



The meaning and making of childhood in the era of globalization: Challenges for social work

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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid in social work literature to the ways in which forces of globalization are shaping understandings of childhood, policies affecting children and youth, and the everyday lives of young people. The authors argue that this lack of attention is problematic given the growing evidence of the effects of globalization on the experiences of children and youth and the implications for social work practice with young people in the U.S. The authors explore the relationship between childhood and globalization, paying particular attention to the social construction of childhood and the logic and practices of neoliberalism. Five distinct yet interrelated processes through which globalizing forces affect children's lives are put forth and addressed: marketization, marginalization, medicalization, militarization, and mobilization. The authors argue that these processes shape not only the experiences of children and youth but also social work policies and practices. They offer diverse examples of ways in which these forces play out and consider the implications for contemporary social work practice.

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1. Introduction

Confronted with the urgency of 21st century political and economic crises regarding issues from health care and welfare, to employment, immigration, and social security, social workers in the U.S. are starting to turn their attention to questions of globalization and the implications for social work practice (Kilty & Segal, 2006; Polack, 2004). Some have addressed ways in which forces of globalization are connected to changes and challenges in domestic social policies and practices (Dominelli, 1999; Ife, 2000; Reisch, 1998, 2006). Others have engaged in debates over the risks and benefits of globalization and considered the relevance for social justice and human rights (Polack, 2004; Ferguson, Lavalette, & Whitmore, 2005; Midgley, 2004; Van Wormer, 2005). However, there has been little discussion within the profession of the ways in which forces of political and economic globalization shape our understandings of childhood, the policies affecting children and youth, or the everyday lives of young people. When attention is paid to children in the era of globalization, the focus is generally on children facing the ravages of war, famine, disease, and displacement outside U.S. borders. Social workers in the U.S. tend to see these concerns as distinct and separable from the everyday domestic struggles of the child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and mental health systems. This lack of

attention is problematic because there is growing evidence that forms and processes of globalization are insinuating themselves into the lives of children, transforming the experiences of children and youth, and reconfiguring the very meaning of childhood and nature of child-serving institutions in the process (Chin, 2003; Fass, 2007; Stephens, 1995). The effects of globalization on children can be felt both directly, through policies that have reduced the social safety net or excluded certain young people from institutions of childhood, and indirectly, through changing ideas about the dangers and dangerousness of youth.

In this article we make connections between childhood and globalization and provoke discussion about the everyday effects of globalization in children's lives. We challenge social workers in the U.S. to ask questions about the processes and consequences of globalization in relationship to their practice with children and youth and to consider why a critical literacy regarding globalization and neoliberalism might be relevant to practice. We draw on a burgeoning interdisciplinary social science literature that addresses conceptions of childhood, children's experiences, and intergenerational relationships in the context of globalization to explore several questions (Cole & Durham, 2007, 2008; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Fass, 2007; Stephens, 1995). What is the relationship between globalization and childhood? How are processes of globalization shaping not only the lives of children but also the very meanings of childhood? What do social workers in the U.S. need to understand about processes of globalization, the social construction of childhood, and the relationship between the two in

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order to have a context for assessing and addressing the implications for social work policy and practice with children in a global era? We begin by presenting our understanding of globalization and, in particular, we address how economic globalization has been shaped by the logic and practices of neoliberalism. We draw from contemporary social work scholarship on the ideology and policies of neoliberalism and the consequences in the lives of marginalized groups to make the case for why these issues matter for practice with children and youth (George, 2006; Ife, 2000; Karger, 2005; Kilty, 2006; Kingfisher, 2002; Reese, 2007; Reisch, 2006). We contend that a critical grasp of economic globalization and neoliberalism is key to understanding not only the contemporary context of practice with children and youth, but also the very ways in which childhood and youth are being constructed at this moment of deep economic uncertainty.

Second, we address childhood as a social construction, considering the dynamic nature of the meaning of childhood and experiences of children across space and time. This paradigm of childhood challenges the dominant view within social work of childhood as a universal experience marked by predictable stages of bio-psycho-social development. It informs thinking about the ways in which ideas about children and childhood as well as the realities of children's lives are configured within particular political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts and encourages research on the links between a changing global order and the lives of children and youth.

Finally, we put forth five distinct yet interrelated processes through which globalizing forces affect the everyday lives of children: 1) marketization, 2) marginalization, 3) medicalization, 4) militarization, and 5) mobilization. We contend that these processes not only shape the experiences of children, but also shape the ways in which we construct both our understandings of childhood and the institutions, policies, and practices directed at children and youth. We suggest that these processes and their consequences matter to social workers concerned with the most intimate aspects of children's lives and well-being – in their families, schools, neighborhoods, and playgrounds – as well as in systems and institutions of child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and mental health. We conclude with consideration of the implications of these processes for social work practice with children and youth in the U.S.

