Ethnographic Imagination as an Interpretative Approach to the World of Infants and Children with Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract

Reflections on children’s agency have become popular in anthropological and sociological studies of childhood. Scholars tended to treat children as independent and active social members, rather than individuals still undergoing maturity. To guarantee their right to information and participation, researchers have constantly refined their methods in hopes of involving children in research projects as much as possible and empowering their voices. Yet, because of our technological and cognitive restraints, these innovative efforts have not helped us comprehend the thoughts and experiences of infants and children with developmental disabilities. This article proposes ethnographic imagination as an alternative approach. Based on 11-month fieldwork in a Chinese orphanage, I suggest that we could utilize the clues drawn from our participatory research and caregivers’ experiences to untangle children’s ‘messy’ behaviors in an ethnographically imaginative way. Rooted in specific contexts and reliant on the collective experience of stakeholders, while also connecting broader perceptions of everyday life and the sociocultural insights of participatory observation, this interpretative approach may provide observers with a justifiable explanation to the world of nonverbal and minimally verbal children.

Keywords

childhood studies, infants, children with developmental disabilities, ethnography, ethnographic imagination, participatory research

Introduction

One afternoon in July 2015, the caregivers at Pearl Orphanage were chatting in the nursery as a handful of children played nearby. Nicole (4-year-old with cerebral palsy and minimum verbal ability), the orphanage’s ‘little bully,’ started making a scene after her attempt to grab a toy from another boy was rebuffed. Her caregiver, Nanny Zhang, scolded her for lying on the ground, but Nicole ignored her. Another caregiver, Nanny Fu, said she had a solution. She went to the storage room, took out an empty carton, and threw it to Nicole, who suddenly froze and backed away. As Fu again nudged the carton toward her, her frightened expression gave way to loud sobs. Curious, the caregivers asked Fu why Nicole was afraid of the carton, but she had no answer, other than saying that Nicole had had the same reaction a few days ago when she was organizing the storage room and throwing out emptied boxes.

The caregivers speculated about Nicole’s fear and eventually deemed that the most likely explanation was from Nanny Zhang, who thought it related to the way the orphanage handled child mortality. Over the years, more than 95% of the children placed at Pearl Orphanage were diseased or disabled. Their physical health—and the fact that many had been abandoned in public places like bus stations and road sides—made them highly vulnerable. Even those admitted to the hospital for treatment did not always survive. If a child died at the orphanage, Mr Ding, the orphanage’s security guard, was
responsible for sending the child’s body to a funeral home for cremation. Since the car at the orphanage was primarily reserved for official use, he had to use public transportation. Out of propriety, he would wrap the child’s body in the clothes and the blanket that the child once used, place it in a carton, and seal the outside. Nanny Zhang proposed that Nicole had a fear of cartons because she had seen Ding use them to enwrap children’s bodies. In other words, she was afraid of cartons as a funerary device.

Zhang’s explanation seemed logical because the fear of death was widely shared in different cultures (Engelke, 2019; Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984), including the Chinese (Qian, 2016; Watson, 1982). Yet, could a 4-year-old know what death was? Was her understanding of death the same as an adult’s? I asked these questions, and Nanny Fu responded that a few older children probably did because they had looked sorrowful on a few occasions when Mr Ding came to handle children’s corpses. However, she was unsure if Nicole also understood, since the girl had never seemed sad and would sometimes stir up trouble instead, like playing with tape. Nanny Zhang became more doubtful about her explanation when she mentioned Nicole’s cerebral palsy, an impairment that had impacted the girl’s intellectual development. Their discussion ended inconclusively, and I mulled over the questions all afternoon. Trained as an anthropologist, I approached the fieldwork with a Geertzian mindset and wanted to understand my informants from their native perspectives. Yet, the above experience imposed a sharp challenge: How can we understand children if verbal communications is insufficient in certain circumstances?

**The Research Site and Methodologies**

Before addressing the above question, I would like to introduce more about Pearl Orphanage. Opened since 1992, it is a state-run orphanage located in Zhejiang province, southeastern China. I have conducted 11-month fieldwork in this institution from 2011 to 2019, with each period lasting from 2 weeks to 6 months. The number of institutionalized children changed over time during my fieldwork, ranging from 77 to 104. A statistical report released in March 2011 stated that, among all 77 children residing in Pearl Orphanage at that time, 42 were less than 1-year-old, 14 were from 1 to 3-year-old, 11 were from 4 to 6-year-old, and 10 were above age 7. Meanwhile, of all the children, 39 had developmental disabilities (mainly Down syndrome and cerebral palsy), nine had cleft lip and palate, two had congenital heart disease, and five had different types of physical disabilities. Another 22 children were reported to have other kinds of diseases and disabilities, but the orphanage had not specified them. The number and percentage of children with disabilities continued to increase in the subsequent years. On the one hand, prejudice against disability in Chinese culture and the lack of government support for families rearing children with disabilities have resulted in the disproportionate abandonment of this kind of children to orphanages (Johnson, 2016; Qian, 2013; Raffety, 2019; Wang, 2016). On the other hand, institutionalized children with curable diseases or mild physical disabilities were acceptable to domestic or international adopters, but those with severer disabilities were unacceptable (Yu, 2020). For these reasons, most older children who were left behind at Pearl Orphanage had developmental disabilities or severe physical disabilities.

