

# “And So I Search for My Lost Life. Where Did It Go?” Sexuality, Abuse, and Violence in Children's Homes 1950-1980

Andrea Smioski, University of Vienna, Austria

*Abstract: This paper presents the results of a biographical interview project about sexuality, abuse, and violence in children's homes between 1950 and 1980 in Austria, and which has been carried out between 2010 and 2012 by Prof. Dr. Reinhard Sieder and Dr. Andrea Smioski. Only in recent years has it become possible to address the crimes committed “in the name of education and welfare” in state-run children's homes, which took custody of neglected children from deprived or lone-mother families. Sexual abuse, violent punishment, and psychological degradation served as instruments of “total education” (Goffman). Contrary to the official purpose of home education, people have been left weakened and broken for life. For the first time now, former victims talk about their childhood in these state-run homes. They tell of imprisonment, censorship of letters, prohibition of contact with their families, physical pain, sexual and sexualised violence, psychological injuries and death fears, coercion to hard labour, etc. Many lost self-esteem and confidence; they are still plagued by loneliness, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Professional educators took over their education, because their parents were unable. However, one out of two educators had no formal training. And what do we know about the academic and professional staff employed in the relevant institutions? Lawyers and psychologists of the Youth Welfare Service, psychiatrists, curative educators, judges, home directors, social workers, and care takers all sent children to these homes, without seriously pursuing the rumours of violence. This paper aims at documenting and explaining the emergence and the typical course of physical and mental abuse. The subjects of investigation are, on a biographical level, the coping strategies of former wards, and on an institutional level, the structures that caused and sustained such violent situations.*

*Keywords: Children, Young People, Violence, Home Education, Total Education, Total Institution, Biographical Research*

## Socio-Historical Background of Home Education

The political and ideological context of juvenile homes in the first and second Republic in Austria is characterised by the idea that the state or municipality must intervene wherever the reproduction of future workers is at risk. The basic principle is education to work (Sieder and Smioski 2012, 26). If this education appears problematic in the family of origin, the state steps in and withdraws the parental rights to raise the child. In the 20th century, juvenile homes take custody of the children. From the 1950s to the 1980s home education replaces the family and runs both schooling and a limited number of apprenticeships.

The large number of homes that is maintained by the City of Vienna between 1950 and 1980 consists of municipal homes, as well as contractual homes belonging to Catholic congregations, families or associations. The City of Vienna operates 31 homes in the city and 30 more in the provinces of Lower Austria, Styria and Salzburg. They accommodate different numbers of children: some homes take in only a few children, whereas the larger homes accommodate up to 390 pupils. Altogether about 5000 children and young people from Vienna can be accommodated in a home in Austria around 1968. Usually a child passes through several homes until coming of age: there are homes for infants, for elementary school children, for secondary school children and homes for apprentices. Many homes have internal schools or apprenticeships, facilitating a seclusion of the pupils from the outside world. Often, the personnel of the home and the school is not strictly separated and teachers also work as educators outside of school.

## The Research Project

In the years 2010 and 2011 about 120 former wards placed in juvenile homes of the City of Vienna until the 1970s came forward in the course of public debates on child abuse in juvenile homes and boarding schools. They tell of imprisonment, censorship, prohibition of contact with their families, physical pain, sexual and sexualised violence, psychological injuries and death fears, coercion to hard labour, etc. Given the fact that most victims will remain silent, the estimated number of unreported cases probably is much higher. The former victims, men and women, are now between 40 and 70 years old.

Commissioned by the City of Vienna, this research project aimed at documenting and explaining the emergence and typical course of physical and mental abuse from the perspective of former wards. On an institutional level, we were interested in the structures that caused and sustained violent situations and reasons why control systems did not work. On a biographical level, we focussed on the coping strategies of former wards and how they dealt with post-traumatic stress after leaving the home.<sup>1</sup>

We conducted 20 narrative-biographical interviews (Schütze 1983) with former wards. They have a length of three to four hours and were transcribed in detail. They cover the childhood and youth of former wards before and after they were transferred into the juvenile home as well as the time after their release from the home until today.

