

Toward a Theory of Permanent Environmental Reassignment for Residential Childcare: A Comprehensive Research Agenda for the 21st Century

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Abstract

Historically there have been two residential childcare institutions in Armenia: orphanages and special boarding schools. The children housed in these facilities are either natural orphans (i.e., children who have no living family or whose biological parents have had their familial rights terminated) or social orphans (i.e., children with living biological parents who are unable or unwilling to care for them but whose rights have not been terminated). In recent years, Armenia's "transitional centers" have offered a residential alternative for older teenage girls who have outgrown the traditional orphanage but who are not yet ready for independent living. While institutionalization has historically been castigated as contrary to a child's best interests, our previous research suggests that residential childcare facilities (RCF) provide vulnerable children with a safe haven during times of crisis, a loving environment through intimate relationships with staff and peers, emotional stability during formative years, an improved standard of living, and superior opportunities upon reaching the age of majority. These transitional centers, invaluable to the continuum of care, suggest that permanent environmental reassignment is the ideal path when familial care is surrendered or expropriated.

Keywords: Armenia, residential childcare facilities, environmental reassignment, orphanages

1. Introduction

Children have the right to be protected from economic exploitation and poverty, sexual abuse, and physical or mental violence, and all governments who adhere to international law should promote child protection consistent with international human rights standards. The "best interests of the child" (BIC) norm, the guiding principle in international children's rights law, is used by decision-makers to make placement decisions when parental care is compromised. The BIC holds that, "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" [Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989]. This standard requires balancing "all the elements necessary to make a decision in a specific situation for a specific individual child or group of children" (CRC, 1989) and assuring that all decisions are made to foster the child's happiness, security, and emotional development.

The Philosophy of the Family and Child Protection

In the context of evaluating child rearing alternatives, identifying the morally correct outcome is challenging. The prevailing position is that children raised by biological parents enjoy more positive outcomes, and suffer fewer negative outcomes, than children raised in alternative child rearing environments (Izendoorn et al., 2008; M.D.S. Ainsworth, 197; Bowlby, 1958). The theory presupposes that the love a child receives from a biological parent (or parents) exceeds the

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emotional support that could be provided from a surrogate caregiver, and that the nurturing provided by biological parents outweighs any tangible advantages that an RCF may offer. Child protection raises philosophical questions about the relationship between biological relations and child rearing; the role and duty of the state to intervene in child protection; and what considerations should justify placing a child with alternative caregivers. Here, we explore the philosophical nexus between caregiver and child and the roles and obligations of the family and state in child rearing.

Early Modern Philosophy

The Age of Reason of the seventeenth century, the Age of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, advances in science, the growth of religious tolerance, and the rise of liberalism marked the beginning of modern philosophy (Weber, 1992). The period can be seen as an ongoing battle between two opposing doctrines: rationalism, the belief that all knowledge arises from intellectual and deductive reason; and empiricism, the belief that all knowledge comes from experience (Weber, 1992). The first of the British Empiricists was John Locke, who believed that humans had absolute natural rights (Tully, 2007). Locke developed social contract theory, which formed the theoretical underpinning for democracy and the modern criminal justice system. Thomas Hobbes described how the modern state was a “social contract” where individuals relinquished natural rights for protection by the state (Hobbes, 1968), while Immanuel Kant combined rationalism and empiricism and theorized that an action can only be good if the principle behind it is duty to the moral law (Oberst, 2015). The philosophy of Hegel during the early nineteenth century was that all reality is capable of being expressed in rational categories (Hegel and Dyde, 1896). The most systematic of the post-Kantian idealists, Hegel deduced a comprehensive philosophy from a logical starting point and used his system of dialectics to illuminate the history of science, art, politics, and religion (Hegel and Dyde, 1896).

