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A Model of Culture-Centered Child Welfare Practice

Oronde A. Miller and Rebecca Jones Gaston

This article presents a framework for culture-centered child welfare practice, including child-family-system interactions, service provision, recruitment and retention of homes, and culturally responsive legislation. There should be no one-size-fits-all approach to child welfare practice. In a diverse society, child welfare practice must be responsive to the particularities of various cultures. A culture-centered framework allows for a holistic system of child permanence, with consideration of a child's mental, physical, and emotional growth. This framework cherishes the distinctiveness of America's cultures.

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Approximately 281,000 children entered foster care during fiscal year (FY) 1999. Of these children, approximately 42% were white, 27% were African American, 16% were Hispanic, 11% were of unknown race or ethnicity, 2% were Alaska Native/American Indian, and 2% were Asian/Pacific Islander. Children of color account for about 35% of the nation's total child population, but they account for at least 47% of the children who entered foster care during FY 1999. Children of color are greatly overrepresented among children entering the foster care system, whereas white children could be considered greatly underrepresented. The largest disproportion was in African American children, accounting for just 15% of the total child population, but 27% of the children entering foster care during FY 1999 (Children's Bureau, 2002).

This disproportionality is, to a great extent, caused by the cultural arrogance of the American child welfare system. Dorothy Roberts (2002) argued that child welfare professionals continue to embrace "stereotypes about Black parental unfitnes" (p. 229) and use these stereotypes as the basis for decisionmaking. In their analysis of African American children in America's child welfare system, Billingsley and Giovannoni (1972) similarly argued:

The system of child welfare in this country is failing Black children. It is our thesis that the failure is a manifest result of racism; that racism has pervaded the development of the system of services; and that racism persists in its present operation. (p. 3)

Many of the issues addressed in this statement continue to permeate the child welfare profession today. The current dialogue surrounding cultural inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence is largely a continuation of the earlier dialogue.

Culture, Worldview, and Universalism

Researchers have argued, increasingly, that culture should play a greater role in child welfare practice. This call is evident in the

demand for culturally responsive social work practice, cultural sensitivity training, cultural competence, and the like. Interestingly, the absence of culture as a consideration in child welfare practice is not the problem. Culture has always been a consideration. The problem is that the culture at the center of the discussion has been, almost exclusively, European.

America's child welfare system has its cultural roots in the European worldview. At least three factors, rooted in Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideas, have laid the philosophical foundation for the American child welfare system (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). The first factor was the conviction among Anglo-Saxon colonists that poverty, as an indicator of deficient character, was evidence of laziness and immorality. Thus, an inherent assumption is that causes of poverty lie within the person, not society.

The second factor was related to the colonists' commitment to religious autonomy. They held a firm belief that each religious group had the right to pursue its ideals without intervention from the government. Thus, religious groups committed themselves to raising children according to their own cultural values, giving way to a private, religion-based child welfare system with little government involvement.

The third factor informing the philosophical foundation of American child welfare was the insistence that all children conform to Anglo-Saxon cultural developmental standards. Those who did not measure up were placed in out-of-home care for remediation (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972).

These inherent assumptions continue to inform child welfare practice today. Although many children in the system are not Anglo-Saxon, workers use the same standards to assess all children and families. These values are not universal. Space does not allow for a full discussion of the worldviews paradigm, but aspects of the African worldview highlight the potential for the two cultural groups to hold opposed philosophical orientations toward life. We must look closely at the assumptions of cultural universality and cultural competence in this light.

The African worldview is rooted in the philosophical assumptions derived from the classical African civilizations of Kemet (Egypt), Nubia, and Kush (Graham, 1999). As a philosophical framework, the African worldview is shaped by, and informs, the epistemological (ways of knowing), cosmological (origin and structure of the universe), axiological (values and preferences within a culture), and ontological (essence of things) assumptions of African people. The core philosophical principles of the African worldview include: (a) a fundamental belief in the spiritual nature of human-beingness; (b) a fundamental belief in the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things, living and non-living; and (c) a historical reliance on a collective/communal orientation among people (Graham, 1999; Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 1985; Schiele, 1997). The classical African civilizations provided the basis for the African worldview, and these fundamental values continue to be shared and cultivated by African people throughout the diaspora, cultural transformations notwithstanding (Diop, 1978; Kambon, 1992, 1998; Richards, 1980).

