



Advancing global and transnational approaches to the study of out-of-home childcare

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Abstract

This paper advances the global and transnational agency approach to the study of out-of-home childcare, specifically the institutionalization of children. Based on existing studies, we highlight gaps in the current knowledge of global and transnational actors who shape child institutionalization around the world, including who these actors are, what they do and why, as well as the implications of their activities for children and families. We argue that the rise of global and transnational actors in out-of-home childcare requires systematic scholarly analysis if we are to understand the ongoing change in the global politics, policies, and practices of care.

Keywords

Global and transnational actors, out-of-home childcare, deinstitutionalization, global politics of care, residential care

Introduction

This paper is about the ongoing globalization of out-of-home childcare, i.e. provision for children without (or at risk of losing) parental care (for extended definition see e.g. UNICEF [White Paper 2020](#): 4). Historically, out-of-home childcare, also known as alternative childcare, was a matter of domestic concern. It was predominantly shaped by domestic policies and delivered as domestic systems of care. Today, the situation is radically changing. In this paper, we argue that in order to understand modern trends in out-of-home childcare, one needs to look beyond national borders and paint a bigger picture of global and transnational forces that shape childcare around the world. Below,

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we discuss this specifically in relation to institutional childcare and propose looking at it from a global and transnational agency perspective.

The post-World War II era saw intensified globalization and an increasing number and scope of international institutions, which brought major changes to out-of-home childcare. Due to efforts of various agencies of the United Nations and multiple smaller advocacy organizations, out-of-home childcare was placed on the international political agenda. Children without parental care came to be seen not as a domestic policy area but as a matter of global concern and a distinct collection of global challenges. The nearly universally ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) made it official: “family environment and alternative care”, and “children deprived of a family environment” were now recognized issues on the global agenda that required global action. As we shall discuss below, an ever larger and diverse range of transnational actors are involved in designing and delivering out-of-home childcare and influencing the extent and nature of institutional care.

Institutional childcare, commonly known as children’s homes or orphanages, is a form of residential care where children are separated from their relatives and segregated from a broader community (for more details [EEG, 2012](#)). In the current mainstream policy literature, institutional care is contrasted with family- and community-based forms of care, which include for example prevention of separation of child from the family, and re-integration of the child into their biological family, kinship care, and foster care ([UNGA, 2010](#)). Millions of children live in institutional care around the world ([Desmond et al., 2020](#)). There is a widespread consensus among practitioners that institutions provide “suboptimal caregiving environments” and are harmful to children ([van IJzendoorn et al., 2020: 703](#)). Today, many countries have adopted the policy of childcare deinstitutionalization (DI) and overhauled their systems of out-of-home childcare to ensure that every child grows up in a family or a family-like environment ([Davidson et al., 2017](#); [Milligan et al., 2016](#); [Ulybina, 2022a](#)). The rate of child institutionalization has significantly dropped in many countries (e.g. [Van Ijzendoorn et al., 2020: 707](#); [Chaitkin et al., 2017: 19](#)). At the same time, some regions see a growing number of children being deprived of a family and raised in institutions ([Chaitkin et al., 2017](#); [Chege and Ucembe 2020](#); [Frimpong-Manso 2021](#); [Milligan et al., 2016](#)). As will be discussed below, many studies indicate that a significant role in both processes – the reduced institutionalization of children in some countries and the increased institutionalization of children in other countries – is played by cross-border players.

We use the terms global and transnational actors as they are commonly used in studies of global social policy and global governance, where global actors include major inter-governmental organizations, such as the United Nations or the World Bank, and the term transnational actors is used to refer to private, non-state actors who organize across national borders and affect global politics, such as transnational corporations, private regulators, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) ([Deacon 2007](#); [Downie 2019](#); [Hale 2020](#); [Thiel and Maslanik 2010](#); [Kaasch and Martens 2015](#)).

