

Narratives of social orphans in Latvia: Using a life history methodology to listen to the voices of care leavers

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Abstract. This study investigated social orphans through narratives of young people with experiences of growing up in institutional care in Latvia. The study uses the life histories of participants to explore the phenomenon of social orphans. To date, narratives about the lived experiences of social orphans in Latvia have been told in the third person, as most studies have used methodologies that kept participants passive rather than active. The research process in this study recorded 19 care leavers' life experiences in detail and covered three main life phases: 1) Prior to living in care; 2) Living in care; 3) Life after care. A thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Participants' experiences revealed some commonalities: factors that preceded children entering care, occurrences from care and life trajectories post-care. The findings also supported a deconstruction of stereotypes and dominant assumptions about orphanage care. They provide alternative narratives to what it means to grow up as a social orphan in Latvia. Notable were the strategies of self-reliance and resistance to adversity, as well as a preference for group care and a summation of what care leavers would like from professionals during care. Finally, recommendations for policy and practice are introduced; these emerged from the study findings and the positioning of the participants as 'knowledgeable of their experience'. This rich knowledge base can be used to support and inform the practice of children moving through the institutional care system in Latvia as well as in other contexts.

Key words: social orphan, care leavers, life history, narratives, Latvia.

1 Introduction

There are over 153 million registered orphans worldwide. It is widely accepted that the primary cause for many children globally, without parental care, is poverty [1]. The academic literature on orphans worldwide tends to fall into two categories: Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) literature and children who grow up in institutional care. The OVC literature focuses heavily on the impact of A-I-Ds and the decimation of traditional social structures and often focuses on Africa [2]. The latter category, children who grow up in institutional care, is more commonly associated with

countries of Eastern Europe, and, generally, has examined their impact of social care on child development. Included in these investigations are issues related to traumatic experiences, language acquisition, the child's ability to bond with others, attachment success and failures, and academic performance [3]. Most research on orphans focuses on the physical, psychological, and social well-being of the child. According to Marsh [4], children who grow up in institutions experience significant psychological challenges, impaired cognitive development, and misguided social functioning. Discussions that focus on the loss of parental care and the child's placement identify that they are highly vulnerable to physical and psychological damage. The psychological risks reported for children residing outside of parental care can often include traumatic disorders, attachment-related symptoms, developmental delays that can consist of cognitive and behavioural presentations and issues related to socio-emotional problems. Discourse from this perspective carries the strength of many scientists and, in many ways, paints a disheartening social and political picture of children in care that "if not troubled then certainly are troublesome" [5]. Agreeing with the substantial ramifications of the state of orphans, some social scientists focus their conclusions on other directions that perhaps offer a more hopeful picture.

The importance of an understanding of the United Nations Commission on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) when discussing children without parental care is two-fold. First, it is the most significant policy in states that have signed up to ratify the convention that informs practice on children's rights. Secondly, the focus in much of the academic and political discourse surrounding children in care is "a discussion of the needs and vulnerability of youth" [6] instead of discussing the *rights* they are afforded and entitled to. This sets the focus askew, and privileges the discussion and narrative of *vulnerability* and the need for protective measures for their vulnerability over the *rights* they were afforded thus deserve outright. That is not to say protective measures are not vitally necessary- yes, they are- however, the all-encompassing discourse on the protection of children overshadows the discussion, which at times lets those responsible for providing those rights off the hook. Not in an over washing manner where complexities are ignored, but in a specialized way, they are intended to protect children within their cultural context.

Academic research has then been predominantly evaluative, and as Emond pronounces, "the voices of children and young people in residential care have been somewhat muted. Few studies have been conducted with young people as the sole providers of data" [7]. This study sought to fill this gap in knowledge that Emond states in 2003 and persists today, in 2018, according research data in Latvia, "children and youths at institutional care are not asked to comment on their institutional care trajectories; they have not ever practised using their voice on matters related to their life" [8].

2 Aims and objectives

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of young people positioned as social orphans in Latvia from the first-hand perspective of social orphans. To explore the lived experiences of social orphans at three distinct periods in their life: before, during and after care.

3 Life history method of inquiry

The life history method of inquiry was chosen for this research. Life histories offer unique contributions to knowledge. While the use of life stories can be an empowering form of social research, according to [9], it often privileges voices that are excluded in other forms

of academic and/or social science investigations. The reflection of personal and social life in this method is communicated by the researcher who collects the life stories and acknowledges the subjectivity involved. For example, social orphans and care leavers are often excluded from conversations regarding decisions about the disposition of their lives.

