

Early Childhood Care and Development Research in Africa: Historical, Conceptual, and Structural Challenges

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ABSTRACT—*This article challenges the specter of the universal child and examines historical, conceptual, and structural factors that have resulted in a virtual absence of African-led contributions to research on early childhood care and development. It considers the dark side of good work, questions who defines “normative and desirable” and how it is measured, and considers ways forward in promoting African research capacity, leadership, identification of key issues, and scholarly engagement with ideas regarding African children’s future and how best to ensure healthy, hopeful, and capable future generations.*

KEYWORDS—*Africa; child development; early childhood care and development research*

This article, designed to provoke discussion at the 2009 Africa symposium sponsored by the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and the University of Victoria, Canada, considers various academic, sociophilosophical, and political forces that have converged to shape a narrow range of understandings regarding children’s care and development that are promoted as normative, universally appropriate, and desirable in the eyes of powerful international development agents. These constructions often echo the dynamics of 19th century social Darwinism, privileging Western perspectives and restricting the development of local possibilities. These approaches, which exist at both child and societal levels, are linear and hierarchical in

nature, providing intrinsic rationales for elitism and inequalities. Western child development science, characterized by its modernist and positivist drive for universals throughout much of the 20th century, has aided political and economic agendas that seek to universalize neoliberal political and economic orientations. Those children and states that fall outside such “normative and desirable” constructions become targets for change under the banner of progress.

This article will challenge the specter of the universal child as part of a globalization process, considering the dark side of good work and questioning who defines “desirable” and how it is measured. It will also consider ways forward that have arisen through other academic orientations over the past two decades. Of focal interest is Africa, a landmass larger than the United States, China, India, Western Europe, and India combined (*The Times Atlas*, 2006), with about 14% of the world’s population and almost 20% of the world’s children and youth under the age of 15 (United Nations Development Program, 2007). Despite Africa’s size and world population share, very few indigenous African voices are heard in the child development literature. Both scientific and popular literature place Africa well outside “normative and desirable.” As such, Africa is a key target for *change*. The form that change may take, and the role that indigenous institutions, governments, and the peoples themselves will play in determining the nature of, and the need for, such change, is the central concern here.

STARTING POINTS

Meetings in Berlin, 1884–1885: Africa Transformed

There are various possible starting points for this article. One could be November 15, 1884, in Berlin. Fourteen countries (of which all but the United States were European) met at the behest of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to “end confusion over the control of Africa” (Rosenberg, 2010). (It is probably not

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necessary to add that no African representatives were present at these meetings.) By February 26, 1885, lines had been drawn, and the Western powers signed an initial set of Agreements. Neither the map of Africa, nor the lives of Africans, would be the same again.

Late 19th Century Europe: Origins of Child Development Theory

This article might also start with other late 19th century activities in Europe that held less immediate implications for Africa and Africans but are highly relevant for both today. Through the social-Darwinist movement, a “scientific” rationale for why peoples around the world differ was advanced—that rationale being evolution, operating through a mechanism of natural selection, pressing from less to more developed forms, from the “savage” to “civilized man” (women being included among the less “advanced”). The child development movement originated at the same time, and not coincidentally, children were placed on a similar developmental continuum from less to more developed over time.

These events put in motion diverse activities that affect sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in the present. The transformed map of SSA that emerged from the Berlin Conference is well known, along with its problematic colonial and postcolonial legacy. However, the transformed map of childhood that emerged at a similar point in time is less apparent, obscured by the powers of modernity, progress, and science to suppress, and even erase, other interpretations and perspectives.

It is this second map, a Western construction of *the child*, with a vast literature, that is of primary interest here. While certain areas of the world have been able to put forward other constructions, and have anchored key elements of early childhood policies and programs to those other ways of understanding (Aotearoa/New Zealand provides a particularly interesting example: Reedy, 1991; New Zealand Ministry of Education [MOE] 1996; Te Kohanga Reo National Trust, 2003), SSA is largely bereft of such initiatives. It has been on the receiving end of colonial ideologies and institutions, and, more recently, those of international and donor organizations, while its own capacity to generate knowledge has declined. This article is written in the spirit of capacity building that is not fundamentally derivative but, instead, generative and inclusive of local as well as Western and other knowledges.