The Relationship between Biological Relations and Child Rearing

The concept of the family is enmeshed with love, duty, and responsibility. More than two centuries ago, Kant asserted that parents and children collectively formed a family, which, by virtue of the union itself, entitled children to various rights and prescribed responsibilities to parents (Kant, 1999). While familial decline is often rooted in utilitarian philosophy, Kant’s non-utilitarianism accords a place to certain moral absolutes: duties and the rights that flow to others as a result of those obligations (Almond, 2012). In the framework of child protection, these maxims dictate parental obligations to children, bestow rights to children from parents, and prescribe interventionist duties to the state when parents forfeit their obligations or when children’s health and safety are compromised.

Hegel extended the concept of familial union by focusing on the emotional connection between parents and children. He noted that, “the family . . . is specifically characterised by love, which is mind’s feeling of its own unit, and . . . in a family, one’s frame of mind is to have self-consciousness of one’s individuality within this unity as the absolute essence of oneself . . .” (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 158). Hegel believed that the family unit and love are inimitable, and that the family is best seen as a collection of interdependent persons rather than individual units. That is, the unique characteristic of each individual is absorbed into the social unit (one is an integral part of one’s family), with these interrelationships conferring obligations from parents to children and bestowing entitlements for children through parents.

Stability within the family unit is one right to which children are entitled. Hegel not only asserted that all individuals have a natural right to live within a family unit, but that this right becomes more absolute if the family unit dissolves (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 159). He saw the family unit as a multi-phase evolution: marriage, which forms the family; property and capital, which builds the family; and the education of children and the dissolution of the family, which signals the end of the filial unit (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 160). The duties conferred to one’s spouse and children, and the relinquishment of freedoms to the family unit, begin with marriage. Two individuals with no previous obligation to each other relinquish their identities to form a spousal unit. Procreation extends the spousal agreement to children, when a husband and wife surrender additional freedoms (e.g., time and money) to offspring when they decide, as a spousal unit, to procreate. The spousal unit not only decides to create a child but should contemplate all eventualities associated with child rearing. These acts of collective decisionmaking mean that, if successful, spouses will become parents, forming a larger family unit and with it assuming greater obligations. Children are entitled to effective child rearing by virtue of their birth.

This philosophical position holds that individuals have special obligations to offspring who they “caused into existence” – that is, biological parents incur moral obligations to their offspring when they *choose* to procreate, and children, biologically determined by virtue of their parents’ decision-making, enjoy certain rights because of this causal relationship. According to Hegel, children were the byproduct of a married couple’s union, stating that, “it is only in the children that the unity itself exists externally, objectively, and explicitly as a unity, because the parents love the children as their love, as the embodiment of their own substance” (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 173). Because Hegel assumed that a married couple comes together through love and unity, children are the essence of their devotion to one another. Hegel

noted that, “in the child, a mother loves its father and he its mother. Both have their love objectified for them in the child” (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 173).

Extending this logic to the relationship between biological relations and child rearing, biological parents can offer children the most love and support because of this unique biological relationship. Inversely, because non-biological caregivers did not create the children (i.e., the offspring were not the product of a married couple’s unity), they cannot offer the same love as biological parents. This is the justification that advocates of family reunification use in their critique of institutionalization and adoption as suitable child rearing surrogates. Hegel supported stability of the family, recognizing that familial development is processual and deeming the family the most effective alternative within the child rearing hierarchy. He suggested that children are a protected class who deserve to live with their biological family. This right is fundamental and should be uprooted only when the familial situation becomes so acute that the child’s interests are compromised. While the family unit is the basis of society, the right to live with and be reared by biological family is not absolute, as circumstances arise that may trigger a child’s removal from the familial home.

The distinctive emotional relationship between biological parents and children, created by procreation and nurtured through child rearing, gives rise to strong moral obligations. According to Hegel, the creation of children through a married couple’s love not only establishes an emotional bond, but confers upon children tangible rights and promulgates certain responsibilities on parents. Hegel asserted that, “children have the right to maintenance and education at the expense of the family’s common capital” (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 174), and that, “the right of the parents to the service as service of their children is based upon and is restricted by the common task of looking after the family generally” (Hegel and Dyde, 1896: § 174). Thus, children are bestowed certain inherent rights by their birth into a family unit, and biological parents, having chosen to procreate, assume duties of protecting or maintaining the family unit and providing for their children.

