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

A one-day workshop at the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge
Wednesday, 10th June, 10-5pm

Abstracts

1. Contextualizing the 'new parenting culture'

Dr. Charlotte Faircloth, University of Roehampton.

Recent work in the social sciences has drawn attention to what has been termed a shift in 'parenting culture' over the last 40 years – both in Anglophone countries and beyond. One of the observations made by these scholars is that the role and meaning of parenthood has changed in recent years, to mean that child-rearing has expanded to encompass a growing range of activities that were not previously seen as an obligatory dimension of this task.

This paper reviews that academic literature, asking how much things have really changed, by exploring some of the historical (dis) continuities in the experiences of these social roles. It suggests that whilst experiences of parenting *are* palpably different for today's adults, the extension of 'parenting' is not down to material changes in the health and safety of children *per se* (for if anything, they are healthier and safer than ever before). Rather, our perception of children themselves has shifted.

Today, children are seen as more 'vulnerable' to risks impacting on physical and emotional development than ever before (especially in the early years of life). As a corollary, parents are now understood – by policy makers, parenting experts and parents themselves – as 'God like', and wholly deterministic in an individual child's development and future. This has inflated the social importance of the parent role, precipitating a swathe of 'support' for and 'intervention' with parents from a wide variety of agencies.

By way of conclusion, the paper explores the ways in which this 'new parenting culture' has (and has not) been replicated across a range of ethnographic locales, to think about how we might theorise a comparative perspective, and what it might offer our discussions.

2. *On the difficulty of defining marginality in the (post)-Soviet context*

Dr Elena Khlinovskaya Rockhill, University of Cambridge

In Soviet society the 'unfit' family (or *neblagopoluchnaya* family) belonged to the margins of society, and was considered in need of normalisation. Conversely, their children, called 'social orphans', or children who grew up in residential care institutions but who have at least one living parent, were at first treated as innocent victims of neglectful parents and placed in residential care to protect them from the bad influence of their parents. State agents considered that by giving these children 'everything', i.e., accommodation, food, clothes, education, etc., the state brought up individuals who were not any different from other youth who grew up at homes. However, many residential care-leavers presented the state and members of society with a set of problems, including joblessness,

difficulties with maintaining accommodation, families and children, and a trail of criminal convictions, producing a mixed perception on the part of the state and society of social orphans as being different – at once marginal and spoilt. At this point they were equated with their 'unfit' parents.

In this paper, I shall argue that possibly, the (post)- Soviet example of unfit parents and their children demonstrates that 'marginality' and 'deviancy' are treated as moral categories outside of socio-economic and structural contexts. While in much of the western social sciences marginality is seen through the lenses of culture, poverty and stigma, in the Soviet/post-Soviet case we approach socio-economic issues behind deviancy through the lens of imagined egalitarianism. Since there was no basis for socio-economic inequality, deviancy must reside in morality, and individual inadequacy. The mechanism of scapegoating is often used to deflate blame aimed at the state, pinning it on mothers and on children. If in the beginning of the relationship between the state and the child, the child was seen as innocent and in need of protection (environmental view of the child), further engagement invoked the biological view of the child. His 'badness' resides in his genes.

Contrary to the processes taking place in western social science discourse that tries to dissipate marginality by de-coupling it from various 'cultures', ie 'cultures of poverty', working class culture, welfarism, etc, in post-Soviet society we might need to do the opposite – to recognise (instead of dissipating) the issue of marginality as a socio-economic construct that portrays, arguably, social pathology as individual inadequacy.

This paper discusses how in some cases marginality in post-socialist society is constructed by reconstructing moral boundaries characteristic of Soviet society, which recreates the islands of the Soviet state at least within the child welfare area.

3. *Parenting and the 'moral economy of hope'*

Professor Val Gillies, Goldsmiths College, University of London

This paper explores how a logic of capital has come to shape and contain understandings of family and parenting in the UK, generating both a moral imperative to maximise the biological and social achievements of children and a blueprint for action against which parents are found wanting. I argue that longstanding concerns about the social fabric have been largely condensed down to the interpersonal level of parenting, with a focus on risk reduction through 'early intervention' eclipsing established welfare state principles of need and mutual obligation. Embodying principles of individualism, competition and self-interest, sanctioned versions of good parenting are enshrined and naturalised as part of a human capital model of child development in which a non-deterministic emphasis is placed on opportunity rather than destiny. From this perspective mothers become the key mediators of opportunity through their practices of investment in childrearing. As I will show an increasing emphasis on 'optimal parenting' is marked by a biological concern with neurogenesis and epigenetic regulation, with poor parenting practices inscribed in brains and genes of the disadvantaged. In particular I draw on the concept of a 'moral economy of hope' (Rose and Novas) to suggest that parenting now entails an obligation to adopt an aspirational style of childrearing regardless of structural and social conditions framing and limiting the effect of such practices. The consequences for those unable and unwilling to adopt such an approach will be examined.