2. What is globalization and why does it matter in practice with children and youth?

Globalization is a complex and contested concept. In general, globalization refers to complicated transnational economic and political processes that have restructured alignments of nations and regions; promoted new flows, linkages, and disruptions of people, ideas, culture, and politics; and contributed to shifting patterns of migration, forms of labor, and relations of inequality (Appadurai, 2002; Cole & Durham, 2007; Giddens, 1999; Harvey, 1989; Hoogvelt, 1997). Some have framed globalization in terms of opportunities for technological advance, cross-border communication, and the exchange of ideas, people, and resources on a scale never before seen, resulting in an enhanced global consciousness and reconfiguration of a global society. Others frame discussions of globalization in terms of accelerating social and environmental degradation and rising rates of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and violence on a global scale (Friedman, 1999; Korten, 2001). Some see globalization as a distinctively new phase marked by fundamental social, cultural, political, and economic transformations and the compression of our experiences of, and relationship to, time and space (Appadurai, 2002; Giddens, 1999; Harvey, 1989). Thomas Friedman (1999), for example, defines globalization as “the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations, and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before ... [and] the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world” (pp.7–8). Others argue that we are merely witnessing the latest

manifestation of long-term social, political, and economic processes (Cooper, 2001). And yet others contend that we are experiencing a rapid globalization of the economy without a corresponding globalization of citizenship (Ife, 2000).

In seeking to understand globalization and the processes through which global forces infiltrate local contexts, a number of scholars have focused on neoliberalism as the driving ideology and political strategy of economic globalization (Piven & Cloward, 1997). For example, McMichael (2000) describes economic globalization in terms of integration on the basis of a project pursuing “market rule on a global scale” (p. 149). Neoliberalism is that market rule. The central tenet of neoliberalism is that human well-being is best advanced when individuals are free to apply their entrepreneurial skills and freedoms in a market economy (Harvey, 2005). This philosophy holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions and so seeks to extend the market into all arenas of social life (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism, as Cabezas, Reese, and Waller (2007), describe,

privileges the expansion of the “free” (without regulation and tariff) market and the global integration of economies. It proposes abolition of government intervention in economic matters and radical cutbacks in social services, including education, health care, housing, agricultural subsidies, and nutrition. (p. 6)

Neoliberalism is premised on the belief that private enterprise and individual initiative are the keys to the creation of wealth, the elimination of poverty, and the improvement in human welfare. Competition, among individuals, businesses, cities, or nations, is held to be a primary virtue. From a neoliberal perspective, many of the social institutions that have been central to social work – social insurance, welfare, public education, and social services – are economically and socially costly obstacles to maximizing economic performance and productivity (Ferguson et al., 2005; Reese, 2007). Deficiency, or deviance, is argued to be located in the individual, leading to the rise of other state institutions, such as the criminal justice system, to play a more prominent role in the control and regulation of social life (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberal ideas became widely accepted as “common sense” at the end of the millennium. Most governments, either voluntarily or under pressure, embraced aspects of neoliberalism and changed policies to roll back taxes, reduce welfare spending, and deregulate labor markets (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal approaches to government have transformed the structure of social welfare institutions, encouraged the expansion of privatized alternatives, and raised new and challenging questions for social work practice (Polack, 2004; Ferguson et al., 2005). In recent years, a number of social work scholars have engaged in sustained exploration of the linkage between globalization and neoliberalism and the consequences for vulnerable groups (Ferguson et al., 2005; Ife, 2000; Kilty & Segal, 2006; Reese, 2007). They have explored neoliberalism in relation to poverty, welfare reform, immigration, health policy, labor, the environment, racism, and the exploitation of women. They have explored the consequences of the privatization of collective welfare; the human toll of the outsourcing of production; and the trends toward private contracting in educational, correctional, and social welfare arenas (Jurik, 2006; Reese, 2007; Reisch, 2006; Schram, 2006; Sclar, 2000).

In short, global processes are infiltrating local contexts in different ways, with varying effects, but their force is felt nonetheless. While globalization does offer the potential for new perspectives, relationships, power arrangements, and opportunities for social and economic development, its organization around neoliberal ideology has produced a set of processes that favor privatization of services, deregulation of markets, disinvestment in social welfare, and primacy of individual as opposed to collective responsibility. Although scholars have examined the effects of these processes on a number of domains

(Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Giroux, 2007; Grossberg, 2001; Kingfisher, 2002), very little explicit attention has been paid to the ways in which these policies and practices trickle down to the everyday lives of children. Our goal in the remainder of this article is to begin this discussion by connecting globalization to childhood and the ways in which global processes affect the lives of young people.

