Lived Experiences of Racism Among Child Welfare-Involved Parents

Article *in* Race and Social Problems · February 2021

DOI: 10.1007/s12552-021-09316-5

1 author:

Darcey Merritt
New York University
28 PUBLICATIONS **1,083** CITATIONS

Race and Social Problems (2021) 13:63–72
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-021-09316-5

Lived Experiences of Racism Among Child Welfare-Involved Parents

Darcey H. Merritt[1]

Accepted: 16 January 2021 / Published online: 5 February 2021

Abstract
The problem of racism has always been a pervasive issue deeply rooted in the fabric of our country. Many of our established social and human services have been structured based on the insidious nature of racism and oppression. The Child Welfare System (CWS) is not exempt and race-based inequities experienced by CWS-involved Black and Latinx families remain persistent and harmful. This article presents a qualitative account that underscores the lived experiences of racism among CWS-involved parents. Two emergent themes are highlighted: (1) the impact of CWS surveillance and oversight and (2) perceptions of race-based mistreatment and unfair judgment. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 primarily Black and Latinx parents in order to investigate their perceptions regarding CWS oversight and ways in which their minority status played a role in how they were treated. There is inherent racism in the surveillance, reporting and assessment, and resulting determinations regarding Black and Latinx people in the child welfare system. This manifests in service delivery practices underpinned by an unbalanced power dynamic between caseworkers and parents. Overall, parents expressed feeling disrespected, fearful of family disruption, shamed and judged based on implicit biases. Implications for policy and system changes are discussed, including a call to include the voices of historically disenfranchised Black and Latinx CWS-involved families.

Keywords Child welfare system oversight · Racism · Black and Latinx parents · Parental voices · Judgement

Introduction

The United States has a storied history of racism and discrimination, which continues to persist within structurally oppressive systems, such as many of our social and human service agencies. Despite good intentions to protect children from harm, the child welfare system (CWS) is not an exception (Kriz and Skivenes 2011; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna 2017). Our collective memory of ways in which racism manifests in our society is severely underappreciated in CWS attempts to mitigate the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. There are few qualitative accounts of the perspectives of Black and Latinx families regarding their lived experiences with CWS involvement. Further, there is scant literature highlighting how race-based inequities are characteristic of families' lived experiences of CWS oversight. Moreover, few have studied the impact of structurally racist CWS processes on child and parental well-being, family dynamics, autonomy, and empowerment. The voices of Black and Latinx CWS-involved parents shared within this article demonstrate that, oftentimes, parents feel poorly treated and characterize CWS oversight processes as racist, unfair, judgmental, and disrespectful.

Disproportionality of Black and Latinx Youth in the Child Welfare System

Child welfare system-involved families are often people of color (Fluke et al. 2011; Fluke et al. 2003; Hill 2006; Kim et al. 2011; Lanier et al. 2014; Putnam-Hornstein et al. 2013; Stoltzfus 2005; Wulczyn and Lery 2007; Klein and Merritt 2014), those lacking in financial resources, optimal living environments and generally less educated (Berger 2004; Berger and Slack (in press); Fong 2017; Kang et al. 2019; Nam et al. 2006). Racial disproportionality in the CWS is defined as an over-representation of children or families from a particular racial group relative to their representation in the general population. This disproportionality has been well studied and widely documented (Boyd 2014; Cooper 2013; Detlaff and Rycraft 2008; Dettlaff et al. 2011; Drake

✉ Darcey H. Merritt
darcey.merritt@nyu.edu

[1] Silver School of Social Work, New York University, 1 Washington Square North, #401, New York, NY 10003, USA

and Jonson-Reid 2011; Font et al. 2012; Goerge and Lee 2005; Hill 2005; Fluke et al. 2011; Jones-Harden 2010; Roberts 2014; Kokaliari et al. 2019; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna 2017), with unfortunate findings that child maltreatment investigations disproportionately affect Black and Latinx families at an alarming rate in the United States.

Recent reports of families involved with CWS indicate that Blacks are substantially overrepresented (20.6%), Whites are underrepresented (44.5%) and Hispanic children (22.6%) overrepresented than in the general population (Blacks, 13.7%; Whites, 50.3%; Hispanic, 13.7%) (United States Department of Health et al. [USDHHS] 2020). Within the CWS, racial disparities have been identified at every decision point (Miller et al. 2013; Roberts 2014)—investigation and maltreatment substantiation (Rolock and Testa 2005), abuse and neglect reporting (Ards et al. 2003), and foster care placement decisions and case closures (Miller et al. 2013). A healthy dose of debate is underway regarding the primary causes of racial/ethnic disproportionality and at what point in CWS processes this manifests (Boyd 2014; Fluke et al. 2003; Font et al. 2012; Sedlak and Schultz 2005; Detlaff and Boyd (in press)).

Racism Within the Child Welfare System

Structurally racist and oppressive societal and environmental contexts are the backdrop with which all systems are underpinned. Institutional racism is insidious, often subtle to many, and largely unheeded by scholars who study child welfare and the plight of Black families in particular. I put forth the notion that inherent race-based inequities are systemically supported and perpetuated in all aspects of CWS processes. While considering such a notion, reflect on Hill (2004), stating institutional racism "can be covert or overt, unconscious or conscious, and unintentional or intentional" (p. 19). The CWS and those charged to provide services are not immune to the undercurrents of racism and should be mindful of the impact on the families they interact with.

