

Research in the Service of Poor and Ethnic/Racial Minority Children: Fomenting Change in Models of Scholarship

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High rates of childhood poverty and rapid, significant increases in the ethnic minority population in the United States make it essential that the field of child development markedly increase its production of knowledge useful in the development, delivery, and maintenance of programs that address the needs of poor and ethnic minority children, families, and communities. Developmental contextualism, with its emphasis on (a) diversity and context, (b) synthesizing research with policy and program design, delivery, and evaluation, and (c) collaboration among researchers and the communities where research and programs are being conducted, is especially promising as a model of scholarship that fosters progress toward this goal. The production of knowledge useful in meeting the needs of poor and ethnic minority children will also be promoted by more research funding; increases in the number of ethnic minority graduate students and faculty; and ethnic, racial, and social class diversification of undergraduate and graduate curricula. Research training must include attention to the processes by which research is made culturally sensitive and to ethical issues that may arise in research and intervention with poor and ethnic minority children and parents.

There is only one sure basis of social reform and that is Truth—a careful detailed knowledge of the essential facts of each social problem. Without this there is no logical starting place for reform and uplift.

W.E.B. Du Bois and Augustus G. Dill
(cited in Edelman, 1987, p. 1)

Nature does not require that we be perfect; it requires only that we grow.

Rollo May (cited in Striker, 1990, p. 1)

There is no coming to consciousness without pain.

Carl Jung (cited in Jung, 1928, p. 193)

Like the children who are the focus of its inquiry, the field of child development must grow and adapt to changing circumstances or suffer a fate of impertinence, languor, and ultimately, death. By their

very nature, growth and adaptation are never free of challenge and discomposure. These fundamental truths frame my response to the provocative article by McKinney, Abrams, Terry, and Lerner (1994 [this issue]) entitled "Child Development Research and the Poor Children of America: A Call for a Developmental Contextual Approach to Research and Outreach." These scholars are appropriately critical of the paucity of basic and applied research on poor and minority children, noting that most studies published in the leading journals in child development focus on White, middle-class children; appraise children in laboratory settings that bear little resemblance to the ecological contexts where development occurs; and do not address topics relevant to the prevention of developmental risks associated with poverty. They implore the academy to broaden its knowledge base and models of scholarship and to increase its production of knowledge useful in the development, delivery, and maintenance of programs that address the needs of poor and ethnic minority children, families, and communities.

The bold challenge that McKinney et al. set forth is accompanied by a well-articulated vision of an alternative model of scholarship. This model, labeled developmental contextualism, has several attractive elements. Socially responsible and well-grounded conceptually, it provides thoughtfully crafted schema for remedying critical problems and shortcomings of child development research. In particular, it calls for embedding the study of children in the families, neighborhoods, and communities within which they live, synthesizing research with policy and program design, delivery, and evaluation, and developing and nurturing dynamic collaborations and partnerships between researchers and the communities where research and programs are being conducted. In effect, it resolves the conflict many scholars feel between generating knowledge for the sake of science and contributing to the solution of critical social problems (Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1994). Developmental contextualism also stresses the importance of studying children from diverse backgrounds (e.g., social class, racial, ethnic, religious, cultural), eschewing the presumption of universality in patterns of human development in the absence of ecologically valid research on ethnically and socially diverse samples of children.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOLARLY NEGLECT

Although it will not be easy because of requisite research skills, instrument development, nurturance of community relations, and in general, determined forays into largely uncharted territory, vigorous pursuit of the goals McKinney et al. propose has never been more essential. Poverty among American children began to increase during the 1970s and especially during the recession of the 1980s. Since that time, it has remained stubbornly high. The United States has a child poverty rate that is about twice as high as those for most other industrialized nations. For example, in 1986-1987, when 20% of American children were poor, the child poverty rates were 9% in Canada and 2% in Sweden (Danziger & Danziger, 1993). The myriad risks childhood poverty poses to positive development, together with the high prevalence of childhood poverty amid America's affluence, renders McKinney et al.'s call nothing short of a moral imperative. As McKinney et al. point out, the absence of a well-developed knowledge base about divergent patterns of development in poor children and the conditions that promote these patterns in a range of care giving contexts seriously impedes the development and implementation of policies that foster positive growth and prevent problematic development in these children.