A biological connection with a child is not the only relationship that creates the moral obligation of child rearing. Parental duties flow from more than procreation. When biological families relinquish child rearing responsibilities, the state may be forced to intervene. This state intervention, which should be immediate and may be permanent, augments parental supervision to safeguard the welfare of children. A biological family, therefore, is not required to consummate adequate child rearing, but its absence may determine the extent to which an outside (non-biological) entity must serve as a suitable surrogate for biological caregivers.

While Hegel addressed the “natural dissolution of the family unit,” he did not consider what happens to children and parents when the child rearing obligation is broken. First, the rights children enjoy at birth and which continue through adolescence do not evanesce merely because primary caregivers are no longer able or willing to care for them. Under any rational protection system, a child’s fundamental rights survive through the age of majority. The more important issue is determining who should assume the duty of ensuring entitlements to children when biological parents are unable or unwilling to do so. The duty of protecting rights must be assumed by an outside authority, which, in most cases, is the state. This requires that the prevailing governmental authority assume the responsibility of assuring that society’s most vulnerable children are sheltered when the biological relationship dissolves.

Second, once a parent’s child rearing obligation is either surrendered or expropriated, a new caregiver must be identified. These alternative caregivers may or may not be biological family, but the process will involve placement into an alternative child rearing environment. The state has a moral and legal obligation to identify a suitable environment that satisfies a child’s developmental, emotional, and tangible needs. This is not an uncomplicated calculus and will almost certainly need to be accomplished quickly and without the benefit of child-specific details that are often critical to identifying the *best* placement alternative.

Third, unless a biological parent’s rights are relinquished or terminated, they may be invested in the consequences of alternative placement. As such, biological parents should be involved, to some degree, in alternative placement determinations and assessments for institutionalization. This involvement, however, should be curtailed if the biological family’s interest in reunification is compromised. Biological parents who refuse to address barriers to reunification, for example, demonstrate such indifference that continued contact may be detrimental to the child’s long-term emotional well-being.

Fourth, placement decisions should not be static. A child’s needs, and the environment in which s/he is reared, is a process that should be revisited regularly to adjust for naturally occurring changes to, and emotional fluctuations within, the child and environment. While consistency and continuity may be the benchmarks of placement determinations, a child is perpetually maturing. If familial reunification is to be weighed against adoption or institutionalization, there must be a comprehensive understanding of what advantages and disadvantages are associated with each child rearing environment so that a decision can be made intelligently.

Since the onset of the twentieth century, philosophers expanded this parent-child relationship and the rights and duties that

flow from this relationship. In the child-centered model, parental rights accompany responsibilities to children, which are morally fundamental. According to Blustein's "priority thesis," parents acquire rights to carry out their responsibilities (Blustein, 1982). A parent can choose for their child and exclude others from making these choices, constrained by a duty to care for the child. Other theories provide more plausible support for parent-centered rights. Brighthouse and Swift (2006) argue for parental rights on the basis of the good offered by parenting. Because parenting is a project with goods which cannot be obtained through other activities, such as the responsibility of caring for a child and the receipt of children's spontaneous trust, affection, and intimacy, the interest in parenting should be protected. Brighthouse and Swift (2006) generate this account partly in response to the challenge of redistribution, or the notion that children should be redistributed at birth to the best prospective parents to maximize children's welfare.

Hegel argued that biological relationship/procreation is the basis of parental love and responsibility, while Brighthouse and Swift (2006) suggest that biology is irrelevant. The former assumes that biological parents always maintain the interest and ability to provide the love and support children need while the latter favors caregiving reassignment without considering the biological connection between caregiver and child. A more intermediate approach would involve the consideration and empirical assessment of all relevant variables. In this formulation, the love and support offered by a biological family can be weighed against the real-world benefits a child could receive outside of the family unit.