3. What does globalization have to do with childhood?

A discussion of globalization may seem removed from concerns about experiences of childhood, the well-being of children, and the responsibilities of social workers practicing with children and youth. We argue, however, that processes of globalization, particularly those informed by the logic of neoliberalism, are central to children and childhood and, in turn, meanings of childhood and experiences of children are central to globalization. In order to develop the argument, we must first address the concept of childhood as a social construction. This means that we understand childhood not as a universal, biological concept defined by predictable developmental phases, but as a social one, whose meaning varies in different cultural, political, social, and historical contexts (Fass, 2008; Mintz, 2004; Sealander, 2003; Zelizer, 1985). Scholars working in this vein argue that children are implicated in and affected by the political, social, and economic arrangements and relations that shape their families and communities, the institutions in which they participate, and the media which they consume and create (Boocock & Scott, 2005; Coles, 1986; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997a; Nybell, Shook, & Finn, 2009). Further, they contend that children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies in which they live.

Viewing childhood as a socially constructed category, as opposed to a biologically determined one, opens up new possibilities for understanding contemporary experiences and representations of young people and poses new questions to social work scholars and practitioners. Why are children a special class in need of protection? What does it mean to protect children? What are children's needs, and how can these needs be accommodated? What role should children play in defining their needs and the allocation of resources and structure of institutions designed to meet these needs? Further, viewing childhood as a social construction opens up opportunities to understand how the answers to these questions and others are shaped by broader economic, cultural, political, and global processes.

There is a growing body of literature on the social construction of childhood and its relationship to globalization in general and neoliberalism in particular that can inform social work thought and practice (Boocock & Scott, 2005; Cole & Durham, 2007, 2008; Giroux, 2007; Grossberg, 2001; Hess & Shandy, 2008; James & James, 2004; Katz, 2004; Qvortrup, 2005). A number of contemporary scholars have argued that processes of globalization are having profound effects on the lives of children and the meanings of childhood. They contend that, in the context of a globalizing world, modern ideas about who children are and what they need are being displaced. Paula Fass (2007) argues that processes of globalization are transforming the very nature of childhood. Sharon Stephens (1995), in her groundbreaking scholarship on the cultural politics of childhood, contends that children are not insulated from the politics of everyday life. Stephens shows how current global processes are transforming social relations and identities, including childhood itself. She concludes that, "we should take very seriously the possibility that we are now witnessing a profound restructuring of the child within the context of a movement from state to global capitalism, modernity to post-modernity" (Stephens, 1995, p. 19). In a similar vein, Scheper-Hughes and Sargent (1998) characterize children as "canaries in the mine shaft," wherein their well-being serves as an indicator of global political and economic conditions. Taking this line of thought further, Elizabeth Chin (2003) proposes that children and childhood are at the center of globalization, from the symbolic invocation of their images

representing a contentious array of hopes, fears, and risks, to their visible and invisible labor and their global movement in diverse forms of migration.

As de Block and Buckingham (2007) have shown, the lives of children around the world are variably shaped by the effects of global processes on welfare, education, immigration, access to food, water, and health care, and military alliances, to name a few. More and more children have "traveling lives" as they negotiate complex circuits of migration and changing meanings of identity and belonging (de Block & Buckingham, 2007, p. 10). These large-scale processes are also playing out and being negotiated through intergenerational relations that are often both strained and sustained across multiple borders (Cole & Durham, 2007). Children are intimately bound to and affected by the push and pull of familial strategies regarding migration, labor, remittances, and return and the broader contexts of exploitation and vulnerability in which they occur (Cole & Durham, 2007; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Pribilsky, 2001). As de Block and Buckingham note, children are often central characters in processes of migration, serving on the front lines as families come to terms with new life circumstances in new locations. Moreover, they contend, media plays a significant role in the process. Children lead complexly mediated lives wherein an understanding of the relationship of childhood and globalization cannot be separated from the fundamental embeddedness of media in children's everyday lives (de Block & Buckingham, 2007).

A number of scholars of childhood have demonstrated ways in which processes of globalization are transforming both the spatial and temporal dimensions of childhood in complex ways (Cole & Durham, 2008; James & Prout, 1997b; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Some have explored geographies of childhood and ways in which children engage with and incorporate globalizing images, resources, knowledge, and practices into the localized contexts of their lives (Katz, 2005). Others have examined shifting forms of inclusion and exclusion shaping children's lives, the boundaries of childhood, and assumptions regarding who counts as a child under what circumstances (Chin, 2003; Nybell et al., 2009). They seek to make questions of time and place more central to studies of childhood as they explore ways in which responsibilities and stresses of adulthood are being pushed onto children in differing contexts, from manifestations in childhood of "adult" health problems such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol to justice systems' efforts to hold younger and younger children morally and criminally responsible for their actions (Cole & Durham, 2008; Stephens, 1995).

Social work practice has long demanded attention to the contexts of children's lives and the ways in which notions of childhood are rendered meaningful within those contexts. We argue here that, in the context of a transforming global order, social workers need to critically question the ways in which these political and economic shifts are affecting the ways in which we conceive of childhood, the nature and practice of our child-serving systems, and the lived experiences of young people themselves. In so doing social workers may be better prepared to see and support young people as agents of their own lives and advocate for policies and practices that counter the seeming inevitability of neoliberal economic logic.