## Reasons for Home Education

Most children are transferred to state-run homes because they actually or allegedly cannot stay with their parents or grandparents. The justifications of responsible youth welfare workers are subject to a *zeitgeist*, which, for example, does not consider a single mother to be capable of caring for her child/children. "Step-families" are also perceived as problematic in this regard as well as deprived families or families where both parents have to work. Besides good reasons like neglect and health hazards, children are removed from their families because they disturb a new couple and also because of minor conflicts. The decision whether a child is removed from a family or not is primarily the responsibility of an assigned youth welfare worker who assesses the child's state of health, the family situation, the housing conditions and the social and psychological condition of the child during her regular home visits. This procedure would be less problematic if the decisions of youth welfare workers were discussed openly and critically in the office. But there is no evidence for this. In our study we found no single case of another authority in the system objecting the assessment of a youth welfare worker. On the contrary, psychologists of the Psychological Service, senior psychiatrists from the University Clinic who are consulted, as well as heads of office from the Youth Welfare Service almost exclusively (and often literally) use the wording of the respective youth welfare worker for their own reports, assessments and expertise. Thus, the youth welfare workers remain without critical corrective.

Explanations for the difficulties of the children in the custody of the state are still influenced by theories of inheritance in the 1960s. Evidence for this can be found in the reports of care takers and educators, but also in psychological assessments. Educators in juvenile homes blame the children for rebelling against an upbringing in accordance with the expectations of society. They construct the "difficult child". We assume that their explanations are not just pursued due to a lack of relevant pedagogical knowledge, but also because they are the most convenient explanations for the educators themselves. They supposedly legitimize the means of total education such as detention, severe beating, insulting, pain inflicting rituals, etc. Only if the child is consentaneously labelled as a "difficult and wicked child", these means, which can very well be described as torture, appear legitimate. The fateful agreement that the child is "difficult" is

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed results of the project, see Sieder and Smioski 2012

constructed within groups of educators, but also between educators, curative educators and psychiatrists. In tacit accordance they thereby create what they consider to be “given by nature and by heritage”. It is a fatal consequence that children treated this way ultimately become “wicked”. To put it bluntly: They create children who are violent, who withdraw, who suffer from enuresis and who do not believe in their own abilities or in their future. What we have here is a self-fulfilling prophecy in the precise sense of Robert Merton (1948).

## **The Discipline in the Home**

During the period of investigation, juvenile homes are organised as closed institutions, practicing an education that intends to control all aspects of a person: the mind, the body and the soul. The ward is admitted no freedom and no self-determination; subjugation is exacted by force. In line with Goffman's concept of a “total institution” (Goffman 1961), only few educators control a large number of wards. The typical ratio: One educator oversees about 20 to 25 children.

The order in the home consists of a standardization and regulation of all activities of its residents: getting up, making the beds, defecating, washing, the meals, housework, learning, leisure time, visits from relatives, bedtime, etc. The result is a hypertrophic order, i.e. an order that inevitably entails a violation of the order, which is to be punished. This has dramatic consequences particularly for young and often very frightened children and infants, who have been taken away from their parents. In their desperate search for protection and security, they feel the need to communicate with other children, especially when it is dark and the lights are turned off in the dormitory. But then, there is a strict ban on speaking. Often, it is prohibited to go to the toilet at night. Especially young children are burdened with enormous fears by this culture of prohibition.

Following Foucault (1997), the juvenile home can be described as a heterotopia, a space of otherness governed by a special order that is rarely or non-existent outside of the home. Similar structures can be found only in old psychiatry, sometimes in boarding schools or in youth prisons. This order entails a rigorous confinement of the individual in a closed institution and the suspension of all individual liberties. Our study shows that the confinement of wards is as relevant as the prohibition for all outsiders to enter the home. The strict isolation of the home serves the purpose of organizing a daily routine behind the facade that is known in detail only by those who reside there for many years. This daily routine comprises a series of practices that are not legally allowed.

## **Forms and Dimensions of Violence**

In our study, we identified several forms of violence that serve as instruments of total education in juvenile homes. It is important to keep in mind that the following list represents an analytical differentiation and should not obscure the fact that the various forms of violence reproduce each other.

### ***Physical Violence***

The most common form of violence is physical violence including creative forms of inflicting pain like tearing at children's hair, twisting their arms, forcing them to finish their meals, even own vomit, coercing them into painful rituals like doing push-ups or crouching for hours with heavy books on their outstretched arms. Severe beating with various objects – whips, belts, towels, a bunch of keys, clogs, etc. – is a daily occurrence as well.

