"Seen and Not Heard" Sociological Approaches to Childhood: Black Children, Agency and Implications for Child Welfare

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In this article, the authors consider the socio-historical conceptions of childhood in relation to Black children and their unique relationship with child welfare institutions. Against this background we apply models of childhood to issues of race and social agency and argue that these elements have been inadequately addressed in developmental models of childhood. Following these concerns, we present a social model of childhood and consider how these distinct and different ways of understanding children might be applied to child welfare practice. This child centered approach presents a unique opportunity to incorporate the differential positioning of Black children in the wider society by engaging with their everyday lives as a framework for child welfare practice. This framework allows for a greater participation of children and specifically, Black children in decision making processes. In the final section we suggest possible outcomes of integrating this approach into child welfare practice.

Key words: *Black children, social agency, marginalization, child welfare*

Introduction

Child welfare holds a central place in the history and development of social work since its inception over a century ago. The history of childhood studies closely parallel the profession's development of therapeutic interventions with children. The models identifying what constitutes 'childhood' use conceptualizations of child development as an established professional discipline that informs current child welfare practice. This academic interest in child development proposes that biological and social development through children's language, play, and interactions are important markers in the developmental progress of children (James & Prout, 1997).

In recent years sociologists have employed 'new' approaches to our understanding of childhood as a social and cultural construct that is attentive to the variables of gender, race and culture. These approaches question the dominant epistemological explanations of childhood as a neutral distinct stage in the human life cycle and rather adopt representations of children as knowledgeable and competent, with abilities to construct their own perspectives of daily lived experiences (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). This knowledge widens our understanding of childhood and raises concerns about the dominant place of developmental psychology in childhood studies which tends to position children moving through ages and stages as if children were solely adults in the making. Many critics argue that these approaches are inadequate in describing children's ordinary lives or their active participation in social life (Burman, 1994; Hogan & Tudge, 1999; Woodhead, 1999).

With significant changes in the way children are perceived, scant attention has been paid to how these distinct and different ways of understanding children and their everyday lives might be applied to child welfare practice. The focus on children's social agency has important resonance with the profession's responsibility to listen to children and take their experiences and views seriously across a range of practice modalities. The increased interest in children's everyday lives is closely linked to international trends in promoting children's rights, as evidenced in conferences and literature, building the case for children to be more involved in decision-making

activities.

In this context, several authors have suggested a balanced model of child development which includes children's active participation in developing policies regarding the welfare services they receive. This modified approach presents the socio-cultural aspects of children's lives from a 'social child' perspective (Thomas & O'Kane, 2000; Hogan, 2005; Winter, 2006). Here, this approach offers insights and understanding of children as their own agents recognizing childhood as socially constructed through differing social relations and contexts. This perspective provides a counterbalance to abstract individualized developmental models by presenting a perspective that examines the way children experience their lives through specific social, historical, and cultural arrangements.

Understanding children's ordinary lives in a wider social context can provide opportunities and strategies for children to voice their experiences, social achievements, and competencies. This focus allows children to communicate their social realities and experiences mediated through the social categories, of race, gender, disability, and the differences among children, rather than using reductive approaches that are based on sameness and generalities (Taylor, 2004). Besides generating a better understanding of children's thoughts, feelings and aspirations, these narratives can uncover the complex ways in which oppression and discrimination are powerful markers of experiences. Although 'listening to children' is regarded as an important aspect of professional knowledge in developing appropriate methods of interviewing, valuing subjective experiences in other areas of practice raises difficult issues as an overall strategy in addressing complex problems. Nevertheless, by adopting these strategies to promote the involvement of children in public child welfare, and in particular for Black children, we can unravel some of the complexities and identify barriers that seem to have a direct impact upon their life chances as a first step towards improving their situation and their well-being. In addition, this approach allows for a greater engagement with the participation rights of children in disadvantaged circumstances.

This article is organized into three broad sections. First, we chart the historical development of child welfare in relation to

Black children. This discussion offers insight into models of childhood through ideological constructions of race and the relationship between Black children and welfare institutions. In the second section, we apply models of childhood to issues of race and social agency and argue that these elements have been inadequately addressed and as a result of this process, Black children's subjective realities and views have been marginalized as an important feature of practice. We maintain that by integrating their lived experiences from their vantage point can assist in shifting emphasis away from 'problem' children towards a deeper understanding of their everyday lives, and their social achievements and competencies. In the final section we suggest possible outcomes of integrating this approach into child welfare practice with children in public care and specifically, with Black children.