Child welfare system-involved families should always be considered based on the ecological contexts in which they live and function (see Freisthler et al. 2006). Many of these families function in contexts that typify historically oppressive structural systems related to their membership in minority populations and living in impoverished communities (Coulton et al. 2007). Specifically, Black and Latinx people experience a host of inequities inherent in systemic racism and structural oppression as they navigate human services organizations, and medical and educational settings (Abner 2014). Lived experiences and perceptions of racism, while navigating such systems, are directly related to being among the lower echelons of our society with diminished access to power, knowledge, and optimal resources to thrive in our society.

Racism and the Delivery of Services

When working with CWS-involved families at risk for child neglect, it is vital to validate their experiences of oppression, discrimination, and racism. Given the CWS is naturally underscored by structural racism, these families suffer a host of socio-emotional and psychological traumas while coping with the constant fear of negative consequences resultant from family assessments, processes, and placement decisions. There is a great deal of variation in the ways in which families navigate service delivery, regardless of whether their participation is voluntary or mandated. Some families embrace and engage in services, while others feel an intrusion on their family's autonomy. One might take pause when considering the idea of regular (and sometimes unannounced) home visits from multiple strangers with mandated authority for the sole purpose of assessing family functioning and parenting behaviors. Substantial power dynamics are intrinsic in these experiences, resulting from an imbalance between those in the position to judge and regularly scrutinize parental behaviors and parents very much at the mercy of their child welfare workers (Bundy-Fazioli et al. 2008). Parents have a keen awareness of negative assumptions levied upon them based on their societal positions, which is further augmented by constant and ever more blatant lived experiences of racism and discrimination during their CWS involvement (Franklin et al. 2008). The ongoing trauma persists because these families cannot escape the discriminatory practices and racial biases displayed by those with the power and authority to disrupt their families. As an example, Black youths are more likely to be deemed in need of CWS despite their white counterparts exhibiting comparable presenting issues (Franklin et al. 2008). CWS-involved families are under consistent oversight and inspection wherein parental behaviors are regularly questioned. This judgement is tainted with implicit bias and coupled with behavioral mandates from CWS professionals that result in a deleterious impact on the dynamics of family functioning. Moreover, services provided by the CWS are inherently coercive because family participation is generally compulsory or, at best, strongly suggested, with the explicit or implicit threat of substantial consequences, including removal of one's child from the home of origin. Given the high stakes for CWS-involved families, it is essential to understand their experiences with the CWS and whether system involvement is considered helpful or harmful, and in what ways.

The CWS is structured by codified practices that support the status quo of racial hierarchies. There are a host of examples inherent in the design of the CWS and the manner in which the practices of service delivery are rife

with upholding racial inequities. The most well-known women for imagining and designing our CWS are White women (e.g., Jane Addams) who were likely unaware of the importance of acknowledging their positionality and ways in which they move about the world in their skin and interact with others. Even now there are few applications of theory that serve well to consider the impact of racism and oppression in all aspects of CWS involvement. For instance, an approach that acknowledges the concept of intersectionality, standpoint theory, and Critical Race theory (Crenshaw et al. 1996) should be foremost in all policy and service design with an explicit mission to eradicate experiencing race-based inequities among CWS-involved families.

This study seeks to include the voices of those experiencing CWS oversight, primarily Black and Latinx mothers, in a manner that highlights their lived experiences and perceptions of racism in the current child welfare literature base. I present preliminary findings of a segment of the overall framework of a larger study underway, which attempts to capture the nuances of a set of contextual factors and the relationship with parental behavior intent and actual behaviors. Below presents a visual (Fig. 1) of the conceptual framework guiding the overall study inquiry. The larger inquiry is intended to assess ways in which personal and structural factors impact the path between parental behavior intent and the actual behavior based on the working memories of lived experiences of child welfare system oversight. The specific components highlighted herein this article can be noted in italicized font.

Hence, presented herein are results from a qualitative study designed to assess and document the perceptions of parents involved in the CWS due to child neglect risk, with particular attention to how such oversight impacts their parental decision making and family dynamics. Whereas this is the broader intent of the research, the data and results reported herein are streamlined according to emergent themes with a two-fold focus: *(1) the impact of CWS surveillance and oversight and (2) perceptions of race-based mistreatment and unfair judgment.* In the context of these two emergent themes, this article provides a general overview of the study design culminating with qualitative accounts of the lived experiences of Black and Latinx parents receiving CWS preventive services. Future steps and recommendations that acknowledge the experiences of racism among those receiving CWS are discussed in an effort to move the conversation forward and identify solutions suited to abolish all aspects of the CWS that cause harm or support complicity in an inherently racist system of care for our most vulnerable families.

