

DADDY, WHERE ARE YOU?: MUSIC AND PATERNAL ABSENCE AT CASA SHALON

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Abstract

This study analyzes the impact of paternal absence in the context of institutional care for children and adolescents at Casa Shalon, a shelter located in João Pessoa, Paraíba. It is an experience report combined with bibliographic and documentary research. The objective is to understand the consequences of the absence of a father figure among children and adolescents in care and to describe the effects of cultural and socioeducational interventions on their behavior. The methodology consisted of participant observation conducted over eight years while managing the shelter, using the mediated listening of the song “Papaoutai” and the organization of biweekly talks by successful professionals from socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds as pedagogical resources. The results show that approximately 80% of the young people at the institution experienced paternal absence, a proportion consistent with national statistics identifying neglect and abandonment as the leading causes of institutional care in Brazil. Identification with musical narratives and stories of overcoming adversity was also found to generate engagement, curiosity, and active listening among the boys. The study concludes that empathetic approaches and real-life examples of resilience are valuable tools for reframing the pain of abandonment and developing new future prospects for children and adolescents in institutional care.

Keywords: Casa Shalon, Experience report, Institutional care, Paternal absence, Pastoral listening.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on experiences observed at Casa Shalon, a shelter for children and adolescents located in the capital of Paraíba. As part of the institution's routine, small groups of three or four boys would listen to music while traveling by car to therapy sessions, medical appointments, and school, and the track "Papaoutai" ("Daddy, Where Are You?") was one of their favorites. Written and performed by Belgian artist Stromae (Paul Van Haver) and released on May 13, 2013, as the first single from the album *Racine carrée*, the song topped the charts in Belgium and France and became the best-selling single of 2013 in the latter country (Wikipedia, 2024).

The song was inspired by the singer's own life story. Born to a Belgian mother and a Rwandan father, Stromae was abandoned by his father, who returned to Rwanda and was killed in 1994 during the Rwandan genocide. His mother concealed the truth about his death from him as a child, and Stromae only discovered it in adulthood (NRJ, 2023). The title is a play on the French phrase "papa où t'es?" and is spelled in a way that imitates children's writing while simultaneously evoking the slang term "empapaouter," meaning to deceive someone (NRJ, 2023). Musically, the song creates a striking contrast between its painful underlying subject and an infectious melody influenced by pop, dance, house, and rap. This contrast is visually reinforced in the music video, which has garnered more than 667 million views and features motionless mannequin-like fathers (Wikipedia, 2024). After the lyrics were translated for them, the boys at Casa Shalon identified strongly with the song and frequently asked to hear it again.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the experience of Casa Shalon requires engagement with five complementary theoretical dimensions: the national landscape of institutional care and its structural causes; the relationship between paternal absence, female single parenthood, and termination of parental rights; the perspectives of children in care regarding their relationships; the interpretation of "generalized adolescence" as an effect of the contemporary weakening of the adult function; and therapeutic and

socioeducational interventions aimed at rebuilding relationships. Taken together, these dimensions support both the diagnosis of the problem faced by the boys in care and the rationale underlying the pedagogical intervention described in this article.

INSTITUTIONAL CARE IN BRAZIL: PROFILE, STRUCTURAL CAUSES, AND LENGTH OF STAY

A documentary study of children and adolescents who experienced multiple placements in institutional care in the Federal District found that most of those readmitted were male (53.4%), underwent an average of three shelter placements, and belonged to sibling groups in 45.5% of cases. The primary reasons recorded were abuse (19.8%), a history of living on the streets (18.5%), neglect (17.7%), and, when combined, poverty-related factors and the absence of adequate material conditions (26.1%) (Fukuda; Penso; Santos, 2013). These findings are directly consistent with data from the National Council of the Public Prosecutor's Office (Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público – CNMP, 2013) and the National Council of Justice (Conselho Nacional de Justiça – CNJ) and United Nations Development Programme (Programa das Nações Unidas para o Desenvolvimento – PNUD, 2020), already presented in the introduction to this article. They reinforce the conclusion that removal from the family is primarily caused by failures and an inability to provide care associated with poverty, while orphanhood accounts for only a residual proportion of cases.