4. Globalizing forces and children's everyday lives: Five processes

As the discussion above shows, there has been a growing interest in the global circulation of ideas about children and childhood and the movements of children themselves (Hess & Shandy, 2008). Yet, there remains a need for more examination about how the complex and seemingly abstract forces of globalization insinuate themselves into the lives of children, how are they implicated in the transformation of childhood itself, and why they matter in our social work practice with children and youth. We respond to these questions by detailing five processes through which we make these abstract forces concrete and

provide specific examples of how they play out. In putting forth and naming these five processes, we do not claim to be either prescriptive or conclusive. Rather we are trying to frame a way of thinking and talking about processes that shape our practice even as they often remain unmentioned and invisible. We hope this discussion expands critical conversation among social workers, researchers, and young people themselves about the myriad forces shaping and constraining our lives.

4.1. Marginalization

Ironically, while images of children are central to a host of adult discourses, concern for the well-being of children, particularly poor children, has been marginalized in our contemporary political and economic context. Over the past two decades, advocates for neoliberal globalization have argued that support for free markets, privatization of state enterprises, and welfare retrenchment would lead to growth and expansion that will trickle down to the poorest across the globe. What has not been fully recognized is the way in which reform movements that celebrated individual responsibility and pathologized dependency also marginalized concern for children.

The widely touted process of “ending welfare as we know it” in the U.S., resulting in passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, provides a powerful example of the translation of neoliberal ideologies into public policy. In the process, children’s entitlement to a minimal level of income support (Aid to Dependent Children) was eliminated as the spotlight focused on the “work effort” of their parents. Under the dramatically altered welfare rules, only one-quarter of poor children were receiving benefits under its provisions (Children’s Defense Fund, 2005; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009), yet the program was widely heralded as a success (Schram & Soss, 2002). Declines in child poverty rates from 21% of all children in 1996 to 16.2% of all children in 2000 (Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009) also buoyed hopes that welfare reform was successful, despite the ambiguity about whether these declines in poverty could be attributed to the sustained period of national economic expansion or to the shift in welfare policy direction (O’Neill & Korenman, 2004). However, the current economic recession places welfare reform in a new perspective as forecasts predict that the number of poor children will increase between 2.6 and 3.9 million children and the number of children in deep poverty will rise between 1.5 and 2.4 million children (Parrott, 2008). Mishel, of the Economic Policy Institute, predicts that the poverty rate among all U.S. children will jump from 18% in 2007 to a startling 27% in 2010, and among black children it will rise from 27% (2007) to more than 50% (2010) if predicted levels of unemployment materialize (Mishel, 2009). Despite the fact that the “safety net” has been somewhat successful at fighting poverty, particularly for those closest to the poverty line, it has weakened for the very poorest, a group that is disproportionately children (Sherman, 2009b).

In the grip of neoliberal logic, the U.S. led the way in reforms focused on holding individuals responsible for their own welfare while concerns for children were pushed to the margins. Meanwhile, the U.S. consolidated its hold over major international financial institutions – the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization – and used these organizations to export its policies in other national contexts, thus “globalizing” a neoliberal model of reform (Ferguson et al., 2005; Midgley, 2007; Reese, 2007). Around the globe, neoliberal strategies and policies have heightened disparities between rich and poor, though these patterns are complex and volatile (Ferguson et al., 2005). Economic trends have affected rich countries as well as poor ones, creating great wealth but generating greater inequality (Prout, 2005; UNICEF, 2007). For example, between 1979 and 2006 real after-tax incomes in the U.S. rose by 256% for the top 1% of households, whereas they rose 21% for the middle fifth of households and 11% for households in the bottom fifth (Sherman, 2009a). Too often, children bear the burden of these inequities.

At the same time, universal commitments to children have been eroded, replaced by competitive individualism that both masks and exacerbates extant inequalities. For example, Kozol carefully describes “the restoration of apartheid schooling in America,” referencing both intensifying segregation and unequal access to educational resources (2005). And after school, children whose parents can afford to pay are enrolled in a rich variety of lessons, camps, and special programs, but public disinvestment in children’s welfare in poor and working-class neighborhoods has produced deteriorating playgrounds, recreation centers, and public spaces for play (Katz, 2004; Kozol, 2005; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). As a result of such disinvestment, the U.S. does not fare well in comparison to other rich countries in terms of the welfare of children. According to UNICEF’s comprehensive study of child well-being among 21 economically advanced nations, the U.S. and the United Kingdom – nations that led the way in neoliberal policy reform – rank at the bottom of the list (UNICEF, 2007).

