Child protection and secondary victimization: The Greek paradox

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Abstract

In post-war European societies, institutional protection of children at risk has prevailed in the area of child welfare policy. Since then, experience and research have highlighted the negative effects of this type of care on children's cognitive, emotional and social development. However, care treatment in closed-type institutions, still seems to be the usual choice of several countries in the area of child protection. Greece is one of these countries, having an additional peculiarity: the operation of institutions for children at risk under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice. In this article, an attempt is made to immerse this paradoxical and beyond all ethics practice, as a frontal violation of children's rights and as a practice of secondary victimization, stigmatization and exclusion of children living in these institutions.

Key words: *Institutions, child care, children at risk, community based care.*

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Introduction

It is an indisputable fact that from ancient times until today there have been dramatic changes in the perceptions of adults about children and their attitudes towards them have gone through many different phases over the years. Child protection has not always been a self-evident obligation of a well-governed State, but it has emerged as a necessity due to major socio-economic changes that have shaped a new social reality.

The concept of childhood, as we know it today, is far from that of previous centuries, wherever it existed. The image of childhood that people of Western culture have today and the role of the child is based on the prevailing perception of the child-centered family. That is, a family where parents are responsible for spending time, money and energy raising their offspring in order to meet their needs and ensure their well-being, in turn gaining emotional satisfaction [1, 2].

In modern post-industrial societies, the state and the sciences are also showing great interest in the child. The well-being of minors with all that includes (education, health, adequacy of financial resources, etc.) is one of the priorities of the modern state that provides services to support children, draw up for a policy focused on caring for and protecting its future citizens. The interest of sciences for the child is reflected of the child's developmental stages, ways and techniques of education, understanding and prevention of certain behaviors and the cultivation of skills by parents that will help them better meet the child's needs, constantly improving the quality of care provided.

The social policy developed over the past decades has largely focused on children and the defense of their rights. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its optional protocols, adopted on 11/20/1989, by the United Nations (and soon incorporated into the Law of almost all Member States of the International Organization), has made a decisive contribution to the recognition of the child as an autonomous personality, for whom the state should ensure that he/she enjoys all rights [3] (In Greece, the Convention was ratified by Law 2101/1992 and has been part of domestic law ever since.

However, there is a contradiction on which issues of participation and exclusion of children in the social life of adults are approached. As Makrynioti aptly states (2003:26) [4] *in modern Western societies, childhood is at one level characterized by empowerment tendencies, and at another level it appears more institutionalized and subject to adult control.*

Child protection in Europe: past, present and future

Child protection, which in modern societies is recognized as a vulnerable group of the population for which there must be parental and state care, is complex, especially prone to social, economic and political change. In Europe of the 20th century, the socio-political changes brought about by the two world wars, the economic and political crisis, the changes in social structures, the impoverishment and the social exclusion of large groups of the population seem to have affected states to a different degree, separating the robust North from the poorer South, which is also reflected in the field of child protection.

The first period after the Second World War, the European states are faced with the losses of the war, the need for economic and social reconstruction, but also with a large number of orphaned and vulnerable children for whom there should be care. The solution set for child protection was to create large institutions with the prospect of long-term stay of children in them and aimed at ensuring a minimum level of their well-being, care, education and further rehabilitation [3].

In the following decades, through the recognition of human rights and their constitutional guarantee, as well as the recognition of various forms of violence against children inside and outside the family environment, a new population of children who have been abused or lived in families with parents who have been unable to exercise their parental role for the benefit of children has been created, for whom there should be relative care. These children were classified as "children at risk": risk for their normal psychosocial development, risk for deviant or delinquent behavior. These chil-

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dren, through the intervention of the mechanisms of Justice, formed an additional population that was channeled into closed type institutions, testing the strengths of the system.

For decades, the institutionalization of orphans or children with "unsuitable" parents has been common, if not the only, practice of child protection. According to recent data, it is estimated that approximately 2.7 million children under 18 years old are living in institutional care worldwide. Although the quality of available data from many countries is poor, it is recorded that most children in institutions are not orphans, as 50% to 90% have at least one living parent **[4]**.

