



## The meaning and making of childhood in the era of globalization: Challenges for social work

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### ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid in social work literature to the ways in which forces of globalization are shaping understandings of childhood, policies affecting children and youth, and the everyday lives of young people. The authors argue that this lack of attention is problematic given the growing evidence of the effects of globalization on the experiences of children and youth and the implications for social work practice with young people in the U.S. The authors explore the relationship between childhood and globalization, paying particular attention to the social construction of childhood and the logic and practices of neoliberalism. Five distinct yet interrelated processes through which globalizing forces affect children's lives are put forth and addressed: marketization, marginalization, medicalization, militarization, and mobilization. The authors argue that these processes shape not only the experiences of children and youth but also social work policies and practices. They offer diverse examples of ways in which these forces play out and consider the implications for contemporary social work practice.

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### 1. Introduction

Confronted with the urgency of 21st century political and economic crises regarding issues from health care and welfare, to employment, immigration, and social security, social workers in the U.S. are starting to turn their attention to questions of globalization and the implications for social work practice (Kilty & Segal, 2006; Polack, 2004). Some have addressed ways in which forces of globalization are connected to changes and challenges in domestic social policies and practices (Dominelli, 1999; Ife, 2000; Reisch, 1998, 2006). Others have engaged in debates over the risks and benefits of globalization and considered the relevance for social justice and human rights (Polack, 2004; Ferguson, Lavalette, & Whitmore, 2005; Midgley, 2004; Van Wormer, 2005). However, there has been little discussion within the profession of the ways in which forces of political and economic globalization shape our understandings of childhood, the policies affecting children and youth, or the everyday lives of young people. When attention is paid to children in the era of globalization, the focus is generally on children facing the ravages of war, famine, disease, and displacement outside U.S. borders. Social workers in the U.S. tend to see these concerns as distinct and separable from the everyday domestic struggles of the child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and mental health systems. This lack of

attention is problematic because there is growing evidence that forms and processes of globalization are insinuating themselves into the lives of children, transforming the experiences of children and youth, and reconfiguring the very meaning of childhood and nature of child-serving institutions in the process (Chin, 2003; Fass, 2007; Stephens, 1995). The effects of globalization on children can be felt both directly, through policies that have reduced the social safety net or excluded certain young people from institutions of childhood, and indirectly, through changing ideas about the dangers and dangerousness of youth.

In this article we make connections between childhood and globalization and provoke discussion about the everyday effects of globalization in children's lives. We challenge social workers in the U.S. to ask questions about the processes and consequences of globalization in relationship to their practice with children and youth and to consider why a critical literacy regarding globalization and neoliberalism might be relevant to practice. We draw on a burgeoning interdisciplinary social science literature that addresses conceptions of childhood, children's experiences, and intergenerational relationships in the context of globalization to explore several questions (Cole & Durham, 2007, 2008; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Fass, 2007; Stephens, 1995). What is the relationship between globalization and childhood? How are processes of globalization shaping not only the lives of children but also the very meanings of childhood? What do social workers in the U.S. need to understand about processes of globalization, the social construction of childhood, and the relationship between the two in

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order to have a context for assessing and addressing the implications for social work policy and practice with children in a global era? We begin by presenting our understanding of globalization and, in particular, we address how economic globalization has been shaped by the logic and practices of neoliberalism. We draw from contemporary social work scholarship on the ideology and policies of neoliberalism and the consequences in the lives of marginalized groups to make the case for why these issues matter for practice with children and youth (George, 2006; Ife, 2000; Karger, 2005; Kilty, 2006; Kingfisher, 2002; Reese, 2007; Reisch, 2006). We contend that a critical grasp of economic globalization and neoliberalism is key to understanding not only the contemporary context of practice with children and youth, but also the very ways in which childhood and youth are being constructed at this moment of deep economic uncertainty.

Second, we address childhood as a social construction, considering the dynamic nature of the meaning of childhood and experiences of children across space and time. This paradigm of childhood challenges the dominant view within social work of childhood as a universal experience marked by predictable stages of bio-psycho-social development. It informs thinking about the ways in which ideas about children and childhood as well as the realities of children's lives are configured within particular political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts and encourages research on the links between a changing global order and the lives of children and youth.

Finally, we put forth five distinct yet interrelated processes through which globalizing forces affect the everyday lives of children: 1) marketization, 2) marginalization, 3) medicalization, 4) militarization, and 5) mobilization. We contend that these processes not only shape the experiences of children, but also shape the ways in which we construct both our understandings of childhood and the institutions, policies, and practices directed at children and youth. We suggest that these processes and their consequences matter to social workers concerned with the most intimate aspects of children's lives and well-being – in their families, schools, neighborhoods, and playgrounds – as well as in systems and institutions of child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and mental health. We conclude with consideration of the implications of these processes for social work practice with children and youth in the U.S.