The Role and Duty of the State to Intervene in Child Protection

One conception of the state's role as a guardian of rights can be found in social contract theory, which suggests that a person's moral and political rights and obligations are based on an agreement to form the society in which they live. According to Hobbes, the justification for state obligation is that man submits to state authority in exchange for living in a civil society (Hobbes, 1968). This authority provides the moral justification for protecting citizens within state boundaries. Kant (1999: § 49) described a hierarchical relationship between the state and its denizen, arguing that, the state should, ". . . treat its subjects as members of one family but it also treats them as citizens of the state, that is, in accordance with laws of their own independence." Adults and children become part of the sovereign's family and benefit from the protections to which they are entitled.

While social contract theory is typically discussed in terms of political and criminal justice rights, the implication for child rearing is no less significant. The social contract assumes that children should be the responsibility of parents unless they are unable or unwilling to fulfill their obligations. Caregivers are entrusted to make important decisions for their children. Barring a physical danger to the child, these decisions are not regulated by the state. In exchange for the freedom to raise children unimpeded by state interference, the family concedes that the state can and should intercede if and when a child's health or safety is compromised.

Children need protection to become autonomous, emotionally healthy adults. Biological parents are charged with the initial responsibility to provide this care, with the state intervening when parents abdicate their duties. When abandonment occurs, the state assumes the protectionist role. This distinction is critical because it provides, first, the legal justification for intervention, and second, requires the state to determine what environment outside of the family unit can foster the best interests of the child. The state's role as child guardian is significant. The most challenging decision is determining what child rearing environment offers the best short- and long-term outcomes, as there is considerable variability in alternative caregiving environments. There is considerable diversity in childcare settings: a nuclear (two-parent) biological family; a one-parent biological family; kinship care; foster care; institutionalization in a private or state facility; domestic adoption; or international adoption. While it is common for children to experience multiple alternative childcare environments throughout childhood, the placement decision will ultimately dictate where children reside during their most formative developmental period. As such, it is important to evaluate the decision-making process and consider how practitioners select alternative child rearing environments that satisfy the child's best interests.

Decisionmaking and Alternative Child Rearing Environments

Gheaus has made the most compelling philosophical argument in favor of nonparental care (Gheaus, 2012), suggesting that when parental care is no longer a viable alternative, the two most important steps are accepting that "care" is a primary good, and second, determining what alternative environment can offer the best care. In the case of child placement, the primary practical consequence is often *identifying* the most suitable alternative child rearing environment. The choice of kinship care, institutionalization, or adoption is based on *expected* outcomes. Expected outcomes, however, do not satisfy the consequentialist's need for *actual positive outcomes*. Because consequentialism judges whether or not something is right by its consequences, the relevant outcome is determining where and with whom a child should reside if biological parents are no longer a viable option. The choice of where (i.e., environmental reassignment) and with whom (i.e., an alternative caregiver), however, should only be part of the calculus.

While the choice of setting and caregiver is critical, child placement consequences are better assessed in terms of the child's acclimation *to* the new environment and *with* the alternative caregiver. From an empirical perspective, outcome

variables might include school attendance, improved hygiene, and emotional stability. If a surrogate caregiver prompts increased school attendance (which should lead to better academic performance), improved hygienic practices (because of ready access to soap and hot water), and greater emotional stability (because of less abuse), the consequentialist argues that “better outcomes” have been achieved.

The “outcome calculus” should be a fluid process. The consequentialist would argue that policymakers should assess potential and actual outcomes of the alternative childcare environment and caregiver perpetually, weighing practical outcomes against the *potential or anticipated* consequences of reunification. If conditions within the child’s biological family improve, policymakers can then consider in which environment positive outcomes for the child can be best fulfilled. Institutionalization may also trigger negative outcomes which would have to be weighed against positive gains. In an institution, children relinquish privacy and the familiarity of a birth environment. These negative consequences should be weighed against the positive outcomes offered by the facility and the positive and negative effects triggered by reunification. Ultimately, the issues for decisionmakers include *how* alternative childcare decisions get made, what variables are considered when evaluating one setting over another, and whether there is an obligation for the state to reconsider the biological family as a suitable caregiver even after a child has been removed from the familial environment. Utilitarian thinkers would approach the determination with a cost-benefit analysis of advantages and disadvantages. The calculus would minimally involve weighing the love and emotional support that should be received with biological parents, along with the dysfunction that renders familial care impractical, against the advantages (e.g., regular access to education) and disadvantages (e.g., a potentially less affectionate environment) of an alternative childcare setting.