Researchers argue that American child welfare practice fails to acknowledge the essential human-beingness of African American children, families, and communities (Ani, 1994; Graham, 1999; Kambon, 1992, 1998; Schiele, 1996, 1997). Schiele (1997) highlighted problems in the European social work/child welfare paradigm. Foremost is that the profession views "the individual as a sort of isolated, autonomous entity" (p. 802). Likewise, a preoccupation exists with "material expressions of reality that underscore sensory perception as the exclusive or primary means of determining whether something exists" (p. 802). This materialistic focus downplays the significance of spirituality and spiritual phenomena as reliable modes of understanding and/or as an appropriate means of engaging reality. Within such a universal materialistic paradigm, the fullness of the human experience cannot be captured. With this paradigm at the center of child welfare discourse, European views will continue to be the standard, with the cultural other assessed as deviant and deficient (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Hill, 1977, 1998; Lawrence-Webb, 1997).

Cultural Competence and Cultural Centeredness

The social work literature has discussed cultural competence at length. Researchers have offered several definitions and conceptual frameworks to clarify and expand the understanding of cultural competence. Poole (1998) asserted:

Culturally competent professionals recognize similarities and differences in the values, norms, customs, history, and institutions of groups of people that vary by ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. They recognize sources of comfort and discomfort between themselves and clients of similar or different cultural backgrounds. They understand the impact of discrimination, oppression, and stereotyping on practice. They recognize their own biases toward or against certain cultural groups. (p. 164)

Poole (1998) explored the kinds of qualities that a culturally competent person should possess, describing an attentive, understanding, perceptive, and knowledgeable person. Poole asserted that social services professionals must work closely with clients' families and support networks, and employ treatment modalities that are most congruent with the clients' cultural backgrounds.

Dana and Behn (1992) also offered a definition of *cultural competence*. Cultural competence "includes an ability to provide services that are perceived as legitimate for problems experienced by culturally diverse persons" (p. 221). What is important is that this conception of cultural competence not only refers to one's ability to understand the experiences of a culture, it also relates to one's ability to provide meaningful assistance in accomplishing what the other person views as important.

McWhorter (1997) offered a particularly useful discussion of cultural competence. She compelled workers to do a minimum of three things: (1) fundamentally reorient themselves as necessary to accept that the European worldview is not superior to any other people's, (2) critically reevaluate their commitment to the European cultural pillars of objectivity and neutrality in so-

cial welfare practice, and (3) commit themselves to the continuous journey of cultural growth and understanding. Cultural competence is not useful insofar as changing one's awareness and understanding per se. It must be fundamentally connected to a process of reorientation and cultural growth and with the empowerment of the cultural other on their own terms. This is indispensable to the process of cultural centering.

The values and belief systems of a community must be at the core of that community's child welfare practice. The goal of cultural centeredness is for a person to be centered within the community's worldview to create solutions from the cultural substance of that community. This process is continuous and involves the transformation of one's entire person, not just an activity to be engaged in while working within a community. This may prove to be key for child welfare practice in general. A fundamental assumption of this framework is that necessary wisdom resides within the collective cultural experiences of the community.

A Four-Tiered Framework

This model presents a framework for child welfare practice with respect to child welfare legislation and policy, child-family-system interactions, child-family service provision, and recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families. The researchers gleaned some ideas from conversations with four members of the Advisory Council for the National Center on Permanency for African American Children in Washington, DC. The strategies and ideas presented have proven effective for child welfare practitioners in African American communities. These strategies are responsive to the salient cultural values of African Americans, primarily the importance of the extended family, the roles of faith and religion in the African American community, the communal ethic within the African American community, a strong work ethic, and a reliance on the African American self-help tradition. These are the values that have historically strengthened the African American

community (Hill, 1977, 1998; Jackson-White, Dozier, Oliver, & Gardner, 1997; Martin, E., & Martin, 1998; Martin, J., & Martin, 1995; Sudarkasa, 1988).

Culturally Responsive Legislation and Policy

It is imperative for child welfare agencies and organizations to thoroughly train their workers in relevant legislation and policy. Everyone involved in child welfare must remain aware of current issues affecting child welfare practice. It may be beneficial for child welfare workers, as well as children and families involved in child welfare, to be integrally involved in the ongoing development of child welfare legislation and policy.

Debate continues about whether child welfare advocates and practitioners should place more priority on children's rights versus parents' rights. This is not a reasonable debate, for neither is more important than the other. We have to strengthen capacity of families to care for their children, while simultaneously monitoring children's safety. As Roberts (2002) argued in *Shattered Bonds*:

The constitutional protection of parents' rights doesn't enforce parental domination over children, akin to the protection of owners' interests in controlling their property. It protects the function parents serve in training and socializing children, which in a free society is better left to families than to the state. (p. 227)

Galston (as cited in Roberts, 2002) argued that American courts, at times, have recognized the "'expressive interest' of parents in raising their children in a manner consistent with their understanding of what gives meaning and value to life" (p. 227). The courts, however, have demonstrated a limited willingness to exercise this flexibility when deciding cases involving minority families. These rights appear to be reserved for certain citizens (Roberts, 2002).

