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978-0-521-77555-7 - Abandoned Children
Edited by Catherine Panter-Brick and Malcolm T. Smith
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1 Nobody's children? A reconsideration of child abandonment

Catherine Panter-Brick

Nobody's child
Nobody's child
Just like a flower
They're growing wild
Got no mama's kisses
And no daddy's smile
Nobody wants them
They're nobody's child *Nobody's child* Song by Cy Coben and Mel Foree

To a casual observer, children who languish in foundling institutions, sleep rough on the streets of crowded urban centres or find themselves confined to refugee camps appear to all intents and purposes abandoned, either by their parents or by society. They appear to be 'nobody's children': in limbo, denied their proper place in the family or society and deprived of a proper childhood. This blanket portrayal of them is, however, often inappropriate. While there is no denying the pain and distress experienced by children separated from their families or displaced in society, or the care owed to them, it is essential to examine the diversity of life experiences masked by the concept of abandonment and to step back from a position which sees all deviations from the predominant contemporary Western model of childhood as wrong.

Abandonment as a catch-all term

Uncritical use of the word 'abandonment' is common in the media and the social welfare literature. Foundlings, street children, victims of war, child prostitutes and children of refugee parents have all been portrayed as abandoned. This promiscuous use of the term robs it of any analytical value. Rather like the case of the words 'stress' and 'lifestyle', the meaning of 'abandonment' is diffuse. It is no accident, however, that the term is used so indiscriminately, for it has powerful emotional overtones both for the media and for the general public from whom charities solicit donations.

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The portrayal of all such children as abandoned may distort understanding even on the part of those closely involved in administering assistance. As Hewitt has pointed out (1992: 44–5), 'For many years, fund-raising by charities has been based on images of children in distress. . . . They have been relatively successful in raising funds . . . but have done little to give a fuller picture of the lives of the children they portray.' Similarly, Ennew (1994) argues that in the realm of social policy and public action, the term 'abandonment', used to provoke pity and an impulse to rescue street children, effectively labels the children and obscures the real issues in their lives. Whereas 'some people claim that there is no time for new research, that . . . the important thing is to act for disadvantaged children immediately', Ennew stresses that we simply cannot afford interventions that fail because of the lack of firsthand research documenting the lives of the children concerned (pp. 49–50).

Ad hoc typologies

Some attempts have been made at a more discerning use of the term 'abandonment' but as little more than ad hoc classifications, they do not get to the heart of the problem. Moreover, the terminology used to distinguish one category of children from another is not always very serviceable.

Residential child care institutions use four terms to characterize children under their care: orphaned, abandoned, unaccompanied and destitute. However, Tolfree (1995) is critical of this classification. The category 'abandoned children' is ambiguous, referring to both 'situations in which a child, usually a baby, is abandoned by a parent or caregiver . . . with the obvious intent of creating a permanent separation' and 'situations in which a parent places a child in a residential institution without the intention of relinquishing the child permanently' (1995: 38–9). The category 'unaccompanied children' lumps together 'those who have become separated accidentally from their families (for example in the process of flight), as well as orphaned and abandoned children, young people who have been abducted or conscripted into armies, and those who have chosen to leave their families' (p. 39).

UNICEF's category of 'children in especially difficult circumstances' (Black 1996) was originally established to include 'refugees, children with disabilities, children affected by organized violence, unaccompanied children in disasters, as well as street and working children' (Connolly and Ennew 1996: 132). In an attempt to identify those separated from home, UNICEF (1986: 15) categorized orphans, runaways, refugees and displaced persons as 'children without family contact' for whom 'aban-

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donment is deeply felt'. This formulation is open to criticism that the phrase 'deeply felt' needs much greater precision and that it is inaccurate to say that runaway street children do not as a rule maintain contact with their families (Glauser 1990: 142–3).

The term 'abandonment' has also been used to specify subcategories of street children by reference to the nature of their ties with the family. Childhope (1993) differentiated three subgroups: children 'on the street' who stayed in regular contact with their families, children 'of the street' who lived away from home but maintained irregular contact, and 'abandoned and neglected' children, left entirely on their own. Such categorizations have been found confusing or misleading in practice.

