

After the Iron curtain: Poor parenting and state intervention in cross cultural perspective

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Across many contemporary societies the quality of parenting is increasingly seen as imperative, not only for the well-being of individual children, but for the health of communities as a whole. This kind of parenting has been objectified in research, policy and applied fields, and reflected in a number of concepts outlining certain parental styles: ‘Concerted cultivation’, ‘intensive’, and ‘paranoid’ parenting are concerned with ‘more’ than the basic childcare that many mothers feel they should do for their children.

The opposite of this is ‘poor’ parenting or ‘unfit’ parents – defined not so much by an approach, as the absence of it. Poor parenting is most often tied to *expectations* of poor outcomes, where children are seen as being at risk of neglect or maltreatment. Intervention by the state is aimed at ensuring children be saved from such parents, either through training, or by placing children in settings that provide more appropriate care. Foster families, or institutional settings are seen as substitutes to being brought up by birth families with poor parenting skills, despite much research outlining problems associated with each alternative. Since much of the social science research on the topic has been done in what’s called ‘Euro-America’, however, the explanatory framework usually draws on elements of capitalist market economies and social stratifications, such as class, poverty, gender inequality and race.

This workshop is concerned with this issue of ‘poor’ parenting. Child rearing practices (the work of parents) and child welfare practices (the work of the state and society) in different countries are based on particular ideologies of parenthood, and on culturally accepted concepts of childhood and parenthood. Taken at face value, the concept of ‘poor’ parenting may look very different in countries with different political, ideological and socio-economic structures such as liberal democracies of the UK and the US, and socialist, and then ‘transitional’ Russia and Eastern Europe. Yet one study has revealed some (tentative) uncanny similarities in child welfare practices between these countries. For example, similarities in governmental policies of pronatalism, women’s employment and child socialization – and the role of the state with its

double-edge sword of support and control – seem to have contributed to the ways in which the state assumes control over children. Where children end up depends on the differences in availability of infrastructure: in the UK, for example, a child could be rehabilitated within the birth family with the help of social services, while in (post)-Soviet Russia, the old infrastructure of public social support has collapsed, and the new individualized support had not been sufficiently established even on the ideological level. Hence there are more children in Russia that have been raised outside their birth families as compared to the UK and the US.

We would like to further problematize the concept of ‘poor’ parenting by making it an analytical concept and placing it in a comparative context. Thus we are asking three main questions: (1) What constitutes ‘poor’ parenting in a particular country? (2) What are the underlying concepts of childhood and parenthood? (3) Are there any similarities between child welfare practices and what accounts for these similarities? We can ask further:

- What vocabulary exists to label families viewed as ‘unfit’ to bring up their children?
- Who and what are these ‘unfit’ parents (or whatever concept there exists to outline their inappropriate child rearing practices)? What constitutes their being ‘unfit’? What might be ontologies of particular concepts of poor parenting?
- Are they seen as individuals or as belonging to a particular group? In what terms can this group be described? In socio-economic? Moral? As deviants? As marginalised?

As a background reading we suggest two publications by the organizers, where many of the above areas have been outlined and problematized.

- Lee, Ellie, Jennie Bristow, Charlotte Faircloth and Jan Macvarish. (eds). 2014. *Parenting Culture Studies*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elena Khlinovskaya Rockhill. 2010. *Lost to the state: Family discontinuity, social orphanhood and residential care in the Russian Far East*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn

We invite papers for a one-day workshop at the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge. Papers are expected to be no more than 20 minutes long, allowing plenty of time for discussion. The workshop will take place in June, on either 8th, 10th or 11th. Please indicate your preference when submitting your abstract, of no more than 250 words to the organizers.