Reconfiguring the Map of Childhood, From the Mid-19th Century to the Late 20th Century

At approximately the same time Darwin undertook his historic voyage on *The Beagle* (1831–1836) and subsequently published *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the most important name in early childhood was Friedrich Froebel. Froebel’s understanding of the nature of childhood was considerably different from that of others who later proposed a “psychology of childhood.” His vision

incorporated a strong spiritual element and an appreciation of the child’s innate goodness and capacity. “Education” he wrote, “must be passive and protective rather than directive, otherwise the free and conscious revelation of the divine spirit in man . . . is lost” (1887, p. 34). Froebel noted that “a child ought to be considered a complete being *during every period of life*” (emphasis added, quoted in Bultman, 2008, p. 1). The Froebelian child was not an empty vessel, an incomplete adult, nor was her or his development amenable to coercion.

Froebel’s ideas were not unusual in Western society at that time (Alcott, 1830), nor in many contemporary societies today, particularly in terms of understanding the child as spiritually endowed and possessing capacities that in certain ways exceed those of adults (see DeLoache & Gottlieb, 2000, for an interesting approach that touches on this topic). By the late 1870s, however, a different image of childhood was being advanced in Europe by individuals such as Ernst Haeckel, one of the first to propose a “science of psychology.” Haeckel connected Darwinian themes with both individual and social evolution: “In order to understand correctly the highly differentiated, delicate mental life of civilized man, we must, therefore, observe not only its gradual awakening in the child, but also its step-by-step development in lower, primitive peoples and in invertebrates” (1879, quoted in Morss, 1990, p. 18). Sully, in *Babies and Science* (1881), continued the theme, aligning the origins of child development theory alongside rationales for colonization:

The modern psychologist, sharing in the spirit of positive science, feels that he must . . . study mind in its simplest forms. . . . [He] carries his eye far afield to the phenomena of savage life, with its simple ideas, crude sentiments and naïve habits. . . . Finally he directs his attention to the mental life of infancy, as fitted to throw most light on the later developments of the human mind.” (1881, quoted in Riley, 1983, p. 47)

One sees in the “science of child development,” from its earliest formulations, a civilizing imperative for the child based on an image of deficiency. A belief in the child’s incompetence and incompleteness continues as a dominant theme throughout the formative years of child study within psychology. One finds its echoes in William James’ classic description of a newborn’s world: “The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin and entrails at once feels that all is one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (1890/1981, p. 488). This image persists in Gesell’s work, and an increasingly powerful supplemental association is put in place—that of maturation as financial investment: “Three is a delightful age. Infancy superannuates at Two and gives way to a higher estate” (1950, p. 40).

These understandings of the child were able to persist in part through psychology’s failure to incorporate culture as a key factor in child development, for, as noted, not all cultures and societies perceive the child in such a way. Cole, in his 1996 critique of psychology’s cultural failing, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and*

Future Discipline, noted Wundt's 1921 formulation of "two psychologies": a "physiological psychology" focusing on the experimental study of immediate experience, and a "higher psychology" (*Volkerpsychologie*) that was contextual in nature and could not be studied using laboratory methods, requiring instead the methods of the descriptive sciences, such as ethnography and linguistics. Cole went on to note that despite Wundt's standing as the founder of scientific psychology, "the only part of his scientific system to win broad acceptance was his advocacy of the experimental method as the criterion of disciplinary legitimacy" (1996, p. 28). With that focus, one witnesses the marginalization of culture within child development.

