

Introduction:

The Irish industrial and reformatory schools system was Ireland's residential care system for children and young people, both non-offenders and offenders. One recurrent and often unacknowledged feature of the system was that the number of females in industrial schools until 1969 always exceeded the number of males. This system has been the subject of intense debate and investigation in recent years. This study contributes to this debate by exploring the impact on women of time spent in the industrial and reformatory schools system and in particular, the impact it had on their subsequent careers and life experiences.

Aim:

To explore the impact on women of time spent in the Irish industrial and reformatory schools system.

Theoretical framework:

Features of post-feminism, poststructuralist feminism and feminist criminology inform the theoretical and methodological approach adopted throughout this study.

Key theoretical concepts:

- Difference
- Social control
- Social injury
- Subjectivity
- Gender
- Power
- Language and discourse
- Strategies of reflexivity, deconstruction and reconstruction.

Research methods:

Compilation of oral histories from women who spent time in the industrial and reformatory schools system.

Critical discourse analysis of societal and child care/juvenile justice policy discourses'

Reasoning behind methodological approach:

Any critical analysis and exploration of the impact on women of time spent in Irish industrial and reformatory schools must include such women in the research process. The need to include some of these women was a key deciding factor in choosing oral history as one method of research.

The need to take cognisance of the different societal, economic and institutional influences which defined, shaped and controlled the experiences of women, during their time in institutional care and in their subsequent careers and life experiences highlighted the need to incorporate a critical analysis of societal and child care/juvenile justice policy discourses'.

Ethical concerns:

At the initial planning and design stages of this research a conscious decision was taken to undertake as much unobtrusive research as possible prior to the commencement of interviews.

Confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were core ethical concerns in negotiating access to women. An informal snowballing technique was used to locate participants.

Interim Results:

A total of twenty-two women participated in in-depth oral history interviews. The period of institutional care encompassed a time span of forty-four years, from 1938 to 1982 and involved a total of thirteen industrial schools and three individual female religious orders. The women were aged between thirty-five years and seventy-three years of age. While many of the women interviewed had similar life experiences, their stories illustrated a diversity of experiences, influences and identities.

Experiences in care:

Key recurrent concerns identified by participants included: their entry into the care system, the use of physical punishment, contact with individual family members, contact with members of the 'outside' community, their relationships with religious and lay staff, and the role of professionals, in particular, the role of social workers.

"We were in another world."

"She could never get me to cry."

"We were never allowed to be individuals."

"We never said the things we really wanted to say."

"Not believing you when I really needed them."

Experiences after time spent in care:

Pivotal and repeated concerns identified by women which had a significant impact on their subsequent careers and life experiences included: the transition to independent living, employment and relationships. In particular, their ability/inability to cope with everyday experiences which emerged in their relationships with men, their role as mothers, their role as welfare recipients and in their interactions as clients of a range of professionals.

The reality of some of the experiences of women in this study included: unemployment and employer exploitation; homelessness; prostitution, crisis pregnancy; eating disorders and mental health problems; lone parenting as a result of violence in families; imprisonment and emigration.

“My life kind of stagnated it kind of stood still.”

“They never told me stuff like that could happen.”

“Therapy saved my life.”

“I had no history there and I could be who I wanted to be.”

“The best thing I’ve done in my life is be a mother.”

Conclusion:

Oral histories provided a key research mechanism with which to explore the reality of the experiences of some of the women who spent time in the Irish industrial and reformatory schools system.

Critical discourse analysis of societal and child care/juvenile justice policy discourses provided an opportunity to critically examine how societal, economic and institutional pressures influenced the formulation of policy and practice in the Irish industrial and reformatory schools system.

Both methods of research allowed for the exploration of the different familial, social and institutional factors which influenced, both directly and indirectly, individually and collectively, the routes through which the participants in this study entered, experienced and left the Irish residential care system and the impact, both positive and negative, that this had on their subsequent careers and life experiences.

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