

Contemporary Public Policy Influencing Children and Families: “Compassionate” Social Provision OR the Regulation of “Others”?

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Critical analysis of change in public policy within and across nations recognizes that the education and welfare of children, families, and all citizens is intertwined with economics, politics, and cultural discourse(s). In the United States, increasingly narrow media, judiciary, and academic discourses have supported legislative actions that limit social provision and opportunity for a range of children and family types, including linguistic and cultural minorities (Cannella, 2004a). This narrowing of discourses and shift in policies is not simply a change in U.S. policy toward children and their families within American borders, but is used to support a particular political agenda and represents narrowing of perspectives spreading around the world. As examples, the language of education has shifted from a discourse of equality of opportunity to blame and punishment; rather than focusing on justice and societal inequities, those who are in need are labeled as freeloaders with parents held responsible for all forms of social provision for the health and education (e.g., care) of their children (Lincoln & Cannella, 2004a). In the name of accountability, experts in the administration of achievement and ability tests are ‘training and testing the world’ - without even a discussion of the embeddedness of transnational capital-

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ism in the testing agenda, monocultural views of knowledge, or even a passing acknowledgement of the conceptual, cultural, and contextual limits of testing as construct (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

A shift in resources is occurring so that those who “talk the talk” and “play the game” are the recipients of social, intellectual, and material support. A bolstered patriarchal enactment of Empire within U.S. borders, as well as around the world, is generating an even more restricted (both reconceptualizing and reinscribing) form of neoliberal politics that places hyper-capitalism at the for-front. The purpose of this paper is to describe possible (however contingently, and with a postmodern avoidance of the construction of new “truths”) disciplinary and regulatory methods that are being used to impose this “new” hyper-capitalism on children and their families. While actually and ultimately impacting all of us, this imposition most often targets children and families from socially excluded and marginalized groups (‘those’ within the U.S. who have most in common with the ‘less powerful’ around the world because of their skin color, gender, socioeconomic level, language, and/or religious practices). In the paper, we combine hybrid perspectives like postcolonial critique, feminist, and poststructural analysis to further hybridize our unveiling of these hyper-capitalist (and patriarchal) public policy methods. Further, the disciplinary and regulatory methods will be illustrated by focusing our examples on specific revisions or discourses related to Child Health and Welfare, Education and Care, and Family/Cultural/Language Diversity. Finally, we focus on the need for an international network of critical social science research that constructs new discourses and forms of public communication, as well as academic activism.

“Compassionate” Discourses and Constructing the “Other”

Although the U.S. and Europe have for quite some time perpetuated modernist views of the world that focus on neoliberal patriarchy and economic/intellectual forms of empire, over the past 30 years (especially in the U.S.) this practice has emerged with a vengeance as a reconceptualized invasive network of thought that attempts to silence all forms of contestation. Some believe that this purposeful construction of discourses, redistribution of resources, and creation of power networks is in reaction and backlash to the civil rights gains by people of color, the poor, and women of the 1960s (Lincoln & Cannella, 2004a; Berry, 1997; Faludi, 1991). Yet, in his 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush introduced a key theme that was again invoked in 2004, the notion of “compassionate conservatism” a phrase that he associated with government helping “people improve their lives, not try to run their lives.”

(Bush, 2004 Republican National Convention). As educators who are concerned with the ways that public policy influences the lives of those who are younger, we begin (however briefly) by examining the origin and content of that compassionate conservatism. Does it actually create an avenue for understanding the complexity, difficulty, and diversity of people's lives and providing equitable and just social provision? OR Does it create an illusion that would further construct, control, and marginalize the 'other' under new forms of patriarchal capitalism that further limit identities and possibilities?

