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The availability and role of non-parental identity agents for institutionalized male adolescent social orphans in Colombia Child and youth services review

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ABSTRACT

An estimated 151 million social orphans exist worldwide, of which at least eight million live in institutions with little possibility of family reunification or legal permanency via the mechanism of adoption (RELAF, 2010; UNICEF, 2012). As such, institutional staff are uniquely situated to fulfill the role of identity agents, a role typically performed by parents, to facilitate a successful transition into post-institutional life for these youth. Drawing upon the concept of ambiguous loss and contextualized theories of identity formation, this qualitative study explores eighteen institutionalized male adolescent Colombian social orphans' perspectives on the nature of their relationships with non-parental adults in their immediate environment. In depth, on site interviews conducted in Spanish with these youth reveal that those who were able to successfully identify and form a bond with an adult identity agent are better able to imagine a future replete with academic, vocational and relational success. The findings suggest a rudimentary typology of the attributes that non-parental figures might possess in order to provide institutionalized social orphans with the requisite support to improve social outcomes upon their departure from the institution. These findings may also inform professional development strategies for adults entrusted with the care of these youth.

1. Introduction

UNICEF (2012) estimates that 151 million orphans exist worldwide, of which at least 8 million languish in institutions, with little possibility of family reunification or legal permanency via the mechanism of adoption (RELAF, 2010). Despite these numbers, within social work research, there is an absence of research that focuses on the process of identity formation and the related sense of social belonging for social orphans, that is, children who live outside parental care despite the presence of at least one living biological parent.

Anthropologists and sociologists have contributed to growing debates that include a deeper understanding of the importance of biological relatedness in the process of family connectedness in domestic as well as international adoption (Carsten, 2000; Howell, 2009). Within these discussions less attention has been paid to the importance of non-parental adults in the lives of permanently institutionalized youth

and, in particular, the role these adults might play in the process of identity formation, future orientation and risk mitigation. While the literature offers conceptualizations of the interactions between these social actors, it remains largely focused on the role of kin as well as teachers for at-risk youth (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The potential of institutional staff to serve as identity agents in the lives of institutionalized children is an area of study replete with possibilities as youth in care interact on a daily basis with precisely this type of adult; unrelated by either blood or legal ties while routinely in charge of their well-being. Such investigations offer, from the perspective of institutionalized social orphans, the desired attributes of these non-parental identity agents.

This qualitative study, therefore, has two primary objectives. First, to explore the ongoing nature of ambiguous loss, that is, the impact of the absent birth parent(s) in relation to a male adolescent social orphan's sense of self. Indeed, the rupture in the parental bond can result in a complete loss of connection; rather than membership in a family unit, the institutionalized adolescent belongs for an unspecified period of time to an intangible object, the institution. As such, he may lose claim, in practice, to the title of brother, son or grandson; the adolescent is relegated to the socially constructed category of orphan. Second, to investigate how non-parental identity agents might mediate the negative impact of institutionalization and subsequently facilitate the male

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adolescent's ability to experience an increased sense of social belonging and imagine a future replete with educational, relational and occupational success. As much of the current literature focuses on identity formation and social belonging for youth post-adoption (Carsten, 2000; Howell, 2003; Yngvesson, 2003), a core aim of this research is to permit those youth who remain institutionalized the opportunity to articulate the attributes they view as most important in potentially available adults with respect to the developmental task of identity formation and the transition from institutional care into young adulthood.

This study focuses on male adolescents under the protection of the state in Colombia, South America. Institutionalized youth in Colombia face a unique set of challenges. Current figures indicate that there are somewhere between 3.9 and 5.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia and approximately half are children under 18 years of age, including the 17,573 children who experienced displacement in 2012 alone (Save the Children, 2012; Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2012). Internal displacement, relative childhood poverty, participation in child labor and a culture of violence that results in child abuse in approximately 42% of families (UNICEF, 2012) contribute, in turn, to the institutionalization of children. Durán Strauch and Valoyes (2009) note that in 2005, 28,125 children resided in institutions contracted by the state child welfare agency, *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF) and of this number, many meet the criteria for social orphan, that is, a child who despite the presence of at least one living biological parent, resides outside parental care, thus enduring separation from his or her family of origin.

This article presents the perspectives of institutionalized male social orphans regarding the attributes perceived as most important in potentially available adults with respect to the developmental task of identity formation and the transition from institutional care into young adulthood. The conceptualization of an identity agent as it pertains to the social orphan in this study is based largely upon the work of Schachter and Ventura (2008) and is influenced as well by Stanton-Salazar's (2011) discussion of institutional agents. Identity agents are defined in the literature as those individuals who actively collaborate with children and youth with the *premeditated* intention of participating in the process of identity formation. Given the volition inherent in this role, these adults actively identify concerns and articulate goals with respect to the adolescent's identity development rather than assume the role of a passive observer.