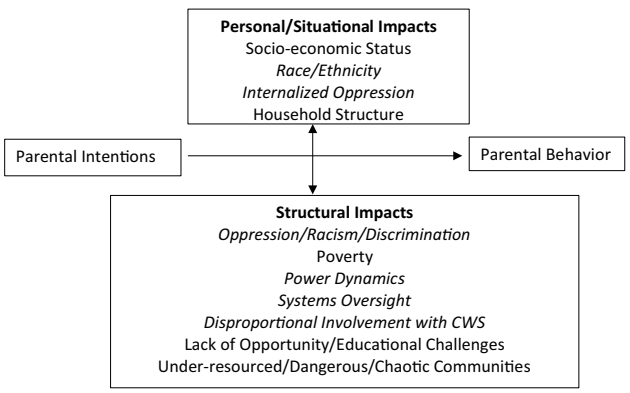

Fig. 1 Overall conceptual framework

Materials and Methods

Setting and Participants

Data were collected from a New York-based child welfare services contracted agency providing maltreatment preventive services and interventions to families at risk. Families needing to improve stability are referred to receive such services by the Administration of Children Services (ACS). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents who receive Functional Family Therapy and therapeutic case management (FFT-TCM) services. Typically, these services are provided up to six months and include regular (oftentimes weekly) home visits from clinicians trained to implement FFT and other case management needs. Both English- and Spanish-speaking families were eligible if an interpreter was available to translate the interviews. A total of 28 parents were recruited, with 17 ultimately consenting to participate in the study. Among the remaining 11 that were not interviewed, three were Spanish speaking (interpreter unavailable) and eight were unable to contact.

Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

The sample of parents were recruited through purposive, non-probability sampling techniques coordinated by the New York contracted agency and outreach supported by the home visiting clinicians. Clinicians were provided with flyers containing the study particulars and enrollment instructions and asked to share with parents during home visits. Parents were provided the flyers containing contact information and a stamped envelope so they could confidentially consent (clinicians were not made aware of who among their caseloads agreed to participate) to be contacted by the Principal Investigator to move forward with screening and scheduling the interviews. Recruitment and data collection took place between January 2017 and April 2018.

Each in-depth interview was conducted in person and lasted roughly 45–60 min. Written informed consent was

attained in accordance with the (redacted institution) Institutional Review Board (IRB), Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Review Board, and the agency's internal review board. Each participant received $30 USD bank cards for their participation. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and secured as per IRB protocol. Importantly, all of the interviews were conducted by the Principal Investigator, who identifies as a Black, cisgender female single mom, which is the identity of the bulk of study respondents. Whereas this shared identity existed and was seemingly helpful in terms of trust building, there remained salient differences with the participants regarding socio-economic status and educational attainment. I approached all interviews with a non-imposing demeanor and remained sensitive to the power dynamics and home environment.

To relieve any potential burden on the parents, all interviews were scheduled for a convenient date and time and conducted in the homes (often low-income housing complexes in low-resourced neighborhoods). The Principal Investigator has extensive experience providing in-person therapeutic services in child welfare-involved homes. The interview protocol was vetted and revised in an iterative process and in consultation with child welfare scholars who have vast experience collecting qualitative data from this population. The interview guide was then administered to professionals with experience in the child welfare arena in order to assess for clarity. The study team included the Principal Investigator and two research assistants who on multiple occasions listened to the audio recordings and thoroughly read the transcripts.

The interview guide was designed to gather information on parental perceptions regarding CWS oversight and identify thematic parental fears based on such oversight and one's societal status as related to child-rearing decisions. Moreover, the in-depth interviews allowed for contributing the voices of parents and new knowledge about the relationship between child-rearing practices and parents' experiences with CWS. Specifically, a sampling of questions related to themes highlighted in this article were as follows: (1) Do CWS workers treat all people the same regardless of their background?; (2) Do you feel you've been treated fairly while involved with child welfare agencies?; (3) What would help you parent better while dealing with (mental health) issues?; and Likert scale items (1–4; strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) (4) You feel respected as a parent while receiving child welfare agency services; (5) You feel judged as a bad or unfit parent while receiving child welfare agency services; (6) Child welfare agencies and caseworkers are helpful to all parents of any ethnic or racial background; (7) You feel respected as a parent while receiving child welfare agency services; (7) You feel judged as a bad or unfit parent while receiving child welfare agency services; (8) Child welfare agencies and caseworkers are helpful to all parents of any ethnic or racial background; (9) Your involvement with child welfare agencies has a positive influence on how you raise the kids (your parenting decisions); (10) Child welfare agencies and caseworkers are usually helpful; (11) You feel supported as a parent while receiving child welfare agency services. Respondents were further probed to elicit clarification based on responses.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an exploratory phenomenological approach focused on lived experiences and perceptions as a function of involvement with CWS oversight as they relate to parenting decisions. Relying on systematic grounded theory, the Principal Investigator and research assistant engaged in a reflective, iterative process that allowed for verifying the identified common themes and underlying sentiments of the responses in the context of the overall tone and tenor of the interview as a whole. The primary focus was to explore the ways in which institutional and systemic racism plays a role in a parent's understanding and response to receiving preventive child maltreatment services (author, in press). The resulting information was open and group coded, which allowed for determining related themes regarding parental concerns based on CWS oversight. The complexity of the issues was characterized in nuanced responses from marginalized parents related to perceptions of racism, CWS involvement, and social control. The data were assessed based on emergent interest and not in order to create or extend an existing theory (Mills et al. 2010, p. 499). A qualitative tool, thematic analysis was implemented to support data reduction where data are "segmented, categorized, and reconstructed in a way that captures important concepts within the data set" (Given 2008, p.867). As noted above, the research team independently reviewed the recorded audio, transcripts, and accompanied memos corresponding to all the interviews. A list of themes was generated according to prevalence with the data. The semi-structured questions mapped onto salient themes. The Principal Investigator and research assistant compared notes from codebooks in order to identify and discuss emergent themes. Relationships among the identified themes were assessed for variation and then distinguished among all the transcripts. Finally, a reflective assessment of the coded data resulted in a synthesis of major themes. Methodological rigor was underscored by (1) regular meetings among the research team to discuss points of agreement and any discrepancies/conflicts in synthesizing the data; and (2) a concerted effort at interpreting codes in order to refine and validate the results (Padgett 2012).