Besides children, there were six caregivers at the orphanage (the number increased to eight in 2016). Ranging from 32 to 55 years old, all these workers were local rural women who had reared their own children. In fact, gender and child-rearing experiences were the main selection criteria for the job. After taking the position, these caregivers received some professional training on rearing institutionalized children with disabilities. When I started fieldwork in 2011, all these workers had worked there for more than 5 years. The long stay had familiarized them with each child’s personality and habits. Their presences and care had been part of the children’s everyday life, and probably also shaped the latter’s thoughts and behaviors. Interviews with these caregivers and participant observations of their interactions with the children set the foundation for the ethnographic-interpretative approach to understanding children’s world that I propose in the following sections.

I received ethical approval to conduct this research from the ethics committee at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and entered Pearl Orphanage as a researcher with full permission from the orphanage director, who acted as the legal guardian of all institutionalized children. The director trusted me because my parents were his good friends. My relationship with the caregivers was more complex. During my stay in the orphanage, I spent most time taking care of the children together with these workers. The caregivers distrusted me in the beginning because they thought I was a ‘spy’ sent by the director to monitor their work. But as time passed, they knew I was not and found me helpful in assisting their childcare work. They thus changed their mind. As our friendship deepened, they became more willing to share their views about their child-rearing practices and children’s institutional life. Still, every time when I started my interview, I informed them that if they did not want to be interviewed, they had the right to reject. They could also withdraw anytime during my research. I would protect their personal information closely so no one would be able to connect their responses and any other information that identified them. Directly identifying information, including their real names and addresses, would be removed from the interview data collections saved in a locked personal computer. Neither would they be identified in any publication from this research. All the caregivers accepted my interviews and our interviews were conducted in Mandarin mixed with the local dialect. All interview transcripts were recorded and translated into English by myself.4

My long-term stay and intensive childcare work also helped me establish good relationships with institutionalized children. The infants and toddlers liked watching me around, and would cry once I moved outside their visions. That forced
me to stay longer and play with them. Some infants always wanted embraces, but then I could hardly lay them down as they would easily begin crying. Similarly, some toddlers who could walk followed me all the time. Although these young children could rarely express themselves verbally, I believed their behaviors indicated their trust in me.

Older children (all with developmental disabilities or severe physical disabilities as noted) were also friendly. While I have tried to explain my identity as a researcher studying their institutional life, these children were more likely to perceive me as another caregiver. Intensive interactions increased our familiarity, yet I failed to conduct interviews with most of them after several attempts, due to their limited verbal communication skills. Even so, on several occasions I had heard their words in verbal language and observed some of their meaningful behaviors. Following a disability rights perspective, I regard these children’s (minimum) verbal and behavioral expressions as a result of their thinking, and that these expressions share many ways with able-bodied people in voicing their desires and practicing their agency. By this means, these children’s words and behaviors serve as an alternative source to formal interviews that may provide clues to understand their thoughts.

**Challenges of Approaching Infants and Children with Developmental Disabilities as Agents**

In his well-known article ‘Why Don’t Anthropologists Like Children?’, Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) suggested that the reason anthropologists rarely studied children was because they believed that children contributed far less to sociocultural (re)production than adults. He criticized previous scholars for failing to see children as subjects of cultural construction and overlooking the way children’s culture impacts adult culture. Over time, reflections on children’s agency have become popular in anthropological and sociological studies of childhood. An increasing number of researchers tended to treat children as independent and active social members, rather than underage individuals still undergoing maturity and with uncertain subjectivity (for a critical literature review, see Spyrou, 2018: 117–156; Valentine, 2011). In order to guarantee children’s right to information and participation, researchers have constantly refined their research methods in hopes of involving children in research projects as much as possible and empowering their voices (e.g., Elden, 2012; James, 2007; Raffety, 2015; a recent systematic review of the literature, see Montreuil et al., 2021). Some scholars have even turned children into co-researchers to study themselves or their peers, which aimed to eliminate age- or status-based power inequities between the researchers and the researched. It also enabled a better understanding of children’s thoughts and feelings through the lens of their own or peers (Coppock, 2011; Horgan, 2017). Besides the human dimension, research methods for studying children have shifted from verbal-centred to a more diversified approach, such as using a wide range of visual observation techniques. This might include asking children to document their lives and their interests through drawing, photography, and video and then inviting them to explain the content they created (Elden, 2012; Horgan, 2017; specifically for children with disabilities, see McLaughlin & Coleman-Fountain, 2019; Moola et al., 2020).

Despite numerous experimental attempts, some scholars believe that exploring children’s agency remains a long, arduous task. Alma Gottlieb (2000) noted that established research perspectives and methods failed to shed light on the characteristics of children’s agency at every age. For example, the younger a child is, the more restricted they are by developmental conditions. They also have a weaker grasp of adult language systems, not to mention more figurative ideographic systems like drawing, photography, and video. This situation has led many previous researchers to focus on older children when exploring children’s agency. However, if we broaden our scope of language, we may acknowledge that babies do communicate through babbling, crying, and screaming (Gottlieb, 2000; 2004). The problem is that the adults struggle to understand those sounds.

Two decades later, Fiona Ross and Michelle Pentecost wrote in a review article that there was only ‘some expansion’ in anthropological literature on infants in Euro-American contexts (many cited publications were Gottlieb’s contributions), and much less in other societies. (Ross & Pentecost, 2021) Even among this existing literature, there had been ‘little attention to infants themselves,’ because their voices were often represented by their mothers and other caregivers, along with the methodological difficulties of understanding infants’ non-linguistic communication (2021: 11–12). To resolve these problems, the authors suggested several innovative methods drawing from other researchers. Besides that, there are also inspirational ethnographic studies investigating infants’ perspectives through their body movements, in which the researcher plays a crucial role in making interpretations of the ‘messy’ behaviors (Ormalm, 2020a, 2020b). Yet, just as what I will do below, these methods still rely heavily on adults’ (researchers or caregivers) experiences with and perspectives of infants, which may not necessarily reflect the children’s ‘real’ thoughts.

The prospering scholarship on disabled childhood has also offered insights into understanding the world of humans with different developmental conditions. Scholars have used alternative interview techniques (e.g., Forber-Pratt, 2020), visual methods (e.g., McLaughlin & Coleman-Fountain, 2019), participant observation (e.g., Fylkesnes, 2021; Dindar et al., 2017), or mixed methods combining the above (e.g., Ellis, 2017) to capture the voices/thoughts of exceptional children, assisted by additional information from caregivers. It is worth noting that some of the above researchers are reflective of their methodologies and willing to acknowledge research findings as social constructions, which aim to achieve certain
understanding of the children who are otherwise voiceless in the academia. This acknowledgement offers inspirations for what I try to push forward in the forthcoming sections.

This article does not refute the creativity and usefulness of the existing research methods for approaching the world of infants’ and children with developmental disabilities. Neither does it refute the agency of the two groups. What it doubts is the absolute truthfulness of the understandings that the methods offer. Older children without developmental disabilities are more commonly selected as research subjects in the current childhood studies, but critical scholars have worried that (re)interpretations of their self-representations may stray from these children’s own intentions (Abma et al., 2022; Spyrou, 2011; Tisdall, 2012). This question is of greater concern for infants and children with developmental disabilities, who are largely nonverbal or minimally verbal. Even developmental psychologists acknowledge that the obstacles to understanding infants’ thoughts will remain until the emergence of technological improvements. They have only scant experimental data on babies, especially those younger than 3 months, and thus regard their mental development as comparable to slugs (Bloom, 2013: 8, 24; Hamlin et al., 2010: 924). For people with developmental disabilities, researchers may also find difficulties (to varying degrees) to understand the everyday expressions and behaviors of the affected adults, especially those with intellectual disabilities (Hollomotz, 2018; Mietola et al., 2017). Given that, how can we find out the ‘true’ feelings and experiences of nonverbal or minimally verbal individuals, including children?

**Ethnographic Imagination as the Method**

From social science research methods to scientific experiments, current technological and cognitive constraints hamper efforts to comprehend children’s feelings and experiences, much less that of infants and children with developmental disabilities. I suggest there is a myth in the existing empirical studies of childhood that attempts to explore the ‘ultimate truth’ of what the children think by presenting their own ‘voices,’ but all we can do is to uncover that ‘truth’ as much as possible through various means. If during the earlier fieldwork I still clung to a Geertzian lens in exploring native perspectives, I had already realized by my return visits that I had no access to absolutely objective native perspectives. Instead, I had to rely on caregivers’ and my own experiences to untangle children’s ‘messy’ behaviors/reactions in a more situational context. The gained perspective is therefore largely ‘social facts’ reworked through human interpretations. This humanist (rather than scientific) approach focuses our knowledge production more on looking for a justifiable explanation that fits the sociocultural context and less about finding the correct answer. What follows in this article thus does not claim to be a true reflection of the children’s own feelings and experiences, but offers a reasonable explanation. This explanation is rooted in a specific context (e.g., Pearl Orphanage) and reliant on the collective experience of stakeholders (e.g., caregivers), while also connecting broader perceptions of everyday life and the sociocultural insights of participatory observation. I call it ‘ethnographic imagination’.

Ethnography, the basic research writing method of most anthropologists and some qualitative sociologists, is widely known for its insights into the complexities of social life. Similar to the ‘writing culture’ school of anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), Paul Willis (2000) views ethnography as an artistic way of writing that pierces through sociocultural meanings and allows readers to see the world through granularities. What gives it such comprehension is the writer’s ethnographic imagination, being ethnographic ‘by “faithfully” reporting “the reality” of the everyday,’ and making imaginations by ‘seeking to transcend the everyday’ (Willis, 2000: VIII). Both Willis’ *Learning to Labor* (2017) and Clifford Geertz’s *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973) are exemplary works in this regard (Geertz, 1973; Willis, 2017). The former reveals the class reproduction mechanism of British society through the cynical attitude of young people in working-class families, while the latter examines the cultural system of Balinese society through the local practice of cockfighting. However, the importance of ethnographic imagination is not just about perceiving a whole from details, but also using ostensibly unrelated ‘social facts’ to craft a logically coherent story that suits the local sociocultural context. Thus, for works that seek the causes of an issue, the process of ethnographic research and writing is more akin to the process of deduction in mystery novels. For both of them, the clues sought from the subjects’ daily lives are interwoven and analyzed within the given contexts to identify possible explanations.

Comparing ethnography with all its imaginativeness to mystery fiction is not entirely unfounded. There are already historical texts styled after speculative fiction, such as Keith Schoppa’s prize-winning book *Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China* (1995), which chronicles an unsolved assassination of a leftist member of the Nationalist Party in 1928 (Schoppa, 1995). Schoppa’s book demonstrates that a historian’s work can, to some extent, be understood as a jigsaw puzzle. In a field of history not yet pervaded by postmodernism, historians’ task remains to reconstruct a jumble of historical facts to get ever closer to the truth of history. That is precisely what anthropologists should do with the communities they study by drawing closer to its overall reality (or the so-called ‘holistic view’), and then, using that understanding of the whole, analyze parts of the cultural composition and grasp their meanings. Thus ethnographic writing resembles the deductive process in mystery novels. Like novelists, ethnographers undertake meticulous investigations and make sense of the clues of the cultural phenomenon at hand to arrive at a sound explanation: they reconstruct events by collecting and comparing the testimonies of those involved in a case, as well as applying their own past experiences; they can also be at the scene, reenacting the events in person. These investigations lay the foundation of the ethnographers’ future imagination.
Then how can we use ethnographic imagination to establish an explanatory framework that suits the local sociocultural context? My response here draws on another death-related example from Pearl Orphanage. During the fieldwork, I noticed that the caregivers usually bathed children either in the morning or at night. But one afternoon in August 2015, I found Nanny Zhang bathing an infant from the special care unit in the orphanage. When I asked about the odd timing, she responded that boy had congenital kidney failure and multiple complications. In the last 2 days, he had all but stopped drinking milk. The orphanage doctors said that he did not have much longer to live, so as his caregiver, Zhang decided to bathe him one last time. That way, he could be cleansed for his next journey and reborn into a healthy body (and I offered help to clothe him after bath with the same cloth). As we were chatting, Nanny Zhu interjected to say that Zhang had incredible nerves to carry out such a task; she would not have been able to do the same.

From their ensuing conversation, I gathered that Zhang and another caregiver, Nanny Yu, were the only two in the entire orphanage who bathed terminally ill children, giving them a reputation of fearlessness. The others believed that the act might court misfortunes. Nanny Zhu even thought that a child’s spirit could linger after death and attach itself to a familiar figure. To that, Nanny Zhang countered that if the child did have a soul after death, he would not harm those who had cared for him in life. At the same time, it occurred to me that in existing scholarship, Chinese funeral rites include blessing the dead by washing the body (Watson, 1988), which Zhang’s practice actually brings to the forefront. When I asked Zhang why she was bathing the boy before death, she said abashedly that she felt it was safer to wash him before death, a response that signified how notions about the impurity of death still impacted her.

In this way, an irregularly timed bath led to a discovery of notions about life and death in Pearl Orphanage. This example illustrates how the many subtle clues in the research subjects’ daily lives can add up to a series of suspenseful events, which can reveal the unseen aspects of our field sites. These clues may be picked up by chance, but they also require the ethnographer to have a thorough grasp of the community under study, as well as a keen sense of anomalies. If above examples only demonstrate the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the comparison between ethnographic writing and suspense novels, then the opening story about Nicole, the girl with a fear of cartons, needed to answer the ‘why.’ Next, I will demonstrate how ethnographic imagination may help us deduce the ‘truth’ of such mysteries, that means, estimating how much agency children with developmental disabilities actually have by examining their lived experiences in the orphanage context.

My line of reasoning started with Nanny Zhang’s explanation. After all, she understood Nicole better than anyone else and was familiar with the workings of the orphanage. Nicole’s fear of cartons was not unfounded, and her ability to link those objects to the processes around child mortality helped to guide those in the dark, like other caregivers and me. Cartons were commonly seen in the orphanage, used mostly for snacks and daily necessities, and nobody had ever feared them before. The only exception was that the security guard, Mr Ding, occasionally used them to transport children’s bodies to a funeral home.

Assuming that death was a foreign concept to Nicole and that she did not realize the child had already died, she only recognized two stark differences with the carton. First, Mr Ding had placed a child into it, and second, he left the orphanage carrying that same carton. (She might also have noticed that the child never came back.) By connecting those dots, Nicole saw the cartons as a container for removing a child from the orphanage. As such, she feared them because they were a tool not for handling death but, rather, for taking someone – another child or herself – from the orphanage. In other words, Nicole was afraid of being placed into a carton and taken away.

That child’s mindset – fear of leaving familiar people and places – reminds me of the experiences of other children at Pearl Orphanage that may support this line of reasoning. Miss Wu was a regular volunteer at the orphanage, and she doted on Jennifer, another girl with cerebral palsy around Nicole’s age. Jennifer trusted Wu because she often brought her snacks and played with her. Then her attitude changed after Wu took her to a park and McDonald’s. She seemed scared of Wu even avoided her for a while. Wu explained that Jennifer had looked terrified the whole time they were in the park and refused to eat anything at McDonald’s. It was a complete departure from her usual vivacity at the orphanage. While Jennifer could not tell the exact reason because of her limited verbal ability, Wu and the caregivers speculated that being in an unfamiliar place stripped away her sense of security. As they explained it, children with families also feel anxious in unfamiliar places. Nanny Zhu said that her son would cry whenever they went on holiday and calm down only once they were back in familiar territory.

Jennifer discovered her fear of unfamiliar places only after leaving the orphanage, but Ashley, a 6-year-old girl with cerebral palsy and minimum verbal ability, realized long before that. In May 2011, Pearl Orphanage took in an increased number of babies, which added to the caregivers’ workload. The orphanage executives decided that June to send a group of older children to rural families for foster care, with Ashley among them. Her mood noticeably worsened in the following days, as she would often cry and scream for no apparent reason. One afternoon, I even found her with a rope around her neck, strangling herself. The caregivers believed it was because she knew and could not accept that she was about to be placed with rural foster family. Still, they were puzzled by how Ashley, who had no previous foster experience, could have known if foster life would be good or bad. Then again, that could be overanalyzing. Perhaps like Nicole and Jennifer, she simply did not want to leave a place she knew.

It was only after revisiting my fieldnotes that I linked these three children together through ethnographic imagination.
Jennifer’s behavior suggests the negative psychological impact that leaving familiar surroundings can have on children, while Ashley demonstrates children’s ability to anticipate their fears upon leaving familiar surroundings. Those inferences, when applied to Nicole, signaled her fear of being taken from a familiar space and thus her fear of cartons. Such a connection does not overestimate young children’s ability to make sense of the world (e.g., the meaning of death and foster care), nor does it underestimate the fact that they have the same basic need for security as children without disabilities.

**(Re)Navigating Children’ Agency Ethnographically with Imaginations**

Assuming its validity, the conclusions drawn from the above ethnographic imagination remind us that attempts to understand children’s agency must account for their age and developmental conditions, as well as carefully judge the areas in which children’s agency are formed and displayed earlier. Despite the dearth of systematic research to determine the order in which areas of children’s agency emerge, the caregivers and doctors at Pearl Orphanage believe that children respond differently to their environment depending on their stage of development and their corresponding needs. In their opinion, the younger a child is, the more their needs center on basic survival. As they get older, children will place more complex demands on their external environment, such as emotional attention and care, contingent upon their physical and intellectual development. As a result, those caregivers believe that children’s needs exist on an evolutionary spectrum, growing from survival to developmental needs. Their journey of socialization in the orphanage starts with the process of reacting to and receiving responses from the outside world.

Like other childhood researchers, I believe in the agency of children at every age. The following sections will merge ethnographic imagination with an analytic focus on two expressions of children’s agency: desires for companionship and dietary consumption. Although children of all ages may have these desires, my discussions concentrate on infants’ (and sometimes toddlers’) yearnings for adults’ attention and older children’s (especially those with developmental disabilities) behaviors regarding snack consumption, which I believe will aid our understanding of the relationship between children and the structural environment of the orphanage.

**Infants and Toddlers: Desire for Companionship**

In the wake of Alma Gottlieb’s criticism, a growing number of childhood researchers have begun to reflect on the fact that the field, while nominally covering children of all ages, has paid scant attention to infants (e.g., Brownlie & Leith, 2011; Oswell, 2013). Scholars who do study infants freely admit to its difficulties, as their subjects’ lives seem so abstruse that it leads only to unreliable observations (Elwick et al., 2014; Orrmalm, 2020a, 2020b).

In order to care for the infants, the caregivers at Pearl Orphanage had to understand their needs (physical or emotional), despite being baffled sometimes by their thoughts and behaviors, and so they turned to their own parenting experience and empathy. From there, they identified two verifiable components of an infant’s life, despite the ambiguities: basic survival needs, including eating, drinking, peeing, and sleeping, and the emotional need for companionship. If the former reflects the infants’ biological instincts, the latter points to their social agency, as emotions are largely a product of human interactions. This section will focus on that latter aspect, examining how (as imagined by the caregivers) infants (and some toddlers) win attention and, in doing so, achieve specific forms of socialization in the context of institutional rearing.

Jessica, a 7-month-old girl with cerebral palsy, was placed in Pearl Orphanage around April 2015. She was usually quiet, so when she started crying constantly one day in July, her caregiver Nanny Fang took her to Dr Huang, who suggested that she might be discomfited by the heat and to dress her in lighter clothing. But Nanny Fang had her doubts. Since the air conditioners ran daily through the summer, the caregivers had to give children more layers to keep them from catching a cold, so she figured that there might be another reason. Dr Huang bristled. Other caregivers at the scene hurriedly tried to defuse the situation and offered other explanations, of which Nanny Yu’s caught everyone’s attention. She thought that Jessica cried as a ploy for attention because she envied the hugs that all the adults gave Jean, her bedmate and Nanny Yu’s ward. Jean had recently grown cuter, so Yu would hug her whenever she came over to feed and change her diaper, all of which Jessica would witness.

