



BIG QUESTIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE: RACIAL BIAS AND CASEWORKER TRAINING

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Hi, I'm John Kelly, host of the Imprint weekly podcast and this is a special bonus series we call Big Questions for Child Welfare. Molly Tierney and Daniel Heimpel have known each other for years. Tierney is the Child Welfare Lead for Accenture, who led Baltimore's child welfare agency for 10 years. Heimpel is the founder of Fostering Media Connections and the Publisher of the Imprint. In this series of podcast conversations, the two friends discuss several of the weighty issues facing child welfare today, including questions about its very existence as we know it. Today, they are joined by Karen Bayens-Dunning, who is a career professional in child welfare, having been a judge, an advocate and a monitor of child welfare agencies. Recently, she took up the role of Acting President at the Southern Poverty Law Center. On today's episode, they'll talk about racial disparities in child welfare, with a particular focus on how it impacts decision making, and what can be done to bend the arc of justice towards equity. Enjoy the conversation.

Hello, this is Daniel Heimpel. Happy to be talking about big issues in child welfare on the Imprint's weekly podcast. We have Molly Tierney here, and Karen Dunning, who have just come off creating a virtual reality type training that really has elicited some things about racial bias that

we know from the literature, but has become apparent in real time. So Molly, why don't you describe what this virtual reality training is? And how you and Karen came to develop it, and what you're finding?

I'd love to and thanks, Daniel. Thanks, Karen, for joining us today. So this thing is, we call it AVenueS here at Accenture. And it's the notion that we can use virtual reality to accelerate the pace with which case workers get good at their jobs. Because we know that the way they learn right now is either by going to a lecture where there's a talking head or out in the field with families they're visiting, and that should, you know, honestly be seen as they're learning on the backs of the families they're serving. And we thought, well, we use virtual reality to drop them into something that resembles what they're going to experience, then they can beef up on universal skills like we ought to be better at observing, we got to be better at engaging people, we got to be better at de-escalating folks, all that sort of thing. And after the death, after excuse me, the murder of George Floyd, our country really turned itself, turns its attention, with renewed vigor to you know, what we sort of consider a gaping racial wound in our country, we turned our attention to how might we use this virtual reality thing at the level of the transaction



for child welfare. So for instance, we might be taking up the matter of racial equity at the level of a concept like Black Lives Matter is a concept. And we might be taking it up even at the level of policy, like we might make rules or regulations that inhibit people making decisions based on race. But our position was that if we don't give people a chance to practice, then when they're in the field of play, they're gonna play like they've always played. And none of us have enough experience practicing other ways of engaging around race. So in this scenario, one puts on a headset and goes to visit a family. And in this case, you're visiting a 13-year-old boy named Tory, and his mom, Cynthia and his dad, Ben, there's a lot of conflict in this house. It turns out Tory identifies as gay, and that's not working for his dad, and his mom's a little nutty. And there's a lot of information coming at you, and you're trying to sift through all that decides this kid is safe. And at the end, you learn that there actually wasn't one family that were two families. And these families, they live in the very same house, and the actors are wearing the very same clothes. And they're even delivering the very same lines, there's a single difference, the first family's white, and the second family's black. The idea is that by going through an experience like this, it might nudge to the surface of our consciousness, how bias present itself. I should say, in the aftermath of being in the headset, we get groups of users together in a seminar so they can reflect on what they've experienced. And you can imagine these groups conversing about what how did you feel when you were talking to a black man playing the dad? And how did you feel when you were talking to a white man paying the dad? And how did you react to Tory when he was black or Tory when he was white, and it is done so, I mean, I'd love to hear what you think about it, Karen, because the journey of creating this in a way that would engage everyone to step forward into this conversation as opposed to retreat away from it. That was a very careful surgical operation. I wonder if you have thoughts about that.

No, it was and this is Molly's brainchild, I'm just happy to be part of her sounding board crew as she was creating, and putting all this together. And it really made me think more about these issues and how bias plays out in actual practice.

