Child-Centered Society: "Children" Social Construction on Children and Families Agency's (Japan) Websites

Muhammad Umar [*1]

[1]*Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

Abstract

Children and Families Agency (CFA) which enacted in June 2022, and starts effectively operated on 1st April 2023, has one of its functions is to make policies in order to overcome the declining birth rate in Japan (Children and Families Agency, n.d.) and has tagline "Child-Centered Society". The uses of this tagline led to a hypothesis that there is a social construction of "child" that different with the other construction in different countries. This study aimed to investigated how CFA constructs "children", and the similarities as well as differences between CFA's construction and the others. To achieved its aim, this research's analysis conducted in two steps: 1) analysing how is CFA's construction; and 2) comparing the results of first step with the others country's case construction. The analysis conducted using data—texts and pictures— which is gathered from CFA's websites. Based on this study's findings, concluded that CFA's construction has a similarity and some differences with the other case of countries' construction of child.

Keywords: Children; Social Construction; Child-Centered; Children and Families Agency

1. Introduction

With one of its functions to overcome the declining birth rate phenomenon that became a nationwide problem, Japan enacted Children and Families Agency (こども家庭庁) — henceforth referred to as CFA— in June 2022, which started its operation on 1st April 2023. As its function, CFA brings out "Child-Centered Society" (こどもまんなか) as a tagline. The use of this sentence as a tagline implicates how the Japanese Government, through CFA, defined "children" in society and how the construction of "children" from the perspective of CFA. Some narratives on CFA's websites seem to indicate how these two points on CFA's perspectives, as example, CFA defined "children" as people that are at the stages of development both physically and mentally (こども家庭庁, n.d.-a). which the definition and categorization are not limited to age, like 18 or 20 years old. This categorization also implies how CFA's not only using the word "children" but also "young people" as well. This example also shows a "unique" construction of "children" from CFA.

Some literature from past conducted studies shows some topics that usually conveyed regarding "children" and its socio-cultural aspect, for example, the studies that

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[1] *Muhammad Umar. E-mail: m.umar0@mail.ugm.ac.id*
Telp: +62815-8949-598

discoursing the relation of children and their socio-cultural environment (Jeyasingham, 2014; Mayall & Morrow, 2020; Stanton-Chapman & Schmidt, 2024; Wyness, 2014). There are also other studies discoursing how children see their socio-cultural environment from their "point of view" (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2014; Scott & Le, 2019). These trend of two topics shows that there is still a lack of discourse on how "children" are constructed in the context of socio-cultural, especially by the government. Moreover, in the case of CFA, the construction is made to overcome the problem that happened in society.

However, although there is still a lack of discourse on how "children" being constructed, we can explore some literature that shows how the definition of "children" (Saraceno, 1984; Schapiro, 1999; Sigurdsen, 2020); how the position of children in the society (Mayall & Morrow, 2020; Pouwels et al., 2018; Sigurdsen, 2020; Sudarsih, 2021); and how children being involved in society socio-cultural dynamics (Collier et al., 2008; Jordan, 2008; Society for Medical Anthropology, 2007). Those three topics and research did not explicitly mention the construction of children, but those topics show some aspects of construction in the context of socio-cultural aspects. Moreover, it shows that no study that focused on the construction of "children" especially in Japanese society.

In the case of Japanese society, especially when CFA was established, it was followed by the determination of various concepts that guided how this institution should work. As mentioned before, how it should work is also shown from its tagline which implicates how CFA see "children" in a socio-cultural context. The point of view of CFA determined how CFA constructs "children" which is very likely realized through its policies. These determining concepts can be seen in the Children Basic Law (こども基本法). This policy or basic law becomes the basic "rules of the game" to CFA on how to overcome problems regarding the children by its policies. Not only from the official document of the policies, but also as mentioned before, how the Children Basic Law become the "rules of the game" also shown from CFA's websites.

From the descriptions above, we can take a hypothesis that: there is a "unique" construction of "children" from CFA that shown on its official websites. In this case, construction regards three aspects: 1) how "children" is defined; 2) how children have been positioned in society; 3) how children have been involved in society especially regarding policies that applied in society. Moreover, there are presumably differences between "children" construction by CFA and the other case of "children" construction. This research aims to investigate how CFA constructs "children" and the similarities and differences between CFA's construction and the others.

