Humanitarianism, mobility and kinship: a reply to ‘Chronic crisis and nuclear disaster humanitarianism: recuperation of Chernobyl and Fukushima children in Italy’ by Zhukova


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Response to *Chronic Crisis and Nuclear Disaster Humanitarianism: Recuperation of Chernobyl and Fukushima Children in Italy*

The article on ‘Chronic Crisis and Nuclear Disaster Humanitarianism’ makes a number of valuable points in relation to how practices of vernacular humanitarianism, such as hosting children in Italian families, can have ambiguous effects. While alleviating some of the negative outcomes, they potentially entrench a sense of ‘chronic crisis’, and intensify pre-existing inequalities. Extending beyond these issues, the material presented in the article has the potential to contribute to kinship and migration studies in ways that are implicit, but not further elaborated on.

In the first instance, Zhukova’s article can be read as part of debates in kinship studies on children’s mobility undertaken in the interest of their welfare. In so doing, Zhukova positions these practices at the intersection of migration, kinship and humanitarianism. Studies of migration have often framed mobility- including, but not limited to- forced displacement, as detrimental and possibly hazardous for children. This is partly because much of migration studies engages with forms of non-privileged migration, increasing the likelihood that this will affect young people negatively. Even when this is child-led, for the purposes of work, adventure or education, there are concerns about the possible vulnerabilities this leaves them exposed to. In contrast to such debates, some research framed by kinship studies highlights how children move, or are being moved, for the express purpose of their welfare.

Children in the Latin American Andes for example, are sometimes moved between families, partly in order to improve their livelihoods (Leinaweaver 2008). This builds on earlier work (Bodenhorn 2000), on how Iñupiat children in Alaska actively choose their relatives, and move between families, irrespective of biological ties. In addition, a common practice in parts of West Africa is children being ‘given’ to another family for fostering. One rationale in these cases is that biological parents are not best placed to educate their children, precisely because they are closely related and emotionally involved (Alber 2004). In this light, the practice of moving children between families, on their own or others’ initiative, has precedent. The article offers an additional context to understand the recuperation of Chernobyl and Fukushima children in Italy that is at issue here. Studies of transnational adoption show how the welfare of the adoptee, as well as the needs of the adopting family, frame decisions about improving their care and wellbeing, especially from countries where they are likely to experience significant disadvantage or hardship otherwise.

These considerations place Zhukova’s work more explicitly at the intersection between kinship, child mobility, and humanitarianism. The question whether transnational (or indeed national) adoption can be understood as a form of vernacular humanitarianism certainly deserves more thought (Sidhu 2018, Candaele 2020). The children from Chernobyl described here do not undergo a permanent adoption experience. Nevertheless, being invited into Italian homes and families constitutes a temporary form of care, which is framed here as
a form of vernacular humanitarianism. An acknowledgement how this contributes to theories of child mobility and kinship, extends the impact and significance of the material Zhukova presents.

A further aspect that this article highlights, perhaps also implicitly, is how migration and kinship interrelate. As suggested above, child mobility, as a result of displacement, but also parental labour migration, is portrayed as disrupting kinship ties (Parrenas 2005). These ties have to be painstakingly maintained and recreated, in difficult circumstances, and often through means of digital communications. As the case of Chernobyl children shows, staying temporarily, but also repeatedly and over longer time periods, child mobility can also create kinship ties. This becomes evident among some migrant care workers, who develop bonds resulting from their mobility and kin-like relations with the children or the elderly whom they are looking after. It is often less visible how humanitarianism mobility can be productive, rather than merely disruptive, of kinship ties. This becomes evident in some of the material Zhukova presents, such as children stating that they consider a member of the host family as a ‘step sister’ or that they felt like a ‘family member’ themselves.

Finally, Zhukova notes how vernacular humanitarianism has the potential to exacerbate a sense of ‘chronic crisis’ insofar as it can intensify existing inequalities. The children from Fukushima, for example, are considered to not fit into Italian families due to cultural differences, thus contributing to their sense of alienation. Further, these programmes give children a sense that their relief period in Italy is exceptional, and in contrast to their everyday life ‘in crisis’ at home, to which they will return. This point is well taken, though it is worth stating that it is not unique to practices of vernacular humanitarianism. Other forms, mediated by humanitarian organisations, can also perpetuate existing inequalities, such as child sponsorship schemes organised by the organisation, World Vision (Bornstein 2008).

To sum up, Zhukova’s *Chronic Crisis and Nuclear Disaster Humanitarianism* makes useful contributions to wider kinship and migration studies, beyond those that are explicitly stated in the article itself. These contributions appear when we read the travels of children from Chernobyl and Fukushima as mobility for their intended benefit, aligning them with fostering and transnational adoption practices. Second, the article illustrates how child mobility, rather than disrupting kin relations, such as in transnational families, can generate new kin relations, in this case with Italian families. Finally, the argument that this form of vernacular humanitarianism may entrench inequalities, is not unique to these forms. It is shared by other humanitarian practices such as child sponsorship, and even kinship-based support systems, such as migrant remittances. It may therefore be the case that it is the particularism of these support practices- that is, singling out specific children or families for the programmes- by design amplify some of the injustices that they seek to redress.

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Reference:


