

REVIEWS MORE

ROMANIA'S ABANDONED CHILDREN: DEPRIVATION, BRAIN DEVELOPMENT, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOVERY. By C. NELSON, N. FOX & C. ZEANAH. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ www.srvip.org**

Reviewed by Thomas Malcomson

THE SUBJECT OF THIS BOOK is the Budapest Early Intervention Program (BEIP) aimed at studying the impact on children placed in Romanian state run institutions, and the placement of some of those children in foster homes, in comparison with children raised within their family of birth. Social Role Valorization (SRV) is not mentioned once in the book, but much of the work relates to SRV, either as further evidence for the basic social science underlying the theory or in regards to the normalizing power of a family life.

Institutional rearing of children was established under communist rule in post-World War II Romania. The state held that it could raise children more effectively than families, though this false belief was aimed more at increasing the available workforce than meeting the needs of children. With the fall of communism, the Romanian economy collapsed and many families abandoned children they could not support to the state. This resulted in overcrowding in the institutions, and the desperate and degrading conditions that followed. International adoptions, hesitatingly allowed at first, were stopped in 1991, amid financial corruption of the adoption system and fears of child enslavement and sex trafficking. Nine months later, the moratorium was lifted, and a reformed adoption system was created, including international adoptions. This led to more institutionalization of abandoned children. International adoptions were finally outlawed in 2005 as Romania sought entrance into the European Union.

Nelson, Fox and Zeanah approached the Romanian government in 1999 to conduct a study on

the impact of institutional living on the children and the potential benefits of institutionalized children being placed with foster families. The authors began working with Romanians involved with a growing child welfare reform movement within the country in 2000. The book follows a group of 136 children placed in the six institutions of Budapest, and a group of 72 children raised in their own families, residing in the city. None of the children had any detected mental or physical disability or emotion disorder at the time of placement in the institution or at the time of selection as one of the children living with their natural family. The children raised in their birth families were matched for age, birth in the same set of maternity hospitals, and ethnicity with those who were institutionalized. Nelson *et al.* randomly assigned 68 children living in the institution group and placed them in selected foster families while the remaining 68 children stayed in the institution.

The random selection of children to leave or stay in the institution raises ethical concerns. The authors felt it was the only way to test the effects of institutional living and the potential remediation of foster care. Nelson *et al.* assure the reader that they did not block any adoption, foster home placement or return to their family of birth for any of the children in the group randomly selected to remain in the institution. No child placed in a foster home was returned to the institution if their original foster arrangement failed; they were simply placed in another foster home. The testing and assessment of those placed in foster homes was performed in the institution, and the early trips from foster family back to the facility for these appointments provoked signs of great anxiety and distress in the children.

Nelson *et al.* have collected data on a wide range of impacts on the children living in the institution and those placed in foster care as compared

with children raised within their family of birth and never institutionalized. Children raised in institutions had lower IQ scores, poorer executive function (especially in the area of inhibitory control) and memory problems, as well as significant language delays. Children placed into foster care prior to age two made significant recovery in these areas but never matched the level obtained by those reared within their family of origin. Brain size was smaller and neural activity lower in institutionalized children; again, issues improved by early placement in foster care. The same was true with physical growth, motor development, even at the level of cellular growth.

A lengthy chapter (Chapter 10) examined the socio-emotional development of the children. Here, Nelson *et al.* focus on attachment between the children and the adults within their lives. Institutionalized children did not form appropriate emotional or social relationships with their care providers. There were children identified within that group who had no social attachment to any staff member; while many others approached and hugged any adult who appeared within their ward. The authors make it abundantly clear that secure attachment early in life was clearly linked to positive later life outcomes (up to ages 10 to 12). Problems with attachment were correlated with psychopathology. Again, placement in foster care had a positive impact on this issue, even linking social development changes with functional brain improvements. Girls were found to benefit from foster home placement more than boys, developing more secure attachments and having reduced psychopathology. There were no age differences in terms of foster family placement impact, thus children placed after age two were as likely to thrive emotionally and socially from the improved environment as children placed prior to two.

Nelson *et al.* propose a two element developmental perspective. The first is expectant development, in which the infant encounters developmental opportunities that the vast majority of infants have. An example is the interactive, per-

sonal, loving and dependable relationship with their parents. These interactions give the children opportunity to develop relatively secure attachments and emotional stability. Similar common experiences could be found that promote brain development, memory abilities, etc. The second element is experience-dependent development, in which the specific environment the infant or child lives in provides unique opportunities for development. The institutions fail to provide either of these. Placement within a foster family by age two (in most cases) provides opportunities that meet expectant development that is open after that age and experience dependent opportunities that can compensate for what has not been appropriately developed, at least to some degree.

The evidence in this research demonstrates the profoundly negative effect of mind and life wasting activity in the institution. It reveals proof of the failure of relationships in such settings between staff and resident to promote the basic development of the person, let alone the activity and engagement that allows people to thrive. The gains made by children placed within foster families promotes the importance of a nurturing, stable and loving environment for development. Yet, the 'recovered' development will largely never equal that of children raised in their birth families from the first day. The findings of this long-term research place at center the question; what do people (in this case children) need? The findings demonstrate the physical and psychological wounding of people living in institutional settings. The differences found in brain development, cellular growth, language, attachment and memory (to name but a few areas) between institutionalized and non-institutionalized children foreground the wounding experienced by the former.