Compassionate Discourses OR the Grand Illusion

Even according to the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research website (a well known conservative think tank), the reshaping of thought in ways that would reject the welfare state but support charity and values was being explored long before Mr. Bush used the compassionate conservative terminology in his first campaign for the presidency (Mitchell, 2000). While still the governor of Texas, Karl Rove introduced Bush to Myron Magnet, from the Manhattan Institute and author of *The Dream and the Nightmare*, a book that proposed that the counterculture and 1960's attitudes were the reason for the existence of the underclass, ideas that Bush embraced regarding culture. Additionally, in 1995, the House Speaker Newt Gingrich was so captivated by the similar work of Marvin Olasky titled, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, that he gave copies to freshmen representatives. Olasky, who later became a University of Texas professor and whose book was funded by the Bradley and Heritage Foundations (Media Transparency, 2005), also expressed the belief that the 1960's social revolution was a disaster, labeling the War on Poverty as an attempt to remove shame from government provision (Mitchell, 2000). Karl Rove introduced Mr. Bush to Olasky with Bush claiming that he mainly learned about the concepts from talking with Olasky (as compared to reading the books). Most recently, Marvin Olasky published the book *Compassionate Conservatism* (with a forward by George W. Bush) that describes compassionate conservatism with seven adjectives: basic, challenging, diverse, effective, assertive, faith-based and gradual (Murphree, 2003). Multiple resources can be found, including the George W. Bush website: <http://compassionate.conservative.com/>.

The concept is clearly grounded in disdain for civil rights activism, in shaming those whose life conditions necessitate social provision, and in the expectation of faith-based, charitable assistance facilitated through neoliberal hypercapitalism. For some there may be, at least, an illusion of compassion; for most, the discourse serves as a position from which to

further impose patriarchal othering (the all-knowing father who enforces “what’s best” for his savage, ignorant children).

Constructing the “Other”

Public policy that is embedded within a discourse of compassionate conservatism constructs a wide range of individuals and groups (both children and adults) as the ‘other.’ The notion of alterity or ‘othering’ can be understood as both a psychological and a sociological phenomenon from a postcolonial perspective. The self identity is constructed as differing ‘from,’ while sociologically the ‘us’ is excluded from the ‘them.’ One group constructs the other’s difference, a danger that “depends on the denigration of the other” (Greenberg, 2003, paragraph 5). A subject (individual or group) is defined as inferior, as commodity, and as the proof of the need for the imposition of power (Schwalbe, Goodwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, & Wolkomir, 2000). Further, othering produces and is produced by patriarchy, as a new patriarchal capitalism emerges (which has always been inextricably tied to colonialism)—a kind of hypercapitalism that is constituted and inscribed and complicit in the production of a hyperpower.

Patriarchy. Our biases as feminist are that “Western” thought (and by extension, capitalism and U.S. Empire) is to some extent an elaboration of rationalist, control oriented patriarchy. As Lerner (1986, 1993) illustrates, the existence of patriarchy and its belief in male superiority can be located before the emergence of Western thought, as well as found embedded within both modernist and postmodernist thinking. Long ago, Aristotle expressed the belief that some are suited for citizenship and others are not: “the one rules and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity extends to all mankind” (1941, p. 1132). The U.S. constitution, which in modern media and dominant discourse is lauded as the foundation of freedom and democracy, excluded women as we were not counted in the representative population, given voting rights, or considered citizens (and to a lesser degree excluded males of color who could not vote but were counted as a lesser percentage of the population for representation). In a conversation with his wife, President John Adams further illustrated both this belief in patriarchy and its ties to colonialism as he referred to women as another tribe like Negroes, Indians, and children. This imperialist assumption of superiority is further demonstrated in his concern that if “male systems” (read Euro-American, white male systems) were changed, chaos would be the result (as cited in Butterfield, Friedlaender, & Kline, 1975, p. 123). The interconnectedness between patriarchy and imperialism cannot be denied. As bell hooks points out in *Outlaw Culture*: “For contemporary critics to condemn the

imperialism of the white colonizer without critiquing patriarchy is a tactic that seeks to minimize the particular ways gender determines the specific forms oppression may take" (1994, p. 203). From a public policy perspective, this construction of the gendered 'other' is fully illustrated through political theory itself (Pateman, 1998), and through pay inequity, marriage and reproductive discourses and legislation that would control women's bodies, forms of "scientific" legitimation that disqualify subjectivity, and a range of discourses regarding mothering (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

Hypercapitalism. Although there are multiple definitions for capitalism, we would introduce a few changes to market perspective that have resulted in what some have called hypercapitalism. First, Rifkin (2000) explains that the primary method for generating wealth in the US economy has shifted from the marketing of goods created by the conversion of physical resources to the commodification of cultural human experience. The economy absorbs culture, as the bonds that hold society together become entirely commercial. Second is the hegemonic hold on contemporary democratic societies exhibited by large corporations, so much so that corporate identities have been granted access to laws that are most often associated with individual human rights, resulting in a type of super entity with greater rights than individual people (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Chomsky, 1999; Horwitz, 1999). Further, global or 'transnational' corporations are no longer limited by national boundaries, laws, or local concerns as claims are made that they have grown beyond national interests (Korten, 2001). Euro-American history could be said to be experiencing a third moment beyond religion or science in which capitalism is ultimately viewed as the foundation for human interpretation, representation, and power—as the solution to all human problems. Whether compassionate, religious, or scientific terminologies are invoked, the "bottom line" is hypercapitalist patriarchal interest and interpretation in public policy agendas and actions.

