

The Challenges of Foster Care in Botswana: An Analysis of Failed Government Policy for Orphans during the HIV Epidemic

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Overview

This paper analyzes why the government of Botswana's attempt to implement a new policy for providing foster care to the neediest of the nation's orphaned children ultimately failed. It uses qualitative research to analyze the creation of the policy, its implementation, and its effects in the only village where children were placed under its auspices. The Formal Foster Care Program (FFCP), launched as a pilot initiative in several sites across Botswana in 2007, differentiated itself from the traditional model of housing orphans within their extended families, attempting instead to provide a new means of support from outside the family that would "improve on family-based care," as one of its planners stated. The FFCP sought adult volunteers who would undergo training on how to foster orphans unrelated to them, a model inspired by the US and UK foster care systems. The program was created as an attempt by the Ministry of Local Government to distance itself from widespread allegations that many relatives only provide care for orphans in order to access the food rations distributed to such families by the government. Ethnographic and qualitative research with the officials who created the program revealed the genesis of their decision *not* to give formal foster care parents any material support or food rations, so as to avoid inspiring further allegations of foster parents taking in children out of greedy motives. The program was based on the optimistic belief that good people would provide for orphans out of empathy even without receiving remuneration. It was an explicit governmental effort to engineer new attitudes toward childrearing and new means of population management.

Drawing on the tenets of anthropological demography, this paper argues that the model of non-materialistic care-by-strangers that underlay the FFCP reflects changing attitudes of Tswana people toward the role of extended families during the AIDS epidemic. But the paper also shows that the program failed because it misunderstood the role of material resource provision in how Tswana people express care and view appropriate childrearing practices. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation with 6 orphaned children placed in the program, plus 19 orphans who remained in family-based care, 29 adults trained as foster parents, and dozens of villagers in the first community in Botswana where the formal foster program was implemented, this research highlights the public reaction to the program and its effects on children's overall wellbeing. The paper concludes with recommendations for successful intervention.

As the HIV epidemic gained ever more international attention in the early 2000s, the question of how to provide care for orphans in a culturally sensitive fashion has become ever more urgent as their numbers grow, and as more extended families prove unable to raise orphans responsibly. The FFCP marked an unusual attempt by the Botswana government to resolve this population crisis. This paper's analysis of the program from its planning stages through its execution provides a timely contribution to social research on orphan care today. By using an anthropological demographic approach, the research explains how this well-funded, strongly endorsed, and initially promising government policy initiative produced a completely untenable system that Tswana villagers resisted and that proved unbeneficial to children themselves.

Significance

This research is of timely importance giving the growing population of orphaned children in contemporary Botswana, which has the highest rate of orphanhood in the world (Miller et al.

2007; UNAIDS et al. 2004), and the second highest HIV prevalence rate in the world, at 24.8 percent of adults in 2008 (BAIS 2009). The epidemic is now concentrated in adults between the ages of 35 and 44 years, of whom an estimated 40.5 percent are HIV-positive (BAIS 2009: 16) – and who are disproportionately likely to have dependent children at risk of being orphaned. Orphans have formed an increasingly visible and significant population category in Botswana since the early 1990s when death rates first began to rise during the AIDS epidemic. They comprise approximately 17.2 percent of all children under the age of 15 in the country (BAIS 2009), and have been estimated at 1 out of every 5 children under the age of 17 (Miller et al. 2006; UNAIDS et al. 2004).

Although cultural norms have long resulted in virtually all orphans being cared for by relatives, since 1996 when the government began giving food rations to relatives who took in orphans, there has been widespread concern at all levels of society about kin who do not care properly for orphans and who only appear to do so in order to receive the rations. The FFCP's pilot initiative was an effort to find another solution to kin-based care for orphans who were being neglected by relatives. Botswana's provision of government food rations to support relatives who house orphans has been praised (and replicated) across the region. However, a nuanced understanding of the system's drawbacks – and the challenges faced by policy efforts to fix them – forms a significant contribution of social science to policy.

Methods

Methods were qualitative and ethnographic, drawing on data from the author's longitudinal anthropological study of orphan care in Botswana. The larger project comprises 40 months of ethnographic fieldwork in three communities in Botswana between 2003 and 2010. This paper draws on two distinct phases of research. The first occurred during the planning stages of the Formal Foster Care Program in 2007, 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 households in Botswana to accept fostered children under the formal program, supplemented by interviews with 27 other villagers who also underwent foster parent training in the same community, and with another 19 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 unsuccessful, the numbers of participants were necessarily small, and this made it impossible to collect any large-*n* quantitative measurements. However, as the research was conducted in the first village to train foster parents and the only village to place any children under the FFCP, these findings are indicative of broader challenges that the program faced.