But we know that dealing with race and racism is not a muscle. It's not a skillset that any of us learn to do in school or growing up or with each other. And so it can be messy. And so giving people an opportunity to discuss it in the concept of this virtual reality. Experience is just brilliant. I agree that there's a lot of learning on the fly that happens, but we're already traumatizing families when we remove children and bring them into foster care.

Karen, can you hold up on that thought? Because, you know, it's something that Molly said also, which was, you know, the social workers learn on the backs of their clients, which is a pretty, you know, stark and scary concept. And now you're sort of reinforcing that you've worked in child welfare in a lot of different capacities. Legal, you've studied, you know, social welfare, you understand the system from all different types of angles. How anomalous is that, you know, that, that you have practitioners that learn by doing and how dangerous is that potentially, when you're walking in with bias, you don't even know it, and you're creating, you know, potential for damage for families.

It's extremely dangerous. And, you know, one of the things you want to make sure that you are doing no harm, right, you don't want to further the harm and the trauma, but the system does it every single day. And so if you think about most fields, you are learning by doing, you know, when I went to law school, they don't teach you how to practice law, learn that when you're actually out practicing. Right. And that can be dangerous, too. The unique thing about child welfare is that there are huge retention issues in the workforce, huge turnover rates. And so you're really talking about a very young, often very inexperienced workforce. And so you're just coming out of school, getting a bachelor's degree in social work, and now you are making what is going to be a life impacting decision on behalf of family. That's a high bar. That's some pretty heavy stuff. And so you do see it every day. You know, some systems have tried to tackle that through coaching, and doing kind of teaming, especially when you have newer case managers. But again, the virtual reality gives them the opportunity to practice this on their own and discuss it afterwards. Without it impacting an



actual family.

What when it when is AVenueS delivered? When is this virtual reality training scenario delivered to them? Is it you know, for workers at any stage? Is it for students? When is it getting delivered to them to try to try to forestall this harm that Karen and you or Molly are alluding to?

Right? There's sort of you can't go wrong here. Right? You could do it as part of the hiring process. Right? You could do it at the point of interview, right? helping people learn is this really what I can get into, or Whoa, that's not what I had in mind. You can do it as part of onboarding before you're out in the field, that's a great choice. Because to Karen's point, you're getting the chance to have multiple turns at what it's like to be standing in someone's home, before you're actually doing it. And you could also do it later in the cycle of someone's career. Because, you know, like every other field caseworkers, if they've been doing it a long time, they can get on autopilot, right? And so inviting people to step into a reflective space. That's the journey of this virtual reality work is what you're learning is, how do I go about decision making? How do I prove myself? I'm sorry, go ahead Karen.

I would back up even more, I get brilliant for students, when you go into this type of social work to have this experience.

Right? You think about it, you know, like, for example, USC School of Social Work has a very big online learning continuum. And I think representative Karen Bass got herself an MSW online through USC, Social Work school online. So I mean, you could imagine how seamlessly something like this could be inserted into that. But I'm curious about this conversation that happens afterwards. You're given this sort of this scenario where and you have the same situation happening, the only difference is the color of the client's, and I hate that term, but the client's skin or what happened what are you seeing?

Well, I can tell you this that what we're seeing from behavior in the headsets and this is very early testing, we've just finished we just literally wrapped on this and released at this month. But the very early testing, what we see is the literature is really leaping off the page as to

