

Children's Experiences of Welfare in Modern Britain

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Pooley and Taylor's edited book aims to provide 'a history of childhood and welfare in Britain through the eyes of children'. The book takes as its starting point the challenging of the prevailing narrative within historical accounts of welfare that the experiences of children and young people were passively experienced by them. Contrastingly, the book's central thesis is that children and young people's agency has been integral to the making, interpretation, deliver and impact of historical welfare service.

The book presents 10 chapters of children and young people's direct accounts of different welfare services and providers. The book chapters are structured chronologically, starting with the emigration scheme of the Children's Friend Society between 1833-1841, through to children in care, children's convalescent homes, schools, the Australian child migration schemes and finishing with the Brook Advisory Centres between 1965-85 in the last chapter. It concludes with a *Postscript* for policy and practice.

This structure is one of the strengths of the book as it allows two important observations to emerge. The first is the evident importance of voluntary, charity and religious organisations to the welfare of children in the 19th century, and secondly, how that significance decreased over time as state intervention gradually, and necessarily, increased.

The book largely relies on secondary data analysis data, including letters, documents, essays and even secondary analysis of primary research. The exception is chapter 10 which is of primary research data. In some of the chapters, the method of data analysis used is clear and detailed, particularly chapter 5 which provides a thorough account of the listening guide method of analysis. However, this is not the case for all chapters, and in some chapters, there is no outline of the method of data analysis. As with all accounts that rely on secondary data analysis, the book is limited by the fact that the data is not always relevant to the analysis, as most evident in Chapter 7, where there are hardly any direct accounts to support the analysis. Additionally, in general the analysis feels at times that the data is being overly interpreted to

meet the aims of the book, which again could be a consequence of the reliance on secondary data.

The book's central thesis of the significance of children and young people's agency is outlined in all the chapters and reinforced in the *Postscript*. If the thesis of the book was that children and young people have always had credible and worthwhile views about their own and others' welfare which adults tend to ignore, this would have been an argument well made by the book. However, the claim that the exercise of agency by children and young people has had an important influence on the development of welfare is not a convincing argument on the whole as is not supported by the evidence presented. This is because the book seems to adopt a definition of agency that defines agency as simply the ability of children and young people to articulate their views. **As an example of this, in Chapter 1 it foregrounds the existence of written correspondence by a 10-year-old child named Trubshaw claiming that he was sold into slavery and generally being mistreated by the Children's Friend Society as an example of his exercise of agency. However, later on it notes that Trubshaw's claims were actually dismissed and no action was taken against the Children's Friends Society, which is significant in the context of what we now know about the Children's Friends Society.** Additionally, the book consistently outlines but does not seem to take into account that many of the positive accounts of welfare services provided by the children and young people are as a consequence of coercion, censorship or selective data use, and so is not a complete picture. This means that overall, the book does seem to be somewhat overoptimistic in the importance that it ascribes to children and young people's agency on the development of policy and practice, based on the evidence provided.

There are two key points which the book does make that have relevance to current social work practice. The first is that it is clear from the accounts of even young children that children and young people are able to articulate their views, wishes and needs, if only we are prepared to listen to them. The fact that we often ignore them, as is evident in the accounts in the book, is to our discredit. The second point, which is of wider relevance not just to social work, is the importance of finding appropriate methods for children and young people to articulate their views. Reading the chapters, it is evident that those data collection methods that are more child friendly lead to more meaningful insights from the children. For example, the quality of data provided by the unstructured essays in chapters 6 and 8 is clearly better than

that provided by the structured questionnaires and interviews in other chapters. This suggests that engaging with children and young people on their terms provides the more meaningful information.

These 2 key points make the book of interest not only to social workers working with children and young people, but those looking to work with children in a way that leads to more meaningful engagement.