Disciplinary/Regulatory Practices

Interpretations of power, especially those of poststructuralists like Michel Foucault and related postcolonial critiques (Young, 2001), offer much for our understanding of public policy that is embedded within hypercapitalist patriarchy. Additionally, postcolonial critique is committed to political liberation as "new forms of engaged theoretical work" (p. 11) are developed. New forms of political action are assumed to be possible when diverse disciplines and intellectual traditions are crossed. Using, and combining, these hybrid perspectives as foundations for analysis, we would describe four technologies of power that we see emerging as related

to contemporary childhood public policy. These technologies are: language/signification as a mechanism of power construction, technologies of invisibility/silencing, co-optation of identities through representation, and corporatization. Language/signification as mechanisms of power are perhaps the most obvious and most thoroughly developed - however, we believe that because of the domination of language in western thought, the construct must always be considered when examining methodologies of power. Notions of invisibility/silence and co-optation are considerations that are grounded in the experiences of the colonized and are often minimalized through the power of language. Finally, capitalism and (perhaps even more importantly) the corporatization of the world may be the greatest contemporary influence on all of us and the public policies that impact our lives, whether child or adult.

Language/Signification as a Mechanism of Power

Foucault and a range of postcolonial scholars (Loomba, 1998) have clearly explained the ways in which language (or more complexly, discourse) functions as a mechanism of power, “systematically forming the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Rooted in human actions and institutions, discourse joins and produces—and is further produced by—power and knowledge. Although we would always want to challenge our own “truth oriented” language, we must at least propose (with past others) that to a major extent, discourses are exercises of power. Individuals living within various discourse practices find it difficult to think beyond or challenge those practices. Additionally, without taking the time to discuss semiotic theory expressly, one should also mention that signification, construction of particular signifier words or images to represent abstractions or ideas (Saussure, 1986), must be recognized within this explanation of language as mechanism for power and the perpetuation of public policy agendas. Further, signification can actually be multiple and mask particular agendas. The term ‘compassionate conservative’ (as already discussed) is an excellent example as words are used to signify kindness and caring, while actually masking hypercapitalist patriarchal agendas.

Discourses (and the languages tied to them) as mechanisms of power are especially important when we examine contemporary public policy related to children and their families. We believe that contemporarily, we can literally refer to the use of language (without even addressing the multiple and netlike discourse actions and artifacts) in the construction of contemporary public policy. Regarding so many issues, whether related to welfare reform and social provision, the denial of linguistic

diversity, or child education and care, we are living within a context (and historical time period) in which simplistic, even compassionate, language is being constructed and used to narrow value structures, to normalize, to control, and to create individuals who believe that they are standing up for what's best for everyone to create a better, freer, more democratic world.

Technologies of Invisibility/Silencing

The demand for an invisible, silent presence (an existence that is often, from a values perspective, associated with the nonhuman, wasteful, and in need of re-channeling or even eradication) is a common colonizing practice that (1) creates invisible power for those who would demand invisibility, and (2) constructs a group of people (and their nonexistent, or at best, unworthy, knowledges and ways of being in the world) as marginal and without voice in a world that demands formal expressive power. To explain, Stephan (2001) has illustrated the ways that much of 19th century colonization in Latin America served to make existence invisible. Attempts were made to change habits, behaviors, customs, and diverse forms of expression as physicians, scholars, teachers, and police sought to repress “uncivilized deviations” (p. 317) by imposing silence, restraint, and grammatically correct and “standardized” language (Cannella & Viruru, 2004).

Harding (1998) describes how this invisibility is maintained (and even newly constructed) contemporarily as particular forms of work and methods of knowledge production are marginalized and hidden away from the center of power. Further, the exclusion of voices and knowledges that do not fit Western technologies and systems of knowledge production are deliberate and planned to result in “one uniquely universally valid perfect reflection of nature’s order” (p. 153). From an empiricist perspective, these knowledges that are not spoken or written then become irrelevant (as if nonexistent).