ways that we, the collective we, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, gender in this country, the ways that we are looking upon and making decisions and interacting with families who can't become involved with child welfare. Already, we can say it for instance, there's an opportunity when one is interviewing the mom, her name is Cynthia, when you're interviewing Cynthia, where you get to ask her about her relationship with her husband, the man who lives in the house, his name is Ben. And you have, you can ask, so tell me about your how things are going with your husband? Or you can ask, Is he a good husband? Or you can ask, Is he the child's father? And it turns out, nobody asks the white family if Ben is the child's father, but people ask the black lady that, right, and I think I'm not mad at anybody. Right? I'm not pointing any fingers is not about that is about Wow, that happened. Look how fast that happened. And it happens regardless of the demographic of the user. Right. So the ability to see, those sorts of things happen if people report, I felt like the black dad was aggressive. And the white dad was in control, right? Like you, those sorts of things are coming to the surface. Once you're in a seminar, there's an opportunity to say, Okay, well, here we are all gathered here. Let's talk about our experience. And now let's follow everything we know about adult education where it has to be real interactive, and people got to get up and move around and work in different size groups and come back and forth. Great. So everybody who saw the black family go the left and everybody saw the white family go to the right, or if you're in zoom, we'll put you in your Zoom Room, that's fine. If you saw a family, that's the same race as you, you split off again, if you saw a family, that's a different race, have you split off again? And you could see iterations of conversations about how did we react? Why did I react that way? How could I come to understand that happened for me, again, so that the bias that is in all of us, right? My colleague, one of the other producers of this says, so that it's not in the driver's seat anymore, right, you have to get your bias into the passenger seat, you have to still do your work, and you may not be able to relieve yourself of bias, but you can at least see that it's there and hold it away from you a little bit. So that it is not owning the way you make decisions. Does that? Does that make sense?



Yeah, it's profound. Karen, you you've got a thought clearly.

No, no, I was I was just an agreement. I think it makes a lot of sense. I think that the system, we have societal bias, right? Because it's hitting us from all points of view. It's hitting us from media and different communications from social, everything is giving, feeding the back the bias. In addition, you have a system, child welfare, that was developed with racism and structural racism at its core, right. So at the very beginning, black children were in a separate system, right than white children, a much worse system. And you could trace history back even more, the separation of black and brown families has always been acceptable, as a nation, right, we see it playing out every day in child welfare, we see it at the border with immigration, we don't see that when it comes to white families. And so with all the bias happening, and the bias that is structurally in the system, the system continues feeding its own bias, right. So if you're seeing this is all you're seeing are black and brown families every day, when you're out there, as a case manager, when you see a white family, suddenly out of the blue, you're wondering, well, what's wrong with this family, I don't understand why they called us about this family. And all these things are playing in the back of your mind, sometimes without you even knowing it. And so this is, this has the opportunity to disrupt all of that. That's really what has to happen. It has to be a disruption for you to really understand what's happening.

What can you take going forward with this beyond virtual reality training? Karen itself, right. So you've got this at the individual level, you know, it's revealing, as Molly says, the bias that we have and putting it, you've got the opportunity to take it and move it to the side hopefully and put in the passenger seat, as you said, Molly, you know, but what does it reveal in terms of choices, the system, and the people in the system need to make to make it really anti-racist move back against the past that is so clearly imbued with a disregard for families of color. That is not the same as the regard that's held for white families as elucidated in this one example, in terms of the question about the father. So I

mean, what are the choices the field needs to make going forward?

Well, I love Molly that you said, put it in the passenger seat and you didn't say, throw it out the window of the car, because it is always present. And I think what these, these conversations that occur after experiencing this, what it does is it starts to build the muscle, it starts people embracing the messiness of racism, and having those conversations with each other, such that when it does come up again, and they can, they can more easily see it, right. So you go through this experience, you have this full-fledged conversation, and then it's followed up, right by your supervisor, and staffing, or suddenly you're thinking about policies differently. Like there's, there's so much good intention that happens in child welfare especially. And sometimes the good intention has disastrous effects that we have to really look at what is the intention of a particular program, our strategy? Does it carry out that intention? And does it do it in a biased way. And I'll give you an example. When I was on the bench in juvenile court, we started seeing more and more children that were testing positive to drugs and mothers that were becoming more and more addicted. And so the thought was, Oh, well, let's back up and do this prevention thing. And when a mother either test positive during prenatal, or admits to using drugs, let's go ahead and do some kind of informal intervention, get them in a treatment program. You know, all this stuff's by time the baby's born, everything will be on track, right? good intention. So how does this get executed is that what we've quickly discovered, was everybody going into those programs was coming from referrals at the public hospital, you know, there may be 10, or 12 hospitals in the county, and only one hospital is referring. And those are all that's the public hospital, where everybody who is poor, or there's a trauma or something else goes, right. And so it was the good intention that was disproportionately impacting mainly black women and their babies. And so we had to stop the program. But if we didn't have those conversations about bias, about race, about structural racism, we wouldn't have even gotten to the point where we could see that this was a problem. And that happens a lot.