4. *"Hardworking People and Their Families": tracking the 'working' and the 'workless' family across the Supernanny State*

Dr Tracey Jensen, University of East London

The evocation of the 'average hardworking family' has been used in recent election campaigns and policy rhetoric across the political spectrum in the UK. As this paper will show, these repetitions of 'working' and 'workless', and the refrain "hardworking people and their families", was not simply election posturing. Rather it reveals a broader and deeper shift in state policy, retreating from protective welfare state and replaced by a penal welfare state, which monitors, scrutinizes, regulates and requires its citizen-clients to submit to an expanding number of disciplining apparatus. Evoking the 'hardworking family' is increasingly used to authorise a latticework of austerity policies which are dismantling the hard-won entitlements of citizens to collective forms of support via the welfare state. The 'hardworking family' is here used to symbolically cleave those functional, lean, disciplined families that are engaged in enough paid work to retain fiscal autonomy, from those families that are positioned as a parasitical drain on scarce collective resources.

The capacity of neoliberalism to attach to existing crises and incubate new forms of statecraft can be seen in the explosion of regional parenting programmes – short courses delivered by third sector social enterprises that promise to turn around 'poor parenting'. 'Poor parents', once recognised in policy as being disadvantaged, often experiencing multiple forms of poverty, are now routinely described in terms of violence, criminality, disruption and addiction (Levitas, 2012). Increasingly 'worklessness' can trigger a referral to a parenting programme. Together with the intensified use of sanctioning, this signals an alarming turn in state policy toward worklessness, whereby moral discourses around 'poor parenting' are recycled, and spiralling class inequalities and postindustrial disinvestment are ignored. In turn this marks our wilful submission to the perverse demands of paternalistic bureaucracy, increasingly delivered through unaccountable para-state organisations, paid on a creeping for-profit basis. This paper situates the advance of 'parent-training' by private and semi-private providers within a broader context of welfare state retreat, whereby the administration of 'problem populations' is increasingly outsourced and posits that we are witnessing the growth of a Supernanny State. I reflect on how public consent for the Supernanny State has been generated, via highly publicized (though often cautious and sometimes contradictory) 'parenting science' which have been enthusiastically adopted by policymakers and grafted onto welfare state reform projects (Allen, 2011; Field, 2010), to authorise a retreat of the welfare state and to legitimate an anti-welfare commonsense.

5. *"They should respect the family, the society and the state". Russian practitioners' perceptions of youth dislocation.*

Dr Svetlana Stephenson, London Met

The paper discusses how Moscow practitioners (youth workers, NGOs representatives, the police and local government employees) view problem children and youth. It shows that the family and the state -not civic membership or the market-are seen as the social space through which society should be conceived and composed. Youth dislocation is seen as resulting from the deficiencies of the family and a lack of social control by the

state. Poverty and inequality do not tend to be perceived as factors leading to children running away from home or engaging in group crime. Rather, the blame is put on the erosion of social bonds and the pernicious influence of Western material culture. The paper concludes that in modern Russia we are looking at a conservative and increasingly nationalistic discourse on youth and parenting.

6. Mediating intimacy through parenting and home-making practices in the 'new Polish diaspora' in Britain

Kasia Choluj , PhD student, SSPSSR, University of Kent

Despite the significance of child-parent relationship in migration situation shaping migrants' family everyday life, surprisingly not much attention has been given how intimate sphere has been mediated through gendered parenting and home-making practices. Taking as a case study the new Polish diaspora in Britain this paper in particularly explores how intimacy has been negotiated within child-father relation through the lens of home-making practices.

Home-making is defined here in terms of negotiating migrants' belonging through family practices and religious rituals building on Gardner and Grillo's (2002) concept 'little transnationalism'. Moreover, maintaining family ties and relating to the places of origin (Olwig 1999) appear salient for the construction of 'good migrant parents' identities. Developing further the notions of 'little transnationalism' different ways of establishing 'close' child-parent relation and intimacy are investigated in this paper.