The experimental method, based on positivism with a belief in an objective and knowable "truth," dominated psychology throughout much of the 20th century. Kessen, for example, reflected on his introduction to psychology in the 1950s with its pursuit of "laws of behavior [that] were to be perfectly general, indifferent to species, age, gender or specific psychological content" (1981, p. 27). It is noteworthy that while psychology continued for the next two decades to strengthen its positivist orientation toward child development, the physical sciences, which psychology had sought to emulate in order to be understood as a true science ("physics-envy" was the term borrowed by Sheldon White, 1996, p. xi), were engaged in processes of poststructural and postmodern critique and deconstruction, questioning the very possibility of separating the seer from the seen, the subjective from the objective. Such perspectives would seem very appropriate for engagement by psychology as a *social* science; however, the grip of positivism and quests for universals remained strong throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Child Development, International Development, and the Pursuit of Universal Truths

It was during this period of child development's positivist and universalist ascendancy under the banner of psychology that the international development community began to elevate the child as a key component of the development equation. Some, including this author, highlight 1989/1990 as a pivotal point: with approval of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, United Nations, 1989) and acknowledgment at the Jomtien, Thailand, Education for All (EFA) meeting that "learning begins at birth": (UNESCO, 1990), the young child was brought onto the international stage. Rather than grounding international child agendas in culture and context, as one might expect (and hope for), international development leadership accepted psychology's largely universalist understandings of child development. Such understandings were rarely challenged despite their foundation in Western populations and sociophilosophical constructs and their lack of global representation (Arnett, 2008; Kim & Park, 2006; Levine & New, 2008; Pence & Hix-Small, 2007). The universalist nature of the CRC and EFA complemented and reinforced the universalism inherent in the dominant discourse of general psychology at the time.

The pronouncements of such influential discourses within general psychology were quickly absorbed and transmitted broadly by international organizations hungry for direction, legitimization, and "products" for a global community now primed as recipients for child-focused agendas. These policy and program agendas, as is too often the case in politically and ideologically driven initiatives, had little time for exceptions, nuances, or counterdiscourses, seeking instead to keep agendas "focused."

The demand for ideas, services, and products to feed newfound international development interests in the young child led to the creation of what are often termed "best practices." Rather than arising locally, "best practices" are typically imported from Western sources, often through the support of Western donors. They tend to be seen as rising above ethical concerns of cultural imperialism, but, nevertheless, the "trading dynamic" is a familiar one. As part of physical colonization, such a practice was called mercantilism, in which "the goal of the [colonizing or supplier] state was to export the largest possible quantity of its products and import as little as possible thus establishing a favorable balance of trade" (*Random House Dictionary*, 1969, p. 896). The balance of trade in child development ideas has indeed favored the West. Such processes enhance and perpetuate inequalities. It is a system that serves neither Science nor Africa well.

Such systems, proclaimed as progressive and in the recipients' best interests, are often regressive, undermining the recipients' ability to build local capacity in order to engage in their own problem-identification and problem-alleviating activities. Creativity, confidence, diversity, leadership, and capacity are all diminished through such processes.

The timing of the entry of the early childhood care and development field into international development was, arguably, unfortunate. In 1989/1990, psychology's hold on child study was strong, despite influential internal critics like Urie Bronfenbrenner, who famously noted that even within the Western context, "much of developmental psychology, as it now exists, is *the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time*" (1979, p. 19). The timing was also unfortunate because child-focused scholarship would soon see the entry of other social science disciplines (e.g., sociology, with a paradigm of social constructionism that poses a significant and useful challenge to universalism [James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994] and anthropology, which reengaged with child issues following a period of lower visibility after the decline of the culture and personality movement [Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; LeVine et al., 1994]).