As children’s economic security has grown more precarious and investment in public services and programs has decreased, punitive responses to the problems of children and youth have gained momentum. For example, juvenile justice reforms “got tough” on young people, making it easier to try children as adults and stiffening their sentences (Sealand, 2003; Shook, 2005). As a result of the expansion of the justice system, increasing numbers of young people, particularly poor youth and youth of color, spend considerable portions of their adolescence and early adulthood in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. The erosion of public institutions and organizations focused on youth development has been accompanied by an expanding criminal justice system. Justice systems are becoming primary public sites for youth development for a large population of young people (Zimring, 1998; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). Youth in these systems are often those whose families did not have the resources to access or purchase the programs and services provided in the private sector.

At present, the evidence is that rather than lifting all boats, the neoliberal experiment culminated in economic crisis that threatens to leave the world’s most vulnerable people, including its poor children, sinking under its weight (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Families with children in the U.S. face this crisis with a diminished safety net of programs and resources to cushion the blow, and social workers in schools, child welfare agencies, mental health programs, and correctional facilities witness and attempt to stay the ripple effects. At the same time, in many developing countries, which are increasingly tied into a world economy and exposed to the radical changes in economies of the developed world, families and children cope with unmediated effects of the crisis that they did nothing to cause (United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

4.2. Marketization

The modern conception of childhood cast it as a protected realm largely outside of the market and its politics (Stephens, 1995). Yet one of the central premises of neoliberal theory and strategy has been the celebration of the market as the best guide for human action (Harvey, 2005). This ethic, which presumes that everything can be treated as a commodity, has permitted privatization and competition to be insinuated into the lives of children in a variety of novel ways. Perhaps most obviously, children are now situated as consumers within a global economy. From computer games to designer jeans to Disney products, children are increasingly targeted as economic actors in the global marketplace. While efforts to cultivate the consumer tastes and desires of children is not new, it seems these processes have intensified and amplified class sentiments and distinctions between children who have and those who have not (Heiman, 2009).

Obscured behind the consumptive practices of the global economy are divergent and emergent forms of child labor, from rug makers and rag pickers of India to the *restaveks* – children conscripted into household

labor – of Haiti, and the labors of children in the U.S. as caregivers, low-wage workers, or dope dealers (Chin, 2003; Bergmann, 2009; Zelizer, 2005). Growing concern over the trafficking in children has brought global attention to the exploitation of children in the global sex trade. Despite international efforts for and claims regarding children's rights, the forces of neoliberal economic globalization continue to expand the reach of novel and disturbing forms of marketization of children and childhood.

Marketization takes other shapes as well, many of them manifest closer to home. In recent years we have seen a growing trend in the U.S. toward the privatization and corporatization of public institutions for children including schools, social services, and correctional facilities. For example, there has been an increasing trend toward the corporate sponsorship of schools and the transformation of community schools into quasi-business structures that evidences a growing infatuation with the socialization of children by private, often for-profit interests (Cross, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003).

Another facet of marketization can be seen in the marketing of images of children and childhood and their circulation around the globe. The plight of poor children is fixed in “save the child” imagery that circulates south to north, fueling relief economies with problematic records of “trickle down” to those whose images they circulate (Maren, 1997). Further, we need to consider how particularly troubling images of the marketization of childhood abroad block our critical view of the workings of these processes closer to home. For example, Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (2006) poignantly address ways in which transnational adoption agencies have marketed children as “orphans,” too often denying their ties to parents, family, community, and cultural history.

Another aspect of marketization is illustrated in media-fueled panics about children and youth “at risk.” As Mike Males has argued, through the marketing of images of children and youth as troubled and troubling, we have created a “scapegoat generation” held responsible for a whole host of social ills (Males, 1996, 1999). Alarmist images of teenage pregnancy, juvenile crime, and child abduction have powerfully impacted local communities in spite of the declining rates of teenage pregnancy (Mintz, 2004) and juvenile crime (Snyder, 2008) and the relative rarity with which children are kidnapped by strangers (Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer, & Schultz, 2002; Nybell, 2009). These images are catalysts for the marketing of parental fears and insecurities and messages regarding the need for perpetual surveillance of children and childhood among the privileged classes. These fears and insecurities have generated what observers dub “domestic fortressing,” “household hypervigilance” (Katz, 2005), or “paranoid parenting” (Lavalette, 2005, p. 154). Through the combined marketing of anxieties and technologies, parents with economic resources are drawn to strategies and devices that they hope will protect their children from threat, such as private play corrals, highly structured and supervised activities, home surveillance cameras, and the ever-present cell phone (Katz, 2005). Motivated by fear, parents restrict children's activities, limit their ability to play independently, and convey them to and from school and recreational activities (Lavalette, 2005).

Social workers need to probe the underlying logic of marketization, examine the patterns and processes through which it is manifest in children's everyday lives, and address questions that are often neglected in the professional literature. What is at stake here? What does it mean for children when public sectors and spaces of childhood are sold to the highest, or as the case may be, lowest, bidder? Whose interests are served when contexts of childhood are transformed into sites of capital investment and corporate opportunity?

