Psychosocial Intervention

Editorial Comment

Out of home care in child protection: An international overview

Comentario Editorial

Medidas de protección a la infancia con separación familiar: Una revisión internacional

Jorge F. del Valle*

Child and Family Research Group (GIFI), Department of Psychology, University of Oviedo, Spain

Families have a major role in bringing up children and addressing their needs from birth to adult independence. Children, particularly the youngest ones, are the most vulnerable group in our society due to their dependency on adults just to survive. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the case of serious problems in the family context children become the most immediate and frequent victims. The lack of autonomy and ability to protect themselves from adversity, especially from child abuse and neglect, makes them dependent on public authority interventions to be protected and safe.

Child welfare and child protection services emerged in the second half of the 20th century and they have become one of the major indicators of a contry's development. The role of public authorities in recent decades has advanced toward the concept of "state care". The term *state care* refers to a situation in which governments or local authorities take responsibility for looking after dependent children, who lack a family to meet the functions of upbringing and protection. The state thus becomes their guardian, *in loco parentis*. Although the state can fulfil this mission from a legal point of view and serve as the entity which assumes responsibility for the children, provides resources, and supervises their upbringing, the fact is that there is a need to place him or her in a context which substitutes that of the family to guarantee the child's development, with specific people who ensure the necessary affective bonding and upbringing.

Thus, two broad modalities emerge: *residential care*, where children are cared for in groups through residential programmes with paid staff or volunteers, and family foster care, when the children are taken in by a family which accepts responsibility for their care and upbringing. Within this second category we should distinguish between kinship care, in the case of relatives or persons who already have some kind of link to the child, and non-kinship care, for the case of persons with no previous relation to the child.

Although the concept of state care could be extended to other types of cases in which the authorities intervene to protect children in their own family home, we can consider state care as out-of-home placement.

In contrast to the case of residential care institutions, which presence dates back centuries, foster care arrived much later, accompanying a change in the concept of childhood, which came to be seen as a period of great worth to be protected and which should be devoted to learning, and free of the obligations of adult life. This idea of protected childhood, particularly within the most intimate and nourishing context of the family, extended the ideal of a family upbringing, in a setting that was healthy and hygienic (as promoted by the early child protection legislators in Europe, who referred to the laws in terms of "hygiene"), and in which affective development was a valued feature.

A milestone of particular importance was the Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, called by President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House in 1909, which concluded that "*home life is the highest and finest product of civilization*" (Ashby, 1997). Although for many years residential care continued to predominate, the idea of family foster care began to develop strongly in English-speaking countries as an ideal of providing a family for those lacking one, without the need to create institutional structures for such a simple and natural function.

Nevertheless, the debate on the use of these measures is much more complex, since the situations of different countries throughout the world and their economic, political, and religious circumstances may determine the use of one alternative or another, over and above reasons related solely to the child's developmental needs. In Africa, AIDS and civil war have left behind thousands of orphans, for whom solutions based purely on family foster care could hardly provide sufficient coverage. On the other hand, in countries with advanced welfare states there should be no excuse for trying to place children in foster care and to reduce residential care to an indispensable minimum. This is what has occurred most visibly in Anglophone countries and in the north and west-centre of Europe (though to a lesser extent). However, in the south of Europe large numbers of children remain in residential care, despite substantial efforts to reduce those numbers.

This special issue, *Out of home care in child protection: An international review,* attempts to make an overview of the state of the art of child protection in a wide variety of countries with special attention to out-of-home care placements, such as residential care and family foster care. The main aim of this special issue is to make an international comparison of important historical background, legal framework, current figures, research trends, and key challenges for the future in a sample of countries representing the most

e-mail: jvalle@uniovi.es

important models of welfare regimes. There are some relevant and recent publications on international comparisons, such as Thoburn (2010) or Gilbert (2012), but this special issue tries to make a complementary contribution with a more systematic comparison.

The first article by Courtney, Flynn, and Beaupré reviews the situation in North America, both Canada and the USA, representing the liberal welfare regime according to the distinction by Esping-Andersen (1990) as well as the federal state organisation. Staying with Anglophone culture, the second paper by Fernandez and Atwool reviews the child protection systems in Australia and New Zealand, which also have a liberal welfare regime but with notable peculiarities, mostly related to Indigenous children and cultural identity as major challenges in child care. The third article by Munro and Gilligan concludes the Anglophone series with a review of out-of-home care in England and Ireland, using the significant growth of formal kinship care in both countries in the last 20 years as the main strand with which to analyse the child care system.

The article by Backe-Hansen, Højer, Sjöblom, and Storø analyses the situation in Norway and Sweden as examples of the social-democratic child welfare regimes in North Europe, representing the most advanced form of the Welfare State.

The Central European models are represented in the following two articles. The first one by Harder, Zeller, López, Köngeter, and Knorth reviews Germany and The Netherlands and the second by Gabriel, Keller, Bolter, Martin-Blachais, and Séraphin examines French and Swiss child care systems. The result is an interesting comparison with subtle differences in predominantly liberal and conservative welfare regimes.

South European models are represented by Italy and Spain in a comparative article by del Valle, Canali, Bravo, and Vecchiato. The so-called Mediterranean model of welfare was characterised by the importance of the family as the main provider of its members' wellbeing and a traditional reduced role of the state. The article will discuss the historical evolution of this model with respect to child protection.

Finally, the article by Anghel, Herczog, and Dima reviews child protection in Hungary and Romania. Both countries are excellent examples of the transition of Eastern European, post-communist countries from a past of child care based on big state institutions to a modern welfare system.

In the last article, we will try to perform a global analysis of the picture provided by this special issue through the analysis of out-of-home child care in 16 countries. Policy and legal backgrounds, statistical figures, and research outcomes will be compared to reach some general conclusions of the current state of the art in this field.

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