2. Methods

This research uses qualitative descriptive approach, and uses in two steps of analysis, which is: 1) analysing how is CFA's construction; and 2) comparing the results of first step with the others country's case construction. The results of both steps will be qualitatively described to achieve this research's aim regarding to three aspects of construction mentioned in the introduction. The first step of analysis will be conducted using data gathered from CFA's official websites, including texts and pictures related to three aspects of construction mentioned before to see how is CFA's construction. The second step of analysis will be comparing the first step's results with the construction in other country's case. This step will be conducted by reviewing past literature about "children" social construction.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1   "Children" and its Definition

Based on CFA's website page—as mentioned before—, children defined as a person at the stages of development both physically and mentally (こども家庭庁, n.d.-a). The literal definition of this—seen in Figure 1— can be translated as:

"[Children] = People who are at the stages of physical and mental development"

This definition of children is not related to or limited to a certain age. As mentioned, on the same page, growth and development needs, both mentally and physically, do not stop at 18 or 20 years old.

Figure 1. The definition of "children" on CFA's official website (こども家庭庁, n.d.-a)

Figure 1, also visualized that "children" are not limited to certain ages, development stages, or certain physical conditions. The illustration shows children with different educational stages, such as elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school and children with different physical conditions; disabled or not. All the people who meet the criteria of this definition are categorized as children in society. Moreover, on the same narrative on the same page, the word "若者" literally means "young person". The use of the word emphasizes that this definition is not related to or even limited to a certain age. However, surely the uses of this kind of definition will make some overlaps related to how the definitions of "children" and "young people" usually differentiate in society, and in this case "young people" can be considered as part of "children".

The use of this definition will also implicate how policies and regulations will be formulated and implemented. Ahimsa-Putra (2009) said that a concept is how something is defined—in this case, the definition of children— and surely will demarcate something from the other things. Defining a concept is essential to achieve "one language" or one understanding on something to carry out the collective work. In this case, the concept or the definition of "children" that is commonly defined is related and limited to certain ages—usually 18 or 20 years old—. Meanwhile, the definition and concept that could be said differently which is related to children's needs and development processes—close to Schapiro's (1999) concept of children—, could expand the scope of work and target of regulations and policies that will be established. This point also can be seen in how CFA use not only the diction of "children", but also "young people". This use of diction is the implication of overlapping between both that are usually differentiated.

3.2   Children and their Positioning

Regarding to children's position in society, CFA, by its website pages, positions children as the center of society. This could be seen on CFA's tagline—as mentioned in the introduction—on CFA's logo (Figure 2). Text that is written horizontally is CFA's name in Japanese or "こども家庭庁". Meanwhile, the curved one is CFA's tagline, "こどもまんなか" means "children centered" which intends to position children and young people as the "main characters" of society (こども家庭庁, n.d.-b).

Figure 2. CFA's logo that written in Japanese (こども家庭庁, n.d.-b)

The positioning from this tagline shows that policies and regulations, that will be established, will be based on the concerns of children and young people as the center or the "main characters" of society. So, those policies and regulations are expected not to be detrimental or have negative impacts on children and young people. This point also shows how the implementation of those policies and regulations are integrated with other stakeholders, as well as the related ministry and local government at various levels (こども家庭庁, n.d.-a). How the information about the Children Basic Law will be spread out is also essential, considering this law has been CFA's "rules of the game" to realize the tagline. Thus, this law can be known not only by people who are directly related to children but also by all elements of society.

So, this positioning could be said to set children as central/"main characters"/key figures of society and force all the regulations and policies that are formulated by the government to be based on the objective of realisation and fulfilling the rights of and benefits of children. It is definitely different from the other positioning commonly seen in other case, by reviewing past research, like the positioning seen from Mayall & Morrow (2020); Pouwels et al. (2018); and Sigurdsen (2020). Based on those papers, it shows that the positioning of children is usually at a position of disadvantage. Meanwhile, the main objective of CFA's positioning of children is to fulfil children's rights of as the basis and main focus when formulating and implementing the regulations and policies.