Scholars who espouse egalitarianism and a preference for research-informed, rather than research-illiterate, child policy also should feel duty-bound to contribute directly or indirectly to understanding patterns of development in minority children. The urgency of this task is occasioned by the rapid and significant changes occurring in the ethnic and racial composition of the American population. These changes were more dramatic in the last decade than at any time in the 20th century, such that by 1990, almost 1 in every 4 Americans had African, Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian ancestry. The rate of increase in the minority population was nearly twice that of the 1970s. This increase was driven in part by higher immigration rates of minorities, compared to the rates for non-Hispanic Whites of European or Middle Eastern descent. Prior to the late 1950s, most immigrants to America were from Europe, but in recent years more than 4 in 5 legal immigrants to America had non-European backgrounds (Barringer, 1991). New immigrants each year from England and Eastern and Western Europe are now far outnumbered by immigrants from Asia, Africa, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America. It is significant that a substantial proportion of them are poor and have

low levels of education. In addition to immigration, higher fertility rates among minorities have contributed to the increase in the proportion of minorities in the American population. By the end of this century, the Hispanic population is projected to increase by 21%, the Asian population 22%, persons of African descent 12%, and non-Hispanic persons of European descent by a little more than 2%. As a consequence of these patterns of growth, approximately one third of all American young people will be from ethnic minority backgrounds by the end of this century (Barringer, 1991; Wetzel, 1987).

Dramatic changes in race/ethnic composition are expected to occur even sooner in particular states. In New Mexico and California, for example, the population of non-Hispanic Whites is expected to decline such that they will be a minority by the year 2000 (Barringer, 1991). In some states, minorities are already approaching or currently constitute the majority of persons who are school-age. In New York state, about 40% of elementary and secondary school children belong to an ethnic minority and within a decade, the proportion is expected to approach 50%. In California, such children already constitute the majority; Hispanics account for 31.4% of public school enrollments, African Americans 8.9%, Asians and others 11%, for a total ethnic population of 51.3%. Whites of all ages account for just 58% of California's population. Similarly, in Texas, more than half of the public school children are Hispanic or non-White. In many cities in California and Texas, almost the entire youth population is made up of "minorities" (Dryfoos, 1990; Henry, 1990).

In view of these demographic changes, rendering minority children virtually invisible in the annals of knowledge about the conditions that facilitate and disrupt development is ethically indefensible. That some of the most pressing problems now facing America affect, disproportionately, children and youth from ethnic minority backgrounds makes it all the more so. It is also inimical to the long-term self-interests of the nation because minority youths' fraction of the total youth population is increasing precisely at a time when the proportion of youth in the total population is dwindling. The latter trend is due to the continuation of low birth rates in 1980s and because Americans continue to show a strong preference for small families. Almost three fourths of today's women under age 25 prefer a family of two or fewer children. In 1967, by contrast, only 40% of wives in the same age group wanted a family that small (Wetzel, 1987). Consequently, the proportion of youths in the total population will con-

tinue to fall, reaching a low of 13% in 1996, down from 19% in 1980. The implications of this trend are far-reaching. The decline in the number of youth, and ultimately, the number of entrants into the labor force, means that the ratio of workers to retirees will shrink. The economic and social well-being of the nation will depend even more than at present on its ability to enhance the intellectual and social skills of all its youth, as these will be crucial for maximum productivity in the workplace. As Marion Wright Edelman (1987) has pointedly cautioned:

Our future comfort depends not just on our own children but on all American children. We no longer expect our own children to support us directly when they are adults and we are elderly. Rather, we rely on Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid payments, which are funded by all Americans. Many of us will require the contributions of the next generation as a whole, and that generation's children. It is therefore in our self-interest to ensure that not just our own children but their contemporaries and their children are healthy, educated, productive, and compassionate . . . Until recently, America's youth population has been relatively plentiful, allowing our society to survive and our economy to grow, despite the waste of many young lives through society's neglect. We no longer have that margin for error. (pp. 30-31)

In sum, as scholars and citizens, we have nothing to gain and much to lose by neglecting the needs of poor and minority children.