Another type of classification distinguishes several types of abandonment: children abandoned by parents, children abandoning their families and children abandoned by the state and society (Adams *et al.* 1985; Hewitt 1992: 51). This typology not only refers to the circumstances of children but seeks to impute responsibility for the abandonment. In doing so, it concerns itself with both the material and the moral aspects of abandonment.

The classic case of children abandoned by parents is the 'exposure' of babies to the elements for rescue by the 'kindness of strangers' (Boswell 1988), an act which effectively sidesteps infanticide. A famous example is Moses who was placed in a basket in the bulrushes at the edge of the Nile but was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who hired the child's own mother as wet-nurse. The fateful opportunity for life has been amply celebrated in religious and fictional literature (for example, in the legend of Oedipus and the story of Perdita in Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*). However, parental abandonment is widely interpreted to include much more than infant 'exposure'. It refers to desertion not only in a physical but also in a moral sense. Accusations of parental abandonment are often levelled at families who eschew their child-rearing responsibilities, whether or not this results in a likely fatal outcome. Thus Boyden (1990: 204) points out: 'Among the children who might be defined as abandoned are those that participate in school infrequently, those that work and those that are left unattended whilst their parents work.'

The term 'abandonment' is also applied to situations in which children escape from their parents and unhappy homes, as in the case of runaways and many street children. Fiction has painted vivid pictures of these characters, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, and Charles Dickens' Artful Dodger being well-known examples. The academic literature has tended, until relatively recently, to emphasize the 'troubled' personality of runaways or their escape from troubled environments (Felsman 1984).

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Lastly, 'abandonment' has been used to describe neglect by society. Thus Hewitt (1992: 46) has argued that street children in Brazil have been excluded from 'definitions of public need' (p. 51) and that their abandonment reflects the most visible aspect of urban deprivation. Structural inequalities and socio-political interest are said to be at the root of both 'Brazilian apartheid', discriminating against slum and street children (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998), and the 'recent proliferation of child-hostile public policies in the United States, Canada, and the United Kindgom, policies that are rapidly unraveling the welfare state' and result in a 'projected increase in child abandonment' (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998: 20, 28).

The chief merit of this typology is to relate abandonment to a nexus of relationships between the child, the parents and the collectivity. It is still confusing to the extent that a child may be both abandoned and abandoning – in real life the circumstances of street children, for example, rarely fit neatly into one or the other of these categories. While the typology tries to go beyond an ad hoc classification in seeking to locate responsibility for abandonment, it has moral overtones and therefore invites value judgements.

Abandonment as a social construct

A much more illuminating approach to 'abandonment' is to recognize that it tends to be used in too stereotyped a fashion because one particular view of a 'proper' childhood tends to prevail. 'Childhood' has been shown to be a social construct that can have no universal validity: there is not one but a variety of historically and culturally specific childhoods. It follows that abandonment must also be seen in a particular historical and cultural context.

A 'proper' childhood: care and protection

According to the modern Western view of a 'proper' childhood, a child should have a 'carefree, safe, secure and happy' existence (Somerville 1982) and be raised by 'caring and responsible' adults. Only in this context can a child develop to its full potential, specified in terms of outcomes in adulthood such as educational achievement, economic security, healthy attachments and lack of antisocial habits. The child is viewed as an innocent in need of protection and a dependant in need of guidance (Holland 1992; Ennew 1995). The responsibility for providing a suitable upbringing is placed unequivocally on the adults who relate to a particular child and, where this fails, on society. A salient feature of this

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notion of childhood is thus the emphasis on parental *responsibility* (James *et al.* 1998: 14), both morally and economically (Qvortrup 1996: 66).

The proper place of children is therefore the home, the school or some other environment in which they can be guided and protected. Ennew (1995: 202) has forcefully argued that a crucial aspect of childhood in modern Western eyes is *domesticity*: 'The place for childhood to take place is inside – inside society, inside a family, inside a private dwelling.' The place that children come to occupy is important because it signifies either a nurturing and secure environment or one in which children may be abused, neglected, corrupted or exposed to deviant habits. As Hecht (1998) also emphasized, a proper childhood is one which takes place at home – not in the streets, a brothel or an institution. Often defined by the absence of bad experiences rather than by any positive qualities, 'childhood can be seen . . . when children do not work, when they are not exploited or institutionalized' (p. 73).