Results

The summary of sample characteristics is highlighted in Table 1. I interviewed seventeen parents, of whom sixteen identified as Black or Latinx cisgender females. The average age of the respondents was 33, with the majority of the sample identifying as Black or African American (64 percent) and 30 percent identifying as Latinx. The mean education level among the respondents was a GED/high school diploma or less ($M = 2.18$, range 0–5). Slightly over one-third were working full time (35 percent), with just under half reporting unemployment (47 percent), and most expressing a need for financial help a moderate amount of the time (in between sometimes and most of the time) as opposed to barely making ends meet or able to meet all financial needs ($M = 1.47$, range 0–3).

Table 1 Participant characteristics ($N = 17$)

	n (%) or mean ± SD
Gender	
Male	1 (0.06)
Female	16 (94.1)
Age, mean ± SD	33 ± 5.32
Race/Ethnicity	
White	0 (0.0)
Black	11 (64.7)
Latinx	5 (29.4)
Other	1 (0.06)
Education	
< High school education	4 (23.5)
High school/GED	5 (29.4)
Some college	4 (23.5)
Completed college	3 (17.6)
Graduate school	0 (0.0)
Other education	1 (0.06)
Employment	
Not working	8 (47.1)
Part-time work	3 (17.6)
Full-time work	6 (35.3)
Financial stress	1.47

Financial stress: barely making ends meet = 0; in need of financial help sometimes = 1; in need of financial help most times = 2; able to meet all of your financial needs = 3

As noted above, the interview domains focused on attributions for child-rearing behaviors based on parental concerns (e.g., lack of childcare, nutritional sustenance, dangerous neighborhoods, threats of child removal). A series of questions included parenting practices related to fears that might result in unwanted experiences with systems. The results highlighted herein focus on two (italicized) of the overall four subthemes (Table 2) that emerged: (1) *CWS oversight and surveillance*, (2) *Judgment/Treatment based on race/ethnicity*, (3) Perceptions of parenting well/parenting intent, and (4) Financial disparities. A noticeable theme that emerged was how parents felt about CWS involvement. Overwhelmingly, parents felt unfairly judged and mistreated by CWS agency workers based on their race/ethnicity. They conveyed experiencing trauma resulting from continued CWS surveillance and oversight that adversely impacted the parent/child relationship. Parents frequently perceived a great deal of stigma and shame within their communities due to their CWS involvement. Some parents communicated challenges associated with being considered incapable of providing the level of care their children deserved based on lower socio-economic status and racial stereotypes. By and large, parents communicated feelings of blame, intimidation, judgment, being overwhelmed, afraid (of family the removal of their children), and a loss of control. Whereas some expressed feeling supported by child welfare workers, others characterized the CWS oversight as intrusive.

Table 2 Emergent themes and a sampling of question prompts

Emergent themes	Associated question prompts
CWS oversight and surveillance	Child welfare agencies and caseworkers are usually helpful to parents
	You make decisions about the kids (parenting decisions) based on what you think is expected and acceptable by caseworkers
	You believe caseworkers at the agencies understand your parenting decisions
	You feel supported as a parent while receiving child welfare agency services
Judgment/Treatment based on race/ethnicity	Do CWS workers treat all people the same regardless of their background?
	Child welfare agencies and caseworkers are helpful to all parents of any ethnic or racial background
	Do you feel you've been treated fairly while involved with child welfare agencies?
	You feel respected as a parent while receiving child welfare agency services
	You feel judged as a bad or unfit parent while receiving child welfare agency services

Judgment/Treatment Based on Race/Ethnicity

Given the processes of the CWS, child welfare professionals undoubtedly leave parents feeling unheard and unfairly judged despite their best efforts to comply with treatment plans. Without a baseline understanding of ways in which racism within the CWS affects clients, practitioners often design and implement treatment plans that discount the daily struggle that some parents have in their attempts at achieving safe and stable environments for their children. This structural racism is based on our mainstream expectations of acceptable parenting and the accompanying criteria by which parents are deemed ill equipped to properly care for their children. Unfortunately, many CWS-involved families are also judged based on their struggles with economic disadvantage (Berger 2004; Kang et al. 2019), incarcerated family members (Foster and Hagan 2015; Roberts 2014; Sykes and Pettit 2014; Western and Wilderman 2009), and mental health challenges that impact parenting (Venta, Velez, & Lau) and increase child maltreatment risk. Underscoring the overall fear Black and Latinx parents have living in our society with such challenges, one mother stated, "I worry about my sons every time we walk out this door. We live in America, we've got Trump as the President. Look at my face and they're [the children] Black and they're Hispanic. Yes, it's my worry. My sons are walking out the door. This was in response to the question, "Do you have any worries about being a parent?".