It is common for legislation and policy to follow standards of European culture. White, middle-class families' values were the

basis for standards and procedures concerning the assessment of potential foster and adoptive families. These standards became law through the passage of federal legislation. Researchers must critically analyze legislation and policy as they are developed. Every community must advocate for legislation and policy that reflects the cultural values of that community and responds to its evolving needs (Schiele, 2000).

Child-Family-System Interactions

Child welfare practitioners must be intimately familiar with the cultural dynamics of the community in which they work. This familiarity may include

- the strengths of a particular racial or ethnic group,
- the community's economic and political capacity,
- legal dynamics affecting the community,
- influential spiritual institutions within the community,
- the availability of safe and affordable housing,
- the potential and effectiveness of the community's educational institutions,
- employment or skill-development opportunities in the community,
- recreational and other life-enhancing activities in the community, and
- the state of health and wellness in the community.

Awareness of these dynamics will enhance a practitioner's ability to understand a person's or family's experiences.

Attitudes and Perceptions. Child welfare practitioners must understand and appreciate the attitudes and perceptions of the community toward the public child welfare agency, as well as community-based private agencies and organizations. The community may include the clergy, church congregations, civic organizations, community leaders, and business owners. Similarly, the practitioner must also be conscious of his or her own attitudes and

perceptions, whether formed through personal experience, indirect observation, or professional interaction.

Community Involvement. A factor that can greatly enhance the interaction of children, families, and child welfare practitioners is the involvement of each of these groups in the operational processes of the child welfare agency, including active participation in the ongoing planning, execution, and evaluation of agency programs and services. Additional participation might include representation on the agency's governing board, grievance committees, and other opportunities to shape the organization. Different levels of expertise and qualification are necessary to perform certain functions. The central idea is that an organization must demonstrate willingness to incorporate the views of the community in its organizational structure and activities.

Accessibility. The hours of an organization's operation must be flexible and responsive to the needs of the families being served. The same holds true for the accessibility of the child welfare worker. The physical location of the organization is important. It is helpful to have offices easily accessible by automobile as well as public transportation. The physical characteristics of the location itself are also important. The exterior and interior of the facilities should be inviting, warm, comfortable, and show a fundamental sense of cultural connection.

Communication. Organizations should have clear guidelines about communication with families, including how often workers should speak with or visit families, how workers should engage families, and how and where meetings should be conducted. Another consideration is food. Some organizations do not have any meetings without food, especially when guests are expected. This is a natural extension of the traditional African communal ethic. All occasions when people come together are occasions for celebration. A commonly expressed concern about the presence of food at meetings is that it interferes with the conduct of busi-

ness. Within the African cultural tradition, however, food and meals enhance the meeting by encouraging interaction and strengthening relationships.

Child-Family Service Provisions

Child welfare practitioners must understand historical patterns and shifts within cultural communities. Workers need to know what influences have shaped the community over time, as this understanding helps identify the causes of a community's present state of affairs. This understanding will likely shed light on a given family's history as well. Dynamics to consider when analyzing the cultural group's history may include the role of spiritual and other self-help institutions, the presence (or lack thereof) of recreational facilities, the presence of health care institutions, availability of general equivalency diploma and other adult education programs, employment opportunities, job training programs, public transportation, and housing availability (quality of housing, patterns of relocation, etc.).

Community Dynamics. An understanding of the evolving dynamics of a given community will enable social workers to assess community resources and families to access these resources. In addition, social workers will be better prepared to articulate the multiplicity of evolving influences on a family's ability to function. A clearer understanding of an individual's or family's present circumstances will create a context for identifying services that might benefit the individual or family.

Historical Perspective. It is important to know the kinds of intervention efforts, generally and specifically, that have been attempted with individuals or families within a community, as well as their effectiveness. This may assist social workers in assessing what approach might be most appropriate. For example, it has been suggested that African Americans are less likely than Euro-

pean Americans to see a professionally trained psychologist or psychiatrist for assistance with emotional problems. African Americans are more likely to speak with their pastor, other close friends, or family. It might prove beneficial to identify the reasons for a community's preferences, as well as organizations that are responsive to these preferences and have proven effective with such groups. Lessons can be learned from these organizations, incorporating their experiences to meet the needs of other organizations.

Intended Outcomes. The intended outcome of intervention in the African American community cannot be an individual case-by-case phenomenon. The intervention must be concerned with the holistic empowerment of the child, family, and community. The person exists within a context. The intervention must address the person within the larger context to be effective.

Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Homes

African American families do take care of their children. Moreover, there are hundreds of thousands of African American families available to care for children currently in foster care (Hill, 1977, 1998). Agencies must be committed to finding the families.

Recruitment Is Retention. Workers engaged in recruiting must recognize that initial impressions last. Moreover, the way potential foster and adoptive parents are treated while being recruited can largely determine the success or failure of a recruitment effort. The best recruiters are current foster and adoptive families. When employing or assigning a recruiter, organizations should choose a person who can stay the course. Consistency is very important in developing and nurturing relationships and following up with potential families.

Family Development. An effective approach is to pursue a process of family development, as opposed to family assessment.

Many families may be appropriate to care for children currently in foster care, but they may need some form of support and assistance. When possible, it may prove beneficial to provide that assistance. The goal is to find families that would be appropriate to care for the children who need care. For example, a worker may be able to provide an allowance for an extra bed, or to have a professional cleaning of a potential family's house. When workers can do things to help approve a family, it is incumbent on the worker to do so. The goal is to find appropriate families to care for children, not perfect families. Similarly, it is important to employ a strengths-based approach to observing families (Hill, 1998). This approach prepares and enables workers to identify and build on the strengths of potential families.

Recruitment Strategies. Several recruitment strategies may prove successful. Television commercials work for general publicity, but they must be accurate and honest. Radio provides cheaper airtime than television with more frequent exposure, and newspaper ads, flyers, and other public relations materials can also be useful (i.e., engraved pens, bumper stickers, church fans). It may also prove useful to work with other community-based organizations, including the African American church, fraternities and sororities, and other African American civic organizations.

Transforming Consciousness

A recurring trend in professional reform movements is that someone will offer a particular framework, along with a series of steps or procedures to make it operational. This article argues that a paradigm shift needs to occur within child welfare. The culturally arrogant assumptions and values that undergird the child welfare profession have presented enduring challenges in child welfare practice. If workers are serious about achieving any success in appropriately serving the children and families in

America's child welfare system, they must fundamentally reorient themselves toward the cultural worldviews of the communities with whom they work.

Although no series of how-to steps will lead workers to this new attitude, this article provides a number of characteristics of organizations that have proven effective when working in African American communities. Some organizational activities and processes are also effective. These processes have as a goal the continued transformation of personal meaning systems, values, prejudices, and assumptions about particular children, families, and communities. These processes include: a recurring organizational assessment to allow individuals and organizations to appraise consistency between the organization's activities and its principles; organizational value system discourse—open dialogues for staff, children and families, and members of the community to talk about central issues to uncover personal and collective attitudes and prejudices; and community-building exercises for working through communication and relationship challenges to create healthy relationships within the organization and with the larger community.

If workers reconceptualize child welfare practice, they can begin to see their child welfare professional role as a healing agent. Child welfare professionals serve at least two functions: (1) to coordinate and provide any necessary and available services to maintain healthy families and communities; and (2) to serve as healing agents, when necessary and to the extent possible, for families and communities facing challenges. The aforementioned processes achieve clarity about the worldviews of the children, families, and communities served. The processes also provide an opportunity for child welfare professionals to work in cooperation with children and families toward healing and continued wellness. These processes can assist with cultural centering by deliberately placing the values, beliefs, and interests of the community at the forefront of child welfare work.

Conclusion

Humans are cultural beings. A certain cultural arrogance exists in the claim that any one person can provide culturally competent services with respect to clients in any given cultural group. The ability to become familiar with the cultural mores and traditions of a given cultural community is, at best, an ongoing developmental process that requires humility and unselfishness (McWhorter, 1997). One must try to center oneself in that culture and seek meaning within its context. In the four-tiered framework, workers use the cultural values and meanings within the African American community to find effective ways of engaging in child welfare practice with African American children and families. Not all of these ideas are transferable to every community, as meaning systems and values vary across cultural groups. This is the basis of the argument for conceptualizing a culture-centered child welfare practice model for different communities. The authors do not naively argue that the African American community is homogeneous; nonetheless, they are convinced that numerous cultural continuities exist.

An African proverb states, "He who upsets a thing should know how to rearrange it." Now, the question many child welfare workers ask at the end of the day has become: "Have I done more good than harm?" As child welfare professionals, we must hold ourselves to a higher threshold of accountability. Disorder in so many families has been created, or at the very least exacerbated, by the American child welfare system. Workers' responsibility is to restore order to the chaos created by such intrusion. They must transform their consciousness to ask at the end of each day, "Have I restored order to the families disrupted by the system I represent? Have I held the system I represent accountable for restoring order to that which has been disturbed?" The experiences of children and families will be a living testament to their level of success. ♦

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