to rising unemployment. Given that Japan also had a lower proportion of direct government spending on social welfare than most OECD countries, the overall situation does seem worthy of close examination.

Through a series of vignettes, Goodman examines typical situations which lead to children of different ages ending up in institutional care, demonstrating the complexity of reasons which often lie behind their admittance (pp. 57–59). Consequently, it is nearly impossible to document the reasons for admittance according to clear-cut categories – and thus to generate robust quantitative data on residential childcare – which means it is difficult to research using quantitative methods.

The pursuit of the above-mentioned aims stretches over eight chapters, two of which are dedicated to the development and delivery of welfare and child protection in Japan. Two chapters focus on one *yôgoshisetsu*, exploring its management, staffing and social organization, and two chapters raise questions about the effectiveness of *yôgoshisetsu* as a valid form of child protection, exploring why fostering and adoption were not popular in Japan at the time of the study. The final chapter traces different understandings of child abuse and how they do or do not contribute to the generation of a population in need of support and protection.

Sifting through the pages, the reader does not only learn about values in Japanese society and how children and childhood are perceived, but is also acquainted with phenomena such as 'coin-locker babies' (children left behind in coin-operated left-luggage facilities in railway and bus stations, p. 47) and *oyako shinjū*, which refers to the murder of a child by one of one of the child's parents followed by the parent's suicide (pp. 164–166).

Russia: Residential care in a time of transition

While Goodman's study challenges the understanding that residential care for children and young people is a phenomenon exclusive to low- and middle-income countries, Khlinovskaya Rockhill (2010) points to the influence of politics as a cause for children growing up without parental care in post-Soviet Russia. To that end, she uses crisis points of family breakdown as a microscope for exploring what constitutes a 'good family' in the eyes of state agents, as well as changes in the relationship between family, parenting and the state. With a keen eye for detail, the author observes the power asymmetries between the family and the state when it comes to child-rearing, arguing that the availability of a network of family assistance would allow for a large number of children cared for in residential homes to either return to their family of origin or not end up in a care home in the first place.

The key period of Khlinovskaya Rockhill's study was July 2000–January 2001, which coincided with profound changes in Russian society. These changes took place in the aftermath of Perestroika and the break-up of the Soviet Union, with the routines and values of these earlier eras continuing to live on, inform day-to-day actions and shape bureaucratic structures. This account is therefore not only about children and young people in residential care, but also about a society grappling with a deep process of transformation that not only challenged existing norms and structures in unprecedented ways, but also demanded a great deal of ingenuity, adaptability and resourcefulness from people just to keep their lives going.

Set in the city of Magadan in the Russian Far East, the study traces the history of family policy in Russia (chapter one) and explains the different types of residential care homes for children and young people (chapter six), providing the reader with the

background knowledge necessary to make sense of the vignettes of individual trajectories (chapter seven) presented later. These vignettes are brought to life through long, vivid quotes of former 'inmates' (Goffman, 1961). While their retrospective assessments of their time spent in residential care varies greatly, the common denominator for most former 'inmates' is that their family of origin has at some point been categorized as *neblagopoluchniye*, meaning to be suspected of not providing a positive enough environment for children. Such families are compared to norm-conforming *blagopoluchniye* families and imagined ideal-type families only to be judged as failures. This then translates into some parents being considered as unfit to raise their children themselves no matter how much they want to do so.

The study's documentation of series of all-female court hearings over the parental rights of the oldest and youngest children of a 24-year old unmarried mother of three (chapter four) throws the state's practice of contrasting the two types of families into sharp relief. Heavily pregnant with her fourth child, the woman is intimidated in court, talked down to by state agents and belittled by the judge, while the children's father is not taken into consideration at all. A situation is depicted where a woman is completely overrun by procedures – complete with terminology she does not understand and the selective use of information of varying quality against her – and humiliated through mockeries bordering on insults. A prime example of asymmetric power relations, these court hearings demonstrate how easy it was at the time of the study for state agents to irreversibly separate children from their birth parents. The study draws attention to the role that administrative routines, customary bureaucratic procedures, prejudice towards parents among officials and partial and inaccurate information can play in court decisions about children's care arrangements.

Returning to this example repeatedly throughout the book, Khlinovskaya Rockhill demonstrates how women's role in society, prevailing moral values regarding intimate relationships and women's reproductive rights, political agendas, and varying degrees of state control and regulation all conspired to increase or decrease numbers of children looked after in residential care in post-Soviet Russia.

