

African American and white child welfare workers' attitudes towards policies involving race and sexual orientation[☆]

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Received 5 August 2007; received in revised form 17 September 2007; accepted 14 November 2007

Available online 9 January 2008

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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Keywords: Child welfare; Racial differences; Child welfare workforce

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 & Vecchiola, 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,

[☆] 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”¹ 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)² 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

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

² 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.”

because these children require parents who really understand racism and can help the children negotiate a racist society and develop a positive self concept (Hollingsworth, 1998; National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972, 1994).

Numerous studies and reports have documented the “preferred” characteristics of adoptive children as well as the characteristics of adoptive parents across the various potential configurations such as same race or “inracial”, transracial, and international placements (see, for example, Brooks & James, 2003; Brooks, James, & Barth, 2002; Chandra, Joyce, Maza, & Bachrach, 1999; Smith-McKeever, 2005). The majority of adoptive parents appear to have strong preferences for a same race child. According to the *National Survey of Family Growth* (NFSG) study, 51% of Caucasian women would prefer to adopt a Caucasian child, a proportion similar to that of African American women who would prefer an African American child (Chandra et al., 1999). Similar preference patterns have been reported by other researchers (e.g., Bausch & Serper, 1997; Brooks et al., 2002).

1.2. Single parent placements

With regard to one versus two parent status of foster/adoptive parents, historically only two parent families were licensed for foster care and adoption. As finding such families became increasingly difficult, agencies became more flexible and broadminded in whom they would license (e.g. Kadushin & Martin, 1988; Pecora et al., 2000). Many child welfare agencies now routinely license single parents. Presently, 28% of adoptive parents are single women and 3% are single men (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). In addition, Brooks and James (2003) report that single parents are more likely to adopt Black children, and adoptive parents of color tend to be single and older.

1.3. Sexual orientation of foster/adoptive parents

The picture with respect to sexual orientation is also fraught with politics and polemics. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) note that the research almost uniformly finds “lesbigay parents to be as competent and effective as heterosexual parents” and most importantly, the children do not differ in developmental outcomes (p. 160). Downs and James (2006) came to the same conclusion after a substantive review of the literature. Moreover, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) issued a position statement which declares that “Child Welfare League of America affirms that lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents are as well suited to raise children as their heterosexual counterparts” (Child Welfare League of America, 2006).

Brodzinsky, Patterson, and Vaziri (2002) report in their national survey of adoption agencies, that 63% of agency directors indicated that they accept applications from lesbian and gay individuals. Similarly, Matthews and Cramer (2006) report on a study conducted by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in which they found that “approximately 60% of adoption agencies accept applications from gays and lesbians, and about two in five agencies (39%) report having placed children with adoptive parents who they know are gay or lesbian” (p.322). Whether or not foster/adoption placements with gay/lesbian couples are increasing remains a question — and a possibility. Such a process may be reflected in the proportion of adoptive parents who were unmarried couples in 2003, 2% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). However, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services does not directly track the sexual orientation of adoptive parents.

Yet, several States have introduced or adopted legislation which restrict adoption and foster care placements to “households in which all adults are related by blood or marriage” (p. 160). Three states (Florida, Utah, and Mississippi) actually prohibit adoption by gay and lesbian parents (Matthews & Cramer, 2006). And in Arkansas, until July 2006, when the Arkansas Supreme Court struck down the regulation, the State prohibited any gay or lesbian person from providing foster care (Department of Human Services v Howard, 2006).

1.4. Research on the beliefs and attitudes of child welfare workers

Despite the pivotal role played by child welfare workers in placement and other case management decisions, Zell (2006) states that “studies examining child welfare caseworkers’ views are rare” (p. 87). With two notable exceptions, we were unable to find any empirical information about attitudes of child welfare workers on the issue of racial preference. Brooks and James (2003) note that “although the law prohibits adoption and other child welfare workers from basing placement decisions on race, it is possible (emphasis ours) that child welfare workers still consider it and emphasize inracial placements” (p. 466). They further noted that 32% of Caucasian parents who were willing to adopt a

Black child would have likely done so had they not been discouraged by the worker. Similarly, Fenster (2003,2004) conducted a national survey of the NASW membership on some issues related to transracial adoption. She found that African American social workers were less favorable toward transracial adoption than were White social workers. In another report based on the same sample, Fenster (2003) found differences based upon religious affiliation in adoption preferences. Catholic social workers were more in favor of transracial adoption than were non-Catholic workers. However, the majority of her study respondents had no experience working in adoption or foster care. Given the potential such views and affiliations could have on foster and adoptive placements, it is essential that we learn more about beliefs of child welfare workers in this regard.

