MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

POSITION PIECES

Affinity through Vulnerability

The Politics of Positionality in Child Welfare

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Abstract

Child welfare is a challenging space for professionals, parents, and most of all children. The labour of care within this space is an intersection of personal histories and ongoing narratives that synthesise self, family, medicine, and the state. I explore how encounters with children in care brought me into this nexus and redefined my position as a researcher. Competing perspectives on the role of experience in shaping affinity reveal a contentious discourse about what it means to be a foster child. In this Position Piece I find that sharing vulnerability through the traumatic experience of family estrangement is one path to mutual understanding that may transcend cultural boundaries. Further, mobilising and reflecting on the vulnerability of estrangement demonstrates the social embeddedness of mental health and healing.

Keywords

Caregiving, Positionality, Child welfare, Ethnography, Japan.

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> I remember a sunny afternoon, when I was young, walking hand-in-hand with a woman in a yellow jacket—a stranger who I never knew—as she escorted me out of my house. I wasn't upset, just curious why I had to be the one to leave. —An interlocutor, reflecting on their childhood.

Beginnings

I work with children of the state and their care workers. The capacity to do fieldwork within this space carries tacit assumptions about intention, responsibility, and reason. Drawing from my graduate coursework in anthropology, I understand the importance of acknowledging how race, gender, ethnicity, class, and nationality—among other categories—constitute a researcher's positionality. Coming from the United States, I embarked on my doctoral fieldwork in Japan conscious that I was an outsider both to Japanese society and to its child welfare system. I did not expect to share sentiments with my young interlocutors. Yet I did. My own experience in care redefined our relationships and challenged me to consider how relatedness through vulnerability—particularly the traumatic experience of entering state care—represents a form of insider knowledge.[1]

In this Position Piece, I discuss how encounters with children in care and their care workers foregrounded my own past in care as the centre of my positionality. This complicated my status as an outsider and encouraged a reflection on my role. In the context of researching health and wellbeing, understanding positionality as tenuous—and re-examining it—offers a way to consider how health knowledge is co-produced by individuals who share an affinity through vulnerability. I describe how affinity between people who share vulnerability through traumatic experiences may provide meaningful insights for contextualising (mental) health.

My interlocutors, who range from children and their parents to social workers and clinical psychologists, are connected through a moral, intersubjective engagement with the institution of the family (Kleinman 1999, 71–2). The decision to separate a child from their family is not an isolated decision made by parents or social workers, but rather a nexus of past and ongoing relationships, desires, pressures, and the uncertainties of attempting to do what is best. Many children in care are at the margins of society; they have less access to educational opportunities, social resources, and live outside a mainstream assumption that parents will care for their children (Goodman 2000, 1–11, 123–8, 172).

1 Aside from any abuse or neglect a child may previously have been subject to, their experience of entering state care—from leaving home to coming into an unfamiliar space—is traumatic in that it is a significant rupture of their daily life and social relationships. However, this does not imply that children cannot cope with or reconcile these experiences.

Within my fieldwork I occupied a liminal space, fluctuating unsteadily between stranger, friend, researcher, volunteer, and foster youth, among other positions. Each role was partial and temporary. This uncertainty, caught between different expectations, defines my connection to my interlocutors. I found that my own history became a decisive factor in how children and adults perceived me. This history, in turn, shaped my fieldwork, and afforded me a measure of closeness to others who have experienced estrangement that I would not have achieved otherwise. Children shared with me how they really felt about their care workers and lives in care. Conversely, disclosing my experience exposed me to criticism from some care workers with whom I interacted—another opportunity afforded by my position.