2. Institutionalization on Child Development

There are approximately 153 million orphaned children worldwide.² The most frequent causes of separating children from parents include poverty, abuse, neglect, disability, and emergencies/natural disasters. Studies and anecdotal reports have shown that the majority of orphanages worldwide are large, which naturally contributes to a lower level of care. In Uganda, for example, the number of orphanages went from thirty in late 1992 to an estimated 800 in 2013 (Boothby et al., 2012). In Armenia, the institutions vary in size, housing as few as 20 children to more than 200. The larger facilities in Armenia are those that house children with special needs.

Poverty is often cited as the reason for placing children in orphanages (Bilson and Cox, 2007). Parents often surrender their children to orphanages to address a financial crisis. In many regions where poverty is prevalent, evidence demonstrates the “pull factor” of residential care as the means of meeting such basic needs as food, access to education, and other services for children (Bilson and Cox, 2007). A recent study in Europe found that, in more than 90% of cases, poverty and homelessness were the true causes of child abandonment and subsequent placement in orphanages (University of Nottingham, 2012). In parts of Africa and Asia, poverty, parental illness, and irregular access to education (transportation and supplies) are important variables that lead to placement of children in residential care (University of Nottingham, 2012).

Developmental Theories

Most developmental theories emphasize the importance of early childhood experiences for social development (Bowlby, 1958). The overarching theme is that child rearing must involve sustained and meaningful interaction between child and caregiver. Attachment theory suggests that a smaller number of stable, caring adults provides the foundation for appropriate social-emotional development and long-term mental health (Bowlby, 1958). An infant with a nurturing, responsive caregiver develops an internal model of supportive expectations from that caregiver. Infants that are hungry know a responsible caregiver will provide food and milk, reinforcing the reliance on the caregiver. These intimate experiences promote the development of trust and self-esteem. Without these early attachment experiences, long-term development may be compromised.

Negative Effects of Institutional Living

The best available studies demonstrate that, compared to a family environment, most orphanages, particularly for infants and young children, do not support a child’s proper development (Johnson and Gunnar, 2011). Placement in orphanages may produce negative long-term effects on children’s physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development (Johnson and Gunnar, 2011). Children raised in largescale orphanages have growth problems, including stunting (severe growth delay) and impairments in fine and gross motor skills and coordination (Dobrova-Khol et al.,

²See

[https://www.sos-usa.org/our-impact/focus-areas/advocacy-movement-building/childrens-statistics#:~:text=ORPHANS, worldwide%20are%20orphans%20\(UNICEF\).](https://www.sos-usa.org/our-impact/focus-areas/advocacy-movement-building/childrens-statistics#:~:text=ORPHANS,worldwide%20are%20orphans%20(UNICEF).)

2008).

The larger the facility, the less likely that children receive care from a consistent caregiver focusing on the child's individualized needs. Typically, children will be group-fed on a schedule rather than on demand, diapers will be changed on a schedule rather than as needed, and less attention will be paid to a child's social and emotional development. Poor quality care and a lack of individualized stimulation can lead not only to health and developmental problems, but to isolation and lack of identity (the core sense of self that is developed through close relationships).

Children raised in biological, foster, and adoptive families demonstrate better physical, intellectual, and developmental outcomes as compared to children living in institutional care (Stamoulis et al., 2015; Zeanah et al., 2003). The Bucharest Early Intervention Project, for example, studied 136 abandoned infants and toddlers and randomly assigned half to foster care, while the remaining children remained in Romanian childcare institutions. Over a twelve-year span, both groups were assessed for physical growth, cognitive functioning, brain development, and social behavior. Data from children raised by their birth families were collected for comparison. The study found that the institutionalized children were severely impaired in IQ and manifested a variety of social and emotional disorders and changes in brain development compared to their non-institutionalized counterparts (Zeanah et al., 2003).