Similar to beliefs about the “place” of race in the placement process among child welfare workers, attitudes of workers toward gay/lesbian placements remain an enigma. We found only two studies, one dealing with attitudes of adoption program directors and the other with child welfare workers beliefs. Brodzinsky and colleagues’ report (2002), described earlier, noted that public agency directors have more favorable views than private agency directors with regard to such a placement. Once again, religious affiliation emerged as a predicting factor. Directors from fundamentalist Christian agencies were less accepting than directors from other agencies. In a small study of child welfare workers, Brooks and Goldberg (2001) found them to be generally positive about placing children with gay/lesbian families, but the workers also believed that actual placements may depend on a given agency’s attitudes and informal practices. Berkman and Zinberg (1997) reported that in their national sample of NASW members, 10% were homophobic, and that religiosity was associated with homophobia. Thus, available studies suggest the potential importance of religiosity and attitudes towards gays and lesbians in the examination of worker opinions.

The minimal presence of the “worker” in research on placement preferences and other case management decisions is a curious phenomenon. By ignoring the worker, the literature assumes that policy *is* practice, which as reality tells us, is hardly ever the case (e.g., Kalichman, 1999; Zellman & Faller, 1996). When policy is translated to practice, the translator, in this instance the child welfare worker, has interpretive power or at the very least, “wiggle room.” And, when the interpretations intersect morality, religion and personal values, the nuanced actions that may occur in the context of personal interactions and in child welfare decision-making may indeed be a powerful tool as suggested by the work of Brooks and James (2003). As Zell (2006) notes, “ultimately child welfare caseworkers are responsible for implementing the policies and laws designed to provide children with protection and permanent living arrangements” (p.85). While the decisions parents make to adopt or provide foster care are very personal, the workers may find themselves in the midst of moral and ethical dilemmas, not to mention decisions with potentially weighty political implications. It is with these complex considerations in mind that we undertook the current exploratory study on worker attitudes and beliefs.

2. Methodology

The study respondents are comprised of 305 “newly hired” child welfare workers who were attending their initial training for their current positions in a Midwestern State between November 1, 2004 and May 15, 2006. Two hundred and thirty five (77.0%) respondents were “new” and “lateral transfer” workers hired by the Department of Human Services (DHS). The “new” workers are individuals who had no prior affiliation with DHS and were first time employees of the agency; they may, however, have worked in other human services settings prior to this time. The “lateral transfer” workers were current employees of DHS transferring to new positions in child welfare; they had worked previously in another position within DHS. For example, a protective services worker might be transferring to foster care, or an adult services worker might be transferring to children’s protective services. In addition, seventy (23.0%) respondents were workers taking positions in voluntary agencies that provide child welfare services under contract to DHS. For the study sample, we will use the generic term, “new workers,” since all study participants received an 8- or 4-week “new worker” training for their new positions, including the lateral transfers and voluntary agency child welfare positions.

The data reported here were collected by our project personnel at the end of each 4-or 8-week training program. All data were gathered in-person at the training location utilizing a self-administered questionnaire which was distributed by a project staff person to all trainees in attendance. During the course of the data collection period, fourteen training programs were held and worker attendance per program ranged from 7–65. Anonymity was assured and participation was voluntary. For 13 out of 20 data collection sessions, we had data on the number of attendees and the number who