Over the past several years, this silencing and making of the existing invisible can be found in a wide range of public policies that either directly or indirectly (sometimes even less obviously but covertly) impact children. Examples include the closing of the White House Office of Women’s Initiatives and Outreach that had focused on women’s and family life conditions in general for decades with women as the dominant visible voices, the changing of the Office of Bilingual Education to the Office of English Language Acquisition, and the establishment of groups (e.g. Focus on the Family), foundations (e.g., Heritage Foundation), and think tanks (e.g., Manhattan Institute) that have generated and inscribed (at times, even reinscribed) particular narrowed, conservative neoliberal

views of the world into the media, academia, and the judiciary (Cannella, 2004a; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004b; Covington 1998). These inscriptions are attempts to silence and make invisible (as if nonexistent) multiple life experiences and ways of understanding and interpreting the world—as not human, not worthy, not moral—as deviations to be eliminated.

Co-optation of Identities through Representation

Notions of representation are used in relation to (1) representative government (as associated with democracy and the attainment of representative voice), as well as (2) the construction of identities (whether individual or group). Colonization is commonly assumed to have ended if formerly controlled peoples have gained access in democratic societies through representation (Williams, 1998). However, according to Williams, representation can lead to an illusion of fairness, equity, voice, and governmental response. Representative government assumes trust, equal access, and equitable conflict resolution. Issues of trust have often resulted in marginalized groups viewing elected representation as pointless as they have experienced individual representatives and government systems that have refused to respond to voices that were considered disruptive. As Gloria Anzaldua proposed “.....perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory.” (1987, p. 101).

Further, multiple perspectives have addressed the ways that representation serves to construct identity, as well as co-opt and even control beliefs about self and others. As Foucault (1972) has discussed for example, rules of formation that create regulations for what is accepted and excluded (produced and producing within discourses) impose disciplinary power over human bodies as the desire to be “normal” (whatever that might be) is inscribed. Contemporarily, the languages of values, morality, and accountability construct docile bodies that judge themselves (and are judged by the system) as normal or abnormal—as good teachers, parents, even good and normal children. Obviously, identity representation (of individuals and groups through normative, moral, or other discourses) is produced by and reproduces power. Additionally, Stoler and Cooper (1997) discuss how societal elites have historically created power for themselves by using representation in the form of categorization. Groups have been created (and labeled) as powerless, needy, uncivilized, objects of salvation, and possessing universal identities; people of color, children, women, and those who do not speak English have been represented as savage, without discipline, without intellect, developing, immature, and on and on.

In the U.S. contemporarily, the *No Child Left Behind Act 2001* (NCLB) legislation (and supporting discourses and forms of activism) is a well documented example of the use of technologies of co-optation of identities through representation. Regulatory orientations have reconstructed, revised and reinscribed the 'normal' through such activities as the National Research Council Report, the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences, and discourses of evidence and scientifically-based research—discourses that purposely attempt to discredit (and therefore silence) postmodern epistemologies or any views of the world that are not linear, replicable, and most importantly, representative of the dominant (see special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2004, 10, 1). An illusion of representation is created as the act (NCLB) stresses local control and options for parents while creating narrowed identities that are required to be clients of the testing industry and subjects of entrepreneurs who would sell tutoring services.

Technologies of Corporatization

The notion that corporations are now given human rights and have gained power beyond national (and obviously human) interests has already been mentioned as an issue that we would relate to hypercapitalism. However, corporate discourses are emerging as major technologies of power related to public policy and social provision. We have all been aware for quite some time that we were undergoing a corporate construction of childhood (Kincheloe, 2002; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997), a construction that viewed children first and foremost as consumers or clients, as people who would be 'marketed to' and who could influence spending. However, we have not functioned as if we were aware of the invasive corporatization that increasingly constitutes all of us. As Said (1996) described regarding orientalism, the corporate institution (and in this case the term corporate actually represents both meanings) is cultivating ways of knowing, interpreting, and representing the world, as well as constructing the ways that citizens are to feel, believe, and act. Corporate values are literally creating (and being used to construct) new value structures, beliefs about knowledge and each other, and forms of action. Three obvious examples, *privatization, competition, and profiteering*, are accepted belief structures that have already influenced public policy. Sue Books (2002) provides an excellent discussion of the embeddedness of privatization within the foster care and adoption changes to the 1996 welfare law; the inequities created for the children involved through privatization have not even been acknowledged by the public, much less analyzed and critiqued. One would assume that the

public either does not care, is not informed, or uncritically accepts the wisdom of corporatization. This technology and the discourses associated with it may be the strongest and most influential on public policies that impact children and their families.

