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*Conference Report: Family and Disability: Comparing British and
German Histories of Care for the Disabled*

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

Family and Disability: Comparing British and German Histories of Care for the Disabled. Conference organized by the Department of Modern History at Kiel University and the German Historical Institute London, with support from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, held online, 2–4 December 2021. Conveners: Christina von Hodenberg (GHIL) and Gabriele Lingelbach (Kiel University).

This conference took an interepochal and comparative approach to domestic care for people with disabilities in Britain and Germany from the Middle Ages to modern times. It had originally been planned for 2020 as an in-person event to be held at the GHIL, but after various postponements, it took place online at short notice due to increased Covid restrictions in the United Kingdom.

After a brief welcome by Christina von Hodenberg, Gabriele Lingelbach opened the conference. In her introduction she emphasized the paradoxical development of domestic care arrangements, pointing out that in spite of changing gender norms, caring for people with disabilities in most cases remains a female task. Lingelbach also argued that research on care for people with disabilities should take an intersectional perspective. She highlighted that the conference would ask whether caring for people with physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental disabilities followed divergent patterns. From the perspective of disability history, she said, it was equally important to assess whether people with disabilities could claim agency in establishing their care arrangements and shaping the conditions they lived under.

Bianca Frohne (Kiel University) opened the first panel, chaired by Raphael Rössel (Kiel University, now FernUniversität in Hagen) and dedicated to investigating home care for people with disabilities in premodern times. Frohne's talk focused on concepts of time in medieval and early modern German households that included members with disabilities, and her analysis was based, among other source

material, on reports of miracles (*Mirakelberichte*), household financial accounts, and diaries. She explained that care and labour duties within the household were fundamentally restructured in response to disability and chronic disease. This forced household members to rethink plans for their futures and made them choose new reference points when writing about their own lives. Highlighting the relationship between concepts of 'care' und 'cure', Frohne showed that household members often believed that the time they spent caring for their relatives would be limited, and emphasized that family members often imagined periods of care as distinct phases of their lives.

David Turner (Swansea University) looked at the effects that the disability of one family member had on the social status of coal miners' households during the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Turner refuted the previously dominant thesis that disability led to the direct exclusion of the disabled person from the household and resulted in institutionalization. In fact, people with disabilities often remained active household members, as Turner showed in his analysis based on ego-documents and social security data. At the same time, middle-class social reformers such as Henry Mayhew publicly praised and idealized the seemingly selfless care practices in working-class households. However, working-class families who too readily agreed to place their disabled members in a residential institution could legally be charged with neglecting their household duties.

In his keynote lecture, Andreas Gestrich (formerly GHIL) developed a systematic approach to historicizing family care and proposed four basic themes. First, he pointed to the changing patterns of organizing care work across generations. Second, he argued that the motives for doing care work or not required historicization, and hinted at possible interconnections with the emerging field of the history of emotions. Third, Gestrich encouraged studies that looked at the importance of gender in care arrangements. And fourth, he emphasized that social welfare needs to be studied in a comparative perspective. International sociographic analyses provide particularly promising source material for such projects. Gestrich introduced the Eurofamcare study on family care arrangements in different states of the European Union as one example.

The second day of the conference began with a panel on the relationship between institutional and family care in the twentieth century. Rachel O'Driscoll (University of Oxford) focused on scholarships granted to blind or deaf schoolchildren and those with other physical disabilities in early twentieth-century London. She looked in particular at the demands made of parents by local authorities in regard to nurturing these children during their scholarships. The central sources for her biographical analysis were minutes from London County Council meetings and documents from the process of allocating the scholarships.

Christian Kintner (University of Münster) complicated the meaning of concepts such as 'care' and 'family' in his analysis of the lives of the cognitively disabled residents of an anthroposophical farm community in Westphalia. Kintner's ethnographic talk was based on interviews with these residents and the couple heading the farm complex, the so-called 'house parents'. Kintner concluded that they and the residents declared themselves a 'family' in order to distinguish their way of life from that pursued in residential institutions.