Table 1
Correlations between dependent variables and item means

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Race/ethnicity are among the most important factors to consider in case planning (Mean=3.09, S.D.=1.11)	–	.27**	.29**	–.15**	.09	.32**
2. It is generally <i>not</i> advisable to place a child with a single foster or adoptive parent (Mean=2.65, S.D.=0.93)	–		.10	–.16*	.14*	.40**
3. It is important for children and families to have workers and counselors of their own race/ethnicity (Mean=2.02, S.D.=0.93)			–	–.12	.22**	.18**
4. Whether or not the race/ethnicity of the child matches that of the parents in foster care has little or nothing to do with how well a child adjusts (Mean=2.90, S.D.=1.11)				–	–.12*	–.32**
5. To place a child with a gay or lesbian couple is <i>not</i> in the best interest of the child (Mean=2.67, S.D.=1.29)					–	–.32**
6. It is very important to place children with families that are racially/ethnically similar (Mean=3.21, S.D.=1.06)						–

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$ **.

completed questionnaires³; for these 13 programs, the response rate was 93%. The total number of usable questionnaires was 305.

The study was introduced as follows:

“This study is being conducted by the University of _____ School of Social Work on the recruitment and retention of child welfare workers in the State of _____. This is part of a comprehensive longitudinal study focusing on the challenges, as well as the stresses and strains, experienced by child welfare workers as they go about the business of providing services to children and their families.”

2.1. Measures

Some precautionary comments are in order with regard to the variables employed in the study. The following six questions (statements), which serve as our primary dependent variables, were developed for the purpose of this study and do not constitute a scale or index. From an approximately 10 page questionnaire, covering a variety of workforce issues, administered to the respondents, the following relevant questions were used.

- Race/ethnicity are among the most important factors to consider in case planning
- It is generally *not* advisable to place a child with a single foster or adoptive parent
- It is important for children and families to have workers and counselors of their own race
- Whether or not the race/ethnicity of the child matches that of the parents in foster care has little or nothing to do with how well a child adjusts
- To place a child with a gay or lesbian couple is *not* in the best interest of the child
- It is very important to place children with families that are racially/ethnically similar

Responses to the items were obtained on a five-point Likert scale from “(1) Strongly Disagree” to “(5) Strongly Agree”, thus, higher scores would indicate greater agreement with each statement. Correlations between these questions (dependent variables) and the overall item means are presented in Table 1. By and large, while many of the inter-item correlations are statistically significant, the relationships are low to moderate, suggesting that these items address somewhat related but different dimensions. Factor analysis did not reveal any multi-item structures with acceptable factor loadings. We, therefore, proceeded to analyze the data treating each item as a discrete variable. At face

³ We decided we should collect data on response rate after data collection had started, and therefore, do not have the response rates from the first seven programs.

value, all of these items are politically charged, may stir up issues of cultural and racial sensitivity, and in addition, may evoke personal value conflicts as well as conflicts with religious and personal beliefs.

We also asked the question: “where would you place yourself on the scale below” — (1) Liberal to (7) Conservative, to get a reading on the workers’ world view (Tropman, 1987). In addition, we asked the question “how religious would you say you are”, (1) “very religious”, (2) “fairly religious”, (3) “not too religious” and (4) “not religious at all” in order to establish the extent of religiosity of an individual — a measure tapping self-perceptions (Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999). Together, these sets of items allow us to explore the potential contributions of ideology and religiosity in the decision process.

It is also important to reiterate the point that the data were collected at the *end* of the training program, one which among other things articulated the relevant legal criteria and DHS and federal policies around placement of children. Thus, if anything, the data should be biased or at least more likely to be in accordance with or influenced by official policy.

2.2. Study sample

Given the small number of workers of color who were non-African American, we restricted our comparisons to African American and White respondents, a total of 259 respondents. The characteristics of this study sample are presented in Table 2. More than three-quarters of the respondents are women. However, there are twice as many