This discourse of childhood is quite clearly a construct, abstracted from the real-life circumstances of children. It is a model or ideal type which maps what is to be achieved and the paths to be followed. As Boyden (1994: 260) has pointed out, it arose in 'Europe and North America in the advanced industrial period. It first gained favour when children were being withdrawn from the labour market and the streets and confined to the home and the school.' Levine and White (1991) linked it to the shift to urban-industrial institutions, the demographic transition, the growth of mass schooling, and the rise of public interest in children. Because childhood is a social construct, contingent on specific historical and cultural contexts, it is not 'simply and unproblematically a description of the early biological development of the human child' (James 1988: 51). Both the Western paradigm of child development as a natural and universal phase of the life cycle and its definition of a 'child' in terms of chronological age, have now been extensively challenged (see Ingleby 1986: 301, cited in Woodhead *et al.* 1991: 3; Boyden *et al.* 1998; James 1998; James *et al.* 1998).

The social historian Philippe Ariès is often credited with launching the reappraisal of childhood as a relative rather than universal social category. In *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) he claimed that medieval Europe did not possess a concept of childhood: children, once weaned, were just 'people', whose needs and responsibilities were no different from those of adults. Specific needs for children in terms of their education and social life were gradually legislated between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (see James 1998; Jenks 1996). While the evidence for this claim has been hotly contested, the idea of the relativity of childhood as a social construct has stood its ground. In the words of one critic, 'Ariès under-

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stands by the concept of "childhood" a peculiarly modern awareness of what distinguishes children from adults . . . the evidence fails to show that previous societies lacked a concept of childhood . . . it shows that they lacked *our* concept' (Archard 1993: 20, emphasis added). Anthropologists have since sharpened a theoretical focus on the 'plurality of childhoods, a plurality . . . stratified, by class, age, gender and ethnicity, by urban or rural locations and by . . . disability or ill health' (Jenks 1996: 121–2). They are now engaged in confronting the manifest diversity of 'childhoods' and envisioning how best to handle childhood as a general category while substantiating its variation over time and space (Qvortrup 1994: 5; James *et al.* 1998).

Other childhoods: circulation and employment

Other childhoods diverge from the contemporary Western model in several important ways. Two aspects are highlighted: separation from home and economic activity, in contrast to domesticity and dependency.

First, the child's links with home and family may be far more tenuous than is prescribed by the modern Western model of the 'domestic' child. In many countries of the developing world responsibility for the upbringing of children lies not just with biological parents but with relatives within the extended family or with substitute unrelated families. West African fosterage, for example, is both a means of managing family size and composition (conferring enormous flexibility: fosterage 'can be done and undone a number of times, even with the same child, to meet new exigencies') and a strategy for social mobility through placement of children with guardians who 'have responsibility toward, and can demand benefit from, children' (Bledsoe 1990a: 81, 82). Commonly, parents 'foster out' their children to urban areas, as a lever towards social and political advancement, while simultaneously 'fostering in' children from yet more rural areas, to help with household and other chores. Thus 'by contrast to the firm belief in Western society that a child needs one stable set of parental figures throughout childhood, most Mende [of Sierra Leone] would argue the opposite: the truly unfortunate children are those who have *not* been sent away from home for their advancement. A rural child who has not been fostered out to a guardian of higher status or to a more urban area is presumed to be unworthy or dull' (Bledsoe 1990b: 77). Here parents tolerate a long separation from their children and the children's neglect or harsh treatment at the hands of a guardian. This is not deviant parenting but careful management of patron–client ties cultivated to ensure opportunities for the child's future (Bledsoe 1990b).

Child fostering and adoption – the transfer of responsibilities from

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natal parents to kin or non-kin – are thus a means of 'creating kinship' through socialization (Cardoso 1984). Indeed, in some cultures mother–infant relationships are deliberately weakened to strengthen wider social networks (Trawick 1992). Among the Inupiat of Alaska, not only are children circulated among a wide range of family members, but, remarkably, children 'decide themselves that they should be adopted and to whom. It is considered a legitimate choice for them to make, even if a parent may not wish it' (Bodenhorn 1988: 14).