Why bring up a really interesting point? Sorry, just Karen, you know about this question of, of testing at birth, in public hospitals, you have pro forma to test for toxicology at birth, whereas in a private hospital, it's not necessarily the case. And so, you know, there is a sort of surveillance bias happening already at that juncture. And of course, we know what separates why certain people go to public hospitals, and why certain go to private hospitals and who goes to private hospitals. But then again, you get back to this problem of how do you offer preventative services without relying on the bias systems that help you identify who to surveil? How do you go about doing that?

Well, I think part of it is you have to talk to the people in a community to see what services they need. And what we oftentimes will sit up in these towers and say, Oh, this is what they need. This is the service. This is the program without ever talking to the people who are living the experience. And so sometimes, you know, we can come up with great things. But if it's not what people need, it's not going to move the needle anyway. And so we have to think outside the box. I know that Molly, when you were leading a child welfare system, you often thought beyond the system itself, like how do we get resources in the hands of trusted community leaders and others who can deliver services and interventions much better than we can as a system?

I think that's right. And it strikes me that, that there's something you said that I like that in and of itself is the bias. Like when we presume that we need to sit in our ivory tower in our bureaucratic office and think about what those people need? It's the presumption that they don't have an opinion, I think, really? of course, they have an opinion. Of course, they have an idea about what would be helpful, but we start from a place of presuming they can't, they won't. They aren't that they're less than somehow. And I but I also want to say, I mean, we all of us, because I you know, I'm mindful that Daniel the last time we were on recording something on this very topic. You were quite articulate. People don't people who work in child welfare don't get up every day out of bed rushing out to go hurt some black children. That's not what's happening for

them, right. Like they're getting up every day to try to do what they believe is right. But the kind of surveillance you're speaking of, is not about child welfare. It's about our country right? It is about how a child welfare is just the forum that is existing in a country that is so overwhelmed with bias, along a color line, that it's so ingrained, we can't even see it. Right? And so in my opinion, the task is, how do each of us as individuals, pull it out so you can see it. Cuz if you could see it, and it wasn't in you, or something, I can't find the right words. But it wasn't all of you somehow you recognize that it's a part of me, but it's not. It doesn't own me.

I think you hit it. I think that oftentimes people avoid these issues and professions because they don't want to see themselves or have other people see them as racist. That's so true. it and put it in the context of we live in a society that has systemic racism built into just about every system, we know. So, um, I think you're right, it's almost like if you could take a balcony level view, but then take what you've seen, and apply it every day. Right? That's when a lot of learning and impact actually happen. And I think that's what the virtual piece does. It allows you to practice knowing that you're not harming it's not a real family, all those things, and then you get to unpack it in a way that you don't normally do in regular practice. I think there's something about that.

This is so important to me, because I think that what our and it may be the case, that what you experience in the headset is less impactful to the future of our country than the conversation you have afterwards. Because we do not have enough opportunities to have conversations about race in heterogeneous groups, right? White people get along talk about black people get along talk about but we don't get into heterogeneous groups and have like, really honest conversations. I mean, I got to tell you that in the creation of this scenario, we started from the get go saying, if we're going to pull this off, if our goal is to get people to have complex conversate, engaging conversations about race and heterogeneous groups, we're going to have to do that as part of the creative process. And that meant, first we're gonna have to have us a heterogeneous group to make this product.