Negative effects associated with orphanages are more severe the longer a child remains in large-scale residential care and are most critical in children under three years of age when a child requires intimate emotional and physical bonding. If this attachment is absent, there is a high risk that development will be impaired. The data suggest that failing to place a child in family-based care before the age of six months can have devastating consequences. When children are in families, they do not "age out" of care. They remain connected to their parents, siblings, and community and have a social support network. This is infrequently the case with children living in orphanages. When children reach the age of majority, they typically must leave the orphanage. These youth (care leavers) are often unprepared for independent life, which can result in unemployment, homelessness, conflict with the law, and sexual exploitation.

3. Residential Childcare in Armenia

Armenia acceded to the CRC in June 1993 (Dillon, 2010), and this obligation requires adherence to the BIC standard. Historically there have been two RCF in Armenia: orphanages and special boarding schools. Armenia's orphanages are full-time residential facilities for healthy and special needs children. The children housed in Armenia's orphanages are either natural orphans (i.e., children who have no living family or whose parents have had their rights terminated) or social orphans (i.e., children with living biological parents that are unwilling or unable to care for them for reasons typically related to poverty, domestic violence, and/or alcohol and drug use). Natural orphans have been permanently relinquished to the institution and, barring foster care or adoption, are institutionalized until at least the age of eighteen. They eat, sleep, and socialize in the facility but go to public school in the community. Parents of social orphans retain legal rights over their children but have temporarily ceded those rights to the facility.

Armenia's special boarding schools house healthy and special needs children who have been referred for institutionalization because of disability, truancy, and/or delinquency. Because of their disabilities and danger to the community, they do not attend public school. Rather, those children who are developmentally healthy enough are educated within the special boarding school environment. Unlike the orphanages, children in the special boarding schools rarely leave the facility. They eat, sleep, are educated, and socialize within the institution.

There are several distinguishing factors among Armenia's residential childcare facilities. First, there are both private and state-managed childcare facilities in Armenia. There are no private, special boarding schools in Armenia, but several of the orphanages are private facilities. Inversely, several of the orphanages, and all of the special boarding schools, are government funded. Second, all of Armenia's state institutions, and several of the private facilities, distinguish by age. Children under the age of six are usually housed in different facilities than those between the ages of six and eighteen. Third, the facilities are also distinguished by disability and health status. Healthy children are typically separated from those with special needs. In turn, several state and private institutions house only healthy children. Fourth, there are four transitional centers in Armenia that house healthy, older teenage girls who have outgrown the traditional orphanage but who are not yet ready for independent living. Because there is compulsory military service for males at age 18, there are no transitional centers for males. Table 1 summarizes the 21 RCF in Armenia: 13 orphanages,³ four special boarding schools,⁴ and four transitional centers.⁵

³ Children's Home of Gyumri; Children's Home of Yerevan (Nork); Dzorak Care Center; Gavar Orphanage; Kharberd Specialized Orphanage; Mari Izmirlyan; Mer Houys; Our Lady of Armenia Center (OLA); Sisters of Charity (Bethlehem and Spitak); SOS Children's Villages (Idjevan and Kotayk); and Zadik Child Care Center.

⁴ Boarding School #2 of Fridtjof Nansen; Vardashen Special School #1; Yerevan Boarding School #1 for Child Care and

Table 1. Summary of Armenia's Residential Childcare Institutions

	Orphanages	Special Boarding Schools	Transitional Centers
State-Funded Facility	7	4	0
Private Facility	6	0	4
Children < 6	3	0	0
Children ≥ 6	10	4	4
Healthy	8	0	4
Special needs	5	4	0

The Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief (SOAR)⁶ was founded in the fall of 2005 as a charitable organization that provides humanitarian relief to orphaned children living in Armenia. Represented by 145 Chapters, 4 Junior groups, and more than 600 volunteers worldwide, SOAR supports 34 institutions – orphanages, special boarding schools, day centers, summer camps, and transitional centers – in Armenia, Artsakh, Javakh, and Lebanon. Of the four transitional centers in Armenia, two are owned/managed by SOAR. SOAR's two transitional centers, opened in Gyumri in December 2019 and Yerevan in August 2022, are residential settings for older teenage girls who have outgrown the traditional orphanage but who are not yet ready for independent living. These young women go to college, are enriched by SOAR's academic and professional programs, appreciate volunteerism, learn essential life skills, including home and money management, build self-nurturance and self-confidence, and prepare themselves for emotional, fiscal, and professional independence.