“You had to eat what came to the table. And we talk about eating up. The worst situation was when they served greaves in the evening. This was hell for my stomach. And if you puked, they paid attention to you finishing everything.” (Interview 07, male)

However, physical violence is more complex. A popular strategy amongst educators is to privilege some wards, instructing them to maintain the order. Like in former SS camps, these functionaries are referred to as “Kapos”. Educators assign them tasks of supervision and punishment. For their services they gain a certain confidence and buddy-like attention.

“There were always those of us, who were superior. We were in charge and had to control the others. Only if a situation escalated, you could go and get an educator. So you had to work against the whole group and you had to use violence to come out on top.” (Interview 08, male)

The “Kapo-system” is designed to turn ward against ward, as the “Kapos” are pitted against the other children in order to maintain the favour of their educators. Brutality as a means of punishment is transferred to the children and tolerated by the educators as an integral part of the “Kapo-system”.

Rituals for the punishment of individuals by the collective must be distinguished from the “Kapo-system”, although they are encouraged by certain educators as well. These rituals are vengefully executed if due to the misdoing of one child, the whole group has to bear a punishment. In the ritual of the so-called “blanket”, the group throws a blanket over a child that is to be punished. This happens at night, while the child is asleep. All children are then obliged to punch the child under the blanket.

“Because of the blanket, you could not see who was beating you. And, of course, as the attacker, you could not see what you were hitting. This made it easier to be more unrestrained. And it always had this group dynamic: either you hit the person under the blanket or you were the next victim.” (Interview 01, male)

Didactically, this represents an education towards physical violence and sets the basis for an erosion of solidarity amongst the children.

Arrest and detention room are also well known as means of punishment in juvenile homes and establish a parallel to prison and the dealing with criminals. Some of our interviewees tell of sleeping on a mattress in a cell, nude or in underwear, provided with a bowl of cold tea and a piece of dry bread. During the day, the mattress is removed from the cell. Besides punishment for certain delinquencies, e.g. if wards are captured after trying to escape, the function of the detention room is to render injuries from physical violence invisible.

### ***Psychological Violence***

Another form of violence is psychological violence aiming at humiliation, degradation and intimidation, and ultimately destroying any self-esteem and confidence, but also the bonding capacity of the child.

Children who suffer from enuresis are the unworthy in many homes. In the eyes of the educators, their bodies “bear the characteristics” of their guilt and inferiority. In several juvenile homes educators exhibit these children publicly. They have to stand in a row, naked and barefoot, the wet sheets around their shoulders. Insulted with animal names they are demoted to the rank of animals. A physical and/or psychological dysfunction becomes the basis for exclusion. This is a special form of racism in homes.

“The next morning was a disaster: my bed was wet (--) (low voice). She (the educator) tore down my night gown and hit me with it repeatedly until my face was swollen all over. Then she insulted me. I was not the only one. And then she hung the wet sheet over my shoulders and I had to go down to the main hall barefoot. It was winter. And we had to stand there and we were hit again.” (Interview 04, female)

Moreover, in the 1950s and 1960s, racist stereotypes of anti-Semitism are still virulent: Children with a darker skin colour, black hair and big dark eyes are almost mechanically identified and maltreated as Jewish or Gypsy children.

### *Sexualised and Sexual Violence*

Sexualised violence is another form of violence that can often be found in juvenile homes. Thereby we understand actions by educators focussing on body parts, and especially genitals of children and young people that cause physical pain, shame and debasement. They are often disguised as pedagogical measures, e.g. when an educator is determining if the children have been washing properly and, by striking the unwashed body parts, is punishing those, who, in his view, have not.

“Once I wet myself. And this one supervisor, she undressed me, beat me and put me under the cold shower. She called me a dirty girl, a pig (high voice). And then she scrubbed me with a hard brush between the legs and it hurt so much. I was four years old.” (Interview 11, female)

Special attention is applied to naked bodies. With the purpose of control – but also the demonstration of power – the children have to line up from the tallest to the shortest. This can be ordered before and after showering, but also in the middle of the night when a teacher enters the dormitory – a situation known from the older orphanage, from military barracks and prisons. The row of children can be surveyed and inspected by a single supervisor. Bodies, more precisely teeth, fingernails, and genitals are the objects of meticulous scrutiny.

A progression of this is sexual violence, involving masturbation, enforced sexual acts and ultimately penetration. Sexual violence can be initiated by individual educators, but also by other children. The excessive culture of violence established by the “Kapo-system” facilitates sexual violence amongst wards. Certain educators know about these assaults and at times even encourage them.