Care leavers' stories provide more nuanced accounts of their aspirations and identities. In reading their stories, different people can comprehend the experiences of care leavers. Life history and narrative methodology in this case "serves as the ideal means for understanding how people see their own experiences, their own lives, and their interactions with others" [10]. There are different references regarding what constitutes a narrative. The inclusion of life stories, events, or personal narratives is understood as talk throughout an interview [8]. According to Bruner [11], narrative research identifies life histories offer an essential and unprecedented look into a person's life, including patterns of interactions, relationships, and ethics within a period [8].

4 Methods

The research took place over three weeks between February 5th and February 26th 2020.

There were 19 participants aged 18-25 years of age with histories of growing up in the orphanage. A purposive/snowball sampling approach was used to secure the participants. Participants were drawn from a diverse background of rural and urban locations and gender divisions and cultural backgrounds that occurred naturally. Interviews were conducted with the participants who came forward interested in participating in the study. Additionally, there was no discrimination based on race, culture, faith, religion, political or sexual orientation, and other features.

5 Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was accomplished and approved through the School of Education and Social Work Ethics processes at the University of Dundee in 2019. Ethical considerations are an iterative process reflected on in supervision and the field journal. Given that Latvia is a small country with an even smaller community of care leavers residing in Riga, confidentiality and anonymity were vital.

6 Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis in this study was completed through NVivo and manual analysis. According to Lincoln and Guba [12], the Thematic Analysis involves breaking down data into categories that become groupings. According to Braun and Clarke [13], thematic analysis can be applied across various theoretical and epistemological approaches. It is flexible and highly accessible, especially to first-time researchers. Categories of meaning and relationships between categories are derived from the data itself through inductive reasoning which aligns with this study. According to Madhill et al. [14], thematic analysis can be driven by the researcher's analytical interest in the research question and broader theoretical assumptions when looking at qualitative results. Additionally, the results are easily accessible to the general reader.

7 Findings

The themes that emerged were related to lived experiences at three different periods in the participants family histories; Prior to Care, During Care and After Leaving Care. Prior to

care, the themes were primarily connected to the reasons they were removed from parental care and exemplified by themes such as Parental Substance Abuse, Lack of Food, and Violence. The themes that emerged from During Care highlighted the importance of relationships and a sense of belonging, which they found most often within orphanage care. Lastly, in the period After Leaving Care, the themes that emerged connected to the continued significance of relationships and creating lives for themselves as young adults.

8 Discussion

The most significant finding from this study is a preference for group care, which is particularly significant in the current climate of de-institutionalism [15]. This study's findings challenge social discourse that regards group care for children as very negative and the last resort and foster care as the best choice [16]. In this study, there was a clear preference for group care, and four reasons for this preference were identified. These reasons include a sense of belonging, which was created through significant relationships with staff and peers, stability of placement and living space. The preference for foster care is a prominent topic in child welfare literature, and Latvia has joined with this ideal through a legislative commitment to close all orphanages by 2023 [17]. This assumption about family care is argued by Smith et al. [18] and is not founded in as much fact as it is in discourse contributed to by the well-known Romanian orphans' studies. These studies from Romania showed that when a child is placed in an institutional setting, institutional care's typical conditions make it less likely that children will develop healthy attachments [19]. This study found that participants had developed a sense of belonging having group care that stemmed from several areas they most often received in the orphanage versus foster care. The study suggests from the participants' accounts that a sense of belonging was critical to why group care worked for them, and almost all participants experienced this sense of belonging having group care. The essential factors for this experience of belonging in group care emerged from three elements which are significant relationships with both staff members and peers; a sense of stability supported by the regular routines and schedules as well as the typically longer-term placements; and a comfortable living space with items both personal and shared that were available to them.

9 Conclusions

Of several findings from this study that contribute to the research on social orphans in Latvia, the first was a preference for group care by the participants. The reason for this preference was aspects of group care that were not present for most of them in family placements. These aspects were a feeling of belonging, which was contributed to by three factors: relationships with staff members and peers; a sense of stability through routines and length of placement, and living space through personal and shared spaces as well as location.

The second significant finding was that care leavers were highly resilient, which opposes the robust discourse of vulnerability that social orphans and care leavers are surrounded by. The last essential findings were a recommendation from care leavers for two things that would improve life trajectories. These included more vocational training and increased inclusion in decision making regarding care decisions that affect them.

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