In historical Europe, also, domestic service, apprenticeship and wet-nursing meant that coresidence of parents and children in the family home was neither universal nor as prolonged as it is today. Separation from home was a feature not just of the lives of children in poor rural areas but also of those of wealthy families in towns. The biography of Talleyrand, the French statesman renowned for diplomatic intrigue under many governments, well illustrates a protracted separation from home and family relationships marked by physical and emotional distance. The second son of a wealthy family (a 'surplus' son under the law of primogeniture), he spent his early life in the care of a wet-nurse. At the age of six he was sent 300 miles away to be raised by his grandmother and at the age of eight to a boarding school in Paris, making each seventeen-day journey without first going home or seeing his parents (Bernard 1973: 21–5). Talleyrand stated that he 'never had the good fortune to spend one night under the same roof as his parents'. But, he observed, 'my sad and dreary childhood . . . taught me to bear misfortune and disappointment with indifference, and to meet such things with the resources which my self-knowledge taught me that I possessed' (quoted in Bernard 1973: 28–9). His early years proved no bar and even a spur to his achieving social advancement, political power and lasting historical significance.

Second, it is only in contemporary Western societies that so great an emphasis is placed on the 'dependent' child. In other times and places, children have routinely been expected to contribute to the household economy (Cunningham and Viazzo 1996). In the United States as recently as in the first decades of the twentieth century, urban working-class children 'were expected to work in their spare time after school, on weekends, and during holidays', turning over all their earnings to their mothers (Nasaw 1985: vii, quoted in Hecht 1998: 83), whereas today it is sometimes argued that earnings may undermine family interaction (Manning 1990). In England during the seventeenth century, children were from the age of five or six 'forced to some art' (Wilson 1936, quoted in Houlbrooke 1984: 154) by which they contributed economically towards their maintenance and the income of their parents and masters. The textile industries relied extensively on the labour of children as young

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as four or five (Defoe 1962, cited in Houlbrooke 1984: 154), while in rural areas, children began agricultural labour by the age of eight. In spite of the eighteenth-century shift to a more affectionate and permissive attitude towards children (Stone 1977; Pollock 1983), the development of cottage industry and the industrial revolution offered increased opportunity for children to earn income. For example, both boys and girls were widely employed in coal mining. This early experience was seen by employers as essential for producing expert workers, and for families it was an effective insurance policy in an occupation in which the principal breadwinner's economic activity could all too easily be curtailed by accident or illness (Colls 1987).

Economic activity was also expected of children who were dislocated from their nuclear families. In England in 1536, by Act of Parliament, orphans, vagrants and begging children of five years and above were put into the service of local authorities, while in later centuries illegitimate and pauper children were bound as parish apprentices at seven or ten (Houlbrooke 1984). Mayhew's (1851) study of young people in the mid-nineteenth century shows that many of them worked, whether from the family home, cheap lodgings, the workhouse or the street. One of the girls interviewed had been sent out on to the streets at age nine to sell flowers which her father provided. Like many such girls, she made most of her income from prostitution and supposed that her parents knew this.

In contemporary societies throughout the developing world, child employment (paid or unpaid) is a widespread feature of the lives of the poor. In many places, work for children between the ages of six and twelve plays a major part in their development, being vital to the child's acquisition of skills, sense of self-worth, and family relationships (Boyden *et al.* 1998). It is not play or schoolwork which takes precedence but economically productive labour (see Panter-Brick 1998). Even in the highly literate state of Kerala, India, school attendance has to be negotiated in line with work responsibilities, with the result that the heavy workload of girls in poor households puts them in a particularly disadvantaged position with regard to completing a formal education (Nieuwenhuys 1994). In contemporary urban Brazil, there are said to be several 'childhoods', differentiated along class lines and marked by contrasting economic and affective relationships to the home (Hecht 1998; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998). Within the upper middle class, parents 'nurture' their children and espouse the ideals of childhood promoted in contemporary Western society. Within the working class, in contrast, children nurture the household by working inside and outside the home from an early age. For Hecht these two models converge in that 'the locus of their childhood is the family home' (1998: 92), while a third life course, one separate from the family home, is followed by street children. For Scheper-Hughes and

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Hoffman, street children are simply 'excess' children from the slums who defy the upper classes by invading their public space, refusing to accept their status as 'nobodies' (1998: 362, 382).