Of particular interest is the institutionalized male adolescent's conceptualization of psychological as well as biological family in conjunction with available adults who may or may not fulfill the roles traditionally ascribed to parent(s). The ongoing social interactions between parent and child are typically considered the foundation upon which the process of identity formation occurs but this study seeks to examine this process when a non-parental identity agents stands in the stead of the biological parent. This study therefore explores whether the male adolescent social orphan's sense of social belonging and the ability to imagine oneself in the future is associated with the tenets of mutuality and reciprocity within the non-parental alliance that mimic the qualities inherent in a parent–child relationship.

2. Theoretical framework

Ambiguous loss theory and contextualized theories of identity formation offer frameworks to understand the impact of an irresolvable loss, that is, forced separation from the absent birth parent(s), on the adolescent social orphan's sense of social belonging and future orientation. An ambiguous loss is best defined as one that defies closure. Conceptualized by Pauline Boss (2004, 2006, 2007) as two distinct types of loss, Type One refers to the psychological presence but physical absence of a loved one and is exemplified by stories of adoption, foster care, migration, natural disasters and unresolved kidnappings. In contrast, Type Two denotes the physical presence but psychological absence of a loved one, often manifested in families where dementia and

autism spectrum disorders are present and have resulted in the loss of a reciprocal relationship. In the case of youth who reside outside parental care, typical responses to the loss of the birth parent(s) often include anger, irritability and poor concentration, among others, and when loss is unacknowledged, behavior is often viewed as pathological or manipulative (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Viboch, 2005). In contrast, ambiguous loss theory normalizes behaviors that might be traditionally viewed as dysfunctional and stresses the relational nature of the adolescent's dilemma. This theory also posits that negative behaviors exist simply as a response to the loss of the absent loved one, in this case, the birth parent(s) (Boss, 2004, 2007).

Based on her work with at-risk youth, Viboch (2005) has suggested the use of a loss survey in the initial assessment as a tool to better understand the connection between the experienced loss and the presence of maladaptive behaviors. While some studies have extended this framework to the foster care population in the United States and have identified the presence of an irresolvable loss as a contributing factor to behavioral as well as attachment issues for these youth (Lee & Whiting, 2007; Viboch, 2005), the ambiguous loss framework has not yet been used to undergird the trajectory of institutionalized social orphans as they transition into young adulthood.

Similarly, despite considerable evidence of the negative impacts of parental loss and institutionalization (Nelson et al., 2007; Smyke, et al., 2007), scholars have not yet developed a typology of attributes that non-parental identity agents might possess in order to facilitate a successful transition into young adulthood and thereby mitigate negative effects of institutionalization such as cognitive delays, insecure attachment, behavioral dysregulation and identity dysmorphia (McLean, 2005).

As noted earlier, the conceptualization of an identity agent as it pertains to social orphans is based upon the work of Schachter and Ventura (2008) and is influenced by Stanton-Salazar's (2011) discussion of institutional agents. Of primary importance with respect to this work is the central tenet that allows for the importance of context in the process of identity formation. As such, it expands our understanding of adolescent development to include youth that live outside parental care and, in this case, evolve into young adults within the confines of an institution, bereft of the complex intimacy of the parent–child bond. Traditional expectations of the parent–child bond include emotional support as well as economic assistance that subsequently permit the adolescent to internalize a sense of self and prepare for the future. Alternative adult ties, including those inherent in the legal contract of adoption (Modell, 1994), have historically been viewed as weaker and thereby less important in the process of adolescent identity formation. While societal norms continue to privilege sanguinal relationships, this study suggests that non-parental adults can also provide support that mimics what is offered within the parent child dyad.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

This study is part of a larger ethnographic project of institutionalized social orphans in Cali, Colombia. The participants represent a subset of eighteen boys residing in an all-male institution in the heart of the city. Subject inclusion criteria were that the male youth: (1) was between the ages of 14 and 19, (2) met the definition of social orphan and (3) has been under the protection of the state for at least two years. Criteria for subject exclusion were: (1) a history of psychosis and/or suicide attempts as documented in the adolescent's record and (2) the youth was in the process of being adopted. All participants, who were in their teenage years, had either been abandoned, determined to be in physical and/or emotional danger or fled their homes due to safety concerns. Length of time within the institutional system ranged from 2 to 13 years with an average of slightly less than six years within this particular facility.