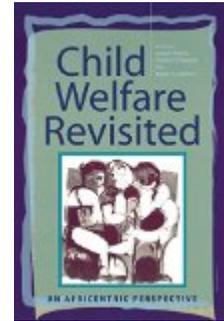


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joyce E. Everett, Sandra P. Chipingu, Bogart R. Leashore, eds. *Child Welfare Revisited: An Africentric Perspective*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. xi + 294 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-3463-3.

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Africentrism in Practice: The Case of Child Welfare

This book is a revised and expanded edition of the editors' earlier collection, *Child Welfare: An Africentric Perspective*. Published nearly a decade ago, the first edition explored the significance of race in social welfare policy and argued that by treating race as an "invisible" aspect of the child welfare system, practitioners risked misinterpreting the experiences of black children and their families. In that original work, as with this new collection, the authors were motivated in particular by concerns over the treatment (indeed, the overrepresentation) of black children in foster care and in other dimensions of the social welfare system, both public and private. More broadly, however, these two collections recommend something of a "cultural turn" in welfare policy. As Joyce Everett's introduction explains, the original collection sought to "call attention to racial differences and to elevate the importance of race in child welfare," especially by calling attention to the relevance of culture and history to the lives of African-American children (p. 1). Appearing in the wake of an often ill-informed public debate about black family "pathology"—a discourse that resulted in major revisions to welfare policy throughout the United States—the first edition explored the structural, racial disparities within the welfare system and offered concrete suggestions to ensure that children's needs are addressed in a culturally competent manner. *Child Welfare Revisited* offers an important and coherent follow-up to those initial conversations. In ways that are both concise and thorough, this collection examines the social and historical context of black families; the particular features that give black families their unique status; and

several ways in which an Africentric orientation can be useful in treating particular social problems facing black children.

There is a depressing historical continuity to the treatment of African-American children by social welfare agencies and the state. As Robert Hill points out in his chapter on institutional racism in the child welfare system, this much was evident to black social workers at least as early as 1930, when Ira Reid of the National Urban League documented the mistreatment, underrepresentation and exclusion of African Americans by welfare providers and health services throughout the nation. Black children were denied access to vital health services, excluded both systematically and informally from landmark social welfare legislation during the New Deal, and routed into the most punitive sectors of the juvenile justice system. Nearly every chapter in *Child Welfare Revisited* underscores the point that such inequities have been extended into our current historical moment.

However, as several authors are equally keen to point out, these conditions are abetted by a general ignorance and misunderstanding of the most basic dimensions of black community life and family structure. Because American social welfare systems excluded African Americans from the start, alternative practices and institutions developed to fill the void. Patterns of child care in black communities (described most famously in Carol Stack's 1975 work, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*) enabled the formation of collective family

identities that included both extended and “fictive” kin, all of whom contributed to the development of African-American children. Joyce Beckett and Nicole Lee observe, for instance, that patterns of kinship care in many African-American communities are not given due consideration, particularly in the adoption system, which does not recognize traditions of “informal adoption” that have developed over the course of many generations of black history. Even though evidence indicates that these historical patterns do indeed provide stable and safe environments for children, Beckett and Lee argue that current welfare policies “are insensitive to alternative family functioning patterns and are not congruent with a kinship care model” (p. 94). Such families typically are not eligible for food stamps, receive inadequate *Temporary Aid to Needed Families* (TANF) payments, and generally receive reduced and inferior services by comparison with white families.

While the articles in this book acknowledge the diversity of African-American families and refuse to promote an essentialist and ahistorical conception of black social life, they nevertheless insist—in chapters on kinship care, fatherhood, mental health services, and adoption, among others—that a specifically “Africentric” perspective would permit welfare providers and policymakers to move beyond the “deficit model” of black families and recognize ways that African-American experience offers a successful guide to addressing complex social problems. The “Africentric” world view is described by Beckett and Lee as one that promotes the view that “individuals and groups have strengths” that can be enhanced; that individual problems are often structural in origin; that “differences between individuals and groups are assumed and accepted”; and that collective identity supercedes the individual (p. 103). Other essays in the collection provide further, if occasionally vague, elaboration on themes and perspectives that each of the assembled authors regard as central to Africentrism. In their essay on substance abuse, homelessness and HIV/AIDS, Joshua Okundaye, Claudia Laurence-Webb and Pamela Thornton, note the “oneness of mind, body, and spirit”

revealed by African cosmology and philosophy (p. 203). Alma Carten and James Dumpson, in their contribution to the collection, indicate that Africentrism is rooted in a “holistic conception of the human condition that assumes the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all things” (p. 237).

Whether readers will quarrel with the Africentric grounding of the essays in this collection, the actual, practical recommendations offered by the authors seem eminently sensible to this reviewer (who it should be noted is a historian and not a social worker). With near unanimity, the authors insist that black kinship patterns need to be understood by “culturally competent” welfare providers; that neighborhood and community treatment models should replace those that focus merely on individuals and their immediate families; that social welfare agencies in black communities need to work in more collaborative ways by sharing resources and information; that social welfare agencies need to utilize African-American community institutions in their delivery of services; that both state and federal laws need to be amended in ways that grant legitimacy and recognition to the unique demographic and social conditions facing African Americans in the twenty-first century; and that in a politically conservative period marked by the retraction of the social safety net and constricted definitions of “family,” African-American traditions of self-help are all the more vital to the welfare of black children. Additionally, many authors acknowledge that more research needs to take place to discover which methods and practices work best.

Overall, this collection struck me as a strong and optimistic (if still suggestive) assessment of ways that culture and history can inform social welfare practice. Such a collection would seem especially valuable to practitioners but especially to students who are working toward degrees and careers in social work. In a profession that is still overwhelmingly white, *Child Welfare Revisited* should be a useful tool for provoking much-needed discussion about the enduring significance of race.

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