The same study found that the average processing time for judicial case files was as long as 3.3 years, constituting a violation of the principle that institutional placement must be exceptional and brief, as established by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente – ECA) (Fukuda; Penso; Santos, 2013). In Parintins, Amazonas, a qualitative study involving social workers, child protection counselors, and a judge described the termination of parental rights as the most severe and definitive sanction within the child protection system, applied only after all alternatives for keeping the child within the biological family had been exhausted. Although the ECA establishes that material deprivation alone does not justify termination, the study found that extreme poverty operates, in practice,

as a decisive structural factor underlying the violations that lead to this measure (Lopes; Valente, 2018). These studies converge with an interpretation also supported by Müller (2014), discussed in the following section: neglect, as recorded in case files, is less a cause than an effect of macrosocial vulnerabilities that effective public policies have failed to address.

PATERNAL ABSENCE, FEMALE SINGLE PARENTHOOD, AND THE GENDER ARCHITECTURE OF ABANDONMENT

An analysis of data from the National Adoption and Institutional Care System (Sistema Nacional de Adoção e Acolhimento – SNA) revealed that single mothers are overrepresented in institutional care cases, accounting for 51.7% of records involving children aged 0 to 2 whose birth certificates do not include the father's name. These children have lower rates of family reintegration, are referred for adoption at higher rates, and face shorter legal time frames for the termination of parental rights. The authors interpret this pattern not as evidence of protective efficiency, but as an indication that institutions make less effort to rebuild family relationships when a woman is the sole identified caregiver (Mota; Gomes, 2026). Drawing on the framework of reproductive justice, the authors describe this pattern as a form of “reproductive governance,” in which the state, rather than supporting vulnerable families, uses institutionalization and adoption as mechanisms for controlling the reproduction of poor and racialized women (Mota; Gomes, 2026).

This situation is corroborated by the documentary survey conducted by Fukuda, Penso, and Santos (2013), in which the father was formally recorded as unknown or missing in 34.4% of the cases analyzed, while mothers were listed as the sole caregivers in 42.8% of cases. When information about the father was available, alcohol and drug use was the predominant psychosocial characteristic. These data are consistent with the previously cited survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE, 2022), according to which 13.5% of Brazilian families are headed exclusively by mothers. Taken together, these findings suggest that the paternal absence observed

among the children and adolescents at Casa Shalon is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather an institutional-scale manifestation of a broader gender architecture in which paternal abandonment is systematically less visible, less subject to accountability, and less directly addressed by the child protection system than the burden placed on mothers.

PERSPECTIVES OF CHILDREN IN CARE: SIBLING BONDS, FANTASY, AND THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

An ethnographically informed study of children in institutional care in the metropolitan region of São Paulo showed that they do not organize their families according to the standard nuclear-family model. Instead, they develop alternative arrangements centered on the extended maternal lineage. The mother appears as the primary emotional reference, while the father figure is frequently excluded from family representations or mentioned only as absent (Müller, 2014). The study also highlights the protective role of older siblings, who mediate communication and help younger children cope with the trauma of institutionalization. It further notes that children resort to fantasy as a childhood mechanism for tolerating their new circumstances. However, it became clear that none of them had been properly informed of why they had been taken to the shelter, how long they would remain there, or what legal decisions had been made regarding their future. This constitutes a structural failure of communication between the child protection system and the children themselves (Müller, 2014).