Historical Discontinuities – Different Childhoods

The history of childhood as a social construct has been the starting point and focus of analysis in generating new paradigms about the historical and culturally specific nature of childhood (Aries, 1962; Heywood, 2001; James & James, 2004). Aries (1962) is credited with stimulating debate and interest in the history of childhood by asserting that the notion of childhood emerged in Europe during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Prior to this historical period, the idea of childhood did not exist – children were perceived as miniature adults. Aries (1962) claims that the gradual removal of children from everyday activities with adults through organized schooling led to the discovery of 'childhood' as a determined stage in preparation for adulthood (James & Prout, 1997). These historical markers have framed the development of professional and academic research in the field of childhood studies and culminating in defining the 20th century as "the century of the child." The historical development of childhood outlined by Aries (1962) has been subject to intense scrutiny by several social historians. These critiques have stimulated a wider understanding of childhood which produces diverse perspectives rather than common perspectives of childhood over time (Heywood, 2001; Pollock, 1983; Pufall & Unsworth, 2004).

In a similar vein, the history of childhood in relation to Black children has particular relevance in marking the social status of Black children and their identities in contemporary society. In many respects these historical markers rupture the constituents of an idealized childhood and produce multiple discontinuities in the nature and experience of childhood. Black children have experienced a unique and different kind of childhood, situated exclusively within the context of formal and legitimized enslavement from the 17th century to the middle of the 19th century, and of on-going marginalization, sometimes extreme and in other cases just barely perceptible well into the 21st century.

Enslavement by its very nature constituted a form of extreme child cruelty. Unfortunately, however, very little is known about the lives of Black children who were enslaved. The narratives available are mostly adult recollections which give shocking glimpses of terror, the witnessing of horrific incidents of cruelty and barbarism at an early age (King, 1995). The legacy of enslavement and its impact upon social welfare in the US has been well documented (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Gutman, 1976; McRoy, 1990). DuBois (1956) reported on the peculiar ways in which the institution of enslavement provided minimal levels of board and housing for Black people including Black children (however, exclusively in the interests of slave owners). These criteria established patterns of diswelfare, segregation and exclusion culminating in the differential treatment of Black children as formal child welfare policy and practice emerged.

Billingsley and Giovannoni (1972) suggest that slavery was the embodiment of the ideology that race encapsulated decisive factors about human worth. Thus enslavement of Black children became the baseline or social marker for hierarchical models of social welfare service provision. In this regard, Black children were positioned as the minimal benchmark for any dependant child. In other words, no dependent poor White child would receive less support than the enslaved Black child. These criteria allowed for the maintenance of a racial hierarchy codified through patterns of social relations.

The abolition of enslavement did not change the status of Black children in regard to social welfare but instead, the

institutional patterns of exclusion, segregation, and discrimination became entrenched over many decades. Civil rights legislation in the 1960s transformed social welfare policy and established access to programs for all without regard to race. However, as child welfare services developed there was a gradual shift towards the overrepresentation of Black children. Several commentators suggest that these shifts are related to the development of child welfare services compounded by public and professional concerns about child welfare generally (Courtney & Skyles, 2003; Smith & Devore, 2004; Stehno, 1982).

Billingsley and Giovannioni (1972) identify three factors that explain the increase in the number of Black children in the public welfare system during the 1950s and 1960s. The first factor was the migration of Black families from the South to the North. The second being the rediscovery of poverty and the greater surveillance of poor families; and the third being the civil rights movement and the concomitant federal legislation mandating integration. The shifts in child welfare from exclusion to over-inclusion have been the subject of intense debate and discussion among child welfare professionals and policy-makers for several decades (Courtney & Skyles 2003; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003). These discussions have sought to account for the over- representation of Black children in child welfare. For example, it is suggested that disproportionate representation is linked to differential treatment ascribed within the child welfare system. Other explanations cite high levels of poverty, unemployment and single motherhood as contributory factors. There are a series of complex relationships between these factors which require a sophisticated understanding of the interlocking nature of discrimination and oppression (Bernard, 2002).