Table 2
Sample demographics

	Total	White	African American	
Gender				
Male	53 (20.5%)	45 (24.3%)	8 (10.8%)	$\chi^2=5.931$
Female	206 (79.5%)	140 (75.7%)	66 (89.2%)	$p \leq .05$
Mean age	36.1 (S.D.=10.27)	35.9 (S.D.=10.30)	36.6 (S.D.=10.25)	ns
Highest degree				
BA/BS	132 (51.2%)	98 (53.3%)	34 (45.9%)	ns
BSW	28 (10.9%)	24 (13.0%)	4 (5.4%)	
MA/MS	23 (8.9%)	15 (8.2%)	8 (0.8%)	
MSW/DSW/Ph.D.	49 (19.0%)	29 (15.8%)	20 (27.0%)	
Other	26 (10.1%)	18 (9.8%)	8 (10.8%)	
Marital Status				
Never married	86 (33.3%)	52 (28.3%)	34 (45.9%)	$\chi^2=9.853$
Separated/divorced/widowed	43 (16.7%)	29 (15.8%)	14 (18.9%)	$p \leq .01$
Married/living with partner	129 (50.0%)	103 (56.0%)	26 (35.1%)	
Children				
Yes	144 (55.6%)	95 (51.4%)	49 (66.2%)	$\chi^2=4.731$
No	115 (44.4%)	90 (48.6%)	25 (33.8%)	$p \leq .05$
Family income				
$\leq 40,000$	57 (22.6%)	37 (20.3%)	20 (28.6%)	$\chi^2=11.265$
40,001–60,000	84 (33.3%)	54 (29.7%)	30 (42.9%)	$p \leq .01$
60,001–80,000	51 (20.2%)	45 (24.7%)	6 (8.6%)	
80,001 \geq	60 (23.8%)	46 (25.3%)	14 (20.0%)	
Religion				
Catholic	56 (21.8%)	56 (30.4%)	0 (0.0%)	$\chi^2=51.278$
Protestant	59 (23.0%)	46 (25.0%)	13 (17.8%)	$p \leq .0001$
Other	104 (40.5%)	51 (27.7%)	53 (72.6%)	
None	38 (14.8%)	31 (16.8%)	7 (9.6%)	
Job category*				
Adoption/foster care	120 (47.1%)	93 (50.3%)	27 (38.6%)	$\chi^2=9.432$
Protective services	105 (41.2%)	66 (35.7%)	39 (55.7%)	$p \leq .01$
Other	30 (11.8%)	26 (14.1%)	4 (5.7%)	

*A respondent was placed in adoption/foster care or protective services, if they reported that they spent 80% or more of their time in that category. All others were placed in the “Other” category.

Table 3
White-African American comparisons on race preferences

	Race	N	Mean	S.D.	Rank	U-score
Race/ethnicity are among the most important factors to consider in case planning	White	185	3.01	1.08	124.47	5822.50 *
	Black	74	3.30	1.18	143.82	
It is generally <i>not</i> advisable to place a child with a single foster or adoptive parent	White	185	2.53	0.90	120.83	5148.00 ***
	Black	74	2.96	0.96	152.93	
It is important for children and families to have workers and counselors of their own race	White	185	2.06	0.89	134.23	6062.00
	Black	74	1.92	1.03	119.42	
Whether or not the race/ethnicity of the child matches that of the parents in foster care has little or nothing to do with how well a child adjusts	White	185	2.95	1.05	133.95	6114.50
	Black	74	2.76	1.23	120.13	
To place a child with a gay or lesbian couple is <i>not</i> in the best interest of the child	White	185	2.53	1.23	122.72	5499.00 **
	Black	74	3.01	1.38	148.19	
It is very important to place children with families that are racially/ethnically similar	White	185	3.06	1.05	120.22	5035.00 ***
	Black	74	3.57	1.02	154.46	
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	Black	74	3.57	1.02	154.46	

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$ **.

*** $p \leq .001$.

White males as African American males in the sample. Over 50% of the workers have a non-social work Bachelors Degree. While 50% of the workers overall are married or living with a partner, significantly more African Americans have never been married. However, a significantly larger proportion of African American workers have children. Over twenty percent of the workers report annual family incomes exceeding \$80,000, but a disproportionately higher number of African American workers report family incomes in the lower income categories, presumably reflecting a single income household. While a little over twenty percent report that they are Catholic and another twenty percent Protestant, 40% indicate their religious affiliation as “other,” with a significant majority of these individuals being African American⁴. About equal proportions of workers are found in protective services and adoption/foster care services. Of interest, however, is the fact that there is disproportionate representation across the two service areas; more African Americans are in protective services and more Whites in adoption/foster care.