Ulrike Winkler (Universität der Bundeswehr München) spoke about the influence of parents and other family members on the architecture of residential institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany. The often remote homes had traditionally been designed as unwelcoming places, Winkler pointed out, referring to their characteristically high fences and massive brick walls. According to Winkler, this kind of architecture was intended to mark the institution as a heterotopic counterworld in which the authority of the management was unquestioned. With continued scandals surrounding homes from the 1950s onwards, parents challenged this institutional inaccessibility. Overall, Winkler argued, homes increasingly shed their unwelcoming character not only because of pressure from activists or from the wider public, but also because of individual family interventions.

Andreas Gestrich chaired the third panel, in which the speakers compared the gendered allocation of care duties in twentieth-century Germany and Britain. Raphael Rössel argued that unlike families with non-disabled children, nuclear families with disabled children could not be seen as a traditional form of household organization in West Germany. Directly after the Second World War, female household

members faced an abundance of care duties in West Germany. Caring for wounded ex-servicemen—husbands, fathers, and brothers—in most cases took precedence over caring for a disabled child. A tendency towards institutionalizing disabled children emerged particularly with regard to children with cognitive and psychological deviations. Only the establishment of parental organizations stopped this trend. Against the background of revelations about maltreatment in residential homes and media attention after the thalidomide scandal, more and more parents changed their minds and advocated for domestic family care, which they believed to be more affectionate than institutional care. Such arguments, however, put pressure on mothers in particular, who were nudged away from paid work and often felt unable to address either logistical and financial difficulties or the stress that goes hand in hand with their care work because it might have given the impression that they wanted to place their children in an institution.

Pia Schmäuser (Kiel University) addressed similar issues in the German Democratic Republic. Schmäuser argued that East Germany's infrastructure for rehabilitation was (even) more inadequate than that in the Federal Republic. In the socialist dictatorship, parents were unable to form associations that could have applied pressure to state officials. Most residential institutions in the GDR were in the hands of the (Protestant) church. From the 1970s, local churches initiated seminars for parents at which mothers in particular were given a chance to voice their daily concerns. While East German parents could not form clubs or associations like those in the FRG, they were, according to Schmäuser, able to establish networks within church seminars. Parents in these circles were empowered, as mothers (and occasionally fathers) became increasingly willing to address supply shortages or the weak infrastructure for rehabilitation during the meetings.

Julie Anderson's (University of Kent) talk concluded the second day of the conference, looking at the Sunshine Homes that were established in the interwar period in Britain. These institutions took in blind newborns and infants, most of whom had been born into working-class families. Anderson contrasted the public discourse on maternal care by mothers of visually impaired children and of non-disabled children. While maternal bonding was seen as the prerequisite for

successfully raising a (non-disabled) child, state officials questioned whether working-class parents of blind and visually impaired children were able to care for their children at all. They argued that blind children should be educated by trained experts, with nurses to provide necessary female bonding.

A panel on state measures supporting family care arrangements opened the third and final day of the conference. It consisted of a talk given by Steven Taylor (University of Kent), who examined the importance of middle-class family ideals for charity initiatives directed at disabled adolescents in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain. Based on an analysis of texts by Victorian social reformers such as Samuel Smiles, Taylor showed that specific gender roles were deemed a prerequisite for sustainable family life. The philanthropic organizations at the core of Taylor's talk differentiated between those seen as 'worthy' and 'unworthy' of public support. Taylor examined to what extent working-class families with disabled children were deemed 'worthy' of such support. He stressed that they were often declared deserving if the household had a bourgeois lifestyle, for instance, with the father as sole provider and the mother not taking paid work in favour of nurturing the child.

The conference ended with an open discussion chaired by Christina von Hodenberg. A major point of discussion were the regional differences that emerged in various talks – for instance, how disabilities and class boundaries showed greater interconnections in the United Kingdom than in Germany. Striking interepochal continuities were also highlighted, such as the tendency to allocate care duties according to gender. At the conclusion of the discussion, various participants called for an expansion of the focus to include the whole of Europe.

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