In contemporary Europe it is now known through extensive research that closed type structures are unable to attend to physical and cognitive needs of children and their needs for social and emotional stimulation, in any way comparable to what can be achieved in a setting which is open to life within society (UNICEF, 2003: 8-9) **[5]**. Institutionalized children experience the absence of a natural family and at the same time a loving individualized care. On the contrary, they are exposed to a collective routine, which does not allow them to develop aspects of their unique personality and participate in the daily life of the institutions, rather passively, unable to control and co-shape it.

Indeed, in recent decades, scientific research and experience has demonstrated the negative impact that long-term stay in institutions has on children's development. Institutions were once considered the best way to care for vulnerable children and children at risk. However, it has been shown that institutional care always has mediocre results in terms of quality of life compared to quality services at community level, and often equates to a lifetime of social exclusion and isolation (EEG, 2012) **[6].**

Dozens of studies have concluded that even a relatively short stay in an institution negatively affects children's development and has lifelong consequences for their emotional well-being and behavior. Thus, it seems that meeting the physical needs of children provided by an institution is not enough for their mental and social development, as each child needs individualized care, which is impossible even in the best institution **[3, 4, 7]**.

Discussion and organized action in the developed countries of Europe are now focused on de-institutionalization, through a progressive process of transforming child protection on the basis of human rights and the recognition of citizenship in children and adolescents. In this context of the application of the principles of democracy and respect for individual freedoms, the relationship between children and the state is redefined.

Children should not be considered passive participants in a process that concerns their lives and future. Nor should they be considered a threat to social morality and therefore should be controlled through their isolation from social life, under the authority of a paternalistic model of state intervention. It takes courage and social sensitivity to recognize the mistakes of the past and for the formulation of a new human-centered child protection policy. In recent decades, action has been developed towards this direction (See more at https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1246&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=9056), with some countries leading the movement to de-institutionalize and return children to their natural space: community and family, and other countries still trapped in stereotypes and ideologies of the past, testing their reflexes for a society without exclusions.

Child protection in Greece: The closed type institutions

The Greek welfare state has been described by scholars as incomplete compared to other European countries. Traditionally, the welfare state in Greece has been criticized as inadequate, fragmented and inefficient, largely due to reduced government spending on welfare, which is traditionally below the European average **[8]**. This also affects child protection, which is part of a state's welfare policy. Traditionally, children without a family or children with harmful family environment were placed in closed-type institutions, a practice that is mostly followed even today.

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In Greece, there are public, private non-profit and ecclesiastic institutions. Although there is no exact figure for the population of children living in institutional care, in a survey conducted by the Research Center "Roots" (2015) **[9]**, is estimated that there are about 100 institutions of all the above types throughout Greece which they host about 3,000 children of all ages ((Roots Research Center, 2015) (Roots Research Center is the national coordinator of the "Opening Doors for Europe's Children" Campaign "We are paving the way for European children" www.openingdoors.eu which aims to de-institutionalize children and their gradual transition from institutional care to community and family care).

Greece's child protection system is considered anachronistic and outdated as it maintains large institutions against temporary trend of de-institutionalization and living of children in small family units. While several European countries now dictate the introduction of children in institutions as a "last resort" and limiting the duration of their stay to a minimum, in Greece institution placement is still the first and usually the only solution considered for the vast majority of children removed from their family. Moreover, the duration of stay of children in institutions significantly exceeds the European average and in most cases - since no alternative sought - reaches adulthood.

The frequency of children's admission to institutions and the prolonged stay in them are directly related to the serious dysfunction of the institution of foster family, as recorded by the Greek Ombudsman (2015) **[10]** and confirmed by the study of the Research Center "Roots". Research shows that adoption in Greece remains largely inactive. Only 10% of children in institutional care were in foster families in 2014, while in general there is a low number of adoptions (in the case of adoptions the number does not exceed 70 per year, and children in a foster family per year are less) (Roots Research Center, 2015). The policy of the institutions on the issue of adoption is not homogeneous and the possibility of placing a child in a foster family or exploring the possibility of returning to its biological family is left to the perceptions of the manager of each institution and is not subject to any control.