In addition, Whites (Mean rank = 100.43) report being less religious (“How religious would you say you are”) than African Americans (Mean rank = 139.06) ($U = 4630.50$, $p \leq .0001$). On the other hand, we did not find a statistically significant difference between African Americans and Whites on the liberal–conservative continuum, with both falling close to the midline on the continuum (3.54 and 3.49 respectively on a 7-point scale with 1 = liberal and 7 = conservative).

3. Results

In a first order analysis, we considered race of the worker as the primary factor. Table 3 presents data from a Mann–Whitney analysis which compared Whites with African Americans on each of the dependent variables. These analyses

⁴ Respondents often indicated their denomination, for example Baptist or Presbyterian, in response to this question.

Table 4
Regression on dependent variables

Predictors	Unstandardized coefficients	SE	B	P
<i>Race/ethnicity are among the most important factors to consider in case planning</i>				
Gender	-.16	.18	-.06	.39
Age	.01	.01	.01	.98
Race (White)	-.32	.17	-.13	.05
Social Work (social work)*	.08	.15	.03	.60
Children (yes)	-.01	.18	-.01	.97
Marital status (married)	.25	.16	.11	.10
Liberal–Conservative	-.05	.06	-.07	.35
Religiosity	-.10	.09	-.08	.26
$F=1.212, p \leq .29$ Adj- $R^2=.01$				
<i>It is generally not advisable to place a child with a single foster or adoptive parent</i>				
Gender	-.18	.15	-.08	.24
Age	.01	.01	.05	.51
Race (White)	-.44	.14	-.21	.002
Social Work (social work)*	.14	.13	.07	.26
Children (yes)	.08	.15	.04	.58
Marital status (married)	.07	.12	.04	.57
Liberal–Conservative	-.01	.05	-.02	.83
Religiosity	-.03	.07	-.03	.67
$F=1.813 p \leq .08$ Adj- $R^2=.03$				
<i>It is important for children and families to have workers and counselors of their own race/ethnicity</i>				
Gender	-.25	.15	-.11	.10
Age	-.02	.01	-.18	.02
Race (White)	.11	.14	.05	.42
Social Work (social work)*	.18	.13	.09	.15
Children (yes)	-.13	.15	-.07	.39
Marital status (married)	.04	.13	.02	.75
Liberal–Conservative	.13	.05	.19	.006
Religiosity	.01	.07	.01	.99
$F=2.588 p \leq .01$ Adj- $R^2=.05$				
<i>Whether or not the race/ethnicity of the child matches that of the parents in foster care has little or nothing to do with how well a child adjusts</i>				
Gender	-.16	.18	-.06	.39
Age	-.01	.01	-.09	.23
Race (White)	.18	.17	.08	.27
Social Work (social work)*	.06	.15	.03	.68
Children (yes)	-.06	.18	-.03	.72
Marital status (married)	-.10	.15	-.04	.53
Liberal–Conservative	-.13	.05	-.17	.01
Religiosity	.05	.09	.04	.55
$F=1.696 p \leq .10$ Adj- $R^2=.02$				
<i>To place a child with a gay or lesbian couple is not in the best interest of the child</i>				
Gender	-.01	.19	-.01	.98
Age	.01	.01	.08	.28
Race (White)	-.36	.18	-.13	.05
Social Work (social work)*	-.06	.17	-.02	.72
Children (yes)	-.06	.19	-.02	.77
Marital status (married)	-.16	.17	-.06	.33
Liberal–Conservative	.30	.06	.33	.0001
Religiosity	-.14	.10	-.10	.14
$F=6.157, p \leq .0001$ Adj- $R^2=.14$				
<i>It is very important to place children with families that are racially/ethnically similar</i>				
Gender	-.14	.16	-.05	.40
Age	.01	.01	.02	.81

Table 4 (continued)

Predictors	Unstandardized coefficients	SE	B	P
<i>It is very important to place children with families that are racially/ethnically similar</i>				
Race (White)	-.53	.15	-.23	.001
Social Work (social work)*	.05	.14	.02	.73
Children (yes)	-.10	.16	-.05	.55
Marital status (married)	.01	.14	.01	.96
Liberal–Conservative	.14	.05	.19	.006
Religiosity	.11	.08	.09	.20
$F=2.662, p \leq .01$ Adj $-R^2 = .05$				

*All workers with a BSW/MSW/PhD (social work)/DSW were combined.

clearly suggest a pattern in which African American workers are significantly more likely than their White counterparts to approve of the importance of considering race in case planning and in favor of the placement of children in racially similar households. Note, however, that on average, this sample of child welfare workers scores is in the mid-range neither agreeing nor disagreeing, with one notable exception: workers disagreed with the statement that “it’s important for children and families to have workers and counselors of their own race.”