Based on existing academic and grey literature on child institutionalization, we argue that in order to understand the modern landscape and dynamics of out-of-home childcare, researchers need to pursue four lines of analysis: (a) systematically describe all kinds of

public and private players who engage in cross-border activities in the field of out-of-home childcare and potentially influence the institutionalization of children; (b) understand what shapes their agency – their identities, ideas, norms and values; resources and funding streams; domestic and international politics; analyse the mutual relationships of actors – whether these actors constitute distinct transnational communities, and if so how they are organized, in terms of hierarchies, dependencies, legitimacy, and accountability; (c) consider the effects of this transnational agency on the policy and practice of child institutionalization.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We start by outlining the global and transnational agency perspective offered by studies in other policy areas, and how it could help us better understand the global dynamics of child institutionalization (1). Then, we locate the global and transnational agency analysis within the broader international study of child institutionalization (2.1). We review what we know about global and transnational actors in the sector from existing research (2.2). Finally, we point out major gaps in our current knowledge about global and transnational actors in institutional childcare and propose some promising lines of further research (3).

Why look through the lens of global and transnational agency?

We argue that global and transnational agency is a helpful lens to analyze global trends in the policy and practice of child institutionalization, and out-of-home care more generally. How is this perspective pursued in other policy areas and what could it help us understand about the global dynamics of child institutionalization?

The field of global and transnational agency is widely studied, using data from various policy areas (environment – Downie, 2019; Hale 2020; social policy – Barrientos 2020; Martens et al., 2021; Shriwise 2020; Ulybina 2020). Scholars increasingly advocate for “methodological transnationalism” (Stone 2019). The main argument is that the nation-state is no longer the sole powerful actor – public policies, behaviour of the state, and social practices on the ground cannot be understood without taking account of cross-border agency of state and non-state players. The term “transnational” is often differentiated from “international” and is used to highlight “the organization of power beyond the state”, to denote political weight, governance, and regulation that transcend national borders (Thiel and Maslanik 2010).

A growing number of studies explore the diversity of global and transnational actor populations – public and private, for-profit and non-profit, formal and informal, stand-alone and collective actors. These include for example, international organizations (Martens et al., 2021), INGOs (Downie 2019; Mitchell et al., 2020), transnational corporations (Bartley 2018; Hamann 2020), private regulatory bodies (Bartley 2022; Renckens et al., 2022; Ulybina 2015; Ulybina and Fennell 2013), transnational individuals, activists, think tanks, consultants and others (Stone 2019; Haang’andu & Béland 2020).

From other policy areas, we know that diverse actors increasingly engage in cross-border activities, which affects domestic public policies and practices. For example, among INGOs, the number of religious organizations has grown recently, and the role of

religion in contemporary global politics appears to have grown (Haynes, 2016, 2022). Scholars speak about “religious transnationalism”, whereby faith-based organizations and communities act transnationally and use religious soft power to promote their own values and interests (Haynes, 2016, 2022). Many religious NGOs have social and political concerns and actively get involved in various social and human rights issues.

Together, transnational actors form transnational policy communities, “who diffuse shared ideas and practices globally” (Gaus 2019: 472; also Djelic and Quack 2010; Stone 2019). Often, they organize across borders, form networks and coalitions, engage in cross-border exchange and coordinated actions. Transnational policy networks are “stable and goal-directed organized interest groups of state and non-state actors”, who seek to influence policy at various levels (Gaus 2019: 472; also Stone 2019). Transnational networks and coalitions are also diverse, with different roles in policy making, for example: networks of scientific experts, trans-governmental networks, transnational public-private partnerships, knowledge networks and advocacy networks, transnational private regulation (Downie 2019; Stone 2019), formal and informal law-making coalitions (Reiners 2021). They set the agenda on many policy issues, create standards, and sometimes monitor compliance with these standards (Gaus 2019). In other words, these communities and networks build transnational governance institutions and change institutions at the national level. Cross-border agency is often framed in terms of global and transnational governance to highlight that the world is governed in many ways – not just by national governments (Thiel and Maslanik 2010; Hale 2020; Martens et al., 2021).

The importance of global and transnational actors is widely recognized, yet there remains a lot we do not know about them – the structure and management of these communities, their internal dynamics and internal power relations, as well as the social effects of their activities. These are not idle questions because cross-border agency is heterogenous and inflicted with internal contestations. Transnational actors may collaborate but also compete and clash with each other, pursue conflicting goals and promote different policy preferences (Hale 2020; Thiel and Maslanik 2010).

