

Failed Fosterage: Concepts of Family and Caregiving in Botswana's Unsuccessful Formal Foster Care Program for Orphans

Bianca Dahl

Brown University

Topic

This paper analyzes the ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the government of Botswana to implement a new policy for providing care to the neediest of the nation's orphaned children. The so-called Formal Foster Care Program, launched as a pilot initiative in a handful of villages in 2007, differentiated itself from the traditional (and virtually ubiquitous) model of providing for orphans from within the extended family networks. Instead, it solicited responsible adults to undergo training to foster orphans who were unrelated to them. Distancing its principles from widespread allegations that relatives are only taking in their families' orphans in order to access the food rations distributed to orphaned children by the government, the Formal Foster Care Program (FFCP) sought to promote a new model of family based on what it described as nonmaterialistic, pure, "Good Samaritan" bonds of "love" – by refusing formal foster parents any governmental support or rations, suggesting that good people will provide for orphans out of empathy, and seeking to engineer new attitudes toward family and childrearing.

This research argues that the model of stranger-love as a corrective to what is often called "greedy kinship" reflects changing attitudes of Tswana people toward the role of extended families during the AIDS crisis. The paper also concludes that the program failed because it fundamentally misread the enduring material underpinnings of kinship in Botswana. Situating the FFCP's objectives in the context of what needy orphans themselves claim to want and need, this research further explores the limitations of the current system of family-based care as well as the shortcomings of the FFCP. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 25 orphaned children and their caretakers, the paper offers potential future directions for successful intervention in the region.

Significance

This research is of timely importance giving the growing population of orphaned children in contemporary Botswana. In 2007, an estimated 95,000 children in Botswana had been orphaned by AIDS alone (WHO 2008) – comprising 76% of all orphans in the country.¹ The numbers are even more dramatic when compared to the total population of children: estimates vary, but according to official figures from 2006, nearly 15% of children in Botswana had lost at least one parent due to any cause. As the HIV epidemic in this previously relatively unknown nation gained ever more international attention in the early 2000s, domestic and foreign support for orphan care programs multiplied exponentially, responding to the powerful image of Botswana as a "nation of orphans."² While the successes of antiretroviral rollout (the first universal and free antiretroviral program in Africa) have certainly slowed the mortality rate in Botswana, HIV had already become endemic in Botswana by the inception of free treatment, and the number of orphaned children – defined as people under the age of 18 who lost one or both parents – continues to rise. The question of how to provide care for those children in a culturally

¹ IRIN News. October 8, 2002. Botswana: AIDS Orphans Exploited. Accessed online at: <http://www.plusnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=31464>, on August 15, 2008.

² See, e.g., <http://www.kalaharichildrenshome.com/Objective.html>, accessed on April 10, 2009.

sensitive and sustainable fashion has become ever more urgent as their numbers grow, and as more and more extended families prove unable (or unwilling) to take orphans in and raise them responsibly. The FFCP marked the latest attempt by the Botswana government to solve this population crisis; this discussion of the program from its planning stages through its execution (including ethnographic observations of the first two households to receive foster children, and the effects of formal fosterage on those children) provides a timely contribution to social research on orphan care in Botswana today.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this research draws together perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and public policy in order to explore why local development initiatives in Botswana are currently striving to adapt deeply entrenched norms for childrearing, during a time of profound social and demographic change. While drawing on contemporary anthropological theories of kinship and family, the paper's most significant theoretical contribution is to trace efforts to promote new ideologies of familial relationships through the perspective of children as well as adults. Orphans' own perspectives on the limits of familial care are, the paper suggests, instrumental to more broadly changing attitudes on the changing nature of family during the AIDS crisis.

Further, while Tswana social workers and villagers increasingly articulate "love" as a necessary element to the practice of caregiving and the performance of traditional kinship bonds, this research draws on anthropological scholarship to suggest this emphasis on an idealized concept of "love" is a more recent phenomenon, fueled in Botswana in part by new forms of Christianity and by discourse imported by transnational aid organizations across the country (Cole and Thomas, 2009; Dahl, forthcoming; Klaitz, 2001). For Tswana people, "love" arguably is and always has been most commonly demonstrated – and kinship best performed – through enactments of duty and reciprocal obligation. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, family members in Botswana are judged as good, or loving, by fulfilling kin-like duties, by providing food, preparing baths, and contributing household labor or income (Durham 1995; 2005; Livingston 2003; 2005). Although people today talk about caregiving as "traditionally" based on love, when they contrast "love" to material greed, they are in some ways applying the labels of tradition and culture to an aspect of social relations that is very new and modern. In other words, this paper demonstrates how the so-called traditional is being used to reinforce an ideal related to caregiving that is the product of ongoing socio-cultural changes. To conclude, although "greedy" caregiving and "loving" caregiving are generally articulated by social workers, policy makers, and ordinary Tswana villagers alike as being mutually exclusive, they necessarily coexist to a far greater degree than the discourses and policies surrounding child fosterage might suggest.

This paper also highlights the ways in which Tswana people draw on the idiom of kinship to discuss real demographic and social changes. Orphaned children are a highly visible population, and their upbringing a genuine matter of national concern. At the same time, however, contestations over good kinship and bad kinship, over appropriate caregiving and inappropriate neglect, are also an idiom in which to make moral and ideological claims, in which to assert and contest the politics of social relations during the contemporary moment, where AIDS has decimated the population, new forms of consumption have dovetailed with different values about forms of relatedness, and the future of social reproduction itself appears to be threatened. While the anxious debates in Botswana about orphans, love, and greed leave Tswana people questioning their own morality, it is the series of challenges to fulfilling the materiality of caregiving obligations that produces these collective doubts. When the causes and consequences

of the “orphan problem” are portrayed in moral terms, this paper underscores the necessity of attending to both what is revealed and obscured about the nature of contemporary kinship and its relationship to social change.

Methods

Methods were qualitative and ethnographic. The paper draws on two distinct phases of research. The first occurred during the planning stages of the Formal Foster Care Program, and consists of interviews and participant observation conducted with the social workers and government officers who conceptualized, drafted, rolled out, and evaluated the pilot program.

The second phase of research involved interviews and participant observation of the first two families in Botswana to accept fostered children under the formal program, supplemented by interviews with 25 villagers who also underwent foster parent training in the same community, and with another 20 children who were identified by the village social worker as “high need” for fosterage, but who were unable to be placed under the FFCP. Because the program was largely unsuccessful, the numbers of participants were necessarily small, and this obviated the collection of any quantitative measurements. However, the research was conducted in the first village to train foster parents and place any children, and the findings are indicative of broader challenges that the program faced.

Implications

The implications of this research for policy are significant. In the tension between “loving” childcare and “greedy” childcare that is emerging around the issue of orphans’ upbringing, the ideals underlying Tswana concepts of normative (and proper) family affiliations have become visible. The research suggests that future efforts to launch new modes of childcare will require both the provision of material resources (a fundamental part of how Tswana people continue to enact family relationships with each other) and the promotion of growing ideals surrounding selfless “love” of orphans by strangers who have been trained to raise children who have been exposed to conditions of profound neglect and/or abuse. The paper will conclude by suggesting modifications to the FFCP design and implementation that take into account the complex and sometimes contradictory local understandings of family, childrearing, and children’s needs, as well as the needs articulated by orphans themselves.

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