FOMENTING CHANGE IN MODELS OF SCHOLARSHIP

The research and service agenda outlined by McKinney et al. are both important and daunting. Consequently, proactive responses are needed from all child development quarters, including professional societies, journal editors, funding agencies, and individual scholars in their roles as researchers, teachers, and reviewers of manuscripts and grant applications. Indeed, it would be naive to assume that significant progress can be made toward these goals without a confluence of facilitating conditions. Research funding; increases in the number of ethnic minority graduate students and faculty in the field of child development; and ethnic, racial, and social class diversification of undergraduate and graduate curricula seem especially critical.

Funding for research on the antecedents of positive development in poor and minority children needs to be increased substantially. In

addition to funding more investigations, it is essential that the higher cost of doing research with minority and poor segments of the population be considered in decisions about funding levels (Brooks-Gunn, 1989). In general, recruitment, tracking, and retention of research participants who are poor are more costly and time consuming because of many circumstances and conditions associated with economic hardship (e.g., high mobility, lack of telephones, higher refusal rates, unavailability of child care). An overabundance of acute and chronic stressors in the lives of poor families makes poor families' participation in research particularly burdensome and of low priority.

Research with poor and minority families also may prove more costly because of increased investment in time and human resources necessary to develop trusting relations. Partly because of their negative experiences with various agents of mainstream society and the socially irresponsible behavior of researchers in the past, many poor and minority parents are suspicious of the motives of researchers. Researchers too often have been self-serving and opportunistic, neutral to the oppression and social problems of minorities and the poor and unwilling to contribute to the betterment of the life circumstances of those whom they study (Gordon, 1976; McLoyd, 1990). McKinney et al.'s integrative research-outreach model calling for genuine collaboration among researchers, policymakers, interventionists and community representatives is a needed antidote to these tendencies.

A second prerequisite for significant progress toward ethnic, racial, and social class diversification of child development research is an increase in the number of minority faculty and graduate students. More minority scholars are also important to service delivery, because substantial numbers of the poor to be served are from ethnic and racial minority groups. Minority scholars typically evidence a steadfast commitment to research on minority and poor populations and often stake their professional careers and identities on the ability to contribute to knowledge in this domain. Marked ethnic, racial, and class segregation exists in housing, schooling, and myriad other facets of American society. This segregation is often accompanied by intergroup tension rooted in historic and current racism and oppression (Hacker, 1992). Among the consequences of these realities are that minority scholars, compared to nonminority scholars, are likely to possess more experience-based knowledge of minority culture, to have more credibility among potential minority research participants, and to experience greater comfort interacting with minorities during

the conduct of research. Because of the strong link between race/ethnicity and economic well-being, they also are more likely than majority scholars to have had intimate contact with individuals who are poor. Recognition of these advantages is not to suggest that research on poor and minority children and families should be the exclusive province of minority scholars. It *is* to suggest that majority scholars recognize the limitations they typically bring to this endeavor, guard against ethnocentrism, and commit energy and resources to bridging the longstanding, structurally rooted chasms that often separate them from poor and minority individuals. Similar caveats apply to minority scholars studying persons from minority populations and social class backgrounds different than their own.

Recruitment and retention of minority faculty and graduate students are fraught with a host of difficulties and challenges, including contentious admission and hiring criteria, isolation, demoralization, lack of mentoring of minority faculty and students, and resentment from majority faculty and students about what they perceive as special treatment for their minority counterparts (Stricker, 1990). Although thorny, these challenges are not insurmountable. We now have more than a modicum of knowledge about the conditions that facilitate recruitment, retention, and integration of minority faculty and students into graduate training programs. At a general level, it is clear that ethnic diversification requires "commitment, energy, resources, and the willingness to unlearn old attitudes, perceptions, and values and to embrace new ones" (Stricker, 1990, p. 4). Recent research has identified more specific structural and social factors. For example, African American graduate students are less likely to have thought about dropping out of school and have higher overall morale if they have more contact outside of school with African American faculty and if their African American and White network members are either friends or know each other well (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990). Qualitative data suggest that a critical mass of ethnic minority students and faculty augurs well for minority morale, in part, because it reduces the perception of tokenism; gives voice to ethnic minority concerns, interests, and expectations; and increases prospects that the latter will be addressed in a productive manner (Jones, 1990; Stricker, 1990).