Everyone chuckled, but they also acknowledged its plausibility. Nanny Zhu recounted several examples of the toddlers at the orphanage competing for their caregivers’ focus, which resonated with the others. For example, Nanny Fang once praised Anna, a toddler around 2 with epilepsy, for learning to walk so quickly, saying that she could be an athlete when she grows up. Then she gave Anna a peck on the cheek. Meanwhile, Joyce, a 3-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, was standing off to one side. Although he struggled to speak, he still seemed to understand them because he suddenly ran around the nursery and then stopped in front of Nanny Fang, as if awaiting her praise. Fang burst into laughter and said, ‘Our children will all be athletes and medal at the Olympic, and I can just bask in my happiness.’

Dr Huang nodded as she listened to Nanny Zhu’s examples, adding that child psychology studies have already shown that 4-month-old children can experience envy and comparisons, like feeling uneasy at seeing their mothers talking to others or crying when their mothers hug other children. Thus, it was possible for 7-month-old Jessica to behave that way and also likely that she cried to gain the adults’ attention.

That inspired me to reflect on my earlier experiences with children at Pearl Orphanage, specifically with Martin
(3-year-old with cerebral palsy and minimum verbal ability), one of the first children I interacted with. When we first met, he took his shoes off and handed them to me. I thought he wanted me to help put his shoes back on, but then he removed them again as soon as I finished it. That continued several more times. When I lost the patience to continue, he started hitting me with his shoe until I blurted out, ‘You naughty kid!’ Hearing that, the children standing nearby, all around Martin’s age, ran over and started hitting him (and I stopped them). When I shared this with the caregivers, they figured that Martin was initially playing with me by putting on and taking off his shoes; it was a game to keep my attention and company. He failed to sense my boredom (or did but still wanted to continue), so he swatted me with his shoe in order to regain my attention. After my outburst, the other children then jostled for my attention by hitting him on my behalf.

Furthering the idea that their behavior was aimed at seeking attention, the caregivers and I began to suspect that many of the infants’ actions sprang from like motivations. Jenny, a 1-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, had a gimmick similar to Martin’s, except that she took off her socks instead of shoes. It started when Jenny would occasionally peel off her socks to play with, chew on, or throw underneath her bed. Whenever Nanny Zhu helped her pull her socks back on, she would tease her and make her laugh. Over time, Zhu felt like she was putting on Jenny’s socks more and more frequently. Almost every time she passed by her crib, she was barefoot.

While Martin and Jenny turned to external mediums to attract adult attention, other children, like Jessica, used themselves as an instrument for generating attraction. Caregivers generally believe children cry either out of discomfort or because they are unhappy. The latter might happen if someone was hugging or playing with the child but then suddenly stopped, causing their mood to sour. Jessica’s crying for attention offers a third reason: crying as an embodied social strategy. The caregivers recognized and accepted that behavior as a social strategy for children to express their demands. For one, it made logical sense in the context of life in the orphanage and with experimental findings in child psychology; their own experiences of childrearing at home also aligned with that imagining. As Nanny Yu said, their own children often threw tantrums to get what they wanted from their parents.

However, crying might not be the only embodied social strategy used by the infants. After realizing that young children employed a range of ‘tactics’ to attract and even gratify adults, the caregivers began to interpret some of the more natural gestures and expressions as a ‘mind game.’ For example, if an infant was gazing at an adult, they interpreted that as the child’s desire for companionship. Even their smiles could be divided into two types. Some were more genuine smiles, while others might be another type of embodied social strategy meant to attract the attention of adults so that they would be held or played with. Nanny Zhang shared the following observations:

You’ve been here for several months and should have noticed that many infants enjoy watching the adults. As soon as they hear your footsteps heading toward the nursery, they will stare at the door, waiting for you to appear. Once you do, they’ll start making all sorts of sounds to win your attention. When you get closer, they’ll smile and sometimes wriggle around a little. Some will raise up their arms for you to hold them. Once you’re farther but still within range of sight, those who can roll or crawl will change their posture to watch you until they can’t see you anymore. Some may even cry when you leave as a way of calling you back.

In Zhang’s words, infants can activate a range of physical and mental functions, including sight, hearing, facial expressions, and inner emotions, to gain adult attention. To some extent, it appears that these children already have the potential to perform emotional work, albeit in a rudimentary form. At the same time, such ‘complex’ physical and mental activities are more than occasional. Instead, they can be performed at any time, depending on when the adults arrive. So infants have to be ready to make the emotional work appear both natural and embodied, as well as blurring the line between their front and back stages.

On the other hand, the nature of institutional rearing means that the caregivers’ practices are process-oriented (including batch feedings, diaper changes, and other set timings), rather than one-on-one care. Consequently, the children compete even more intensely for adult attention and care. If we imagine that infants do recognize these strategies and can (to varying degrees) use their physical and mental faculties to achieve their goals, then the children who triumph are undoubtedly the ones who are more socialized in the orphanage setting and best meet the expectations of caregivers. They are more responsive to the outside world, more eager for the caregivers’ affections, and more receptive to the care they receive. The ‘smartest’ children, however, can sense changes in the caregivers’ emotions and temper their desire for attention accordingly. Thus, the competition created by that desire is likely to be a catalyst for growth for a number of institutionalized children, prompting them to constantly adjust their behaviors, habits, and mental states to meet the expectations of the institutional care system.