4.3. Medicalization

Another process closely linked to marketization is that of medicalization, wherein the problems and concerns of children and childhood are rendered in medicalized terms, given meaning through the application of diagnostic labels, and subjected to a range of psychopharmacological treatments. So intense is the process of medicalization

that it seems childhood itself has been constructed as a form of pathology to be monitored, managed, treated, and contained (Finn, 2001, 2009; Males, 1999). Over the past two decades we have witnessed a proliferation in diagnostic categories to name and classify the pathologies of childhood, an exponential increase in use of prescription drugs to manage and contain troubled children and troubling youth, and a downward thrust on the naming and labeling of pathology, such that younger and younger children bear the weight of what had previously been conceived as “adult” diagnoses.

Curiously, in an era when support for welfare provision, schools, and social services for children has dwindled, alarm over the status of children's mental health is flourishing. In 2000, the Surgeon General of the United States, David Satcher developed a national “action agenda” to respond to the “public crisis in mental health for infants, children, and adolescents” that was conveyed as afflicting all children across lines of class, race, and culture (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Experts at the conference quoted estimates reporting that as many as one of every five young people suffered with diagnosable mental disorders and registered concern that the majority were not receiving treatment (Kelleher, 2000; Offord, 2000). As a result, an increasing proportion of the youthful population is being diagnosed and treated pharmacologically. In 1996, for example, it was estimated that 1.3 million of the 38 million children between 5 and 14 took Ritalin to treat attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Hancock, 1996). By 2003, the Center for Disease Control estimated that approximately 4.4 million children (or close 8% of all children) were reported to have a history of ADHD diagnosis, with 2.5 million of them taking medication for the disorder (CDC, 2005). By 2004, a reported 5 to 7 million children in the U.S. were being medicated with Ritalin. Production of Ritalin increased 450% in 1990s, and the U.S. consumes 90% of world's supply (Transit, 2004). While such medical intervention may provide important support for some children struggling at home, in school, and in the community, it is incumbent upon social work professionals to ask why these numbers are so high and how they may relate to the larger social, political, and economic contexts of children's lives.

In addition to surging increases in prescriptions for Ritalin, an increasing number of children are being diagnosed and treated for what have traditionally been considered adult disorders, particularly bi-polar disorder. Researchers reported a five-fold increase in the use of potent antipsychotic drugs to treat children for problems such as aggression and mood swings between 1993 and 2002 (Carey, 2006). Rachel Ragg (2006) offers a scathing critique of the medicalization of childhood and the absolute neglect of attention to the toxic environments in which far too many children live. Ragg cites a *Journal of the American Medical Association* study from 2000 reporting a 200–300% increase in the prescription of anti-depressants and stimulants to children under age three, including some as young as 15 months. According to U.S. psychologist and attorney Bob Jacobs, a critic of the Ritalin rage, “Drugs ensure the conformism that Western society demands... Public consciousness is offended by seeing a child in physical restraints, but because chemical restraints are internal they are a much less ‘sexy’ issue, even though they are arguably more destructive” (Jacobs, cited in Ragg, 2006, p. 42). According to Jacobs, it is not so much our children's behavior that has changed but the way in which it is viewed in contemporary capitalist society. Ragg contends that children are being pathologized and medicated for a broad and ever changing range of behaviors deemed inappropriate and that “inappropriate” is the catchall term used when a child's behavior “doesn't fit the prevailing agenda” (2006, p. 42).

Even more troubling, Ragg argues, is the serious lack of attention to the toxic environments in which children live, play, eat, and study. Escalating attention to children's behavior draws focus away from what is neglected – the larger environmental context of children's lives. By focusing on the individual child and neglecting the broader context, social workers miss a key opportunity to understand how

globalization and neoliberalism shape the lives of children and how we understand their lives, thereby limiting opportunities to develop interventions that attend to the multiple forces that influence their developmental trajectories.

4.4. Militarization

In recent years there has been growing public awareness about the effects of militarization on the lives of children. Media attention has been drawn to the plight of child soldiers, the brutal practices through which very young children are forced into military service, and the gender-based nature of violence experienced by girl soldiers, (Dunson, 2005; Herbert, 2004; Mc Kay & Mazurana, 2004; Nordstrom, 1999). Personal accounts by young people who have survived the violence of warfare have brought the reality of the militarization of childhood home to a broad audience of “privileged readers,” disrupting assumptions regarding the innocence and safety of childhood (Beah, 2007). Realities of war continue to leave their scars on children in conflict and “post-conflict” zones around the world.