However, for the purposes of this article, the historical information about Black children concerning their relationship to child welfare provide indications of the ways in which welfare institutions and policies have been defined primarily largely by race, rather than by class or gender. Black children have been subjected to a particular conceptualization of childhood which has shaped and framed institutional neglect and the lack of responses to their needs. These considerations have

ongoing implications for contemporary social relations. For example, Black children were integrated into public welfare provision based upon an individualized, liberal, ethnocentric notion of children's welfare and well-being. In these institutional formulations, the focus is directed toward the needs of individual children largely divorced from their social contexts which not only disallows their collective identities, but also promotes their shared processes of exclusion, historical neglect, and differential treatment as irrelevant or non-consequential (Krieken, 1999). Thus, childhood as an integral part of society is shaped and prescribed by social forces which frame the "complex relations between children and institutions and the formal and informal hierarchies that influence children's lives" (Christensen & Prout, 2005, p.54).

Black children have a unique historical relationship with child welfare institutions to which their marginal position in society is firmly linked (Smith & Devore, 2004). Incorporating socio-historical factors in this analysis is essential to understanding the disparities in childhood experiences through modes of stratification and social hierarchies. Moreover, in considering any social group which is subordinated in the social order it is crucial to acknowledge the weight of the past bearing down on the group's social position and its ability to negotiate, improve, or transform (Mayall, 2002). Consequently, it is important to take seriously the impact of history in the longstanding racialized conceptualizations of child welfare institutions.

Bringing Race into Models of Childhood

Although the social category of gender has received considerable academic interest in childhood studies, as well as uncovering the gendered nature of social work practices in child welfare, the issues of race and social difference have received much less attention (Graham, in press; Scourfield, 2003). Established models of childhood have largely ignored these considerations as irrelevant or insignificant (Boushel, 2000; Chand, 2000; Williams, 1989). There has been scant attention paid to the key dimensions of social differentiation and the ways in which Black children experience childhood within the broader context of society. This neglect is largely

associated with the social concept of race which is an unsettling issue in the public discourse and more specifically in childhood studies where a color blind approach has been adopted as a popular way to deny or avoid recognition that any race privilege exists. These attempts to present a 'raceless' society fail to acknowledge that this social belief is afforded only to the majority society (Dei, 1999a; Graham & Robinson, 2004).

The denial of race as a social relational concept has appeared in social work literature in recent years, through the intense focus on its meanings and the problems in relation to social theory (see O'Hagan, 2001). These debates and discussions have sometimes denied the importance of race and the subsequent discrimination as a function of denial through engaging in semantics and over theorizing. As Dei (1999a) explains "race is more than a theoretical concept. It is also an idea that governs social relations . . . race hierarchies shape and/or demarcate our schools, communities, workplaces, and social practices and lived experiences" (p. 24). This discussion recognizes the shifting nature of identities and the different ways of being 'Black' in an era of "difference" but we insist that social relations are raced, gendered and classed. This means race, gender, and class are not simply identities but sites of power and difference (Dei, 1999b). Other authors have referred to the interlocking nature of oppression and the ways in which the trilogy of race, gender, and class are articulated in various contexts and situations (Dei, 1999a; Hill-Collins, 1991). However, race can also be an entry point for relational aspects of difference and in this context, Essed (1991) provides an account of everyday racism which emphasizes the processes through which racism is experienced in daily encounters. These processes of racism can operate in gendered ways which require a complex reading of the interlocking nature of oppression and power relations in the wider society.

Drawing upon a postmodern frame, social models of childhood tend to assign privilege to the social construction of identities, rather than to issues of power in racialized contexts. However, as Scourfield, Evans, Shah, and Beynon (2005) concede "identities are being negotiated in a clearly racialised context" (p. 222). In light of these concerns about the social character of childhoods, there is a pressing need to openly

acknowledge the differential position of Black children in the broader social and political aspects that inform their lives. These concerns allow for space to give voice and agency to diverse accounts of childhood experiences.