This finding leads to a debate on how institutions operate in Greece. The relevant research reaches common findings on gaps and failures of the child and adolescent care system. For example, a report by the Greek Ombudsman on child protection institutions (2015) typically states that institutions operate on the basis of an "asylum" model and that the chronic insufficiency of staff and infrastructure leads to multiple violations of the rights of the hosted children.

The constant and common finding of the organisations dealing with the extra-family care of children, but also of the Ombudsman, *are the serious problems due to the absence of a single framework and operating standards for both public and private child protection institutions* (The Greek Ombudsman, 2015). This picture is supplemented by the lack of staff in the vast majority of institutions, the inadequacy or complete absence of scientific staff and the lack of provisions for the training of unskilled staff.

Often the needs of the institutions are addressed fragmentally and occasionally with temporary staff, short-term contracts or volunteers, without any special education or training provision and more importantly without monitoring and evaluation. The lack of a system to ensure the suitability of people working with children, the lack of certification, control and accountability of institutions and their administrations, leads to violations of children's rights, harmful treatment undermining their well-being.

Juvenile Protection Agencies and Shelters for minors, Ministry of Justice

As mentioned, different types of children's institutions operating in Greece. The vast majority of public institutions operates under the supervision and funding of the Ministry of Health, marking their welfare nature and mission. This is common worldwide and not a Greek originality. But what distinguishes the country in a negative distinction, is that there are public institutional structures aimed at children up to 18 years, which are under the supervision and financing of the Ministry of Justice. These are Shelters for minors coming from abusive environments or families with problems

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that operate within the framework of the Juvenile Protection Agencies (JPAs), a Greek originality and paradox at the same time!

Following is a summary of the operation of these structures in an effort to highlight that the paradox in this case is not simply a deviation from common practice, but a form of institutional secondary victimization, stigmatization and exclusion of children living in these shelters.

In 1940 in Greece, the Juvenile Protection Agencies (JPAs) were established, as Legal Entities under Public Law, with an appointed Board of Directors from the Ministry of Justice and volunteers. The State assigns to JPAs the task of implementing policies to prevent juvenile delinquency, contributing to the implementation of correctional measures and support the reintegration of minors facing problems with the Law. However, from the moment of their establishment, the JPAs were essentially left to the responsibility of the members of the Board and citizens voluntary efforts. The vast majority of JPAs did not actually work, due to lack of staff and social service providing, [11]. JPAs are subsidized by small sums from the state, but mainly receive sponsorships from individuals, and sometimes from royal institutions (Avdela and Basiliadou, 2014).In the years that followed, the situation did not improve, while the JPAs begin to operate also Shelters for minors (According to Symeonidou-Kastanidou and Pitsela (2015) [11] in 1990, 6 shelters for minors were operated by JPAs). In the last decade, those JPAs that do not have Shelters either remain inactive, or their operation is limited to individual acts of support for children at risk. However, today, three Shelters for Minors at social risk are active. It should be emphasized that juveniles living in these shelters have not committed any criminal acts, but come from dysfunctional or abusive family environments and carry the heavy "load" of abuse or neglect.

These shelters for minors are closed-type institutions that address all the problems and shortcomings of other welfare institutions. Mostly, they do not have the necessary staff and technical infrastructures to meet the needs of their mission, nor is there any coordination of their work. They have not been included in a common design, with other structures hosting minors operating by the Ministry of Health, the National Center for Social Solidarity, NGOs or by private entities and therefore there is no coordination of their work, no statistical data are kept, the course of each child is not evaluated after its placement and so on [11].

The children in shelters belong to the category of the so-called vulnerable groups of children. These children are facing social adjustment difficulties or are at "moral or social risk", victims of neglect, or even victims of crime committed against them, usually by members of their family.

As understood, the care and protection requirements of these children are particularly high inconsistent with the suitability of the staff working in this purpose. Shelters lack specialized staff and the care of the psychosocial needs of the children is taken over by administrative employees, without any training, even in key or managerial positions.