Race-based judgement manifest through the intrinsic power dynamics embedded in the relationship between CWS practitioners and parents. CWS services as delivered are inherently accusatorial and principally initiated as a result of judgements about misunderstood parenting practices despite parents' good intentions. Child welfare system professionals guided by state policies and statutes are in a place of power to determine if parenting is appropriate or inappropriate. We have been neglectful in acknowledging that such judgements come with implicit biases at all levels of service design and delivery (Kriz and Skivenes 2011; Mixon-Mitchell and Hanna 2017; Roberts 2014; Wells et al. 2009). A consequence of this is that some parents feel they are beholden to the CWS once a case is initiated and worry about the potential for a CWS practitioner to abuse their power in order to manipulate parents into submission with the mandated plan of family management and child rearing. There is a great deal of justifiable fear and frustration regarding the power of the CWS to remove children from the home, as noted in this sentiment, "ACS [ACS is a CWS agency] don't care, let's just tear the family apart." Inappropriate judgment results in mistreatment, disrespect, lack of support, and little meaningful help. In response to a query about feeling judged as a bad parent, one mother stated she felt, "judged by what you see, what you look like, not who I was." Overwhelmingly, the respondents in this study expressed feeling mistreated and unfairly judged by child welfare agency workers based on their race/ethnicity. Another parent articulated a similar frustration stating, "they don't make it easy, their perception of whatever they have in case notes…they judge you, very judgmental…they come in like treating you a certain kind of way, they make it seem like they here for support and they want to help you…they dictate what needs to be done."

In order to assess perceptions about being judged based on their race and ethnicity, parents were asked, "Do caseworkers treat all people the same regardless of their background?" Sally communicates concern that she felt judged based on a stereotype that parents of color are bad. Generally speaking, there is stigma associated with CWS involvement, but it is even more pronounced for Black and Latinx families with open child welfare system cases.

> I don't know. I don't know. I just think if you're a minority and you have an ACS case, they have a certain perception of you. It's like a stereotype… If you already have an ACS case, they think in their mind, y'all are the worst type of parent. (Sally, 32)

A similar sentiment in response to that question was expressed by Olivia, a 35-year-old, married African American woman with six children in a blended family (ages 10 to 27 years old),

> Nope. They don't give a damn. Oh yes they do. Skin means a whole lot. If I was light enough, if I was white enough, bright enough... They'd be a little nicer to me... because I'm dark.
> The word was said [that I] look aggressive. This is how I talk. I can calm this is how I
> talk... But this comes across as aggressive. If he ain't Black in America, it's a not a good
> thing to talk this way, but I'm not going to stop being me.

This was a clear example of tone policing from the family's caseworker. Immediately after the mom shared these comments, the caseworker phoned due to a situation with the focal child receiving services. Disturbingly, I heard her use this very term in admonishment of the parents who were rightfully upset about their child who was at the time very distressed in school. These parents were in crisis, yet the CWS caseworker resorted to referring to the mother with an incendiary term, 'aggressive,' often used to stereotype Black women. These exemplars are likely common among CWS-involved Black women in particular and stymie all efforts to engage in a respectful and helpful partnership, void of provocative language and in a manner that balances the power dynamic.

Child Welfare System Oversight and Surveillance

> What is these more allegations that's coming in and this is the part we trying to figure out. How many allegations is coming in and we're not doing nothing. (Hubert, age 48)

Feeling burdened by CWS oversight and surveillance emerged as a prominent theme throughout all of the interviews and across subject domains. Black and Latinx parents with little privilege and less empowered to exercise self-advocacy for autonomy are often subjected to scrutiny. These families, particularly Black families, have extensive histories of discriminatory and oppressive supervision and surveillance across multiple social welfare and human service systems (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Rothstein 2017; Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol 2016; Wise 2010). Regular surveillance is no stranger to Black families, and it could be considered quite normative to be followed around in stores and live in neighborhoods with heavy police presence, as well as a host of other disturbing scenarios. Most parents rely on their family lives to be sacredly private and immune from outside powers, intrusive oversight, and judgment from places of authority. CWS services are based on protocols designed by those in positions of power and privilege who have not likely been subjected to such authoritative involvement in their own families. Further, those authority figures may not have considered the impact of the CWS on historically oppressed communities and those who have repeatedly suffered from disenfranchisement, racism, and other forms of exclusion.