I focus this discussion on the beginnings of my friendship with Ryuji, a primary school student in state care, and the state of my relationship with a senior care worker, Ayako. Through these contrasting illustrations, I reflect on how people made sense of who I was and how it affected my research position. I describe these encounters as I experienced them—as fragments of a larger, unfinished narrative. They are personal, emotional, and messy. There is also an aspect of vulnerability for my young interlocutors which is embedded in sharing these stories and necessitates that I alter details to protect my interlocutors.[2]

As much as ethnography is the story of our interlocutors, it can also be a story of ourselves. But how do we find a balance between the two? I wonder what a careful ethnography of one's own world in relation to their interlocutors could be. With this Position Piece, my aim is not to suggest answers, but instead to provide a hopeful space in which to ruminate on the position of the ethnographer and how vulnerability—in this case produced through estrangement—could provide a theoretical space to better understand the social dimensions of mental health and wellbeing.[3]

Ryuji

On a late summer afternoon, I arrived at a child welfare institution in the suburbs of Tokyo. Approximately 40,000 children in Japan are currently in state care, 85 per cent of whom are placed in group homes rather than with foster families (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2022, 2). I had begun my research on the daily life in these homes, and the staff of this institution had invited me to spend

2 In addition to pseudonyms for names and places, I have also altered subtle details about my interlocutor's identities and stories. These changes do not impact the substance of the encounters.

3 This curiosity aligns well with autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2017), although the term intimates a marked category that is distinct from ethnography and suggests a primary concern with methodology and a researcher's perspective. My inquiry lies more with incorporating a reflexivity around one's own trajectory parallel to one's interlocutors within ethnographic writing and analysis. The distance or difference between ethnographer and interlocuter could become shorter, blurred, or disappear entirely. My thinking is in line with Ruth Behar's (1996) essays on writing more openly about the personal intersections of positionality.

time with the children and their care workers. At this point, I had been visiting the home for about two months of a period of fieldwork that would go on to last twelve months. The campus of this institution, Evergreen Academy, consists of an office building surrounded by smaller residential cottages. At the reception, I checked in with the staff. Transitioning to slippers, I walked through the building to a room used for study and special events. In it, an older care worker, Megumi, who also teaches occasionally at a nearby school, was listening to Risa, a primary-school aged student, as she read aloud a story. I sat to listen but, soon after, Ryuji—another child resident—ran in, announcing he was back from school. ‘Welcome home’, Megumi said, looking toward him. ‘What homework do you have today?’ ‘I only have kanji today’, he replied. Megumi nodded and said, ‘Alright, Christopher can help you.’

Ryuji was placed in institutional care at the recommendation of his social worker and with the consent of his parent. He comes from a single-parent household and because his mother had trouble balancing work and family obligations, Ryuji entered care until his circumstances stabilised. Although his stay was initially intended to be temporary, at this point he had lived there for over three years.[4] Today, Ryuji had to finish his homework. We sat and Ryuji opened his kanji practice book.[5] As he worked, we chatted about his day at school and his plans for the weekend.

Ryuji reached the final character and paused. ‘Can you teach me this one?’ he asked. I didn’t recognise it. ‘Let me check my dictionary’, I said. The character was *kō* (孝), which is often used in ‘filial piety’ (*oyakōkō*). The book listed this term and its antonym, ‘unfilial’ (*fukō*). I showed him how to write the character, but when he asked me the meaning, I found myself at a loss for words. ‘It means we should be kind to our parents’, I offered. He nodded and started writing. Not satisfied, I asked Megumi to help. She came over and laughed, commenting ‘Those aren’t very common words!’ After defining filial piety, she added that it is an important cultural value. She went back to help Risa. ‘I still don’t understand it’, Ryuji said to me as he resumed writing. ‘I can try to provide an example’, I started. ‘I know two [Japanese] brothers who are the sons of a fisherman. When the boys graduated from secondary school, their father told the older brother that he would take over the family business, while the younger would go to university. The older brother reluctantly agreed because it was his duty as the eldest son to care for the family’. I also told Ryuji it is the belief that when our parents get old we care for them, just as they cared for us. Ryuji said, ‘Thank you, but I still don’t understand’. I replied,

4 The average length of stay in Japanese child welfare institutions is approximately five years (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2022, 6).

5 Kanji are Chinese characters used in written Japanese and while each represents a particular definition, the characters can be combined to form new meanings. Children learn them through memorisation during the course of primary education.