The data in Table 3 show that African American and White workers also have differing attitudes with respect to the placement of children with single parents and with gay/lesbian parents. White workers are significantly more likely than African American workers to consider such placements not harmful to children. Thus, at first light, it appears that “race” on the one hand and “family structure” on the other hand bring forth differing responses from African American and White workers.

However, it is possible that other factors besides worker race may impact these perceptions. In order to explore these possibilities we conducted a series of regression analyses on these questions, and included in the equation worker age, marital status, training, religiosity, liberal/conservative ideology, and whether or not they have children of their own. These analyses would allow us to factor out the effects of relevant demographics. Table 4 presents the data from the regression analyses.

The regression analyses essentially confirm the main effects of race and liberalism/conservatism. Interestingly, neither religiosity, marital status, nor the presence of children emerges as significant predictors. However, given that both race and liberalism/conservatism surface as significant predictors in the placement of children with gay/lesbian parents and race matching in placement, we looked into possible interactions between race and world view. Liberal or conservative leanings do not impact African American workers’ views on these decisions, suggesting that these views may be driven more by racial identity than ideology. Among White workers, conservative White workers are more likely to disagree with placing children in gay/lesbian households ($U=2614.50, p \leq .0001$), but show no difference with respect to race matching in placement. However, conservative White workers are more likely to agree with race matching of workers and clients ($U=3420.00, p \leq .05$).

4. Discussion

The data suggest that worker race plays an important role in their beliefs and attitudes about appropriate child welfare decisions. The worker’s liberal/conservative self-characterization also plays a role, but its role is more complex and interacts with race on some decisions. African American child welfare workers are more likely than White workers to believe that race should be considered both in general and in placement decisions. These findings suggest that African American workers are more likely to adhere to a world view of the “best interests of the child: that is inconsistent with DHS and Federal policies with regard to the role of race in assessment and placement, and more consistent with the position of the *National Association of Black Social Workers* (1972, 1994). That is, African American workers are more prone to believe in race-matching in child welfare decision-making. In fact, Fenster (2002) noted that African American social workers who are “members of the NABSW had less favorable attitudes toward transracial adoption than Black social workers who were not NABSW members” (p.33). Federal and DHS policies only allow the consideration of race in very rare circumstances, whereas the NABSW’s position is that African American children should always be placed in African American homes. The NABSW is concerned with the impact of transracial placements on racial identity and on preparing Black children for encounters with racism. In addition, a cogent argument has been made that the lack of foster and adoptive homes of color represents a failure on the part of the

child welfare system to recruit these families rather than a failure on the part of families of color to respond to the needs of children of color (Bonham, 1977; Hertzog & Bernstein, 1965; Hill, 1977; Kadushin & Martin, 1988). Moreover, from a best practice perspective, transracial placements are controversial. On the one hand, longitudinal studies of children who have been transracially adopted show on the whole these children do well (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983; Simon & Alstein, 1996). On the other hand, transracial placements have been challenged from social justice and cultural sensitivity perspectives (Hollingsworth, 1997, 2000; McRoy, 2003).

It is likely that child welfare workers who are knowledgeable about these issues are faced not only with competing views, guidelines, and practice expectations, but also must live with their own beliefs. As Clark (2006) stated, social workers cannot be value neutral. This may translate to a practice environment where African American workers are required to engage in activities with which they may disagree, a potentially harmful and stressful psychological context. In the long run, the conflict between agency mandates and personal beliefs may contribute to worker turnover and burnout (see, for example, Zell, 2006). Our findings suggest that these conflicts may differentially impact workers of color.