With few exceptions, researchers have failed to meaningfully consider the CWS from a social justice perspective (Brooks and Roberts 2002; Edwards 2016; Roberts 2014), which has resulted in an inattention to the stigmatizing effect of disproportionate system oversight on marginalized parents, children, and communities. Understandably, those who have experienced oppressive systems have little faith that parental autonomy and empowerment would be bolstered while receiving oversight services. The deleterious impact of CWS surveillance persists by virtue of how the CWS has been designed, in large part to ignore the racist underbelly of the mission and service delivery. Those with histories of diminished control over their lives struggling to effectively manage their families are particularly at risk for added trauma of CWS surveillance. Persistent and authoritative oversight results in tense parent–child relationships, poor emotional well-being, and suboptimal parental functioning. Moreover, this distress transfers intergenerationally to children and affects their coping mechanisms and healthy development. Oppressive surveillance of authority figures with the power to disrupt families by the removal of children is both troubling and harmfully consequential for autonomous parental decision making (Merritt and Snyder 2015). Further, withstanding regular surveillance while attempting to flourish as a family under oppressive societal conditions is deeply unsettling and impairs well-intentioned efforts of Black and Latinx parents to care for their children. One mother used three words in response to a question asking if child welfare agencies and caseworkers are helpful to all parents of any ethnic background, "Nope, nope, nope."

The experience of receiving CWS services has a profound impact on parental concerns and fears for their children. For example, in response to the question, "What do you want to protect your kids from," a mother replied, "walking out and running into ACS… [my] main hope is to avoid ACS…tell ACS to leave me alone… three to four times a week visits happen." Yet, another parent stated, "But at the beginning, it was more, you know, when you know the ACS is involved in your life and you feel like, oh, my God, they think I'm a bad mom." Perceptions of absolute intrusion on family home settings and the fear of continued 'policing' by CWS caseworkers was a prominent sentiment across the sample of respondents. Another parent responded to that same question prompt citing CWS agency involvement as well,

> ACS, It's like they give you deadlines showing no structure for the kids for discipline, right.
> They're teaching children that they can say and make any allegations they want and your job if you work with them was to come out and investigate -and I'm not mad at that-but the thing is, you're listening more to a child and giving what they want versus the parent that is cooperative…

This parent expressed frustration resulting from continued CWS oversight that negatively influenced the dyadic child/parent relationship. She communicated feeling a lack of control and inability to lead her family due to the caseworkers usurping her authority as the parent in the house, thus straining the relationship with the children. Overall, parents expressed feeling overwhelmed, fearful (of family disruption), and a loss of parental control, yet some expressed satisfaction with the tangible support from private child welfare workers, and some conveyed feeling a combination of being supported, but also intruded upon. Below is an example of a mixed and nuanced opinion about CWS surveillance and characterizes the sentiment of the intrusion into a private family life.

> I really don't like people coming in and out of my house. It's just like I feel like it's an
> invasion of privacy. But they, you know, everyone has been very nice. They've helped out
> in every way possible. Then they've helped me out with resources so I guess it's - I guess

one bad experience I guess, I don't know. Something good came out of it or is coming out of it. Just have to wait and see. (Sally, 32)

Discussion

Principal Investigator: Is there anything you want to say based on what I've asked you and remember I came here because I want to make sure that your voices as parents receiving services is considered important. Mother: I know why you're here. I don't know if it's really going to work because I'm Black… we know shit don't happen. But I respect and like you now. What you're doing is making sure that people feel what I'm feeling -what he's feeling at this moment, what the kids are feeling – is being hurt with what the system does – what they do when we put our voices out there. So, I respect you for what you came out here for.

It is extremely important to consider the perceptions of Black and Latinx parents enduring CWS oversight and surveillance in order to ensure the most supportive environments for children and their parents. The lived experiences of Black and Latinx CWS engaged families are crucial to highlight in all research queries, policy development, and practice protocols, but most especially in efforts to include their voices to the extant literature. Parental voices in CWS research is an essential ingredient for identifying best practices that positively impact the experiences of families under CWS surveillance. If we fail to sufficiently acknowledge the historical contexts of Black and Latinx families, we run the risk of ignoring the ongoing trauma of such surveillance. Future reforms to CWS interventions should be informed by parent's perceptions about the challenges related to ways in which racism and implicit bias appear in service delivery. The harm to Black and Latinx families will persist within all aspects of the CWS as long as we remain complicit in upholding the accepted racist conditions experienced by those most disenfranchised in our society.

The impact of CWS oversight and surveillance can be mitigated by encouraging practitioners to partner with parents in a helping capacity, rather than leaning into an authoritative mindset that comes with unbalanced power dynamics germane to a system designed in the context of a racist society. These deeply rooted power dynamics are inherent in coercive systems, such as the CWS, and they ultimately influence parenting assessments, as well as all decisions made by mandated reporters, practitioners, and service providers. If racism and implicit bias is acknowledged and corrected across all aspects of the CWS, parents will be less likely admonished for their well-intentioned parenting practices, particularly regarding child neglect. Rather, caseworkers would be more inclined to note parent's positive efforts and strive to mitigate parenting challenges specifically among Black and Latinx families. All attempts should be made to circumvent distressed family situations with an oversight framework that prioritizes the lived experiences of CWS-involved families. This type of approach would allow for a shared power dynamic, noted by families as a more positive experience (Dumbrill 2006; Smith 2008), rather than accepting the notion that practitioners have power over parents and consequently their family management. Moreover, we must be cognizant of how consistent surveillance of families causes profound distress and remains emblematic of the racism and oppression these families endure everyday living in our society at large.