'Well, I don't quite understand it myself, since I was a foster child. Unlike the brothers, I never met my father, so I don't feel an obligation to him.' I chuckled, 'I guess I'm unfilial'. Unexpectedly, Ryuji looked up and beamed, 'That's right! We're the same! Others [Megumi] don't understand, but you do.' From this point on, Ryuji preferred to spend his time with me. Up until the end of my fieldwork the following year, Ryuji specifically requested my attention, and we got to know each other well. Several care workers were delighted that he had found an adult role model to form a bond with.

The sentiment between Ryuji and I redefined our relationship, which became characterised by feelings of camaraderie.[6] He asked about my childhood, and in turn I learned about him. Megan Warin, in her research on the embodied experience of anorexia, noted that her relationship to her interlocutors changed when they learned that she was pregnant (2009, 16). With the pregnancy, her relationship to her body changed, which created a space to relate more closely with her interlocutors. In contrast to Warin, who was coming into a new affective space, with Ryuji I achieved relatedness by invoking old memories and identifying with a shared label—a child in care. Ryuji and I could empathise with one another despite our differences in culture and age. We share the experience of growing up in a world which teaches us that a family consists of our biological mother and father, who care for us. Through not experiencing this presumed relationship we see ourselves as different from others. What connects us is an alienation from the social institution of family.

This affinity became the centre of how people perceived me. Most care workers were excited to work with me because of my background and thought it would be nice to have a role model for the children. I disclosed my history as a foster youth as a measure of honesty about why I was interested in child welfare. But how should one discuss their position when the act of revealing it makes them vulnerable? Many youths have experienced complicated circumstances and would not want their personal histories made known, which is why anonymity and confidentiality are imperative. But for others, myself included, these conversations are not particularly challenging and yet they create an emotional vulnerability between me and my interlocutors. By talking about the experience of estrangement, I opened myself up to being perceived by different standards.

In some situations, my position as a former foster youth became a master status. Some care workers were very thoughtful in how they asked me about my past. Others saw me as an intriguing gateway into learning about child welfare in the United States. In sharing my care experience with others, my childhood

6 While I hope it is implied, this connection remained partial, because I was both a researcher following approved ethical guidelines and a special volunteer at a child welfare institution which has its own protocols.

unknowingly became reimagined as a site of fieldwork. Experiencing care prepared me to conduct research on the topic because many of my interlocutors' stories and frustrations were relatable, like absent parents and interacting with authority figures who don't understand. In anthropology, rapport is often viewed as a relational mode of engagement with research participants that has the potential to unlock ethnographic information. In contrast my research unsettled this assumption. For me, rapport turned into a way of becoming a part of others' narratives—an aspect of their moral engagements—and vice versa.

Ayako

Not everyone, however, saw care experience as an asset. Some care workers at the institution thought of the children as a distinct *other*. That is, they saw children in care as a separate category to children who are not in care—what they consider to be an 'ordinary child' (*ippan no ko*). Even I was outside of this separate category. When my past came up in a chat with Ayako, a care worker, she told me, 'You are not Japanese … your experiences in care do not matter (*kankei nai*)—these children will not go to university as you have, they do not have a future.' Ayako's viewpoint aligns with negative depictions of children in state care among the Japanese media (see Ambrose 2014), in which they are commonly described in terms of pity, tragedy, and need. I understand that the labour of care is exhausting and often thankless, which may lead to a pessimistic worldview. Yet how should I reconcile *what was* with *what is*? As Ayako indicates, I am not a child in care. I *was* a child in care. Due to that degree of separation and my foreign passport, Ayako believes that I am ineligible to claim familiarity with Ryuji and other Japanese children in care. There is merit in acknowledging this. I am no longer a foster child, and there is privilege in my ability to choose when to invoke this status. My self-identity does not need to be bound to it. However, it is important to recognise that the two categories—child and adult—do not need to be separate (see Goldfarb 2016). By achieving a sense of familiarity with Ryuji, my status as a former foster child constituted a counterbalance to the othering of children that I witnessed. I served as an example of a child in care who *did* 'have a future'. Nevertheless, I could not overcome Ayako's perception of me. And while she did not object to my presence, her disposition towards me was cold.