And just that alone, it's like it's a journey to say, Alright, well, how do you have a working group? That is, you know, that is a diverse working group? groups tend towards homogeneity right, how do you actually pull that off? Keep everyone a seat at the table, give everyone equal voice at the table, so people aren't silenced? So that you're taking care not to have one demographic always be the first that talks or always be the deciding voice? When How are you really creating a forum in which you can think, honestly, and reflectively? about your experience? And I don't know, maybe the person you hope to be? I don't know, I don't know how else we move past that. Anyway, it was very, very interesting process to do that, as part of creating this thing.

It was, it was great for me to Molly just talking to your team, because it made me really reflect on where some of the bias points might derive. Right. And so just as an example, and in addition to working in a child welfare system, and that my oldest son was our foster son, before we adopted him, I'm a mother. I'm a mother of two black boys, you know, sons. And so I was able to reflect with a team that I wake up every day with the burden of worrying about their safety, just by virtue of the fact that they are in black male bodies. And I have a favorite Audrey Lorde quote, when she was she wrote something to her white feminist sisters. And she said, You worry that your sons will grow up and join the patriarchy and testify against you. I worry that my son will be dragged from his car and killed in the streets. That's a very different parenting experience. And so oftentimes, what I see as strict parenting, what may come across the others as being mean, or overpowering, is that tricky balance that women of color have and and women raising children of color period of how much do you protect? And how much do you prepare? Right? A lot of people have been talking about when you have these conversations with kids about race, and how they will interact and engage it in the broader society. And unfortunately, that happens at very young ages for children of color. And so parents involved in the child welfare system are already coming into it knowing that the system is biased against them and their children. And that's a that's a much different level of trauma, then white family. And so what may be coming across as

angry, and there's already the myth of the angry black woman, what may be coming across as defiance is really could be seen as protective factors could be seen as Wow, yeah, is really wanting to make sure he's okay. And she's trying to protect them even from this system that can gobble them up.

yeah. In creating the characters, right like one of the things we learned is that by having iterative discussions on the creative team was that it was generally understood that for a black family, if a public official, like a cop, or a child protection worker shows up at your house, you're thinking, Oh, this cannot be good, we're in real trouble. We're in real trouble here. For white family. If official like that shows up, you think they're there to be helpful? And you're ready to open the door and saying, How can we help? Well, just that, just creating that stance in the families, there's fascinating, fascinating.

Well, I have to say, Karen, we're going to have to have you back on because you have a lot of things that we want to dive into about your career life, and your family life, and how that affects your work life now. And so I just really am very happy that you joined us today. And Molly, thank you for bringing Karen here, as well and for being here. And you know, what, struck me as we close out is just the whole purpose that Molly's been espousing, in all of this work, is to try to get at the person to person level, how do we expose and deal with bias to lead to conversation? And then as we talk, this other concept comes up about the question of the ivory tower decision making. And it seems to me this through this, you know, technological advancement that allows for actors to become virtual clients that social workers are interacting with without having to harm them. Remember, we have that harm thing that we're avoiding as well. It elicits a conversation that then is both heterogeneous, racially, but also in terms of position within the agency. So you have the young frontline worker, and what Molly used to be formerly sitting in her ivory tower in Baltimore, making decisions about the fate of families across her jurisdiction. I'm joking, you didn't do that, Molly. But, but but you know, you have that opportunity. So I'm just look, these conversations are iterative, and always a little bit hard, because



it makes you think about things that you don't want, you don't want to think about what you were talking about, Karen. I mean, the realities of being a white mother versus being a black mother in America are pretty, pretty stark, and to be fearful of a system and being warranted in your protectiveness, and being dinged for that is with the ultimate, the removal of your child. I mean, that is some heavy, heavy stuff. So we're trying to get through this. And Molly, I just want to thank you for reminding us about the conversation. And then for coming up with ways to make that conversation happen. So with that, I will say goodbye to this conversation. Karen, we'll get you back. And Molly, thank you so much.

See you next time. Thanks, guys.

Love to come back.

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