China: Residential care in international relations

The examination of the relationship between residential childcare and politics is also of concern to Wang (2016). Unveiling the intricacies and global entanglements of orphanage care and international adoption of unwanted Chinese children, she identifies the latter as part of China's strategy to amass soft power in international relations.

Wang's account is based in multiple research stays of varying length in the People's Republic of China between November 2006 and June 2014. During these stays, she conducted interviews with a range of relevant actors and carried out ethnographic fieldwork by means of volunteering in different orphanages. The first three of the seven chapters of Wang's book outline the wider context that makes residential care for children and young people both necessary and possible. Part of this context are certainly the particularities of the time when the research took place. These include China's post-reform period, when the shift from a centrally planned to a more deregulated economy took place, which required 'high-quality' human resources to meet the demands of global competition. This was reflected in China's one-child policy, first enacted in 1980 and eventually discontinued in

2016, which caused Chinese parents to focus on raising one healthy and preferably male child, leading to large numbers of unwanted girls and sick or disabled children growing up in orphanages. From here they were eventually adopted abroad, mainly to the US. The earlier part of the fieldwork was undertaken in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic summer games, attracting foreign journalists and, with this, world-wide attention to the country's social and welfare problems. This, in turn, had repercussions on the researcher's position in the field and the circumstances in which the research took place.

Chapters four and five provide a microscopic view of the care children receive in orphanages. To that end, the author juxtaposes the different approaches two groups of Western foreign volunteers take. One is composed of predominantly American evangelical Christians ('Tomorrow's Children') following the biblical imperative to care for orphans. Investing their own personal financial and time resources, they provide medical treatment and therapeutic intervention for children with special needs. What have previously been young lives deemed to be disposable are in the process converted into coveted commodities sought after in the international adoption market. The author does not romanticize this, however, but complicates the picture by also discussing adoption projects which turned out to be unsuccessful because adoptive parents had taken on too much and not anticipated the extent of the challenges such an endeavour may imply (chapter six). This kind of volunteering is contrasted with that of the wives of high-profile expatriates ('Helping Hands') seeking to fill gaps in their schedules with voluntary work in local orphanages, which they feel gives 'meaning' to their otherwise apparently unfulfilled existence. In both cases, tensions with low-paid, overworked local staff (*ayis*) arise due to the different approaches to care each side is taking.

Chinese-American herself, Wang identifies close ties between China's national politics and the circulation of children, care and corresponding resources. Coining the notion of *outsourced intimacy*, she observes the emigration of children from China to Western industrialized countries by means of international adoption all the while foreign currencies, labour force, care supplies and knowledge are flowing into the country. She contends that both ultimately serve the political and economic objectives of the Chinese state, contributing directly and indirectly to the strengthening of its global position.

Conclusion

Each of these three books contributes to a better understanding of care arrangements for children and young people in each respective context, highlighting how they are shaped by a vast array of historically-rooted ideological underpinnings, whether intentionally or not. From Goodman's observation of how a drastic change in numbers of children suffering abuse was caused by a change in public discourse, to Khlinovskaya Rockhill's unveiling of the devaluation of unmarried couples by state agents, to Wang's consideration of children with special needs morphing from disposable nobodies into sought-after commodities, the three studies testify to the social construction of 'children in need', which, as Woodhead (2002 [1997]: 63) suggests, is mainly the result of assumptions, judgements, personal values and a particular cultural environment all coming together at once.

The second insight to be gained from these studies is that residential care for children and young people emerges from the economic, political and socio-cultural context in a given area, responding with precision to its needs and adapting accordingly if and when

they change. Japanese care homes trying to meet the demand for care provision required by late-working parents, post-Soviet Russia's effort to raise loyal workers and China's attempt to produce 'high-quality' human capital through restricted reproduction all make it abundantly clear that poverty alone is not the sole decisive factor which leads to children growing up in residential care, although it may play an important role. Residential care for children and young people is, rather, closely intertwined with a country's political agendas and economic strategies, a result of gender norms and a reflection of the type of citizens children are meant to become. Consequently, poverty alleviation alone would not be enough to reduce the number of children becoming and growing up separated from their biological parents. Rather, this would require a multi-pronged approach, based on a detailed situational analysis, which would need to account for, among other things, the political aims that residential care serves. China's striving to enhance its soft power on the international stage by means of international adoption is an illustrative example of that.

Well worth the read, each of the three books is likely to be of interest not only to scholars in childhood studies, education and social work, but also in area studies, political sciences, gender studies and social policy.

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