CWS-involved families have good reason to be fearful on a daily basis, in large part due to increasingly challenging environmental circumstances; health and mental health disparities exasperated by the national pandemic; consistent lack of access to resources; and deeply rooted, unjust social stratification norms. Efforts to decrease the prevalence of child maltreatment must consider the challenges of Black and Latinx parents living in distressed communities often subjected to systemically oppressive oversight systems. A social justice approach should require the inclusion of parents' perceptions as a path towards improvement of the CWS and parental empowerment. I suggest a shift in the narrative in order to center the voices of Black and Latinx families. Now is the time for legislation that exemplifies the true meaning of equitable treatment of Black and Latinx families. This necessitates a method that accepts as truth, the intrinsic systemic and structural barriers that persistently result in the midst of CWS service receipt.

There is a strong and unyielding cycle of systemic racism that results in increased anguish for Black and Latinx families, as they endure the pain of constant, mandated, or strongly encouraged child welfare oversight. All biased and unjust systems concerned with the well-being of families, including the CWS, should be reimagined in a manner that implements an explicit anti-racist stance. This is critical if we are to truly support struggling families who have been historically disenfranchised based on the color of their skin. Further, all who work within the CWS should remain mindful of the profound and debilitating parental fear based on experiences of racism and oppression across settings, with consideration of multi-layered, diverse contexts. It is imperative to increase our understanding of how racism plays a role in the involvement of Black and Latinx families engaged in CWS services and explicitly commit to honoring the lived experiences of the families we claim to support and empower. This requires an assessment of the CWS from an anti-racist stance.

References

Abner, K. (2014). Dimensions of structural disadvantage: A latent class analysis of a neighborhood measure in child welfare data. *Journal of Social Service Research, 40*(1), 121–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2013.852651.

Ards, S. D., Myers, S. L., Jr., Malkis, A., Sugrue, E., & Zhou, L. (2003). Racial disproportionality in reported and substantiated child abuse and neglect: An examination of systematic bias. *Children and Youth Services Review, 25*(5–6), 375–392. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0190-7409(03)00027-6.

Berger, L. M. (2004). Income, family structure, and child maltreatment risk. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26,* 725–748. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.02.017.

Boyd, R. (2014). African American disproportionality and disparity in child welfare: Toward a comprehensive conceptual framework. *Children and Youth Services Review, 37,* 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.11.013.

Brooks, S. L., & Roberts, D. E. (2002). Social justice and family court reform. *Family Court Review, 40*(4), 453–459. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.174-1617.2002.tb00854.x.

Bundy-Fazioli, K., Briar-Lawson, K., & Hardiman, E. R. (2008). A qualitative examination of power between child welfare workers and parents. *British Journal of Social Work, 39*(8), 1447–1464. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn038.

Cooper, T. A. (2013). Racial bias in foster care: The national debate. *Marquette Law Review, 97*(2), 215–277.

Coulton, C. J., Crampton, D. S., Irwin, M., Spilsbury, J. C., & Korbin, J. E. (2007). How neighborhoods influence child maltreatment: A review of the literature and alternative pathways. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 31*(11–12), 1117–1142.

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Inglis, C. (1996). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York: The New Press.

Dettlaff, A. J., Rivaux, S. R., Baumann, D. J., Fluke, J. D., Rycraft, J. R., & James, J. (2011). Disentangling substantiation: The influence of race, income, and risk on the substantiation decision in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33,* 1630–1637.

Dettlaff, A. J., & Rycraft, J. R. (2008). Deconstructing disproportionality: Views from multiple community stakeholders. *Child Welfare, 87*(2), 37–58.

Drake, B., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2011). NIS interpretations: Race and national incidence studies of child abuse and neglect. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33,* 16–20.

Edwards, F. (2016). Saving children, controlling families: Punishment, redistribution and child protection. *American Sociological Review, 81*(3), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416638652.

Fluke, J.D., Harden, B.J., Jenkins, M.F., & Reuhrdanz, A. (2011). Disparities and disproportionality in child welfare: Analysis of the Research.

Fluke, J. D., Yuan, Y.-Y.T., Hedderson, J., & Curtis, P. A. (2003). Disproportionate representation of race and ethnicity in child maltreatment: Investigation and victimization. *Children and Youth Services Review, 25*(5–6), 359–373. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0190-7409(03)00026-4.

Fong, K. (2017). Child welfare involvement and contexts of poverty: The role of parental adversities, social networks, and social services. *Children and Youth Services Review, 72,* 5–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.10.011.

Font, S. A., Berger, L. M., & Slack, K. S. (2012). Examining racial disproportionality in child protective services case decisions. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(11), 2188–2200. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.07.012.

Foster, H., & Hagan, J. (2015). Punishment regimes and the multilevel effects of parental incarceration: Intergenerational, intersectional, and interinstitutional models of social inequality and exclusion. *Annual Review of Sociology, 41,* 135–158.

Franklin, A. J., Boyd-Franklyn, N., & Kelly, S. (2008). Racism and invisibility: Race-related stress, emotional abuse and psychological trauma for people of color. *Journal of Emotional Abuse, 6*(2–3), 9–30. https://doi.org/10.1300/J135v06n02_02.

