Reviewer's report

Title: Care-'Less': Exploring the interface between child care and parental control in the context of child rights for workers in Children's Homes in Ghana

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Reviewer: Sarah de Benitez

Reviewer's report:

I have very much enjoyed reviewing your article. It is an original and interesting piece of work that addresses a really significant gap in our understanding of challenges faced by institutional programmes that deliver care services to vulnerable children. It adds to our knowledge of the considerable challenges faced by caregivers charged with ensuring the well-being of children outside of family protection.

The phenomenological research design and qualitative methods you have chosen for data collection and the data analysis are well suited to the task of examining the three research questions posed, which address: Caregivers' perceptions of 'parental care'; How caregivers experience working with child rights; Caregivers' perceptions of the impact of child rights on their ability to provide care. Your article is well structured and clearly written.

My main concern is that the Conclusion, as currently written, is not adequately supported by the ways in which data were collected or by the way in which data collection has been articulated in the manuscript. The changes needed to bring data collection, articulation and Conclusion firmly into line may be minor - because the central assertions in the Conclusion - that the intent of child rights policies is not fully understood and not well accepted by employed caregivers… etc… (P. 22 line 21) and that child rights are regarded to some degree as 'foreign' by caregivers - seem to me to be well supported by the data presented and the Discussion. I think your article will be considerably improved by a more focused Conclusion that advances logically from the data presented, through the Discussion.

My three specific areas of concern are as follows:

1 - Evidence of reflexivity, in particular, systematic attention to the effect of the researcher on caregiver responses in the FGDs and interviews. Power relations between researcher and caregivers - and the effects they may have had on care-givers' responses - are under-examined in the manuscript. Caregivers are likely to occupy a relatively 'powerless' position vis-à-vis you as the researcher (and vis-a- vis the care home as institution), which leads to the question - What
measures were taken / techniques used to reduce power disparities and avoid / manage respondent bias? Factors that may distort caregivers' responses could include: position of the interviewer vis-a-vis caregivers (using lenses such as eg gender, age, education, class/ethnicity); Caregivers' understandings of interviewer preferences (and a wish to produce the 'right' kind of information); and the interview/FGD situation - eg location, timing and consideration of other contextual factors that may have affected care-giver responses. A further question then is: What limitations might any identified power disparities / biases have on the ability to draw conclusions from the data?

2 - 'Perceptions' and strength of claims: The study relies heavily on care-givers' responses in relatively short in-depth interviews (under 1.5 hours on average) and one FGD per institution, to generate 'care-giver perceptions' on which the conclusions are premised. As recognized in the Limitations section, children's perceptions were not elicited (participant observation was not used). This raises questions about some of the assertions made in the Conclusion: eg Are 'experiences' (behavioural events) sometimes in the article being confused with perceptions (expressed views) - as in P. 22? Did all caregivers or just some perceive child rights eg as a form of control? (In the Discussion there are several references to 'some' and 'most' caregivers eg 'some' caregivers saw control as inseparable from parenting P.12 line 52 - meaning presumably that some did not - dissenting/diverse views should be referenced/acknowledged in the conclusion). Do the perceptions 'stem from' the wide deviation of child rights principles from Ghanaian cultural norms - as asserted on P. 22 line 9? Or could they also be interpreted as stemming from a confusion perpetuated by authorities and institutions between the job of 'parenting' (unpaid and unregulated) and 'caregiver work' (paid and regulated)? Has the study really shown that implementation of the UNCRC still remains at the policy level (P.22 line 16)? (in which case, it will be important to define 'policy level' because child rights appear, in the data presentation, to be embedded at care home institutional level - with tensions presenting between management and caregiving in the institution). Finally - has the study really shown that 'presence of the policy has eliminated the emotional component and spontaneity that goes with child care etc…'? The data presented does suggest that some caregivers perceive this - but that surely does not make it fact? Is it fair to say that caregivers now have no emotional bonds or spontaneity… ? Indeed would it be fair to say that caregivers, without 'the policy' would have been emotionally engaged and spontaneous? These seem to be leaps rather than a logical progression from the data.

3 - Clarification of 'policy': In the Discussion, there are several important references to 'the policy' (eg P. 17, line 58 and P. 19, line 4) that are picked up again in the Conclusion. However, there is no clear statement in the manuscript of exactly which policy (link?/ref to a national plan?) is under discussion, making blame apportioned to 'the policy' difficult to justify in the Conclusion. I suggest 'the policy' be clearly defined and that care is taken to support assertions of links between perceptions and policy.
I also offer some smaller comments that may help you finalize what I have found to be an extremely readable and informative article:

Parenting v professional care - Expectations (whether at policy or management level) that caregivers act as parents seems to ignore issues such as regulation, pay, recruitment, staff conditions and workers' rights. It also ignores possible trauma/distress caused by a) loss of parent(s) and b) substitution of parents by caregivers required to act as parents… It could be interesting to raise this in the Discussion, and failing that, in the Limitations and Directions for future research.

Another interesting Direction for research suggested by the Discussion seems to be at organizational level - examining tensions between management expectations and realities of caregivers - where the pivot from child rights to real care work is taking place.

Challenges in 'bonding' on P. 6 seems to assume that blood relations are de facto good and professional relations bad…? That's clearly not the intention, since that would not account for child abuse in the home…

Caregiver recruitment (where's the catchment area - local?) and Caregiver training (on the job/ diploma?) - a bit of information may help the reader to better understand caregiver perceptions. Perhaps they can be included in Table 1?

Physical v corporal punishment - P. 4- is there a difference?

FGDs - with only 2 conducted, perhaps state how long each was, rather than give an average?

P. 11, line 53 - meaning unclear 'doe's'?
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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No

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