The 1990s also saw important culturally related developments within psychology, including a strengthening of cross-cultural psychology (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992; Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1990), cultural psychology (Cole, 1996; Greenfield, 2000; Shweder, 1990), and indigenous psychology (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006; Sinha, 1997). Within child development and early childhood studies, a host of poststructural

and postmodern publications were forming a strong and vibrant international literature (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Morss, 1990; Moss & Pence, 1994). Indigenous and postcolonial early childhood studies, with important implications for work in Africa, also became increasingly available throughout the 1990s and the past decade (Ball & Pence, 2006; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Nsamenang, 1992, 2008; Viruru, 2001), and the most recent handbook in the Denzin and Lincoln series *Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008) has much of value regarding research methodologies for early childhood and all social sciences in the Majority (“developing”) World.

While it is unfortunate that such a broad, vibrant, and contextually sensitive literature was not fully on hand for the initial entry of child development issues onto the world stage of international development, the good news is that such diversity of perspectives and disciplines *is* increasingly available in the 21st century, and it *can* be employed in strengthening African and other Majority World contributions to child development and child study literatures.

WAYS FORWARD

Pursuing new ways forward is more possible today than it was two decades ago. The conditions that led to international organizations’ largely unchallenged acceptance of universalist and normalizing perspectives are less secure than they were. Other disciplines and subdisciplines, with additional methods and understandings, have entered the child arena; critical theory and poststructuralism have usefully problematized psychology and child development; and indigenous and local perspectives are more respected and powerful than previously.

Looking forward should not preclude looking back. As Super, Harkness, Barry, and Zeitlin note in their article (this issue), and as evidenced by the long-standing work of Serpell (this issue), good work *has* come out of Africa in the past. Reviewing these authors’ citations, however, one cannot but be struck by two phenomena: the prevalence of works led by Western researchers, and the relative absence of studies led by African scholars. This “failure to thrive” is not, this author believes, the result of poor research leadership, a lack of commitment to indigenous development, uninteresting theories, or limitations in research possibilities. Indeed, some very important theoretical and empirical questions have been touched on in this earlier work and deserve to be pursued further. For example, both Serpell’s earlier work regarding local understandings of intelligence and his more recent work on schooling in Africa represent important contributions that should be extended in the future (Serpell, 1982, 1993). In addition, LeVine et al.’s (1994) historic and detailed work in East Africa provides useful inspiration for other parts of Africa. Weisner and Gallimore’s (1977) identification of the importance

of child-to-child caregiving around the world is familiar to anyone who has spent more than a few days in Africa, yet it has not been adequately pursued as a scholarly focus. (Note, however, the important practice-focused work of the Child-to-Child Trust [<http://www.child-to-child.org>] dating from 1979.) More recently, the HIV/AIDS pandemic in southern and eastern Africa is increasingly examining impacts on children, with implications for deeper understandings of theories of attachment, resilience, and development over time. As Oburu notes, “there is a possibility that the alarmist construction of the orphan situation in areas heavily infected with HIV/AIDS underrates the capacity of orphans . . . to overcome adversities (Abebe & Aase, 2007; Oburu, 2009). And finally, the work of Super and Harkness (1986, 2002) on the developmental niche deserves continuing attention—and it may be getting some from experienced international development specialists who are mounting useful critiques of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) “in context.”

This last reference, relating specifically to a recent white paper by Bissel, Boyden, Cook, and Myers (2009), introduces another rich area for African-led child-related research: examining closely the impact and implications of international conventions, declarations, and movements on families, communities, institutions, policies, and politics in Africa as they relate to children’s lives. These authors, all experienced in international development and in work with the CRC, note that

researchers and practitioners involved in child rights and protection issues are questioning the paradigms and strategies now dominating national and international efforts. . . . *There is a growing realization that the real issue may have to do with universalized responses to problems having locally specific characteristics.*” (p. 1, emphasis added)