By taking a bird’s eye view of global and transnational agency arena, by seeing who holds the leverage, we may better understand global policy trends. Not all transnational actors are equal. They vary greatly in the roles they play in shaping global and national policy agendas. They have at their disposal different resources, legitimacy, connectedness, and power, which undoubtedly affect their potential to influence others. The influence of any transnational actors is not self-evident and far from unconditional.

To understand the nature and dynamics of global and transnational agency, as well as what makes it more or less ‘effective’, scholars analyze the relationships between transnational actors, trying to look inside their communities, i.e. shared “transnational social spaces” (Djelic and Quack 2010), where these actors develop their identities, build coalitions, (dis)agree on principles and practices, compete for resources and authority. Actors’ mutual relationships vary greatly in terms of hierarchy, (in)formality, forms of control and mutual dependence. A major recent phenomenon is hybridization of transnational agency, whereby public and private actors are becoming ever more interrelated and mutually defined (Hale 2020; Stone 2019; Westerwinter 2021). This raises questions about the legitimacy and accountability of many transnational actors. Whose

interests do they actually represent? How independent are they in their decision-making? What kind of authority do they respect? And ultimately, what consequences is their agency likely to have for the intended beneficiaries? In other words, by revealing the relationships between transnational actors, scholars can better explain the outcomes of transnational agency.

The transnational agency lens is not without limitations. The field suffers from terminological vagueness and challenges of establishing causality. The field also remains dominated by Euro- and global North-centred perspectives, reflected both in the objects of study (focus on transnational actors from the global North) and the normative underpinnings of this research (normalizing transnational agency that conforms with the Western political and ideational mainstream, while marginalizing transnational agency that may be deemed problematic by Western policymakers (for critique [Triandafyllidou 2020](#)). While the existence of various ‘marginal’, or ‘alternative’, actors, such as transnational criminal networks, is widely recognized, their analysis remains on the sidelines of global and transnational agency and governance research. Finally, the growing multiplicity of actors, their increasing interdependence and potentially expanding influence contrast with the deficit of empirical knowledge about this agency “that conforms to the methodological rigor and conceptual richness” ([Thiel and Maslanik 2010](#)).

Most recently, scholars have started to pay more attention to the fact that childcare is shaped by global and transnational agency and pointed out the need for systematic study of childcare from this perspective ([Holzscheiter et al., 2019](#)). With this paper, we stress the increasing relevance of this perspective for understanding the global landscape of child institutionalization and broader trends in out-of-home childcare.

Looking at child institutionalization through the lens of global and transnational agency

The ‘global and transnational agency’ niche in the broader international study of child institutionalization

First of all, we would like to make a distinction between viewing childcare through an international lens and understanding the role of global and transnational actors in childcare arrangements around the world (for a similar argument in relation to social protection research see [Shriwise 2020](#)). There is extensive literature studying child institutionalization beyond national borders and discussing various international aspects of child institutionalization. We cannot do the whole field justice within the limits of this paper. So here are just a few examples of different strands of beyond-national-borders study of child institutionalization: cross-country comparative studies of care systems ([Islam and Fulcher, 2022](#); [James et al., 2021](#); [Kendrick et al., 2011](#); [Milligan et al., 2016](#); [Nicklett and Perron, 2010](#); [Ulybina, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c](#)); international legal studies analyzing care in the context of international law and policy ([Cantwell and Holzscheiter 2007](#); [Van Doore 2022](#)); the global travel of childcare ideas and policy models ([Harlow, 2021](#); [Hoffman, 2021](#); [Ulybina, 2020, 2022a](#)). A growing number of studies reveal the

geopolitics of out-of-home childcare, and more specifically the hegemony of Western powers and international organizations representing Western ideologies and assumptions about childhood and care (Brown et al., 2002; Harlow 2021; Hoffman 2021; Islam and Fulcher 2022). Scholars analyze the global political economies of child abandonment and institutionalization, revealing how child institutionalization is part of the global care chain, where ‘orphans’ are manufactured in the global South to meet the demand from the global North (Chege and Ucembe 2020; Cheney 2018; Frimpong-Manso 2021; Guiney and Mostafanezhad 2015; Qian 2014; Van Doore 2022).