**Older Children with Developmental Disabilities: Demonstrating Initiative Through Snack Consumption**

Compared to infants and toddlers, older children are even more active social members. Some of them have already made strides in their mobility and mastery of adult language. This section will focus on the ways in which they demonstrate their agency through dietary choices.

Meals at Pearl Orphanage are mostly procured and prepared by the canteen on a scheduled basis, so children have more choice and initiative only when it comes to snacks, comprising primarily of dairy drinks, puffed snacks, candy, and fruit. Everyday at 10a.m. and 2p.m., they all crowded...
around the table and eagerly waited for the caregivers to distribute the snacks. If caregivers forgot, these children would find ways to remind them. There were also those who stole food. As soon as they could walk, they learned where the snacks were stored: in a cabinet in the caregivers’ workspace. Whenever the caregivers were distracted, they would sneak food away. During snack time, some (especially the younger ones and those with profound developmental disabilities) seemed to be content with any snack they received, but the pickier children would specifically request their favorites. Besides taste, many older children also paid particular attention to the packaging of snacks if they had cartoon images. Showing off items with cartoon were popular, which always provoked comparisons and jealousy, and eventually leading to fights and stealing.

Thanks to financial aid from the state and generous donations, Pearl Orphanage has ample funds to buy daily necessities for children, including snacks. Often asked about their preferences, many children seemed to have realized that they could get whatever they could name. I have heard children who had some verbal ability nagging the caregivers about what they wanted to eat or about the snacks that have run out. They also responded immediately to donors’ questions about food preference. Those who could not speak would use their body language to communicate their choices, like selecting a snack from those offered by donors.

The use of food and food rituals as an expression of affection is common in interactions between Chinese adults and children, and is considered one of the most important ways in which Chinese families dote on their only child (Fong, 2004; Jing, 2000). The caregivers at Pearl Orphanage treated their favorite children likewise. As mentioned before, Nicole was Nanny Zhang’s favorite. Because of that favoritism, the girl had become the orphanage’s bully, throwing tantrums whenever she did not get her way. Nanny Zhang always capitulated to Nicole and would allocate a larger portion to her on days she distributed the snacks. If Nicole wanted something outside of snack time, Zhang would fetch it for her. Nicole’s feelings of privilege led to certain habits. For instance, if the other caregivers were handing out snacks that day, she would always help herself to an extra serving or take food from the other children. Other caregivers believed that Nanny Zhang’s doting made Nicole arrogant, willful, and rude, so they would reprimand the girl about her behavior.

The philanthropists who visited the orphanage also conveyed their care for the children by donating snacks, and the food helped them build trust with their beneficiaries. Children who could walk often followed the philanthropists around, while the infants and toddlers would wave and smile at them. After being given snacks, they seemed to feel closer to the adults by playing with them. Moreover, after seeing philanthropists distribute snacks and realizing that following them meant getting a share, some older children deliberately updated their behavior. For example, 7-year-old Calvin, who has Down syndrome and some verbal ability, would always gather around the entrance whenever philanthropists came. He would diligently help them carry in their donations, only to surreptitiously open the bags to peek at the contents inside. If it had snacks, he would grab a handful. Later, when the snacks were being distributed, he would also position himself closest to the philanthropists in order to choose first or to get more.

Furthermore, food flows not only between children and adults but also among the children themselves, mainly in competing and sharing. Fights in the orphanage are primarily caused by competition for food, though not because of scarcity. Instead, according to the caregivers, it is because the children ‘never eat enough and want to keep eating even if they throw up.’ In addition, they eat not only for the purpose of eating itself (like satiating hunger, cravings, or simply because it tasted delicious) but also as a form of play. Once, for instance, Allen (5-year-old with cerebral palsy) came to the caregivers’ workspace and asked me for a glass of water with body language. After I poured him a glass, several others also came for water. Then everyone in the hallway came running toward us, drinking cup after cup of water until the cooler was empty. I found it strange that they would be so thirsty so suddenly and that they just kept drinking. Seeing the entire scene unfold, Nanny Yu reminded me that Allen likely was actually thirsty, but the second child only thought I was giving Allen something special and wanted it for himself. Then one by one, the others started seeing it as a game. They drank because the others were drinking, and then they drank as much as the others. Yu’s explanation reveals the multiple meanings contained within children’s drinking behavior and, more importantly, the self-perception behind those meanings: ‘if someone else has something good, I want it too, and I want however much they have.’

Aside from competing for food, some of the older children have developed food-sharing relationships, which suggest that their selves are not a kind of isolated individualism. From my observations, food-sharing relationships fall into two types: sharing among ‘family members’ and that among ‘friends.’