Freisthler, B., Merritt, D. H., & LaScala, E. (2006). Understanding the ecology of child maltreatment: A review of the literature and directions for future research. *Child Maltreatment, 11*(3), 263–280. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559506289524.

Given, L. M. (2008). *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Goerge, R. M., & Lee, B. L. (2005). The role of race in foster care placements. In M. Testa & J. Poertner (Eds.), *Race matters in child welfare: The overrepresentation of African American children in the system* (pp. 173–186). Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

Hill, R. B. (2004). Institutional racism in child welfare. *Race and Society, 7*(1), 17–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.racsoc.2004.11.004.

Hill, R. B. (2005). The role of race in parental reunification. In M. Testa & J. Poertner (Eds.), *Race matters in child welfare: The overrepresentation of African American children in the system* (pp. 215–230). Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

Hill, R. B. (2006). Synthesis on disproportionality in child welfare: An update. Casey—CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System. Retrieved June 1, 2020 from https://www.aecf.org/resources/synthesis-of-research-on-disproportionality-in-child-welfare-an-update/.

Kang, J. Y., Romich, J., Hook, J. L., Lee, J., & Marcenko, M. (2019). Family earnings and transfer income among families involved with child welfare. *Child Welfare, 97*(1), 61–83.

Kim, H., Chenot, D., & Ji, J. (2011). Racial/ethnic disparity in child welfare systems: A longitudinal study utilizing the Disparity Index (DI). *Children and Youth Services Review, 33,* 1234–1244. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.02.021.

Klein, S., & Merritt, D. H. (2014). Neighborhood racial & ethnic diversity as a predictor of child welfare system involvement. *Children and Youth Services Review, 41,* 95–105. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.03.009.

Kokaliari, E. D., Roy, A. W., & Taylor, J. (2019). African American perspectives on racial disparities in child removals. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 90,* 139–148. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.12.023.

Kriz, K., & Skivenes, M. (2011). How child welfare workers view their work with racial and ethnic minority families: The United States in contrast to England and Norway. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(10), 1866–1874. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.05.005.

Lanier, P., Maguire-Jack, K., Walsh, T., Drake, B., & Hubel, G. (2014). Race and ethnic differences in early childhood maltreatment in the United States. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 35*(7), 419–426. https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000083.

Merritt, D. H., & Snyder, S. M. (2015). Correlates of optimal behavior among child welfare-involved children: Perceived school peer connectedness, activity participation, social skills, and peer affiliation. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 85*(5), 483–494. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000091.

Miller, K., Cahn, K., Anderson-Nathe, B., Cause, A. G., & Bender, R. (2013). Individual and systemic/structural bias in child welfare decision making: Implications for children and families of color. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35,* 1634–1642.

Mills, A. J., Durepos, G., & Wiebe, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Encyclopedia of case study research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc.

Mixon-Mitchell, D., & Hanna, M. (2017). Race matters: Child protection and the communication process. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 26,* 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2017.1344944.

Nam, Y., Meezan, W., & Danziger, S. K. (2006). Welfare recipients' involvement with child protective services after welfare reform. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 30,* 1181–1199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2006.01.006.

Padgett, D. (2012). *Qualitative social work research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Pager, D., & Shepherd, H. (2008). The sociology of discrimination: Racial discrimination in employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets. *Annual Review of Sociology, 34,* 181–209. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131740.

Putnam-Hornstein, E., Needell, B., King, B., & Johnson-Motoyama, M. (2013). Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 37*(1), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2012.08.005.

Roberts, D. E. (2014). Child protection as surveillance of African American families. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law, 36*(4), 426–437. https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2014.967991.

Rolock, N., & Testa, M. F. (2005). Indicated child abuse and neglect reports: Is the investigation process racially biased? In D. Derrezotes, J. Poertner, & M. F. Testa (Eds.), *Race matters in child welfare: The overrepresentation of African Americans in the system* (pp. 119–130). Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. New York: Liveright Publishing.

Seabrook, R., & Wyatt-Nichol, H. (2016). The ugly side of America: Institutional oppression and race. *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy, 23*(1), 3.

Sedlak, A. J., & Schultz, D. (2005). Racial differences in child protective services investigation of abused and neglected children. In M. Testa & J. Poertner (Eds.), *Race matters in child welfare: The overrepresentation of African American children in the system* (pp. 47–61). Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

Stoltzfus, E. (2005). *Race/ethnicity and child welfare*. Washington DC: Congressional Research Services.

Sykes, B. L., & Pettit, B. (2014). Mass incarceration, family complexity, and the reproduction of childhood disadvantage. *The Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science, 654,* 127–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716214526345.

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2020). Child Maltreatment 2018. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statisticsresearch/child-maltreatment.

Wells, S. J., Merritt, L. M., & Briggs, H. E. (2009). Bias, racism, and evidence-based practice: The case for more focused development of the child welfare evidence base. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*(11), 1160–1171. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.09.002.

Western, B., & Wilderman, C. (2009). The Black family and mass incarceration. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 621,* 221–242. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208324850.

Wise, T. (2010). *Colorblind: The rise of post-racial politics and the retreat from racial equity*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Wulczyn, F., & Lery, B. (2007). *Racial disparity in foster care admissions*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.