3.3   Children and their Involvement in Society

The positioning discussed before related to how children and young people are involved in society, especially in the processes of formulating or evaluating regulations or policies. To optimize the expediency to the main character of the society—in this case children and young people—, it became important to hear and consider the "voice" of the main character. This point has been implemented by CFA regarding their regulation and policies. Children and

young people are allowed to voice their thoughts, concerns, and feedback—suggestions or critiques— to CFA and other related stakeholders by various methods. Further, the voices of children and young people that have already been received by related institutions will be discussed at internal meetings of those institutions. Then, by considering the feedback, existing regulations and policies will be evaluated whether the feedback can be implemented or not reconsidering the initial objective of those regulations/policies. The feedback can also be considered in the making of regulatory baselines or guidelines for other related institutions or stakeholders to fulfil the feedbacks and children's needs in the form of programs or other forms of follow-up action.

Figure 3. illustration of how children can deliver their thoughts or "voice" (こども家庭庁, n.d.-a)

Children can express their thoughts through some methods, such as filling out the form provided by CFA or the other institutions, directly speaking to the staff of the related institutions, or directly participating in the meeting of the related institutions (Figure 3). These "related institutions" are not limited to CFA, but also local governmental institutions at various levels. CFA, in this case, acts not only as a coordinating agency but also as an easily accessible liaison agency between those who want to deliver their thoughts or "voices"—in this context, especially children— and other related institutions that should receive those thoughts or "voices". This point can be seen in how CFA provide a list of related institutions or stakeholders that are accessible to anyone who wants to deliver their thoughts. The institutions on the list are categorized by topics of the feedback or topics that need to be consulted, and by region or domicile of the sender.

Shortly, children's involvement in the dynamics of society, especially related to regulations and policies—formulating and evaluating— is the implication of how children being positioned as the central of society. This point shows how their thoughts and voices are important to implement a child-friendly society and environment. Listening, compiling, and considering children's voices for the sake of the children themselves is an act of understanding the children's thoughts. Those who are already familiar with some of the concepts in anthropology will find that this kind of act is close to those concepts, especially how Malinowski (1922) said that grasping the native's point of view is the main goal of anthropologists or ethnographers. A similar concept by Ahimsa-Putra (2022) about ethnoscience, that in this case, the native society is "children" and the ethnoscience—as a set of knowledge— is their thoughts from their point of view about problems or concerns that they are facing as children.

4.   Conclusions

From the discussion above, the uniqueness of "children" social construction showed by and from CFA's official websites. This construction focused on some points to establish the social aspect of children such as definition of children, children's position in society, and children's involvement in society. Compared to other cases of "children" social construction, CFA's has similarities at one point, and differences at the other point. The similarities are how CFA's constructions define "children" based on children's needs and development processes. Although some constructions define children as related and limited to certain ages, others also use children's needs and development processes instead of using ages as the benchmark, to define children.

However, the differences are more dominant between CFA's compared to other cases of the construction. One of them shows how children's position in those constructions, children are usually placed in a disadvantaged position. On the other hand, CFA's positioned children as a "center" of society or can be argued as one of the most advantageous or important positions. Another difference shows how those constructions let children be involved in society, especially regarding regulations and policies, that in other cases usually the voices of children are not heard. However, in CFA's construction, it is instead the voices of children that are the main considerations, as well as they are the "center" of the society. Overall, in short, CFA and its constructions are established to fulfil the rights of children who are frequently not properly considered or can be said as marginalized; not in the context of social class, but in the context of the other social groups that are positioned above children, that usually differentiated by age. As CFA itself is a newly established institution by the Japanese government to overcome and alleviate various problems in Japanese society, this research could be considered as the first research that discusses about social construction of "children" specifically established by CFA through its official website pages. Moreover, from the point of view of anthropology, it shows that there are some principles or concepts of anthropology that are used by CFA to form the construction. So, it might be a little difficult to comprehensively understand the construction without using the perspective of anthropology. Therefore, as research that discusses a — relatively— new topic, this research is expected to bring some new contributions to the discourse of the body's construction, especially in the scope of anthropology.

Much like the others, this research has shortcomings and limitations as well. As research that uses literature review methods, surely there are a lot of unseen things that have not been revealed yet. It could be revealed by conducting research using direct interviews with CFA or Japanese people. Moreover, research that discusses the construction of children— especially by CFA— can be more elaborated with the other topics. For example, discussing CFA's "children" construction compared with "children" construction before CFA was established, or how CFA's construction has been carried out in the dynamics of Japanese society and how it implicates the society. These two topics of course just a little out of many other possible topics that can be discussed to expand and elaborate the discourse and study of the body, especially from the perspective of anthropology.

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