A longitudinal study of eight adolescents in institutional care in Espírito Santo, grounded in the Bioecological Theory of Human Development, found that despite histories of neglect, abandonment, or domestic violence, most participants viewed the shelter positively as a safe environment that provided emotional support. The family remained their primary aspiration for the future. Attempts at renewed contact, such as spending holidays at home, proved ambivalent, revealing both positive experiences and the persistence of structural conflicts, including paternal alcoholism. Of the eight participants, four ran away from the institutions, and only one completed the formal transition out of care upon reaching the

age of majority. The boys, in particular, reported greater difficulty obtaining clear information about the progress of their legal cases (Rosa et al., 2012). The convergence between these findings and the Casa Shalon boys' search for a song capable of expressing, albeit indirectly, the question "Daddy, where are you?" suggests that mediated listening to music may have provided them with a symbolic channel through which to work through experiences that, according to the literature, the child protection system itself tends to leave unspoken.

"GENERALIZED ADOLESCENCE" AND THE EROSION OF THE ADULT FUNCTION IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

From a psychoanalytic perspective, contemporary culture is said to be experiencing a state of "generalized adolescence," driven by the logic of consumption and the older generation's difficulty in maintaining an adult position. The idealization of youth as a condition to be perpetuated across all age groups erases the generational difference that structures the adolescent transition (Pereira; Gurski, 2014). According to this interpretation, "capitalist discourse" weakens interpersonal bonds and promotes an illusion of completeness anchored in rapid and disposable consumption, thereby producing segregation and pushing young people toward either individualism or the tyranny of groups governed by intolerance. The resulting "eroded adulthood" empties the transmission of experience, memory, and symbolic law of its substance. Without an adult as a point of resistance and in the absence of structured rites of passage, contemporary young people consequently experience symbolic helplessness that hinders their integration into the social world (Pereira; Gurski, 2014).

Under pressure from the paradoxical imperatives of autonomy and originality, young people are said to express this discomfort through extreme symptomatic responses. A healthy transition would depend on adults maintaining generational difference and resuming the transmission of experience through language, occupying the position of a symbolic point of reference rather than that of a tyrant (Pereira; Gurski, 2014). This framework offers a means of interpreting the pedagogical resources adopted

at Casa Shalon. Both the mediated listening of “Papaoutai” and the biweekly talks by professionals who had overcome similar vulnerabilities can be understood as attempts to reintroduce, albeit informally, adults willing to occupy the symbolic position left vacant by paternal absence and the erosion of the adult function in the lives of these boys.

THERAPEUTIC AND SOCIOEDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS: PARENTING, LISTENING, AND REBUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

In the field of clinical interventions, an action-research study grounded in group psychodrama and conducted with eight family members of children removed from their homes under protective measures in Amazonas was structured around three meetings. These meetings respectively revisited the caregivers’ own childhood memories through techniques such as role reversal, soliloquy, and doubling; addressed the pain and guilt associated with the removal of their children; and promoted the symbolic reconstruction of the relationship through the creation of an object and a simulated reunion (Romão; Vidal, 2025). The first meeting made it possible to identify “cultural conserves,” that is, crystallized behavioral patterns often marked by intrafamily violence and alcoholism, and to work toward replacing them with new forms of affectionate and protective behavior with a view to breaking the cycle of intergenerational violence. The authors conclude that group psychodrama is an effective tool for fostering empathy and reorganizing roles, but that the legal removal of children alone is insufficient without public policies providing psychological support to their families of origin (Romão; Vidal, 2025).

In the educational field, a literature review on the schooling of children in institutional care within early childhood education found that the subject is rarely discussed outside Psychology, that the existing debate focuses on school access while neglecting the quality of children’s continued attendance and learning, and that institutionalized infants and children with disabilities are the groups most severely affected. The authors argue that effective inclusion depends on emotional bonds mediated through play and on sensitive teachers capable of welcoming children without labeling them (Hillesheim; Wuo, 2023).

Taken together, the studies reviewed in this section indicate that attentive listening, symbolic mediation, and emotional bonds, whether therapeutic, familial, or educational, constitute the common thread capable of transforming institutional care from mere custody into an effective space for reframing experience.

