The effects of residential care in Switzerland on life trajectories

by Thomas Gabriel
July 5, 2017

Research on the long-term effects of institutional care on life trajectories provides crucial and sometimes unexpected insights. Findings show a complex interplay of resilience and vulnerability. It is clear that more evidence is needed to guide policy and practice.

Despite problematic conditions in Swiss residential care facilities between 1940 and 1990 and the negative effects of such conditions on children’s development, many of those affected were ultimately able to take charge of their lives and steer them in a positive direction.

Decades after leaving institutional care, many former residents have acquired self-confidence and in some cases benefited from the support of other people, and they have been able to transition out of residential care and forge independent lives.

“Rather than joining in calls for abolishing such facilities, we need to gather evidence about the factors that contribute to high-quality residential care.”

A number of critical questions about residential care need to be answered. Rather than joining in calls for abolishing such facilities, we need to gather evidence about the factors that contribute to high-quality residential care.

Historical context

During the 20th century, tens of thousands of children and adolescents in Switzerland were placed in residential child care or foster families. Several studies suggest that little attention was paid to the integrity and well-being of these children. Research also shows that they were often subjected to social isolation, compulsory work, or even sexual or physical abuse, resulting in lifelong consequences.

Few studies have looked at the impact of the changes that took place in the residential care sector during the second half of the last century, and even fewer have addressed their consequences for the life trajectories of affected children. So far, research has provided little insight into their socioeconomic circumstances, integration into society, or quality of life in adulthood.

Moreover, most studies have sought to explain life outcomes with problems stemming from socialisation or neurobiological vulnerability. These studies tend to focus only on negative outcomes and explain them exclusively in terms of the impact of care itself. The problem with that
approach is that it inappropriately simplifies what are, in fact, very complex causes and effects.

**Current research**

Our research team – Clara Bombach, Samuel Keller, and I – have launched a research project to gain a better understanding of these issues. One of our objectives is to determine whether and where the formative experience of growing up in residential care between 1940 and 1990 resulted in similar outcomes for different individuals. The study is associated with the research network “Placing Children in Care: Child Welfare in Switzerland (1940-1990),” which is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

We chose an approach that allows us to trace, analyse, and interpret the patterns of people's lives, the crises they experience, and their coping patterns. We particularly wanted to understand how the life trajectories of adults relate to their experiences in residential care. Initial findings suggest that there are complex interactions between resilience and vulnerability. As Werner and Smith have pointed out, “Not all development is determined by what happens early in life.”

“The surprisingly strong impact of residential care on a person’s life manifests itself in turning points and critical life events, as well as in certain life domains even decades after that person has left the care facility.”

The surprisingly strong impact of residential care on a person's life manifests itself in turning points and critical life events, as well as in certain life domains even decades after that person has left the care facility. Such individuals often report, for example, having great difficulty engaging in social relationships with colleagues, friends, partners, and children: “[I]t’s very difficult [...] because you don’t really trust anyone [...] You lack that sense of basic trust that children normally have” (Adrian, a former resident of a residential care facility).

Analyses show that these impacts are closely associated with experiences in the care setting. Memories of institutional care evoke feelings of loneliness, isolation, and a sense of being left on one's own.

Jonas, who also spent his childhood in residential care, expresses a feeling of being out of place or superfluous: “Yes, sure. My God, they might just as well have thrown us away. [...] You were simply superfluous, like a piece of meat. We were kept alive, nothing more.” This comment reveals how these individuals perceived themselves as children; they were only one of many children in residential care, and they saw little evidence that they were valued.

Of course, not all children who are placed in residential care are ultimately psychologically burdened by their care experience. But care experiences can crop up unexpectedly, having an impact on them for the rest of their lives.

Findings of our study will be available by the end of 2017.

**References**

BLOG ON LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT [https://bold.expert/the-effects-of-residential-care-in-switzerland-on-life-trajectories/]

This article was published on BOLD, the Blog on Learning and Development. If you would like to share it with others, please do not use this PDF but instead link to the original post at https://bold.expert/the-effects-of-residential-care-in-switzerland-on-life-trajectories/.