### *Social and Economic Violence (Structural Violence)*

Censorship of letters, prohibition of contact with their families, separation of siblings, isolation and bans on speaking are parts of social violence, constraining the children to forge or sustain a close relationship to other children, family members or relatives.

“I tried to write a letter to my mother. Of course, I couldn't write what I wanted. The letter had to be handed to an educator and was controlled and censored. Only when everything was the way they wanted, they released the letter. But then, you had to have enough money for the stamps to send it home.” (Interview 02, female)

Often the perfidiousness of social violence consists of enforcing a transgression of the rules and thus legitimizing the use of physical violence.

Economic violence is indicated in cases where children and young people have to perform work tasks for which they are not paid, e.g. contributing to agricultural activities or cleaning and building activities, etc. Often, a part of their wages for working in apprenticeship workshops is withheld by the home.

We can also speak of social and economic violence with regard to the “choice” of schools as well as future professions. The bureaucratic logic of repeated changes between different homes (each time a change of school or the beginning of an apprenticeship is pending) neither considers local and personal relationships of the child nor its talents. The career choice is the decision of a “home commission”, and the children do not have a say in this matter. Boys and girls are forced

into a very narrow gender specific range of careers: a few apprenticeships for young men (carpenters, painters, butchers, and mechanics), girls are trained as seamstresses, housekeeping and cooking aids on a low skill level. Career aspirations of young people are almost never taken into account.

“I always had good grades and the psychologist recommended me for commercial school (upper secondary school). But suddenly there was a note regarding my behaviour. Something like “if she doesn’t amend her behaviour, she will be sent to polytechnic (minimum compulsory school).” I don’t want to know how many kids were sent to polytechnic only because they talked back once or twice. They wanted to keep us stupid and not send us to higher education.” (Interview 11, female)

Home education does not aim at individualization, let alone at the development of competences, skills or talents. It focuses exclusively on an integration of the individual into the low-wage collective. As a consequence, young people leaving the home are faced with relatively poor job prospects, low-quality employment and comparatively low incomes – mostly for their entire working life.

It is becoming clear that violence in juvenile homes has many diverse dimensions that mutually influence each other. Since the deficits of the homes cannot be kept entirely secret and wards eventually leave, juvenile homes become mythical spaces of otherness. Rumours of violence begin to spread in the homes and in the area surrounding the homes. But no one seems to be seriously investigating and pursuing those rumours any further.

### **Why this State of Affairs Remains Uncovered?**

One might raise the question why is this state of affairs not revealed and, in particular, the various forms of excessive violence in a large number of homes for children and young people? Why is it not discussed publicly in the 1970s when major changes are implemented regarding the removal of children from their parents and their placement in juvenile homes? There are three explanations:

1. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Austrian society still maintains the black myth of a strict upbringing of “difficult children” in the orphanage. Violent education is delegated to “experts” behind the walls of the home. This delegation to “strict educators” in the home – but also in boarding schools, in military camps or in youth prisons – enables the society to live in “order”, to feel “civilized” and “modern”, to renounce violence and to delegate aggression to supposed experts of a strict upbringing.
2. Youth welfare policy in Vienna relies heavily on the concomitant control of home education by experts from two (applied) sciences: paediatric and juvenile psychiatry and psychology. These disciplines are dominated by national socialist ideas and theories of inheritance. Thus, the “experts” provide no effective control of home education. Mostly they are closely allied with home directors, youth welfare workers and educators. Or, on the other hand, the routines of their daily work impede them from recognizing or criticizing the structures of violence in the homes.
3. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there is a severe lack of professionalization in home education. The relevant municipal departments employ educators lacking adequate training for their area of work. Half of them have only completed brief introductory courses and are learning their difficult duties “on the job”, e.g. from experienced, but likewise insufficiently qualified educators. This lack of training and professionalism prevents traditional concepts of “strict education” from being replaced by new pedagogical and psychological knowledge. “Black pedagogics” dominates everyday life in the home. In addition, there are resistant remains of a racist exclusion of children with

signs of otherness or inferiority, such as a darker skin and hair colour or the various forms of enuresis (organic, functional, and psychological).