Associated with such studies would be research regarding the impacts of a broad set of interventions and programs funded by the international donor community—an acronym forest of international, governmental, nongovernmental, community-based, and faith-based organizations and related groups. This aid and intervention work, ubiquitous across most of SSA, represents an expenditure of funds supporting “child welfare” that exceeds the expenditures on many services provided by host governments. These familiar, foreign “elephants in the rooms” of SSA (as unfamiliar in the West as real elephants) are an extraordinarily important part of the lives of large numbers of Africa’s children and families, who are both recipients of services and sometimes employed as service providers. However, despite their omnipresence and importance, these local organizations rarely feature in independent research, appearing, if they do, only in project-focused evaluations of service or policy reports. This conspicuous research absence may be changing, if a recent doctoral dissertation is an indication. Dr. Dennis Banda of Zambia focused his study on a critical assessment of the EFA (2008), arguing that “formal schooling education . . . may not be the right

vehicle to deliver EFA goals” and proposing that “African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) can enhance the achievement of EFA” (p. xi). In support of not overlooking what has come before, Banda cites educational reports from as early as 1847 flagging the importance of local knowledge, and he also notes two reports from the 1920s with similar recommendations (Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1922, 1925).

Banda’s work touches on critical theory and postcolonial research, a particularly vibrant area of recent scholarship. As noted earlier, Denzin and Lincoln’s latest volume, coedited with Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Denzin et al., 2008), reminds the academy that “the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples” (Smith, 1999). Critical and indigenous methodologies have had a limited impact on African child research to date, but the excesses of colonialism *are* a remembered history across the continent. Their continuing presence is evident in Nsamenang’s (2006) critique: “Whenever Euro-American ECD programs are applied as the gold standards by which to measure forms of Africa’s ECD, they forcibly deny equity to and recognition of Africa’s ways of provisioning for its young, thereby depriving the continent a niche in global ECD knowledge” (p. 296). Concerns such as those voiced by Smith and Nsamenang will find a fertile ground in many parts of Africa in the years ahead—they are part of a broad mosaic of indigenous and culturally sensitive studies that can inform contextually suitable ways forward for children’s development. Their approach and potential, as evidenced by the unique contributions of the Maori “500 PhDs in 5 years” initiative (<http://www.maramatanga.co.nz>), will open up pathways of understanding and knowledge not accessible through Western lenses.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

This article has argued that African child development and international ECD research will be best served by a broad range of disciplines, methods, and orientations. Consideration should be given to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches as a priority for African tertiary institutions. And in order to maximize potential social benefits of such work, this diversity of interests and approaches should extend beyond the academy to include perspectives from governmental, nongovernmental, and local groups, because all are key players in addressing African children’s well-being. Ideally, such interactions would extend beyond individual countries to include regional and subregional interactions and networks as well.

Two such networks are attempting to promote regional development. One is in child development, led by the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development (ISSBD); the other, in ECD, is based on the SRCD-supported event that led to this Special Section of *Child Development Perspectives* (Marfo & Pence, 2009) in combination with the leadership and capacity-

building program of the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU; <http://www.ecdву.org> and Pence, Habtom, & Chalamanda, 2008). Both face significant challenges in moving forward, not least of which is sufficient financial resources to activate and sustain networks over time and to fund research proposals that emerge from such interactions. Such initiatives should be based on the principle of promoting *African* capacity, *African* leadership, *African* identification of key issues, and *African* scholarly engagement with ideas regarding *African* children’s future and how best to ensure healthy, hopeful, and capable future generations. These ideas should be supported to grow and develop in mutually beneficial exchanges with ideas and research from other parts of the world.

Research colonization and mercantilist trade in child development ideas should become a thing of the past. The “science of child development” as advanced by influential international organizations too often has roots in colonial attitudes and social-Darwinist beliefs that carry sorrow as well as promise. Child-related developments in academia—not only in psychology (cultural and indigenous psychology, for example) but also in other disciplines, including sociology and anthropology, and the emergence of critical perspectives that range from issues of gender through poststructural and postcolonial viewpoints—offer an increasing range of opportunities for African scholars.

When Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he responded, “I think it would be a good idea.” This article echoes his view. A truly international, inclusive “science of child development” is a good idea—and one deserving of enhanced and appropriate international support.

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