

# African American and white child welfare workers' attitudes towards policies involving race and sexual orientation<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This article reports findings from a study of attitudes of 259 African American and White child welfare workers. They were asked about their views of the role of race in child welfare decisions and about the appropriateness of placement of children with gay and lesbian and single foster/adoptive parents. African American child welfare workers were more likely than White workers to believe that race should be considered both in general and in placement decisions. Both African American and White conservative leaning workers are more likely to disagree with the placement of children in gay/lesbian households. African American workers were more likely to agree with a placement of children in a single parent family.

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## 1. Introduction

The child welfare system in the United States is intended to address the needs of dependent, maltreated, and disadvantaged children (e.g. Kadushin & Martin, 1988; Lindsey, 2004; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & Plotnick, 2000). How the needs of these children have been pursued has varied considerably over the history of the child welfare system (e.g. Kadushin & Martin, 1988; Lindsey, 2004; Myers, 2004; Pople & Vechiola, 2007). Presently, their needs are conceptualized as child safety, permanency, and wellbeing (e.g. Faller, Meezan, Mendez, Tropman, & Vandervort, 2004; Fanshel, 1957; General Accounting Office, 2004). Although current Federal statutes consider child safety as primary, they also dictate that permanency should be in the most homelike environment in which the child can be maintained because such an environment will maximize child wellbeing and development (Crosson-Tower, 2007).

The diverse families of today present complex challenges to the child welfare system, prompting numerous criticisms about which populations receive services, the nature of services for different child welfare populations, and what types of homes are deemed appropriate to promote child wellbeing. These issues are politically sensitive, ideologically debatable,

<sup>☆</sup> These correlations are based only on White and African American respondents since they represent 87% of the sample.

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and academically contested (Fanshel, 1957; Grow & Shapiro, 1974, 1976; Hollingsworth, 1998, 2000). Specifically, the literature posits that children and families of color have historically received second class services from the child welfare system (Billingsley, & Gionannoni, 1972; Herman, 2005; Kadushin & Martin, 1988; Roberts, 2002a,b). The irony of this situation is that African American children and families are not only disproportionately involved in the child welfare system (Herman; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005), despite the fact that they are no more likely than white families to maltreat their children (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1985), but children of color are dramatically over-represented in out-of-home placements (Children's Defense Fund, 1985, 2006; Derezotes & Poertner, 2001; Green, 2002; Roberts, 2002a,b). Moreover, what are considered appropriate foster and adoptive placements has varied over time, with middle class, married parent families regarded as the most desirable. Only recently have single and LGBT parents been considered as potential placements (Downs & James, 2006).

In this study, we examine child welfare workers' views about the role of race in placement and other child welfare decisions, their views about sexual orientation—specifically whether a child should be placed with a gay/lesbian foster/adoptive parent, and their attitudes about single parent status—whether single foster/adoptive parent homes are good placements for children.

### 1.1. Race and child welfare services

The sheer number of children needing to be in safe and permanent homes that foster their well-being is very high. Approximately 523,000 children currently are in foster care in the United States, with 103,460 being eligible for adoption (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Available statistics consistently indicate that children of color are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, with the single largest group of children waiting adoption being African American (Children's Defense Fund, 1978; 1985, 2006). In 2003, according to the *Department of Health and Human Services*, 40% of foster children waiting adoption were African American (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Barth (1997) found that African American children were one fifth as likely as Caucasian children and half as likely as Latino children to be adopted. Similar results were reported by the *Child Welfare League of America* nearly a decade earlier (Child Welfare League of America, 1988). The reasons cited for both the over-representation of children of color and the failure to find permanent placements for them are numerous and varied, and passionately debated, with much of the conversation focusing on the pros and cons of same-race policies and placements (Derezotes & Poertner, 2001; Fanshel, 1972; Gilles & Kroll, 1991; Grow & Shapiro, 1974, 1976; Hollingsworth, 1998; Roberts, 2002a,b). This debate persists despite the fact that statutorily, the passage of the *Multiethnic Placement Act* of 1994 (P.L. 103–382) and its subsequent modifications in 1996 with the *Interethnic Placement Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996* (P.L. 104–188) essentially removed the issue of race from the adoption decision-making process (McRoy & Grape, 1999).

In contrast is the history of placement of Native American children (Fanshel, 1972). Although Native American children were the first group to be transracially placed, they are presently protected statutorily from such placements by the *Indian Child Welfare Act* of 1978. Among other provisions, this act gives tribes exclusive jurisdiction over “Indian Children”<sup>1</sup> whose domicile is on the reservation and tribes the right to intervene or to seek transfer of jurisdiction over those children who are not domiciled on the reservation.

The existence of Federal statutes that intend to address and resolve the role of race in placement (albeit with different guidelines for Native children and other children of color)<sup>2</sup> has not silenced the debate over “what to do” with children of color needing substitute care and the insufficient numbers of foster/adoptive homes, in general, and foster/adoptive parents of color, in particular (Rothman, 2005; Simon & Roorda, 2000). One side of the debate is supportive of transracial placements, arguing that any home is better than a shelter or an institution and that the research shows good outcomes for transracial placements (Grow & Shapiro, 1974, 1976; Simon & Alstein, 1996; Vroegh, 1997). On the other side of the debate, the arguments are that: 1) the lack of availability, particularly of African American homes, represents a deficiency in the child welfare system; and 2) White parents cannot provide adequately for African American children

<sup>1</sup> The term, “Indian child” refers to children who are enrolled or eligible for enrollment in a Federally Recognized Native American or Alaskan Native tribe.

<sup>2</sup> In amending the Multiethnic Placement Act in 1996, Congress maintained its intention that this statute would have no impact on cases coming under the purview of the Indian Child Welfare Act. 42 U.S.C. § 1996b provides “This subsection shall not be construed to affect the application of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978.”

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