Childcare Research in Armenia

Few empirical studies have addressed the risks of institutionalized children in Armenia. Within the past two years, SOAR's access to Armenia's RCF has triggered several empirical works that have reshaped the philosophy of child protection. Unlike in other countries where central branches of government decline access to children house in RCF, SOAR has access to the state and private facilities. This access not only affords opportunities to conduct primary research with a vulnerable population of youth but also suggests that humanitarian organizations, like SOAR, are a gateway to access that would be difficult, if not impossible, for traditional human rights monitoring organizations. SOAR's relationship with the institutions and national authorities in Armenia is a product of trust, mutual respect, and a willingness to address human rights issues without advertising or condemning any actual or perceived violations.

Our recent research suggests that RCF compliant with international law offer residential childcare opportunities that may supersede those of family care. In early 2020 (Yacoubian, 2022), we explored six constructs among a sample of children housed in Armenia's RCF: abuse and neglect; education; food safety; hygiene; institutionalization and reunification; and sexual abuse. The results across all constructs were strong. Almost all of the children (93%) reported getting to school on time, going to school every day (93%), and receiving help with homework from facility staff or from other children in the institution (94%) (Yacoubian, 2022). With respect to abuse and neglect, 96% reported that no one at the facility ever made them feel scared or unsafe. A high majority (97%) reported never having been touched or been asked to touch someone else in a sexual way, and no children had ever been offered money to do sexual things (Yacoubian, 2022). With respect to hygiene, almost all of the children did not wear clothes (97%) or shoes (96%) that smell, used deodorant (66%), and washed their entire body (99%) (Yacoubian, 2022). Most recently, 160 children housed in Armenia's RCF were interviewed between February and May 2021 (Yacoubian and Bardakjian, in press). Results indicated that the children perceive each other as siblings, while the relationship between the children and directors is nurturing and supportive (Yacoubian and Bardakjian, in press). Taken collectively, these findings suggest that Armenia's RCF offer a loving and emotionally protective environment within which society's most vulnerable children can be reared with potentially lower risk of negative, long-term outcomes. The lessons learned from this study shed light on how best to develop policies advancing international child protection. While biological families may be perceived as serving the best interests of the child because of a genetic relationship, the dismissal of RCF as efficacious alternatives is misguided. Rather than reflexively advocating for their repudiation, which may deny vulnerable children a *de facto* familial environment, decisionmakers should weigh the consequences of child rearing with biological family against *all* alternative environments, including institutionalization.

Protection; and Yerevan Special School #11 (Nubarashen).

⁵ While transitional centers are intended for females 18 years of age and older, they sometimes accept younger girls. As such, these four institutions are included under the residential childcare rubric: Mer Doon; OLA Annie Bezikian Youth Center (Kanakaner); and SOAR's Transitional Centers in Gyumri and Yerevan.

⁶ www.soar-us.org.

4. Discussion

While our research should allow decisionmakers to reconsider the negative stigma of RCF, more work is needed. First, our findings are based on research conducted in Armenia, a culturally homogenous, Christian, democratic, second world nation. The extent to which these findings are generalizable to other countries is an empirical question that can only be answered with future research. While there is no reason to believe that our research methods are not suitable for replication, the protocol will likely need to be adjusted to accommodate radically different cultures.

Second, the BIC standard and determination are subjective. As with all independent assessments, they may be influenced by biases and preconceptions. There are some who advocate for the repudiation of all residential childcare facilities under all circumstances. This myopic approach to child protection does not reflect the real-world realities that exist anywhere children are abandoned, abused, or forgotten.