In addition, many studies with a focus on national childcare reforms mention the importance of international influences. For example, national reforms of childcare deinstitutionalization are often associated with globally spreading deinstitutionalization ideas and the institutions-as-a-last-resort rhetoric (Bindman et al., 2019; Huseynli 2018; James et al., 2021; Petrowski et al., 2022), as well as ‘harder’ economic and political influences of external actors, e.g. through budget support programmes and EU accession leverage (Greenberg and Partskhaladze 2014; Iusmen and Stalford 2015; Ulybina, 2020).

Scholars recognize that national policies and practices of child institutionalization are not quite ‘home-made’. Existing childcare systems are products of an interconnected world, where the local and the global, the domestic and the foreign are closely related. Domestic policy choices with regard to child institutionalization are influenced by international laws and global policy norms, global politics, and political economies of childcare. In other words, child institutionalization in individual countries is influenced by external actors, whose agency has political, ideational/cultural, and economic nature. Yet, studies often mention global and transnational actors involved in child institutionalization only briefly, as part of some international context within which national reforms take place and which serves as a source of policy ideas (Bindman et al., 2019; Kuuse and Toros 2019; Nicklett and Perron 2010).

Altogether, these studies reveal many aspects of how globalization plays out in institutional childcare. Throughout these studies, there is an implicit recognition of cross-border actors as carriers of ideas, resources, authority, and policy intentions with regard to childcare. Yet, a detailed and at the same time holistic picture of global and transnational agency in the sector is missing. We propose to build on these and similar studies of childcare and go beyond: to understand the actors who are behind different cross-border movements, politics, and political economies of child (de-)institutionalization.

Global and transnational agency in relation to institutional childcare: what do we know?

Based on existing research, what do we know about global and transnational actors shaping child institutionalization around the world? Scholars commonly refer to several types of actors: international (intergovernmental) organizations, international NGOs, faith-based organizations, various donors, for-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and individual transnationals. These players cross national borders to promote certain childcare ideas and policy models and provide resources for (non-)institutional childcare services in other countries. As will be discussed below, some actors support institutional

childcare, while others promote deinstitutionalization, although these preferences may change over time.

Perhaps most mentioned are agencies of the United Nations. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognized the right of children “to grow up in a family environment” (UNHR 1989: 1) and committed governments to reforms in this direction. Since then, the United Nations and its agencies have actively promoted the deinstitutionalization agenda in childcare and provided resources for reforms (Greenberg and Partskhaladze 2014; Ivanova and Bogdanov 2013; O’Brien and Chanturidze 2009; Ulybina, 2020, 2022b, 2022c).

Studies note the important role of international donors in helping countries develop family- and community-based services and reduce reliance on residential institutions: *intergovernmental organizations* such as the World Bank (Greenberg and Partskhaladze 2014; Ulybina, 2020) and *national agencies* dealing with international development and aid, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swedish International Development Agency, the Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development (O’Brien and Chanturidze 2009; Radeva Hadjiev 2018). The contributions and strategies in relation to child institutionalization of most of such actors are usually mentioned in passing. Generally speaking, they tend to promote the policy of childcare deinstitutionalization. Yet, grey literature also provides ample examples of where international organizations and foreign governments fund residential childcare institutions around the world (e.g. Lumos 2015; O’Kane and Lubis 2016).

In contrast, the role of the European Union is widely discussed in the literature, including the growing advocacy grey literature. The European Union is a widely recognized driver of deinstitutionalization reforms within and outside the Union and an actor that increasingly pushes its childcare norms and policies on the agenda of other countries (Herczog 2021; Iusmen and Stalford 2015; Ivanova and Bogdanov 2013; Kuuse and Toros 2019; O’Brien and Chanturidze 2009; Radeva Hadjiev 2018; Ulybina 2020; Von Bahr 2019). The active involvement of the EU in the global politics of child institutionalization is a relatively recent phenomenon and is tightly linked to childcare developments in Romania (Iusmen and Stalford, 2015; Ulybina, 2020). Today, the Union employs various soft and hard tools to promote the deinstitutionalization of childcare as its external policy in a growing number of countries.