For citizens of the U.S., discourse regarding the militarization of childhood is likely to draw attention to sites of struggle beyond our borders. We may find it hard to recognize the many ways in which the lives of children and experiences of childhood are being militarized from within. While we may recognize and hold diverse viewpoints about the politics and ethics of military action, we tend to see these decisions and actions as separate and separable from everyday civilian life, especially the lives of children and youth. Yet, there is considerable evidence that the discourse of militarization has seeped into the consciousness of many young people. Consider, for example, the degree to which war has served as a constant backdrop to childhood in the U.S. over the past two decades. Children coming of age in the late 20th and early 21st century are doing so in a country engaged in an ongoing “war against terror.” How is the experience of childhood and family shaped by the multiple deployments of one or both parents as the U.S. continues to stretch increasingly thin military personnel across expanding global terrain? Social workers will play key roles in uncovering answers to these questions as they join the ranks of expanding mental health service systems responding to the concerns of returning veterans and their families.

The combination of expanded military presence globally and contracted numbers of new enlistments has also had direct reverberations in the lives of many young people, as exemplified through increased military recruitment and the spread of Junior ROTC programs in U. S. schools, particularly among non-white, working-class student populations (Ahn & Kirk, 2005; Berlowitz & Long, 2003; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003). In their provocatively titled book *Education as enforcement: The militarization and corporatization of schools*, Saltman and Gabbard (2003) bring together a group of critical theorists and activists who speak compellingly to the militarization of children's everyday lives, particularly in the context of public schools, as one manifestation of globalization. Further they demonstrate powerful links between militarization and processes of marketization, as addressed previously.

A discourse of militarization has also made its impression in the world of computer games. For example, as Michael Reagan (2008) describes, since the U.S. Army introduced its latest recruitment tool, the “America's Army” video game, in 2002, the game “has gone on to attain enormous popularity with... more than 9 million registered users” (p. 1). On the surface, these issues may be seen as irrelevant to social work practice with children and youth. We encourage social workers to explore the threads that connect diverse forms and processes of militarization in children's everyday lives and reflect on its relevance to social work practice.

Militarization also plays out in subtler ways that often go without saying and connects with a broader trend toward the policing and

surveillance of young people. Contemporary children and youth are growing up in what Giroux dubs “emergency time” – an era of seemingly never ending crisis in which young people – particularly poor and minority young people – are distrusted and treated as a “generation of suspects” (2003, p. xvii). Consider, for example, the ways in which the space of public schools has been reshaped over recent years. It is not unusual for students to pass through metal detectors to enter the building. Police officers patrol the grounds, and hallways are fitted with surveillance cameras. Random drug testing of students involved in school activities has been ruled constitutional and become routine (Giroux, 2003). Zero tolerance policies have become widely accepted since the 1994 passage of the Gun-Free Schools Zones Act (Saltman & Gabbard, 2003). Ironically, the act has contributed to a more broad-based acceptance of the policing of children and, in effect, an implicit militarization of key spaces of childhood (Ahn & Kirk, 2005). These conditions are made more visible by a case recently decided by the Supreme Court (Unified School District #1 v. Redding, 557 U.S. __ (2009)). This case involved the constitutionality of the actions of public school officials who strip-searched a 13 year-old girl, accused by another student of possessing prescription strength Ibuprofen in violation of school policy. Although the Court found this search to be unconstitutional, the efforts by the school and organizations such as the National School Board Association and American Association of School Administrators to uphold this search is illustrative of this push to increasingly police the spaces of childhood. A recent example out of Iowa, wherein a high school administrator ordered a strip search of five female students in response to a theft report by another student, offers troubling evidence that these practices continue despite explicit prohibitions in law and policy (KCCI-DesMoines, 2009).

As these forms of practice have taken hold, many social workers have struggled to resist the narrowing of our efforts to focus on the assessment of the risk posed by young people. At the same time, many social work jobs demand a focus on the surveillance, tracking, and monitoring of young people's behavior (Ferguson et al., 2005; Nybell et al., 2009). Often lost is a form of practice that focuses on engagement, relationship building, and the actualization of young people's potential.

4.5. Mobilization

Both in spite of and in response to adultist discourses, policies, and practices shaping the meaning and experiences of childhood, young people themselves are mobilizing. Children and youth are defining themselves as social actors and seeking engagement as partners in research, creators of media, collaborators in organizational development, and activists for social and political change. In so doing, they are often positioning themselves as global actors, aware of and responsive to networks and connections that defy boundaries. It is time for social workers committed to the well-being of children and youth to recognize children as meaning makers and theorizers who possess a rich cultural, political, moral, and intellectual life (Coles, 1986; Stephens, 1995; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998). Children are always and everywhere involved in the construction of their worlds. Thus it is imperative that we acknowledge children and youth as fully human beings, rather than “human becomings,” and take their voices and views seriously. We can begin by educating ourselves about the myriad ways in which children are critically engaged in their social worlds, grappling with the realities of their lives, and taking individual and collective action to challenge and change their life circumstances, no matter how constrained they might be.