The histories of Black children in child welfare reveal patterns of exclusion, neglect, segregation, and social constructions of 'otherness.' These patterns are subject to various contexts and situations which continue to have an important influence upon the character and quality of the childhood experiences of Black children (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Graham, 2002; Smith & Devore, 2004). This means that various social mechanisms often marginalize Black children and as a consequence of these experiences, Black children are silenced and excluded from the few opportunities to speak, to be heard and to participate in decision-making processes. Giving voice to these diverse childhood experiences can elicit new questions and lines of inquiry to reveal useful practice approaches. These concerns are particularly relevant in child welfare practices because Black children are over represented in child welfare institutions and often find themselves in stressful circumstances where they struggle to find opportunities to develop competence and confidence (Smith & Devore, 2004). Consequently, rather than being able to articulate their specific circumstances, Black children's social experiences are mediated through their differential positioning in relation to race, gender and class (Dei, 1999a). These social markers characterize their realities and define the context for social relations.

While it appears that children's agency and their differential positioning in relation to society has received some attention in recent years, these considerations have attracted new research agendas in connection with social institutions. These frames of reference seek to uncover insights into complex power relations between black children and institutions in society's social arrangements which are often inscribed by formal and informal hierarchies (Christensen & Prout, 2005). In the context of schooling, this literature presents an analysis which explores the role of educational institutions in producing and reproducing racial, gender, and class-based inequalities in society (Dei, 2000; Gillborn, 2004; Graham & Robinson, 2004). These research agendas include giving voice to young Black

people by illuminating the everyday experiences that frame their social context. There is an expectation that the narratives of Black children will reflect their experience in the broader social context and has critical effect upon their subjective experiences. For example, Dei (2000) suggests in his research into race and schooling that some young people have a sophisticated understanding of social difference and the ways in which powerful stereotypes frame and sometimes limit their educational experiences and opportunities. These insights give voice to the experiences of discrimination and the realities of power which once acknowledged allow for the revitalization of the processes in which education facilitates the development of tangible equity and opportunities.

Child Centered Approaches – Implications for Practice

In the social work context, applying the social child perspective presents a unique opportunity to incorporate the differential positioning of Black children in the wider society resulting in more inclusive theoretical perspectives and approaches to practice. These multiple lived experiences can provide fresh insights into what it means to be a Black child in societies where adverse power relations based on race, gender and class are etched into everyday experiences. We place emphasis upon the social category of race because this form of inequality has been accorded marginal significance in mainstream paradigms of childhood.

Many authors share the view that Black children live in a society that not only devalues their personhood, but Black children are also subjected to overt and covert experiences of racism and discrimination (Bernard, 2002; Courtney & Skyles 2003; Graham, in press; Graham, 2004). Following these concerns, it is clear that there is a need for a model of childhood which draws attention to their agency, social competences and diversity among children for child welfare practice. Another related but different point is that children in out-of-home placements are by definition at a disadvantage and in most cases their life chances have already been limited by factors outside their control. A key issue for child welfare practitioners must

be to understand patterns of disadvantage in the wider society as well as the ways in which children are sometimes discriminated against by the very services that have been organized to protect their best interests.

In applying a social model of childhood to child welfare practice, we have identified the key areas where useful professional knowledge can be drawn. The involvement of children and young people as active participants in decision-making activities has widely been recognized as an important trend in promoting children's rights. These developments question the wholly paternalistic approach to welfare, based upon the assumption that by involving parents or concerned adults the best interests of the child will automatically be served (McNeish & Newman 2002). One of the drives towards acceptance of children's participation has been increased understanding of children as active participants in the everyday world who are contributing to its events as equal to members of society. Several commentators have argued that children's participation is essential for a healthy society because participation promotes democratic processes as children become active members of their community (Lansdown, 1995; Sinclair, 2004). Even though children's participation holds potential risks; for example, imposing responsibilities onto children for which they are ill prepared, there are many benefits for welfare organizations as well as benefits for children themselves.

Cashmore (2002) outlines several reasons why children in public care should have their views taken seriously and treated with respect. First, the participation of children in decision-making activities has the potential to accord children both recognition and protection. This is particularly important for children who have been abused or neglected because rather than being victims of adult agendas, this approach would give them some sense of being active agents engaging with processes in relation to their own care generally. Second, the decision-making processes for children living at home and those in public care are quite different. For children living at home, decisions are generally made by one or two adults with whom the child has daily or regular contact. This is not the case for children living in public care where decisions often involve many adults, some of whom may not have even met the child

or know what is important to this child. Third, as children in public care experience fewer opportunities to participate in decision-making, they are often ill prepared for independent living and making decisions for themselves. Children learn about decision-making activities through support and guidance as well as practice by example.