Cross-border activity of private, non-state players is increasingly noticeable in the field of institutional childcare: transnational NGOs, companies, individuals, and their networks. *International non-governmental organizations* are important carriers of knowledge, ideas, and skills in childcare and it is INGOs who often drive and enable policy change across countries (Huseynli 2018; Ivanova and Bogdanov 2013; Penn 2011; Ulybina 2020). A growing number of these studies note that faith-based charitable organizations often act as transnational actors supplying funds, volunteers, and other support to residential childcare in other countries (Insights into... 2022; Lumos 2017; Weiss 2020). The demand for ‘doing good’ feeds multiple charities that transfer Western money to build orphanages around the world, and thus help maintain the so-called orphan crisis (Cheney 2018; Frimpong-Manso 2021). Yet, as well as sponsoring orphanages, religious transnational charities also promote alternative forms of care, such as

international one-to-one “child sponsorship” schemes for orphans (Benthall 2019). So, given the different forms of INGOs’ involvement, their influence on the global dynamics of institutional childcare is not clear and far from obvious.

Cross-national private *adoption agencies* are another type of relevant actors and are associated with persistent demand for child abandonment and institutionalization. Studies reveal the existence of a global “orphan rescue industry” or “orphan industrial complex”: foreign-funded orphanages recruit ‘orphans’ from poor families and make them available for international adoption or keep them in orphanages to attract foreign aid (Chege and Ucembe 2020; Cheney 2018; Van Doore 2022). This practice is believed to have grave consequences not only for the recruited children but also for local parenting norms and wider childcare practices, as they undermine local kinship-based systems of care (Cheney 2018).

For-profit *tourist agencies* are also understood to drive child institutionalization in various countries (Guiney, Mostafanezhad 2015; Qian 2014; Van Doore 2022). The demand for ‘doing good’ and humanitarian experiences among populations of higher-income countries created the so-called orphanage tourism industry, whereby well-meaning volunteers from the global North choose orphanages in poorer countries as sites for their good-doing, thereby encouraging further supply of abandoned and institutionalized children, driving child trafficking and the exploitation of children for profit.

Institutional childcare is influenced by *transnational individuals* who belong to *transnational policy elites*, e.g. Baroness Nicholson, the European Parliament’s rapporteur for Romania, who placed children’s rights on Romania’s EU accession agenda (Iusmen 2013; Ulybina 2020). Finally, there are *independent transnational individuals*, such as founders of grassroots INGOs, who do not act on behalf of any organizations but cross national borders and participate in policy design and service provision for children without parental care (Appel 2022; Miles and Tweheyo 2022; Penn 2011; Ulybina 2020).

The above transnational actors operate as advocacy coalitions and networks (Hoffman 2021; Ulybina, 2020), many of them form the global movement towards the de-institutionalization of childcare (Chege and Ucembe 2020; Hoffman 2021).

Given the above-cited research, one can talk about the global politics of child institutionalization: child institutionalization has risen on the international agenda and turned into a matter of global concern, an object of global and transnational policymaking, and an arena for legitimate global and transnational agency and power struggles. Multiple case studies suggest that global and transnational actors are diverse, increasingly influential and have triggered or facilitated childcare reforms in many countries (Bindman et al., 2019; Greenberg and Partskhaladze 2014; O’Brien and Chanturidze 2009). Yet, studies fall short of explaining what drives these organizations and individuals, how they are organized and mutually related, and how they evolve. Arguably, mutual influences of actors need to be understood as they shape the dynamics of their activities. For example, the campaigns “Children are not Tourist Attractions” (Friends International) and the “Love you Give” campaign by the Better Care Network evolved in response to the growing orphan tourism. We argue that these are major gaps that need to be addressed to enable a holistic picture of childcare dynamics.

Global and transnational agency shaping child institutionalization: future research directions

Studies reveal a great deal about global trends in child institutionalization, yet they tell us little about global and transnational players who shape this policy area. To bridge existing gaps in understanding the global and transnational agency that shapes child institutionalization around the world, researchers need to do three things: (a) identify the relevant actors; (b) understand what, how and why they do, in relation to child institutionalization, and (c) systematically analyse outcomes of their agency for children and their families.