The vulnerable group of children in the shelters of Ministry of Justice bears from the beginning the stigma of its environment, which is responsible for its abuse or neglect. From the very first moment of children' placement in this type of institutions, the stigma multiplies and leads to further victimization, through a system that exists against every valid pedagogical concept. Furthermore, for children who are cut off from their family environment and the institution takes custody, there should be an increased effort to safeguard their right to make decisions, to file complaints to be informed and their views are heard. However, practice shows that not only these specific rights of children are not guaranteed, but in some cases they are not even recognized (The Greek Ombudsman, 2015) [10].

Shelters for minors, despite common problems they have with other closed type institutions, also have some peculiarities:

Peculiarity 1: They operate, in an unacceptable manner, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Justice, as highlighted in the report of the Greek Ombudsman (2015), far from their "natural" area: welfare. In this way, children from abusive environments or families facing health problems, addictions or extreme poverty are usually placed under a prosecutor's

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order in these institutions and bear the stigma of the victim, but at the same time of the potentially deviant-offender. Their inclusion in such structures marks a stigmatization from the very beginning and a dangerous connection between their difficult social situation and future anti-social and delinquent behavior.

Peculiarity 2: As the Chairman of the Board of Directors, the Ministry of Justice appoints a prosecutor, which symbolizes the dangerous interconnection of victimization with future criminal behavior. Even more deeply illustrates the conservative and anachronistic perception that children at risk have reduced moral inhibitions, are prone to crime and without proper control will exhibit antisocial behavior.

Peculiarity 3: The role of caregivers and supervisors in these institutions is taken over by prison employees/ guards, seconded from detention centers, which do not have and do not receive any special training.

In addition to the obvious lack of staff suitability, it should not be overlooked that these structures are not aimed at children with delinquent behavior, but at children in need of affection and personalized care.

Peculiarity 4: Shelters for minors which are under the Ministry of Justice, cannot easily escape the architecture of the buildings under the jurisdiction of the specific Ministry (e.g. juvenile reformatories, detention facilities). Although efforts are being made to beautify the spaces, so that they resemble "houses" inhabited by minors (vivid colors in children's rooms, dolls and toys, etc.) they cannot shake off the ugliness of the areas of increased surveillance and control. They look more like "golden cages" surrounded by railings and barbed wire, controlled barred entrances and surveillance cameras. Sometimes they even have small temples at the entrance, a symbol of faith and hope, that the "tortured" children could follow the path of God. This environment, no matter how hard it tries to be transformed fails to give the feeling of a friendly "home" environment for children, while constantly reminding them the limits of their separation and differentiation from external community.

Peculiarity 5: In these structures, due to the load of the

concepts of "hazard" and "danger", the spirit of charity is pervasive, along with the goal of hosting children to become "good people" and follow God's way. Avdela and Vassiliadou very aptly observed (2014:7) **[12]** «...*in the interwar meanings of the action of the JPAs, the coupling between the (Christian) values, the selfless offered "love" and "salvation" dominated, while now the action is more part of a (equally Christian) complex of "sacrifice" and salvation*». The management and staff of these institutions perceive their role as difficult and arduous to which they attribute the characterization of a major mission: to save the "misguided" or vulnerable children «...*Thus, the love they offer to minors who do not have what is considered natural parental protection seems to be not only selfless, but to become a form of sacrifice, to be presented as having a cost for those who offer it.*».

In the internal environment of these institutions, but also in their communication with the external environment, especially when attracting sponsorships and volunteers, the language used, mainly by the Administration, aims to provoke pity or emotion in the audience they address ("poor angels", "defenseless creatures", "unfortunate children", etc.), reproducing stereotypes, against psycho-emotional well-being of children. Around this projected narrative, compassionate philanthropists of the local communities gather and children, who accept their generosity, remain forever grateful to their "benefactors".