The terrain of children's agency and activism is dynamic and multifaceted. For example, the work of Fryzel and Evans (2009) documents the activist role of youth transitioning out of foster care and their role in the critical education of child welfare social workers in California. Former and current foster youth are demanding a collective voice in the policies and practices that affect their lives and in the

preparation of social workers who will shape the lives of younger children in care. They reject tokenism and cameo roles in the process and demand instead that their expertise on the foster care system be recognized and their critical analysis included.

Jen Tilton (2009a) traces the organized efforts of young people to block plans for a “super jail for kids” and shows how young people’s issue-based activism is creating new forms of cultural and political engagement. Young people from Asunción to Albuquerque are building new social movements through linkage of children’s rights, labor rights, and demands for social, educational, and environmental justice (Finn, n.d.). From the National Movement of Street Children in Brazil to the cross-border activism of *Jovenes Unidos* of New Mexico, children and youth are forging collective ties to transform their lives and their worlds (Hecht, 2008; Finn, n.d.).

The growing role of children and youth in the production of media offers provocative and inspiring examples of mobilization. Children are using media projects to tell their stories, critique the systems that affect their lives, and make connections that cross cultural, geographic, national, and generational boundaries. De Block and Buckingham’s (2007) work on the promotion of children’s video clubs around the world exemplifies the meaning and power of children’s voices in the process of social change (see project websites at www.chicam.net and www.chicam.org). Young people are turning to poetry, spoken word, drama, and hip-hop to convey their visions and forge connections with others (Jackson, 2009; Tilton, 2009b).

Child advocates throughout the world have turned to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as one resource for acknowledging and promoting children’s rights claims. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the importance of children’s right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. It recognizes children as persons with rights including: right to name, family, and citizenship; the right to education, a safe environment, access to health care, and an adequate standard of living; and the right to be free of violence and exploitation (United Nations, 1989). The document attempts to extend fundamental human rights to children while at the same time recognizing that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance. It is emerging as a tool that gives children power; and as a movement it has been redefining childhood internationally. Social workers in the U.S. can expand their own possibilities for promoting children’s rights by becoming informed about the Convention and the ways in which it is being used for empowering child-centered practice throughout the world (see, for example, Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2000; Schwab, 1997).

The Child Friendly Cities Initiative offers a powerful example of the possibilities for grounding the principles of children’s rights in concrete action on a local and global scale (Child Friendly Cities, 2006). The initiative, spearheaded by UNICEF, seeks ways to put the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to practice at the local level throughout the globe. Fundamentally, the initiative promotes children’s participation in the issues that affect their lives. A Child Friendly City is a local system of good governance committed to fulfilling child rights for all its young citizens (see website at www.childfriendlycities.org to learn more).

5. Implications for social work

In summary, we argue that at this turbulent historical juncture the profession of social work must place urgent attention on the ways that macro-level political and economic transformations are changing the daily lives of children and youth in communities. We agree with those scholars who suggest that social work educators are paying too little attention to how a globalizing political economy and a shifting configuration of social programs are reshaping human behavior and altering the possibilities of achieving social justice in local settings (Mulroy & Austin, 2004; Stone, 2004). We argue that a focus on shifting conceptions of childhood, children’s experiences, and intergenerational relationships is key to linking the study of larger economic and historical to an understanding of individual lives.

While at present it seems “natural” for social workers to separate theories of child development from accounts of globalization, an interdisciplinary cadre of child researchers has been re-theorizing childhood in order to illuminate the connections (James & James, 2004; Prout & James, 1990; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998; Stephens, 1995). This literature challenges and inspires social workers interested in children and youth to develop a critical literacy of globalization and neoliberalism. At the same time, acknowledging the historical contingency of childhood challenges scholars of globalization and neoliberalism to take account of changing conceptions and experiences of children and youth.

We hope that, by detailing five processes through which the abstract forces of globalization play out, we have advanced the effort to connect studies of childhood and globalization. We propose that social work scholars and practitioners critically examine the ways in which market forces penetrate social policies, agency policies, and everyday social work practices with children and youth. We argue the need to question the dominance of the medical model that goes without saying in our practice at present. We underscore our responsibility to resist the marginalization of children, as we constantly ask, “Where are children and youth in this picture? Where are their voices? How are they represented? How will they be affected?” We hope to spark a critical examination of ways in which the militarization of everyday life plays out and the consequences for children and childhood. And finally, we consider the urgency of mobilization for and with young people — joining as allies to accompany them in critical dialogue and efforts at social change.

As social workers, we have a unique role to play in resisting the neoliberal ideology and strategies that have cultivated apathy or cynicism about the future, thereby jeopardizing our collective commitment to young people who embody it (Grossberg, 2001; Giroux, 2007). In the face of pressing challenges to the conceptions of children and youth that are located at the heart of social work practice, social workers require space to reflect on, critique and, when necessary, resist those conceptions of childhood and youth that make it possible to diminish or infringe on the just and caring treatment of young people. At this moment of transformation, social work has an opportunity to renew and re-envision a professional commitment to take children and youth seriously.

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