Identify and systematically describe all kinds of actors who work across borders to intentionally shape the extent and nature of institutional childcare

There is a growing range of global and transnational actors who have not yet been analyzed as potentially influential players in the global out-of-home childcare and who yet participate in the global politics of child institutionalization, influence global care markets, and increasingly penetrate domestic childcare arenas. While activities of global players such as the United Nations, UNICEF, and a few well-known INGOs such as SOS Children's Villages or Save the Children are widely cited in the context of national care reforms (Greenberg and Partskhaladze 2014; Ivanova and Bogdanov 2013; Ulybina, 2020), various other cross-border actors remain in the analytical shade. In other policy areas, scholars reveal a broad and growing range of influential global and transnational actors, which includes not just the 'usual suspects' like intergovernmental organizations and INGOs but also transnational companies and corporations (Bartley 2018; Hamann 2020), private regulatory bodies (Bartley 2022; Renckens et al., 2022; Ulybina 2015; Ulybina and Fennell 2013), think tanks, policy experts and consultants (Tallberg and Jönsson 2010; Thiel and Maslanik 2010), trans-governmental networks, transnational public-private partnerships (Downie 2019; Stone 2019), and informal institutions (Reiners 2021). Given that these organizations and individuals now penetrate and impact ever more areas of social life, it is important to investigate the agency of these groups of actors in the field of childcare. Some of these types of players are well known to childcare practitioners but have lacked scholarly attention, possibly because they – unlike UNICEF and advocacy NGOs – do not particularly seek publicity (e.g. private care providers, care corporations), or are not obviously associated with a problem of child institutionalization (e.g. charity regulators). Some of them may be in the process of consolidation into distinct transnational communities or networks concerned with (non-)institutional childcare.

Understand key factors of their agency, such as identities, norms, and values; resources and funding streams; domestic and international politics

Once we have identified the players in the global institutional childcare arena, we will need to look inside the black box of diverse transnational agency to understand how these actors differ from each other, where their ideas and motivations come from, who runs and

funds them, etc. This involves tackling several broad questions about their vision of childcare, resources, and limitations. How are these actors organized and managed? What drives their agency and affects their strategies? For example, why do many transnational actors support residential care facilities, despite the existence of globally respected pro-family UN Guidelines and a broad consensus on the detrimental effects of institutional childcare? Existing studies suggest that there are different types of INGOs active in residential childcare (Penn 2011; Ulybina 2020), yet available categorizations are ad hoc. Such analysis will require addressing practical challenges in obtaining information about some transnational actors, such as care corporations and philanthropic organizations which may not welcome scrutiny and attention to their potentially profitable activities.

An important question is about mutual relationships of these actors. Do these global and transnational actors constitute distinct transnational communities, and if so, how are they organized in terms of hierarchies, dependencies, legitimacy, and accountability, and ultimately how is this relevant for childcare? In other policy areas, researchers often investigate interactions between state and non-state actors. They show that these vary greatly with different degrees of hierarchy, (in)formality, direct or indirect influence, hard or soft forms of control (Downie 2019; Thiel and Maslanik 2010; Martens and Niemann 2022 on soft governance in global social policy). Potential proximity and mutual dependency of actors is crucial for understanding their agency in terms of representation and accountability, and ultimately the impact of their agency on national policies and practices.

To be fair, there are some studies that focus on transnational actors who shape institutional childcare. For example, a few studies reveal the national roots of transnational agency: how the European Union became a global advocate of childcare deinstitutionalization due to specific events in Romania and Bulgaria and the following pressure from the British public, British and Bulgarian NGOs, which led to the development of EU norms regarding child institutionalization (Ivanova and Bogdanov 2013; Radeva Hadjiev 2018). These studies also reveal the complex interplay between public and private actors, how private actors (transnationally active experts, NGOs, etc.) shape the transnational public agency (of the European Union). In other words, they show that transnational agency in childcare is a public-private hybrid, which suggests that it is probably prone to the same processes as transnational agency in other policy areas. Some other studies look at the characteristics of directors and donors of private faith-based residential care facilities (Insights into..., 2022) and discourses of transnational orphan care organizations (Freidus and Ferguson 2013). Now scholars need to build on these fragmented analyses and develop a systematic research programme, which would aim to understand the roots, nature and internal workings of transnational agency concerned with child institutionalization. More analysis along these lines exists in relation to domestic actors, for example Chege (2018) explores the legitimization strategies of *domestic* pro-orphanage charities, which secure the support of donors from the global North in order to run private residential care institutions. By building on this research and applying the same analytical perspectives to transnational actors, scholars will be better able to understand who (and how) shapes the global childcare landscape.