The research indicates that race-matching of client and worker in social work (Jayaratne, Gant, Brabson, Nagda, Singh, & Chess, 1992) and in child welfare (Perry & Limb, 2004) is common practice. In fact, Perry and Limb, reporting on public child welfare workers in California, noted that “racial/ethnic matching occurs at a significant rate throughout California” (p.977). However, we have no national data about the planned race matching in child welfare.

A notable result in this study is the impact of one’s world view with respect to being liberal or conservative, and its significant role in how workers perceive and situate race in the placement of children. Conservative White workers are more likely to endorse race matching in service delivery compared to their liberal counterparts and African Americans.

This then raises a question about what it means to be a child welfare worker while holding conservative or liberal views. Unfortunately, our study question in this regard was generic, and did not differentiate political conservatism from social conservatism. It is in this context perhaps that religion and religiosity may come in to play. Fenster (2003) found that White Catholics were more supportive of transracial adoptions than White Protestants. She also noted a positive relationship between religiosity and the approval of transracial adoption. Our data indicate a relatively strong positive correlation ($r = .38$) between religiosity and conservatism. However, we found no differences between White Catholics and Protestants on any of the measured dimensions. Curiously, we also found White Catholics in our study to be significantly less religious (mean = 2.46) compared to Protestants (mean = 1.98) although they were similar on the liberal–conservative continuum. Since we had no African American workers who identify themselves as Catholic, we were unable to examine the impact of Catholic versus Protestant within African American workers. Thus, it would appear that we have a complex picture on the interaction of religion, religiosity and “social conservatism” among White workers. In contrast, while African American workers on average were more religious than White workers, neither religiosity nor the degree of conservatism impacted their views on the desirability of same race placements.

Personal beliefs and values also appear to play a significant role in how workers respond to issues of sexual orientation of foster/adoptive parents. In discussing parenting and the sexual orientation of parents, Stacey and Biblarz (2001), note that “the inescapably ideological and emotional nature of this subject makes it incumbent on scholars to acknowledge the personal convictions they bring to the discussion” (p. 161.) In child welfare, it is likely that worker and agency views of gay and lesbian foster parenthood are reflected in the finding from Downs and James’s (2006) study of 60 gay and lesbian foster parents that one of the challenges of fostering was agency discrimination. Matthews and Cramer (2006) found a growing number of public and voluntary child placing agencies are licensing gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parents. Given these findings, it is important to find out more about workers’ attitudes and beliefs about placing children with gay and lesbian parents.

Both African American and White conservative leaning workers are more likely to disagree with the placement of children in gay/lesbian households. Although African American workers were more religious overall than Whites, there were no differences between the more religious and less religious African Americans on the issue of gay/lesbian placement. In contrast, the more religious Whites were less approving (mean = 2.76) than their less religious counterparts (mean = 2.25) ($U = 3157.50, p < .01$). This suggests that African American and conservative White workers have different reasons for their opposition to the placement of children with gay/lesbian families, reflecting the complexity of this issue within and between groups.

The statistical differences noted between African American and White workers regarding the placement of children with single parent households also raise some interesting value questions. Hollingsworth (1998) reported a dramatic increase in the last decade of the proportion of adopters who are single parents, and Groze and Rosenthal (1991) noted

that adoptive parents of color tend to be single. The additional fact that a larger proportion of African Americans are single or divorced in the U.S. brings a contextual reality to these findings as well. Since single parenthood is not a legal barrier to placement, it may be important to better understand the role of race in this process.

The data in this study clearly argue for including the worker in research and discussions around the issues of race, family structure, and sexual orientation in child welfare. This article only examines workers' beliefs and attitudes as they are taking on new positions in child welfare practice. Whether or not workers change their beliefs over time remains to be seen. In addition, future research should also attempt to determine whether there are indeed placement and other case management differences between African American and White workers, and the emerging implications. Future studies should also include representation from other professionals of color, for example Hispanic, Asian–American, and Native American workers.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the USDHHS Children's Bureau, Child Welfare Training Grant Award # 90CT115. The authors would like to thank Dr. Melnee McPherson and Robbin Pott Gonzalez, MPP, JD for managing the longitudinal study data set and Candice Everett for managing the Recruitment and Retention Project. The authors would also like to thank Prof. John Tropman for his review of the manuscript.

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