Another important prerequisite for effective participation is providing good information to children and young people in order for them to make informed choices about services or decisions about their lives. A social model of childhood helps to modify professional knowledge which tends to view children as passive recipients or as adults in the making, lacking social competence. From this perspective, children are socially competent in different ways and opportunities for genuine participation involves a two way process built upon trust developed over periods of time which allows children to properly understand the issues and to take part in their own care. In child welfare there has been some caution or even reluctance to involve children wholeheartedly in the decision-making processes that affect their lives because caseworkers sometimes interpret involving children in decision-making as allowing them to get their own way. As Cashmore (2002) maintains, children 'are not seeking self-determination or to control the decision-making; they do, however, want to be informed and involved in the process. They want to "have a say" rather than "their own way" (p. 845). '

What would we know if we applied our proposed child centered approach to practice with Black children? We suggest that there might be no immediately discernable outcomes, yet in the longer term there would be a qualitative difference in children's experiences of public care. Black children would be less likely to feel alienated from decision-making processes and instead have a sense of active participation in the decisions made about their lives. There is some evidence that suggests children are more stable in out-of-home placements where the child is consulted and their views taken into account. This is because out- of-home placements are likely to be more appropriate and acceptable to children if they have had a real role in the decision-making process regarding a specific placement (Cashmore, 2002; Lindsay, 1995). Equally

important, giving voice to Black children can be empowering in the context of societal racism where their views and perspectives are often marginalized or ignored. This understanding can enhance a child's perception that they are important and what they have to say matters to the adults involved in their care.

Professional knowledge about children in public care largely stems from developmental models which tend to focus upon pathology specifically, 'problem' children. Sandbaek (1999) believes that this orientation towards children is biased because it does not include knowledge from children themselves about their lives which, in turn can cast light on their social achievements, competence and important people in their life. Moreover, there is little attention given to how children perceive the welfare services they receive. Some of these gaps in our professional knowledge are addressed by Sandbaek (1999) and premised upon sociological models of childhood. This research takes a participatory approach by engaging children in a deeper understanding of their interests, successes and important persons in their lives. By integrating this method into practice, children are perceived as active agents and are encouraged 'to have a say' through active participation in decision-making activities.

Conclusion

The general aim of this article has been to explore the marginalized position of Black children and their unique historical relationship with child welfare. Another aim has been to apply social models of childhood to sketch out a framework for social work practice with Black children. By providing opportunities for children to voice their experiences of everyday lives, this approach can assist to shift emphasis away from the aggregate problems of children and grasp a deeper understanding of individual everyday lives. This is particularly important for children from socially stigmatized groups who are subject to majority representations and stereotypes in the wider society. We maintain that by integrating the lived experiences of Black children from their vantage point in the decision-making process can help to shift emphasis away from

deficit models of 'problem' children to a deeper understanding of the social achievements and competencies of Black children. This approach can strengthen positive elements of their lives as well as help raise self esteem.

The trends towards greater participation of children in the decisions that affect them have gathered pace in recent years. These important developments have begun to direct attention to the minority group status of children in society and raise concerns about the need to give children a voice in key areas of public policy and service provision (Mayall, 2002; Thomas & O'Kane, 2000). These sociological models of childhood have generated research agendas that seem to respect children's competence and value their views and perspectives. Rather than children's competence being considered in comparison to adults' competence, children are perceived as being socially competent in different ways. Further, as outlined above, these new conceptualizations have significant implications for Black children.

Social work has an important role to play in facilitating children's active participation and in reframing direct practice with children, specifically by raising their profile and status. This requires a re-conceptualization of our thinking about children to widen our professional knowledge. The social child perspective offers research agendas that bring the voice of children to the center of professional knowledge as a source of data to better understand children's needs and interests. By employing participatory approaches children can be empowered to provide their own accounts of their lives. This acknowledgement is a first step towards ensuring better outcomes and quality of life for children, and particularly in the long term ensuring better outcomes for Black children in the care of public child welfare agencies.

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