Importantly, scholars need to take a distanced view on the diverse population of transnational players and analyze all kinds of actors, both pro- and counter-orphanages, in the same terms. Research concerning child institutionalization is largely normative and aims to inform advocacy efforts and to facilitate deinstitutionalization, or broader childcare reforms. Hence, it primarily highlights deficiencies in the current global set-up that shapes childcare across countries and discusses transnational players to the extent they are associated with ‘problematic’ childcare practices or with resolving these problems. In this sense, studies of out-of-home childcare suffer from the same shortcoming as research in other social policy areas, where the analytical attention is often skewed by normative subjectivities of researchers. Studies of global social governance often consider actors who are legitimate from the point of view of Western academics and policymakers, leaving ‘alternative’ governance actors, who do not operate according to internationally endorsed guidelines and dominant codified norms, outside the analytical limelight (for a critique see [Triandafyllidou 2020](#)). In other words, researchers need to analyze various actors systematically, including those associated with normatively inferior behaviour (in our case this often means supporting institutional childcare).

Systematically analyse the effects of global and transnational agency on the policy and practice of child institutionalization

In other policy areas, given the growing number and diversity of transnational actors, scholars debate the implications of their agency for national policies and practices, as well as conditions that make their agency more effective, which is often understood as influencing the nation-state or other international actors ([Downie 2019](#); [Haang’andu and Béland 2020](#); [Thiel and Maslanik 2010](#)).

Research in other policy areas shows that the effects and ‘success’ of transnational agency vary. On the one hand, these actors shape global policy agendas, facilitate cross-border diffusion of policy ideas and models, create global private regulatory frameworks and employ market mechanisms to ensure compliance ([Deacon 2007](#); [Haang’andu & Béland 2020](#); [Martens and Niemann 2022](#)). On the other hand, in many cases, the effects of transnational agency remain limited ([Mitchell et al., 2020](#); [Wireko and Béland 2017](#)). Outcomes of transnational agency are increasingly debated, not least because of what their agency means for target populations or those whose interests transnational actors claim to represent. Transnational agency is often Eurocentric and underpinned by Western worldviews, which raises concerns about its accountability, representativeness, and democratic legitimacy ([Batliwala 2002](#); [Bexell et al., 2010](#)). To better understand the impact of cross-border agency on child institutionalization, scholars could also use such analytical frames and ask: Whose interests do these actors represent? What kind of authority do they appeal to? What are the sources of their legitimacy and power?

In relation to child institutionalization, existing studies and grey literature also indicate that the population of these actors and the results of their agency are diverse. A growing number of transnational actors promote the deinstitutionalization agenda, while others continue to support institutional care ([Mapping U.S. Support 2020](#)). Strong disagreements exist also within the global pro-deinstitutionalization community ([Rosenthal 2021](#)).

Although collectively, studies give us a sense of the overall complexity and heterogeneity of transnational agency in childcare, to our knowledge, there are no studies that would take the ongoing contestation of global policy norms regarding child institutionalization seriously and analyze the current global childcare landscape as an outcome of this contestation. Building on research of different policy areas, it would be useful to investigate to what extent the expansion and pluralization of transnational agency is also occurring in out-of-home childcare, as well as the implications of these processes.

Overall, although the available evidence is fragmented, there appears to be sufficient ground to conceptualize child institutionalization as an arena for increasingly complex transnational agency. With this paper, we propose to frame child institutionalization as a set of issues that can be better understood through the lens of global and transnational agency scholarship. The rise of global and transnational agency is a phenomenon spanning across many areas of social life, and out-of-home childcare scholars will benefit from considering what we already know about transnational agency in other sectors and how this applies to childcare.

It is striking that so many studies acknowledge the influence of transnational actors on the design and provision of institutional childcare and, at the same time, so few studies attempt to understand these actors and how their agency changes over time. There are some investigations along these lines. However, a lot more needs to be done to fulfil the promise of transnational methodology and transnational agency analysis. Scholars need to consider how out-of-home childcare is constituted as a whole, who sets the trends, why cross-border actors do what they do, and how they influence each other and domestic actors. This requires new empirical material to capture the multiplicities of transnationalization of out-of-home childcare, and the evolution of institutional childcare as an arena for transnational politics and agency.

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