Firstly, my analysis illuminates how Polish migrant fathers perform their parental roles in diasporic context through care giving, language use and religious practices. Secondly, diversity of intimate experiences are discussed - how Polish fathers give meanings to rituals (religious and secular) or family celebrations in which they engage in transnational context. Hence, drawing on the literature related to transnational families the findings reveal emerging tensions between breadwinning and care-giving activities of migrant fathers is the new Polish diaspora. In doing so my analysis contributes within the discussions about the social phenomena so called 'Euro-orphanes'.

This article draws on findings from interviews and biographical narratives conducted within post accession migrant families the UK. In analyzing the narratives and experiences of Polish migrant parents concerning intimate relationships with their children and care giving practices this paper poses a challenge on predominant representations of Polish new diasporic actors in Britain constructed through their breadwinning activities and experiences related to work.

7. ***Neuroparenting and the reconstitution of parental love***

Dr Jan Macvarish, Research Fellow, Centre for Parenting Culture Studies, University of Kent

What we call 'neuroparenting' is a framework for understanding the obligation of parent to child that sees the primary role of the parent as that of safeguarding the 'healthy' development of their child's brain. Experts,training workshops, books and advice websites which explicitly advocate a neuroparenting approach recommend particular ways of interacting to 'attune' the parent to the child in order to secure the normal or

optimal cognitive and emotional development of the baby, child, adolescent and future adult. In its most explicit form, parents can purchase toys to 'stimulate' their child's brain in the 'right' way, they can follow expert-given guidelines concerning in what way and how often to talk to, make faces at, tickle and sing to their child, they can select foods which are said to 'feed the brain' and eliminate environmental factors, such as television and conflict between other family members which are said to stymie development.

In some ways neuroparenting can be seen as just another parenting fad, abranding exercise to dress up old (commonsense) wine in new (pseudo-scientific) bottles. However, the greater significance of neuroparenting is indicated by its adoption by national and supranational institutions, policy entrepreneurs and policy advocates. Neuroparenting has become a prominent approach adopted by states in the development of two related policy agendas: early intervention and parent training.
The central argument of this paper is that neuroparenting arises from the renegotiation of some of the profound questions of meaning in family life. By locating it within other significant developments in parenting culture, in particular the intensification of parenting, the presumption of infant vulnerability and parent determinism, the colonisation of intimate family life by expertise and the weakening value placed on family autonomy, neuroparenting can be seen as a synthesis of a number of significant reconceptualisations of familial and intergenerational relationships.

8. *The problem of parents who lose successive children to the state: what does it tell us about disputed territory of the best interests of the child?*

Professor Judith Harwin, Brunel University

This focus of this paper is on English law, policy and practice for children caught up in care proceedings and the care system due to poor parenting. A key issue is how to intercept the transmission of vulnerability from one generation to the next. Whilst there is widespread agreement on the importance of early intervention and family support, there is less consensus on the role of family reunification versus child rescue for children in care proceedings. Historically policy has seesawed between return home and permanency in another family. Rescue has often been driven by high profile parental neglect and abuse cases, such as the Baby Peter case, which resulted in the largest rise in care proceedings and child removal for many years.

More recently, we have gained further insights into the profile of families in care proceedings with a new national study that has exposed for the first time a significant problem of mothers losing successive children to the care system. The study findings raise searching questions about prevention and family support, and the role of the court. It also illustrates the huge burden on the courts, children's services and health placed by mothers subject to successive repeat care proceedings.

What role should the court play in care proceedings whether for one or successive children? The family court today is undergoing huge changes and recent case law has shifted the debates about return home and out of home care. At the same time, one of the most exciting developments is the introduction of a family drug and alcohol court within care proceedings. Based on principles of therapeutic jurisprudence, FDAC is a problem-solving court which seeks both to adjudicate and treat parents before deciding on return home or alternative permanent placement. It is an entirely different and more compassionate approach to care proceedings. What is the future of these courts and how

far can they address the underlying causes of vulnerable parenting and facilitate longer term solutions to intercept the transmission of vulnerability from one generation to the next?

The paper will explore the profile and features of these "unfit parents" and argue that a strategy does not support the parents as well as safeguarding their children is short-sighted and a missed opportunity for change.