Theoretical Contributions and Overview of Findings

Compared with the toolkit of most demographic research (exemplified by the sample survey method), anthropological demography sacrifices statistically significant quantifiable claims in favor of demonstrating "the way people experience the events that demographers count" (Heady 2007: 557). As sample surveys have been critiqued for "methodological individualism" (Johnson-Hanks 2007: 4) – that is, relying on self-report, constraining possible answers, and producing results that might not reflect lived experience or the complexities of social interaction – ethnographic research on demographic questions can provide particularly meaningful analysis of "social organization and ... culture" (Kertzer 2007: 529). Further, as Kertzer and Fricke argue, "the value of individual community studies [i.e., those with the small-*n* characteristic of anthropological demography] need not be limited to their suitability for

statistical generalization if they allow researchers to bring to bear a more extensive and highly variable range of data on the understanding of population processes” (1997: 17-18). In other words, anthropological techniques can help provide a richer understanding of how people experience demographic changes, while also addressing the “why” question regarding people’s behavioral choices and their reasons for acting in particular ways.

This research thus combines theoretical perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and public policy in order to explain why local development initiatives in Botswana are currently striving to change deeply entrenched local norms that indicate childrearing is the privileged domain of kinship. By drawing on contemporary anthropological theories of kinship in Africa (e.g., Cole and Thomas, 2009; Durham, 2005), the paper shows that the main reason why the FFCP failed was because the government’s decision to withhold food rations for formal foster care parents failed to realize the centrality of this material support in how Tswana people think orphan care must be conducted. Even though villagers across Lentswê overtly castigated and gossiped over relatives who were rumored to be caring for their family’s orphans only in order to receive the ample food rations, villagers also ended up protesting the FFCP program when it actually sought to remove orphans from family homes and place them in the homes of strangers. Further, despite the publicly announced claim by the government that formal foster parents would not receive remuneration, villagers continued to believe (correctly, as it turned out) that nobody would care for orphans unrelated to them without receiving compensation.

In Lentswê village alone (a village of about 6000 people where this research took place), 40 suitable adults initially volunteered for and completed training in the FFCP to become foster care parents, ostensibly agreeing to foster children they were not related to without any material support or remuneration from the government. However, when the social worker sought to place children in those homes, only two households actually agreed to take in children without food rations. Both of those were female-headed households, whose matriarchs were subject to malicious gossip and rumors in the village about what their motives for “buying” orphans must have been. Lentswê’s social worker, a Catholic nun, continued to assert that formal foster parents did not receive food rations or compensation. Yet this research uncovered that both of the women who fostered children did in fact end up secretly receiving food rations from the social worker, who felt forced to bribe them with food to keep the children in their care.

The research demonstrates that the formal foster care program misunderstood how Tswana villagers believe that kinship and childcare is – and must be – conducted as a practice involving provision of material goods toward dependent children, goods which most people believe must be given to guardians by the state. Despite popular response to the program in its planning stages, the fact that the FFCP failed suggests that the government’s aim to provide an alternative to kin-based care (without relying on residential orphanages, which most Tswana people see as against their culture), was a popular concept that resonated with villagers in theory. However, when the program was put into practice, villagers judged it with suspicion, continuing to assess its suitability according to conceptions of kinship and childcare that see such practices as being about both emotional connection (“love”) *and* about material resource provision.

As numerous scholars have demonstrated, family members in Botswana are judged as good, or loving, by fulfilling kin-like duties, by providing food, and by contributing household labor or income (Durham 2005; Livingston 2003). 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, in practice they necessarily coexist to a far

greater degree than the discourses and policies surrounding child fosterage might suggest. The paper suggests that any successful intervention will have to take this fact into consideration.

This paper also highlights the ways in which Tswana people draw on ideas about 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 what get labeled as good or bad kinship, over appropriate caregiving and inappropriate neglect, are also ways for people to make moral claims, and are thus another important point for policy consideration as well. Villagers gossip about orphan care as a way to assert and contest the changes to family-based care during the AIDS epidemic. When the causes and consequences of the “orphan problem” are portrayed in moral terms, this paper argues that we must underscore the necessity of attending to both what is revealed and obscured about the nature of contemporary kinship and its relationship to social change.

Additional Policy Implications

The implications of this research for policy are significant. The research suggests that future efforts to launch new modes of childcare will require both the provision of material resources and the promotion of growing ideals surrounding selfless “love” of orphans by strangers who have been trained to raise children exposed to conditions of profound neglect and/or abuse. The paper concludes by suggesting modifications to the original 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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