This provides the theoretical basis for the intervention described below.

METHODOLOGY

The study is an experience report supported by a review of secondary data and is characterized as applied qualitative research. The fieldwork was based on participant observation conducted over eight years while the author served in the management of Casa Shalon. Following the identification of a lack of protective male figures at the shelter, a socioeducational intervention was developed consisting of biweekly talks led by independent professionals from a range of fields, including medicine, law, engineering, entrepreneurship, and bank management. These professionals were selected on the basis of their socioeconomic backgrounds, with priority given to individuals who had experienced significant family financial hardship during their own childhoods. The method consisted of presentations recounting their life stories, followed by discussions and question-and-answer sessions with the children and adolescents in care.

Statistical support was also sought from official databases maintained by the National Council of the Public Prosecutor's Office (Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público – CNMP), the National Council of Justice (Conselho Nacional de Justiça – CNJ), and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE), as well as from the scientific literature, in order to situate the circumstances observed at Casa Shalon within the national context of the breakdown of family relationships.

From an ethical standpoint, the report did not involve the collection of personal or identifiable data concerning the children and adolescents in care. Instead, it drew on the author's accumulated professional observations while managing the institution, with the anonymity and integrity of the minors

preserved in accordance with the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente – ECA; Law No. 8,069/1990). Because this was not a field study involving the direct collection of sensitive data from identifiable participants, individual Informed Consent Forms (Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido – TCLE) were not used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the circumstances at Casa Shalon revealed that approximately 80% of the adolescents in care experienced paternal absence. This rate is consistent with the national context: in 2025, Brazil had 34,427 children and adolescents in care, 93.8% of whom were housed in institutional facilities. Approximately 9,420 of these young people were over the age of 15, and many remained in care for years without their siblings (Agência Brasil, 2025).

The reasons leading to institutional care are closely linked to structural shortcomings and failures of care within the family of origin. A CNMP survey of 2,370 care institutions identified neglect as the leading cause of placement, reported by 84% of institutions, followed by alcohol and drug dependence (81%), abandonment (76%), and domestic violence (62%) (CNMP, 2013). An assessment conducted by the CNJ in partnership with the PNUD confirmed similar proportions and found that orphanhood accounted for only 0.4% of all cases (CNJ; PNUD, 2020). This demonstrates that paternal absence is primarily attributable to failures to provide care, an inability to provide care, or abandonment, rather than to the death of the father.

A study published in the journal *Fractal* indicates that the family support networks available to children in institutional care are significantly weaker than those available to children who have left care, particularly regarding the absence of extended family members willing to assume custody (Mastroianni et al., 2018). At the same time, IBGE data from 2022 indicate that paternal absence is a widespread social phenomenon in Brazil: 13.5% of Brazilian families are headed exclusively by mothers, representing more than 11 million households without the presence of a father figure (IBGE, 2022).

As a counterpoint to this situation, the practical intervention implemented at Casa Shalon yielded positive results. The strategy of inviting professionals who had overcome similar hardships during childhood captured the boys' attention to a remarkable degree. These stories of overcoming adversity fostered considerable interest, as demonstrated by the large number of questions asked and the young participants' attentive engagement at the end of each talk. This suggests that combining mediated musical listening with testimonies of resilience supports the symbolic processing of paternal absence.

CONCLUSION

The study reinforces the premise that the void left by paternal absence, observed among approximately 80% of the children and adolescents in care at Casa Shalon, reproduces on a smaller scale a severe Brazilian sociodemographic problem involving abandonment and neglect. In the face of this emotional void, culturally based tools for connection, such as empathetic listening mediated through Stromae's song, combined with real-life accounts from resilient professionals, proved to be powerful avenues for socioeducational intervention. The engagement and curiosity elicited among the young people suggest that listening and envisioning tangible possibilities for overcoming adversity are important steps toward reframing paternal absence and breaking the cycle of vulnerability within the institutional care system.

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