## 2. What is globalization and why does it matter in practice with children and youth?

Globalization is a complex and contested concept. In general, globalization refers to complicated transnational economic and political processes that have restructured alignments of nations and regions; promoted new flows, linkages, and disruptions of people, ideas, culture, and politics; and contributed to shifting patterns of migration, forms of labor, and relations of inequality (Appadurai, 2002; Cole & Durham, 2007; Giddens, 1999; Harvey, 1989; Hoogvelt, 1997). Some have framed globalization in terms of opportunities for technological advance, cross-border communication, and the exchange of ideas, people, and resources on a scale never before seen, resulting in an enhanced global consciousness and reconfiguration of a global society. Others frame discussions of globalization in terms of accelerating social and environmental degradation and rising rates of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and violence on a global scale (Friedman, 1999; Korten, 2001). Some see globalization as a distinctively new phase marked by fundamental social, cultural, political, and economic transformations and the compression of our experiences of, and relationship to, time and space (Appadurai, 2002; Giddens, 1999; Harvey, 1989). Thomas Friedman (1999), for example, defines globalization as “the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations, and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before ... [and] the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world” (pp.7–8). Others argue that we are merely witnessing the latest

manifestation of long-term social, political, and economic processes (Cooper, 2001). And yet others contend that we are experiencing a rapid globalization of the economy without a corresponding globalization of citizenship (Ife, 2000).

In seeking to understand globalization and the processes through which global forces infiltrate local contexts, a number of scholars have focused on neoliberalism as the driving ideology and political strategy of economic globalization (Piven & Cloward, 1997). For example, McMichael (2000) describes economic globalization in terms of integration on the basis of a project pursuing “market rule on a global scale” (p. 149). Neoliberalism is that market rule. The central tenet of neoliberalism is that human well-being is best advanced when individuals are free to apply their entrepreneurial skills and freedoms in a market economy (Harvey, 2005). This philosophy holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions and so seeks to extend the market into all arenas of social life (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism, as Cabezas, Reese, and Waller (2007), describe,

privileges the expansion of the “free” (without regulation and tariff) market and the global integration of economies. It proposes abolition of government intervention in economic matters and radical cutbacks in social services, including education, health care, housing, agricultural subsidies, and nutrition. (p. 6)

Neoliberalism is premised on the belief that private enterprise and individual initiative are the keys to the creation of wealth, the elimination of poverty, and the improvement in human welfare. Competition, among individuals, businesses, cities, or nations, is held to be a primary virtue. From a neoliberal perspective, many of the social institutions that have been central to social work – social insurance, welfare, public education, and social services – are economically and socially costly obstacles to maximizing economic performance and productivity (Ferguson et al., 2005; Reese, 2007). Deficiency, or deviance, is argued to be located in the individual, leading to the rise of other state institutions, such as the criminal justice system, to play a more prominent role in the control and regulation of social life (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberal ideas became widely accepted as “common sense” at the end of the millennium. Most governments, either voluntarily or under pressure, embraced aspects of neoliberalism and changed policies to roll back taxes, reduce welfare spending, and deregulate labor markets (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal approaches to government have transformed the structure of social welfare institutions, encouraged the expansion of privatized alternatives, and raised new and challenging questions for social work practice (Polack, 2004; Ferguson et al., 2005). In recent years, a number of social work scholars have engaged in sustained exploration of the linkage between globalization and neoliberalism and the consequences for vulnerable groups (Ferguson et al., 2005; Ife, 2000; Kilty & Segal, 2006; Reese, 2007). They have explored neoliberalism in relation to poverty, welfare reform, immigration, health policy, labor, the environment, racism, and the exploitation of women. They have explored the consequences of the privatization of collective welfare; the human toll of the outsourcing of production; and the trends toward private contracting in educational, correctional, and social welfare arenas (Jurik, 2006; Reese, 2007; Reisch, 2006; Schram, 2006; Sclar, 2000).

In short, global processes are infiltrating local contexts in different ways, with varying effects, but their force is felt nonetheless. While globalization does offer the potential for new perspectives, relationships, power arrangements, and opportunities for social and economic development, its organization around neoliberal ideology has produced a set of processes that favor privatization of services, deregulation of markets, disinvestment in social welfare, and primacy of individual as opposed to collective responsibility. Although scholars have examined the effects of these processes on a number of domains

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