Third, our earlier work (Yacoubian, 2022) focused only on six human rights concepts. When this project was conceived, it was intended to be a first step into the unseen world of residential childcare in Armenia. Toward that end, certain constructs, like routine medical care, were excluded. Future studies should expand the quantity of human rights domains or focus on a smaller number of concepts in greater detail.

Fourth, the data collection protocols we employed involved a multimethod approach with various advantages and disadvantages. While self-report data collection is inexpensive, can be performed relatively quickly, and can be anonymized to protect sensitive information, it has limitations. Respondents may distort when they convey personal experiences and many individuals may be influenced by “social desirability,” the tendency to give socially desirable responses instead of choosing responses that reflect their true feelings (Latkin et al., 2017). Potential bias may intensify when the study involves provocative topics, such as politics and religion, or sensitive, personal issues like criminal activity, drug use, and sexual abuse.

Fifth, children under the age of ten were excluded from our surveys because of the subject matter and a perceived lack of intellectual maturity. Future research should determine an appropriate age range for answering questions related to non-sensitive topics, like education, and sensitive topics, like abuse and neglect, which may cause embarrassment and trigger negative emotions among younger children.

Sixth, the ramifications of institutionalization on outcomes measures into adulthood is unknown. Longitudinal studies would offer the most scientifically defensible approach for studying the impact of alternative caregiving environments on development. The ideal research design would match children in two-parent households (across gender and age minimally) to children raised by single parents and in kinship care, children in residential childcare institutions and foster care, and children adopted domestically and internationally. By tracking the samples from infancy through adulthood, the caregiving environments can be evaluated across a variety of outcomes, including alcohol and drug use, criminal involvement, general happiness, education, job history, income, and emotional maturity.

Environmental Reassignment

Population control and regulation by the state and/or medical professionals is accomplished to protect the subject or the general public. Drawing on incarceration and residential substance abuse, “environmental reassignment” holds that people can and should be removed to alternative living environments if a determination is made that said removal is in their best interests and/or that of the community. In the context of child protection, environmental reassignment suggests that, on a case-by-case basis, children can and should be removed from the care of biological family when their best interests are compromised within the home environment and that, if circumstances require, that removal be permanent.

Incarceration serves as the prime example of social control and exemplifies how members of society (i.e., accused and convicted criminals) are removed from law-abiding society to both advance individual (e.g., rehabilitation and specific deterrence) and societal (e.g., incapacitation, general deterrence, and retribution) penal aims. The philosophical rationale for this “reassignment” from free society to an incarcerative setting is ultimately irrelevant, as is the empirical support for any of the traditional aims of punishment. What is most important is that all legal systems allow for the forced removal of criminals from law-abiding society to an incarcerative setting. For society’s most egregious offenses – such as an intentional, premeditated homicide – the death penalty may be imposed, or the offender may be sentenced to life without parole. In either scenario, the criminal offender’s environmental reassignment is permanent.

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) addiction is a chronic struggle, and relapses occur even after long periods of sobriety. While individuals can voluntarily enter residential substance abuse treatment, forced admission can be compelled through the criminal justice system, as part of a diversionary program, or as a condition of imposed through disposition (i.e., sentencing). That is, the criminal justice system can be required as a condition of pretrial release, probation, or parole. Whether residential AOD treatment increases the likelihood of sobriety or other positive long-term outcomes or

unfairly restricts a person's liberty is irrelevant. For the purposes of "environmental reassignment," key decision-makers within the criminal justice system (e.g., judges and probation officers) have the authority to compel confinement in an AOD treatment facility.

The international community generally, and Armenia specifically, should encourage institutionalization as an alternative to family-based child rearing when this care is compromised. If family-based care is the environment within which a child's interests are best served, forging a surrogate, permanent family is imperative. While the child placement calculus is challenging, the BIC standard requires that practitioners espouse permanent environmental reassignment as part of the plethora of alternative settings and surrogate caregivers available to children when care from biological parents is no longer possible or in the child's best interests.

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