An Emerging Contemporary Example:

The New Freedom to Label all as Clients/Patients for Mental Screening

While we in this paper have mentioned legislation like NCLB and in the past investigated policies that range from the imposition of marriage through welfare reform (that has resulted in greater numbers of children living in poverty) to the elimination of Educational Resources Information Centers, to the growing hegemony of English, there are a range of other public policies that could be addressed. These combinations of public policies and discourse practices include decreasing funding for child care within a context that demonizes women who work, attempts to reduce low cost housing although housing availability continues to be a major avenue for reducing child and family poverty, and cuts to environmental protection (obviously a health and welfare issue for all children). Each of these (and other) issues could be explored in detail. However, in the space that we have here, we would like to introduce an example of discourses, actions, and potential policies that are emerging around the issue of child (and adult) mental health. Although the issues are just beginning to be addressed, one can already hypothesize concerning technologies of power that are being imposed (especially if familiar with the history of NCLB).

In 2001, George W. Bush established by Executive Order the New Freedom Initiative with the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health as a major component. The group was charged to make recommendations to improve the nation's mental health system. Since that time, the group has developed an elaborate set of recommendations that they believe would accomplish six goals (President's New Freedom Commission, 2005). Currently, grant proposals for states to transform mental health have been requested that represents a potential \$18.8 million dollars in awards (USDHHS, 2005). The language that would assist others with health problems, remove the stigma of mental illness, and improve a fragmented system is language to which we almost all respond positively. We find it difficult to argue with providing as much assistance as possible to those in need (whether mentally or physically), just as we all agreed that we should create learning environments in which "no child is left behind." However, when we look at the languages and technologies of the present, the need for critique of these potential mental health policies becomes necessary.

First, the language of concern for those dealing with mental issues becomes difficult to challenge—further, signifiers like eliminating stigma, sharing in decision making, and consumer and family centered services, support the notion that the agenda would truly help others. However, this compassionate language makes possible various other technologies of power—makes possible the silencing, co-optation, and corporatization of others. As details are examined, statements like the following can be found throughout that may illustrate these looming possibilities:

(1) “Mental illnesses are shockingly common; they affect almost every American family” (President’s New Freedom Commission, p. 1). — We would mention that if we examine the critical history of mental illness (as in the work of Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* or *The Birth of the Clinic*, we recognize the complexity and diversity of constructions of mental illness and the complicity of society, and historical/political/contextual value structures in constructions of mental expectations, desires, conditions, and the valuing of oneself. Further, the statement sounds tragic and shocking, but it actually tells us nothing about real people.

(2) “... early detection of mental health problems in children and adults—through routine and comprehensive testing and screening — will be an expected and typical occurrence.” (Commission, p. 9) — This statement opens the door for the co-optation of all of our identities (whether child or adult) as a population of the mentally ill. Further, we are being placed in the position of accepting a new “normal” in which we all are continuously tested for mental problems.

(3) As a method of implementing continued services for children, the following is highlighted: “Increase the number of schools that provide school-based mental health treatment services (note that school-based clinicians need not be on the school payroll but can, rather, be contracted)” (USDHHS, RFP, p. 42). — This recommendation creates avenues for all types of privatization, profiteering, and corporatization.

These are just examples of a range of issues that include initial funding for only those who can leverage multiple sources of funding, the continued use of evidence-based discourses, the labeling up-front of children as all requiring screening for serious emotional disturbance, the privileging of clinicians and interventions, the expectation that anyone receiving assistance (for example welfare recipients) must all be continuously screened, and on and on. Who will decide who is mentally ill? How can stigma be avoided when the issue is constructed as a crisis? Will testing and intervention be imposed on all schools and child care services? Who will make money and gain power? Who will be further labeled and stigmatized? The imposition of screening and intervention for mental

illness may be our new NCLB (and we are still living with the public policy and services disaster created by NCLB).

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