Part of the project's aim was to assist the Romanians in enhancing their foster care system. In the early 1990s, it was underdeveloped, underfinanced and viewed with suspicion within the country. By 2008, some 30,000 unionized salaried foster parents were recruited. The public pro-

file of foster care had risen substantially. In 2004, Romania had passed a law that banned institutionalizing any child prior to age two, with the exception of those with severe disabilities. The 2008 global economic downturn resulted in a 25% pay cut to the foster parents, which has produced a mass exodus of foster parents from the foster care system. A hiring freeze on new foster parents only adds to the system's problems. These events serve as a reminder of the vulnerability of those held within in a large bureaucratic system subject to economic volatility and state fiscal policy. Nelson *et al.* suggest that a subsidy system (like that in many western countries) would avoid this problem; a questionable solution.

Thirteen tables, thirteen figures and four images help to convey the research data. The list of sources for the authors' research provides the reader with further explorations of the impact of institutionalization. The index is extensive and very useful.

This book could be used in SRV courses as a resource, an extended case study, or as part of a book review assignment. Nelson *et al.* continue to collect data on the children and the system they are following. As the children reach the end of adolescence another lengthy report of their findings would be worth reading.

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THE CASE FOR REPARATIONS. By T. COATES. *The Atlantic*, 2:54-57, June 2014. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ www.srvip.org**

Reviewed by Susan Thomas

THIS COVER STORY stirred up a flurry of discussion, interviews, etc. when it came out. It raises the question whether the American nation ought to make monetary reparations for its long history of enslavement, and other oppressions and devaluations, of black people. Exactly to whom these reparations would be paid is not made clear; see further below. The article also raises important questions about the continuing forms that devaluation takes when its more obvious forms are overcome (or pushed underground), and about how to “make up for” long episodes of devaluation. The article makes and documents the following very strong arguments:

1. Not only the era of slavery in the US, but also the period before it, and the more than century-and-a-half after it, are/were built on exploitation of blacks and their labor.

2. Structural injustice and bias against blacks continues to pervade the banking system and housing market, and especially conspires against black home-ownership. This is important because home-ownership is tied to access to good education and to the accretion of wealth, and inhibition of home-ownership therefore inhibits blacks from attaining these other goods.

3. Even if the pathologies of the modern black family were overcome, blacks still face an unfairly steep climb to success, compared to whites.

4. Even programs such as “affirmative action” do not actually address these disparities.

The author concludes that one major motif or theme that has run through the history of blacks in the US is theft against them, sometimes explicit, but also often hidden, even disguised as programs to benefit them. He calls for at least an exploration of the possibility of making financial reparation to blacks for these centuries of oppres-

sion and theft. He says this exploration would be “a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal” because it would force the nation to confront this major aspect of its history and its present (and for that matter, its likely future). Every year for the past 25 years, a congressman from Detroit, Michigan, John Conyers, has introduced a bill in the US House of Representatives to “study slavery and its lingering effects as well as recommendations for ‘appropriate remedies,’” i.e., reparations. The bill has never even gotten to the floor for debate, but Coates suggests that at this point, it is the study and discussion the bill calls for that are needed. The practicalities of what forms reparations would take, how they would be distributed, and to whom, etc., are to Coates—at least so far—less important than the honest examination of these realities.

Coates also references the post-war payment of reparations by Germany to Israel for the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II as a parallel or antecedent. However, such reparations were opposed (even to the point of violence) by some in Israel on the basis that no material compensation could make up for the attempt to exterminate the Jews. Also, we need to remember that Germany had been thoroughly defeated, and was just emerging from being ruled by occupying forces; it is a big question whether America would ever thoroughly and honestly discuss and consider similar reparations, let alone make them, unless and until it is in a similar situation. Given the nature of empires, it is unlikely.

Not mentioned in the article, but another possible parallel, is the recent efforts (sometimes taking the form of lawsuits, as in Canada) to compensate handicapped people and their families for the era of institutionalization and the abuses they suffered from it.

Apart from Coates’ specific recommendation for reparations to and for this particular historically devalued class, readers familiar with the never-ending tragic reality of human devaluation

and oppression might also consider the following more general questions.

One is “what is the purpose that reparatory efforts are supposed to accomplish?” Are they to punish the oppressor and the oppressor’s descendants, if any? Are they to atone for the oppression? Are they to restore to the oppressed what was theirs? Are they to “level the playing field,” i.e., give the (formerly) oppressed the same chances for success enjoyed by the (former) oppressors? Are they to symbolize an acknowledgment by the oppressors that they have done wrong?

Another, and very important question, is “will such efforts accomplish more good than harm, or more harm than good?” And what are the particular harms and goods?

Yet a third is, “do any of these efforts address the problem at its source—in other words, what, if anything, do they do to get at the root of severe and long-term devaluation and alienation between classes of people?”

A fourth possible question, though at a much lower level than the others, is, “to whom would

such reparations go, and how would they be calculated?” For instance, after World War II, it was the state of Israel that received the lion’s share of reparations; very little went to specific persons and families.

Yet more SRV-derived analysis could be brought to a reading of the article, and a consideration of its proposals, such as: what efforts could be made to really increase interpersonal identification between the devaluers and the devalued; what roles do image- and competency-enhancement or degradation play in this continued devaluation; does Coates’ analysis point up limitations of SRV, and if so, what are they?

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