After being placed at Pearl Orphanage, each child is assigned to a specific caregiver and their existing group of children, whose relationship grows through the day-to-day nurturing process. Those who can speak address their supervising caregiver as ‘mom’ and the other caregivers as ‘aunts.’ Over time, older children come to identify with the other children under the same caregiver as ‘family members.’ This identity also manifests itself in food distribution. For example, I was once helping a caregiver feed a toddler in the nursery when 7-year-old Barton (with cerebral palsy and some verbal ability) approached me and told me not to feed toddlers in the next bed because they were not members of his family. In another instance, Nicole snatched a snack from a boy about her age, a ward of Nanny Fu’s. That angered another one of Fu’s wards, who grabbed Nicole and pressed her down. Then the two started hitting Nicole together. The caregivers broke up the fight, but in private discussions later, they commented that those two children with cerebral palsy were quite smart.
and had a strong sense of family. They hoped that their own wards would feel just as strongly about their own groupmates.

Another type of food sharing occurs between ‘friends’. Elaine is a child with growth hormone deficiency. She has stayed in the orphanage for over a decade, and thus become the ‘alpha child’ there. Once, while handing out snacks during snack time, I noticed that quite a few children gave some of their own to her. The caregivers joked to me that they were trying to curry favor with Elaine. However, after careful observation, I found that her relationship with those children was not hierarchal. Instead, she had developed a wider circle of friends through smaller strategies, including the reciprocal exchange of snacks. While the others finished their snacks each time, Elaine ate very little and ended up stockpiling hers, which she shared with close friends outside of snack time. If other children wanted some, she would ask them to repay it back. I noticed that she might only give them a few pieces of crackers from an entire sleeve, but then they would repay her with an entire packet. As a result, the amount of food in Elaine’s stash only increased. I tried but could not ascertain if the children who ‘borrowed’ snacks from Elaine didn’t mind the system or simply hadn’t thought about it. Those who couldn’t speak had no way to express themselves to me, while those who could didn’t quite understand what I was asking. Either way, they looked overjoyed to have something to eat outside of snack time, and they got to know Elaine well. In this way, the network of relationships around snacks elevated Elaine over the others in the orphanage.

Acting haughty because of a caregiver’s favoritism, asking for food from philanthropists, comparing, competing, and sharing food with peers, all these may seem like ordinary acts of children in daily life, but they actually signify the socialization process through which children form their self-knowledge and dispositions in the orphanage context. The self-awareness derived from the competition for food, the formation of a ‘family’ identity around food, and the creation and maintenance of a network of friends through food-sharing, all these reveal that children’s expressions of agency include not only their individuality, but also the ways they relate to each other and live a collective life.

Conclusion

From infants and toddlers’ longings for adult companions to older children’s enthusiasm for snack consumption, these ethnographic materials offer a detailed look into children’s expressions of agency at different ages. Yet, these expressions are constantly reshaped and adjusted in conjunction with the children’s growth and socialization processes, which ultimately serve to integrate them into institutionalized life. It is through these processes that we see the intertwining between the orphanage’s structural environment and children’s agency. As this article has suggested, however, all of these explorations are humanistic, dedicated to providing a set of explanations that fit the local sociocultural context and broaden our understanding of the thoughts and feelings of infants and children with developmental disabilities. They aim not to be fully objective.

My review of childhood studies literature points to the struggles of fully understanding the ‘real’ thoughts and experiences of infants and children with developmental disabilities, given current technological and cognitive limitations. Those difficulties exist for both anthropologists and sociologists using conventional social science research methods and for developmental psychologists using scientific experiments. Against that backdrop, this article attempts to carve a new path of ‘ethnographic imagination’ to construct an explanatory scheme that is rooted in a specific context and reliant on the collective experiences of those involved. From there, it can then relate a broader sense of everyday life to the sociocultural insights drawn from participatory observation. While well received by the caregivers at Pearl Orphanage, the credibility of this experimental approach needs further examinations from other colleagues interested in this subject.

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Notes

1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Developmental psychology suggests that children’s ability to understand death is governed by the extent of their brain development. Average children begin to form relatively mature understandings of death between the ages of 5 and 8, including awareness of its irreversibility, the elimination of bodily functions, and the causes of death (Paul, 2019). For this reason, social science studies concerning children’s perceptions of death typically select children over 5 as their subjects (Davies, 2019; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018). If we trust the premise of those studies, then it seems even more unlikely that Nicole would have been able to perceive death at that time.
3. Initially, I intended to obtain written informed consent, but my first interviewee Nanny Fang thought it was too formal to confirm her
agreement by signing a written form. I explained to her that it was to make sure she knew her rights in joining this research, but she said she already knew its content and believed that I would not do harms to her because we knew each other well after staying together for a long period of time. In that situation, I turned to verbal informed consent. I read the consent form to her again and she concurred. With Nanny Fang’s suggestion, my following interviews with other caregivers all started with verbal informed consent. I should note that when I obtained ethical approval from my institution, I have mentioned the possibility of using verbal informed consent and it was approved by the ethics committee.

4. Born and grown up in the city where Pearl Orphanage is located, I am familiar with local society and dialect. This familiarity has helped me better communicate with the caregivers and understand their cultural norms as well as child-rearing styles. 5. However, I have talked to two teenagers who had paraplegia but grasped average communication skills about their lives in the orphanage. I have not included their information here because this article focuses primarily on infants and children with development disabilities.

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