Collaborative research between the small cadre of minority scholars and majority scholars would seem to pose a partial solution to several problems cited here (e.g., insufficient numbers of minority scholars to study minority populations, chasms between majority

scholars and minority research participants). Nevertheless, such ventures are relatively rare because the same racial and cultural factors that have acted as barriers between particular ethnic/racial groups within the general populace also have discouraged collaborative research between minority and majority researchers. As these barriers are dismantled, we can expect increases in the number and quality of multicultural and multiethnic collaborations.

Because they reflect the canons of the discipline that are transmitted to newcomers in the field, graduate school curricula also must be targeted for ethnic, racial, and class diversification. Various models have been proposed to guide integration of course materials and practical experiences relevant to ethnic minority populations into traditional graduate programs (e.g., separate-course model, area of concentration models, interdisciplinary models, integration model) (Davis-Russell, 1990). All of these models have strengths and weaknesses. However, many believe that the integration model, which calls for the introduction of materials relevant to ethnic minority populations in *required* courses, is the most viable because it "mainstreams" the information in question by ensuring that all students are exposed to it under the instruction and guidance of a large number of faculty. At the same time, this model is thought to be the most difficult to implement because it requires redesigning of courses and field experiences and requires the commitment and time of a large corpus of individuals (Davis-Russell, 1990).

Whatever model is selected for implementation, careful attention must be given to course content. Courses should provide critical overviews of what we know about development in poor and minority children, attend to theoretical and conceptual issues, and identify critical gaps in knowledge. As important as these elements are, they are not sufficient. Students need to learn the intricate processes by which research is made culturally sensitive (Rogler, 1989). They also need to develop competence in handling a series of ethical issues that may arise in research and intervention with poor and ethnic minority children and parents (e.g., balancing the need to recruit valid samples with the need to protect the autonomy of potential research participants who may be highly vulnerable or need assistance; judging the ethics of research activities that usurp the parental role and conflict with the child's family heritage and values) (Fisher, 1993; McAdoo, 1990).

TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING AHEAD: PROGRESS AND GAPS IN THE STUDY OF POOR CHILDREN

The increase in child poverty during the early 1980s precipitated a new wave of research on poverty and children. A recent issue of *Child Development* devoted to children and poverty is one result (Huston, Garcia Coll, & McLoyd, 1994). It provides both a barometer of progress and a marker of gaps in the study of poor children. The scope and issues of the work in the special issue differ from earlier approaches in several ways:

1. Conceptions of poverty are more complex such that poverty is not treated as a simple, unidimensional phenomenon, nor is it assumed to be identical to low socioeconomic status.
2. Emphasis has shifted from description of effects of poverty or outcomes of intervention to analysis of processes by which such effects and outcomes come about.
3. Studies are more ecological in their approach to human development, often going beyond the individual child and parent to such contextual influences as school, neighborhood, and community.
4. Outcomes have expanded beyond cognitive and intellectual development to encompass socioemotional functioning (Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1994).

Despite these important advances in our understanding of poverty and children, the volume also reveals that too little attention is given to (a) extrafamilial, proximal factors that link economic hardship to children's psychological functioning and development (e.g., kin, peers); (b) transactions between the child, the family, and larger ecological systems; (c) individual differences in responses to the contexts of poverty and to interventions to alleviate the effects of poverty (e.g., what interventions are most effective, for whom, and why); and (d) empirical evaluation of the effects of public policies on child and family functioning (Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1994). In addition to redressing the neglect of these content issues, more study needs to be devoted to poverty as experienced by White children and children living in rural areas. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of poor children in the United States are of European ancestry and that the prevalence of childhood poverty is as high or higher in rural areas than in urban areas, especially among African Americans and Mexican Americans. Because knowledge is indispen-

sable to social reform, we must press ahead with all deliberate speed toward systematic study of these complex issues.

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