Abandonment as a moral discourse

These many childhoods are not only factually but conceptually and normatively different. Embedded in them are *normative* judgements of what the life of a child should be. There are different approaches to child 'care' and 'protection', some of which involve the separation of children from home and their early employment; most often these practices are locally considered to be in the children's best interests. From the modern Western viewpoint, however, many other childhoods are aberrant, harmful, tantamount to abandonment in so far as they fall short of providing children with a nurturing home environment.

From this standpoint, children who are not at home and nurtured appear 'forsaken', 'lost' or 'deviant'. 'Abandoned' street children, exiles, refugees from war zones, and children bonded to virtual slavery or prostitution are deemed to have 'lost' their childhood. The international media feed this portrayal by painting 'an especially stark picture, of innocent and vulnerable child victims . . . of "stolen" childhoods in refugee camps and war zones' (Boyden 1990: 185). Similarly, the sociological and anthropological literature of the 1980s and 1990s depicts children 'robbed' of their childhood (in Hecht 1998: 72–3), 'children without childhood' (Winn 1984; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998: 15), 'lost, stolen, and disappearing childhoods' (Vittachi 1989; Stephens 1995: 8–9), or 'childhood abandoned' (Garbarino *et al.* 1991: 73).

Furthermore, children who are not under the care of responsible adults are simply not in their proper place. Street children, for example, allegedly live by their own means, without direct adult supervision, roaming the streets rather than sleeping at home and attending school. Such children are 'at risk' but also a menace or risk to society (Stephens 1995: 12–13) – victims but also deviants. As Ennew (1995: 202) categorically states, 'this means that street children are society's ultimate outlaws . . . not only outside society, they are also outside childhood'. They are 'out of place' (Connolly and Ennew 1996).

In short, contemporary Western notions of abandonment spring from a particular representation of childhood and from normative judgements about a child's actual and ideal life course. Abandonment – considered to be an observation on the life of certain children – is itself a social construct. Moreover, it is a construct guided by a highly prescriptive and normative ideology, namely, the vision of what a proper childhood should be. Popular notions of 'nobody's children' therefore spring from a specific

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discourse about the life course. Children who are not nurtured by responsible adults, who are separated from home, are portrayed as disconnected from family and society; their existence cannot be safe and happy, and therefore they must be rescued or 'saved'.

Abandonment and remedial action

There has been a growing universalization of concern for children, if only because 'responses to the injustices which children experience are increasingly seen to be of international rather than simply national or local concern' (Hill and Asquith 1994: 144). The international community's concern is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which came into force in September 1990. It asserts a number of rights for children worldwide, sets out basic principles to be applied, and creates a legal obligation to put these rights and principles into practice. Thus humanitarian concerns are legislated and have become a matter of local, national and international responsibility. The Convention lists the areas where the rights and interests of children need to be taken into account – for example, separation from parents, freedom of expression, health, education and employment – and enunciates the principle that in 'all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' (Article 3.1).

Nonetheless, remedial action, particularly international involvement and intervention, can be misconceived – especially where attempts are made to 'save' children from 'abandonment'. Two questionable assumptions are commonly made, both of which lead to action that tends to be preconceived and hence to involvement that tends to be ineffective and inappropriate.

First, while the Convention does provide a universal mandate for intervention – in the best interests of the child – it may be assumed incorrectly that a specific solution or course of action is thereby prescribed. In fact, this principle is *deliberately* left open-ended or indeterminate. It does not provide any 'specific and readily ascertainable recipe' (Alston, 1994: 2–3) for intervention. What would be the most appropriate way to safeguard children's rights is left to be determined by examination of the particular circumstances of a child in a particular cultural context. Similarly, the obligations or entitlements of the state, the family and the child are not clearly defined but left to local interpretation. In legislating the international rights of children, the international community is grappling with an ongoing difficulty, that of drawing up laws

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