Peculiarity 6: These institutions operate to a large extent with the help of volunteers, mainly from the local communities. This is not uncommon as for other types of institutions. Volunteers, especially due to staff shortages, seem to contribute significantly to the operation of the institutions by providing children with daily care, hosting them on holidays or weekends, accompanying them in social or recreational activities, etc. But what we need to consider is the way in which volunteers are selected, their monitoring and training, the type of activities they undertake, the delimitation of their role and ultimately their suitability to be found among children by offering pro bono services. Suitability here does not refer to possession of formal qualifications, but to personality traits, such as the ability to communicate

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with children, respect for diversity, empathy, and awareness of ethics. Particularly with regard to the protection of children's personal data and the observance of ethics, there are many cases where volunteers, sponsors and even politicians, under the apparent inability of the administrations of institutions to control the situation, use and publish (mainly in social media) images of the hosted children. In this way, they seek to increase their social prestige by promoting their services and their genuine interest in "poor children". At the same time, however, they act stigmatically for children and contribute to their secondary victimization.

Summarizing, it should be noted that society's perceptions of protecting vulnerable children remain anachronistic, as Xanthopoulou (2019) **[7]** aptly points out in her article, mainly due to the lack of knowledge and information from a system that supports itself. In an unacceptable way and beyond any contemporary practice in the field of child protection, shelters for vulnerable children continue to operate in Greece, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Justice. The existence of such structures, which once meant for juvenile offenders, contributes to institutional, secondary victimization, to further stigmatization and social exclusion of minors.

Conclusions

In the foreword to Csaky's (2009: iv) **[13]** report for "Save the Children" organization, Witbread, caustically but so aptly states that "...for *governments and donors, placing children in institutions is often seen as the most straightforward solution. And it's a way of sweeping out of sight the poorest and most discriminated-against children with the biggest problems".*

Scientific research has highlighted the negative effects of the placement of a child in an institution, on the development of its personality, on the development of bonds, on social integration and prosperity. It is further argued that institutional care can create "lost generations" of young people **[13]**. The children living in institutions face the consequences of institutionalization in the development of social networks which play an important role in later life. Also important is the impact of the stigma of "growing up in an

institution" that still exists, despite any progress of the societies **[14, 15]**.

Institutions, despite their negative effects on children's lives, remain resilient over time and in some countries, such as Greece, continue to be a major form of intervention in child care and protection. The related factors are many and varied. First is mentioned, the lack of political will, as the institutions operate instrumentally, to the benefit of governments, as structures that quietly absorb the vibration of social phenomena such as poverty, social exclusion, discrimination. The groups experiencing the effects of these social problems are parents whose children are likely to be hosted in institutions, but at the same time they are marginalized groups without any power.

From an economic point of view, although the cost of operating institutions is high, it seems that investing resources in developing an alternative child protection system that will pay off in the long run is not a choice for governments. In some countries, the institutionalization of children has evolved into an "industry" that benefits many caregivers as employees, private entities and NGOs whose existence is depending on the funding and donations for children in institutions **[13, 16]**.

The European Union is developing policies which lead to the end of institutional childcare. The European Commission encourages Member States to develop forms of alternative care, foster care and promoting adoption. The goal of de-institutionalization may be achieved gradually through the development of a range of services in the local community including prevention. The transition from institutional care to family and community care begins initially with the reduction of institutional structures. However, informing and raising public awareness about the implications of institutionalization remains an important goal.

The gradual transition of children from institutional to community care is a situation in which Greece is called upon to enter. Greece needs to reduce and decongest closed type institutions by following international guidelines and make immediate reforms, create organized services in the com-

munity that aim to support families at risk (Roots-research-center, 2015). Moreover, the effort to reduce the number of institutions and improve the services provided by the remaining institutions must be proceed with the abolition of institutions under the auspices of other Ministries, rather than those linked to welfare, such as the shelters of the Ministry of Justice, to which we have referred in detail.

Satisfaction of children's basic rights should not be limited to meeting their basic needs for housing, food and education. We must all bravely recognize the right of children to define their lives, to be actively involved in shaping it, and to live free from stigma, social isolation, exclusion and discrimination. We have a long way ahead, but it's worth to go through it.

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