## **Coping Strategies of Children Living in Homes**

Children respond differently to excessive violence. In our study, we were able to differentiate three types of coping strategies of children:

### ***Type 1: Children Becoming Violent in the Course of Home Education***

Children of this type fight back, assuming physical violence as a means for regulating conflicts. They perceive no other means of dealing with difficult situations. The ability and readiness to use force is constantly imposed on younger children by older, stronger and more powerful children, e.g. in the course of punishment rituals. This way, new children quickly adopt the practice of using violence. Regarding some of the children, the tendency to resolve conflicts by force persists even after leaving the home and some relapse into violent patterns later in their lives.

### ***Type 2: Children Trying to Escape from the Repressive Home***

Children and young people attempt to escape from a home only if it is notoriously repressive. They try to get away from the system of violence and the physical and psychological pain by taking flight. On part of the home management and the educators, this is interpreted as “proof” of their behavioural problems and is sanctioned with severe physical punishment and detention.

### ***Type 3: Children Becoming Mentally Ill***

A large number of children respond to excessive violence with detachment – “dissociative disorder” in psychiatric terminology (Spiegel et al. 2013). The major characteristic of all dissociative phenomena involves a detachment from reality that is necessary to master, minimize or tolerate stress and conflict. These children and young people soon lose trust in other people, confiding in or expecting good intentions from no one. Following attachment theory (Hazan and Shaver 1994), most of the children of this type are either particularly anxious in their relationship to others, desperately clinging to them, or they develop avoidant attachment patterns. They no longer believe to be capable of having a lasting relationship and if they enter a new relationship, they expect nothing of it. Some children become self-harming, inflicting serious injuries on themselves. Others think about suicide early in their life. At the non-pathological end of the continuum, dissociative behaviour such as daydreaming, losing oneself in the imaginary world of books or in nature is a common strategy to shut out the brutal reality of home life. The various forms of detachment have in common that they appear to the educators as anti-social – again a bizarre misunderstanding.

## **Implications for the Future Life of Former Wards**

The time in the home ends when young people reach the age 18 or 19. Most of them do not possess any specific scheme of their future lives. To a large extent, they are released from home education unprepared to master their own life and they feel left alone. In many cases this results in a phase of searching. They often remain in the structures of their peers, trying to orientate themselves on each other. However, few really know what to do, and some have wrong ideas that are ultimately detrimental to their further lives. With startling regularity they enter relationships to other former wards. Others get into social milieus that pose an objective threat such as girls prostituting themselves or boys favouring criminal strategies of self-preservation.

In spite of all the individual differences, the further life trajectory of former wards is often characterized by failing efforts to establish professional careers and to maintain reliable relationships to intimate partners. Marriages fail and partnerships break up. After years of home education, many of the former wards commit themselves in ways that most likely bring about a failure of private and professional relationships. Only in some cases and after a chaotic period of repeatedly failing efforts to master their life, a re-orientation, re-planning and re-telling of their future can take place. These are the lucky ones: those who have caring and mentally healthy intimate partners, benevolent employers or loyal friends with the strength to support them and to tolerate their impulsivity and instability of affects. Even then, the fear of being hurt or abandoned often lasts until old age and almost all of them still suffer from the psychological trauma of their upbringing.

“It has broken me and (--) that`s why in my current life I am totally (----) I am crazy, I mean (--) I am content, yes content. But I am broken.” (Interview 05, male)

“And so I search for my lost life. Where did it go?” (Interview 06, female)

## Conclusion

This paper endeavoured to show that contrary to their official purpose, state-run juvenile homes, which took custody of neglected children from deprived or lone-mother families from 1950 until 1980 have left people weakened and broken for life.

It was not until the early 1970s that onset reforms gradually contributed to a change of the reported grievances. Since then, many large homes have been closed or converted into smaller units. Educators receive a much better training today and children attend public schools. Due to a less stigmatizing socio-political approach to problems of lone parents, households affected by divorce or unemployment and parents with a criminal background, the total number of children in welfare care has dramatically decreased by approximately 50%. Above all, however, the proportion of violence has decreased significantly.

Nonetheless, only in recent years has it become possible to address the crimes committed “in the name of education and welfare” from 1950 until 1980 (see also Weiss 2012; Schreiber 2010; Bauer and Hoffmann and Kubek 2013; and others). Restitutions and interventions on behalf of the former victims are initiated by the government, but still do not reach all those concerned. It is a sincere hope that this research contributes to break the “pact of silence” about the violence in juvenile homes.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Andrea Smioski:** Researcher, Institute of Sociology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

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