In my fieldwork, I had the choice to draw upon my status as a former foster child, but it created vulnerability as I opened myself up to new critique. Before, during, and after my research took place, most people I talked to, from academics to interlocutors, saw care experience as an advantage and encouraged me to be open about it. However, I occasionally interacted with people who thought differently, like Ayako. Before I began fieldwork, one established social researcher told me to scrap the entire project and choose a different topic because they

thought I was too close to my research subject. In another scenario, I lost points on a grant application because a reviewer shared a similar sentiment about my perceived closeness and suggested I was psychologically unfit to research children in care.[7] I was disappointed that people saw me not as an in-training social scientist, but some sort of defective result of an experience that happened over 20 years ago. Consequently, I started my fieldwork a little unsure as to how I would be received.

In the context of my research, vulnerability takes on multiple meanings, and I share it with my interlocutors in different ways. With Ryuji, we bonded over breakages in our families. Ryuji was in a less vulnerable position because there was comfort to be found in interacting with someone who could empathise with him. However, children and youth currently in care still face social and structural obstacles. Many of my young interlocutors do not divulge their status at school in order to avoid being treated differently. By invoking my previous care experience, though, I am not completely separate from these vulnerabilities—as I have described, critics made decisions that impacted my self-identity and ability to complete my degree. Writing this essay, too, leaves me with a feeling of ambivalence—acknowledging positionality is important, but how will this choice to disclose and discuss my position here affect my future?

Nonetheless, in light of the genuine connections I made with children and youth in care—not just Ryuji—I reject the criticisms I have faced of being too old, too foreign, and ‘too close’ to connect. We bonded through our experiences of estrangement to achieve a measure of mutual understanding despite our differences.

Futures

This Position Piece explores how individuals perceive and rectify vulnerability within local social worlds—it is in essence a small story about the intersubjectivity of wellbeing. I see my research on child welfare not as a singular, bracketed encounter, but as a part of a lifelong curiosity about the ways in which people care for each other. By being a foster child, along with many other serendipitous moments I cannot share here, I ‘did fieldwork without being aware of it’ (Rosaldo 2021, 1). Just as Rosaldo notes the formative influence his bilingual childhood had on his cultural worldview, my varied family encounters marked my first engagements with untangling social and cultural difference. Following up on a more personal aspect of his decades-long engagement with Nepal, anthropologist Tom Fricke recounts his relationship with his ‘key informant’, Yhebe (Fricke 2006,

7 In addition to being arbitrarily ‘too close’, the reviewer thought it would be better to have medical training in clinical psychology or psychiatry to be able to work with children who may have traumatic histories.

199). Fricke notes how his relationship with Yhebe gradually shifted into a powerful friendship, saying ‘when I think of Yhebe now, I still sometimes use words of my profession … when I truly *imagine* him, I lose these abstractions and I see a man, a man with whom I am joined in a common story’ (Ibid.). By being present and active, ethnographic work can be transformative for the researcher, who learns to care and to empathise (idem, 210–11). This commitment to listening to the people we come to know demonstrates the importance of sentiment in ethnographic research, and how researchers become an inseparable part of the stories they experience. I cannot guarantee that I will meet Ryuji again. At least, however, I will keep our story alive as a moment of friendship and learning, and as a reminder that while child welfare is a contentious space, it is possible to create meaningful affinities. With care, there is potential and promise in realising togetherness through vulnerability.

Authorship statement

I am the sole author of this work.

Ethics statement

The research data on which this piece is based were collected responsibly. Rigorous ethics protocols were approved by the University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC), with protocol number R69069/RE001.

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Christopher Chapman is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Oxford, and a medical anthropologist interested in caregiving, mental health, and personhood. His doctoral research examines the multi-sited politics of child welfare in Japan.

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