

# Father Involvement and Child Welfare: The Voices of Men of Color

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## Abstract

This study conducted focus groups with fathers from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds residing in the San Francisco Bay Area in order to explore (1) the level of involvement with their children, and (2) their experiences with social workers. Unintentional bias can inadvertently affect paternal involvement and create ethical concerns in child welfare case management.

*Keywords:* Biases, ethical dilemmas, child welfare, fatherhood involvement, focus groups

## 1. Introduction

When involving fathers in child welfare matters, it is important to understand the role gender plays in a father's relationship with his children. Regardless of race, men are often viewed as ineffective and unimportant parents (O'Donnell, 2001; Greif et al., 2011; Coakley, 2013). In many

case-management instances, the value of fathers has been marginalized by patriarchal beliefs that a man's sole responsibility to his family is financial with no direct impact on the social and emotional outcomes of his children (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; O'Donnell, 2001; English, Brummel, & Martens, 2009). As a result, many men have been conditioned to believe that if they cannot contribute to their children financially, then their presence is not warranted (Greif et al., 2011). Research studies have been scant with regard to father-child relationships and their value in the greater context of the family unit.

### 1.1 Maternal Influence

The ability to co-parent with the mother(s) of his children is crucial to a father's level of commitment to his parenting obligations. A mother can be the single most determining factor in promoting a father's relationship with their

children, or conversely, a significant hindrance. A positive relationship between a mother and a father may encourage the man's confidence in his role as a father (O'Donnell, 2001; McRoy, 2008; Grief et al., 2011). Adversely, a negative relationship may obstruct a father's participation in his child's life. It can be argued that a mother's role is sometimes that of a gatekeeper when it comes to sharing information, such as the father's whereabouts or offering identifying information for paternal relatives when child protective services is involved (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2009; O'Donnell, 2001; Grief et al., 2011). As a result, this lack of communication can have a critical impact in child welfare as it potentially restricts access to extended relatives for kinship placement options if out-of-home care becomes imminent. Excluding certain family members as possible caregivers can pose ethical concerns for social workers regardless of whether the exclusion of certain kinfolk was intentional. Child welfare workers are trained to be prime advocates for children in the system. According to federal and state policy, worker advocacy should include a balanced exploration of efforts to locate kin for children who are unable to live with their parents (California Department of Social Services, 2010). Kinship care not only reduces the trauma of separation for children, but also provides them with a connection to someone who is likely knowledgeable about their family heritage and culture (California Department of Social Services, 2010).

## **1.2 The Social Workers' Role**

In addition to the maternal parent affecting paternal involvement, transference and counter-transference issues of the child welfare worker can largely contribute to worker bias. Racial stereotypes, social class, and differences in educational background can result in flawed decision-making on the part of child welfare workers based largely on a lack of knowledge or overgeneralization when working with families, in particular, families representing ethnic

minority backgrounds (McRoy, 2008; Curtis & Denby, 2011; Lefkowitz, 2011). Unintentional bias can inadvertently affect the level of paternal involvement in child protective service cases due to differential service provisions that are offered (McRoy, 2008). This kind of unfair treatment in case management creates an ethical dilemma...how can social workers truly operate in the best interest of children when unresolved personal issues have such an ability to overtly and subconsciously impact case plan outcomes?

## **2. Mandated Guidelines**

### **2.1 Benefits of Paternal Engagement**

Father involvement can provide access to social workers knowing a child's early developmental history, genetic background, and existing kinship networks (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; O'Donnell, 2001; English et al., 2009; Grief et al., 2011) – all of which are pertinent elements in effective case management. Promoting fathers may decrease the high number of African American children in the foster care system, for example, by expanding paternal placement options and generating a more complete composite of the child's family medical history. A lack of this kind of balanced (paternal and maternal) information does not serve the best interest of the child. Fatherhood inclusion strengthens concurrent and permanency planning efforts – which is a federal provision under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (English et al., 2009; Curtis & Denby, 2011).

### **2.2 Child Welfare Compliance**

The nature of social work practice can be challenging and leave room for unintentional bias, which poses an additional threat to fathers who have children in the child welfare system. There are mandates in place which state that child welfare practitioners must operate from a family-centered perspective, implying minimal value judgment and limited subjectivity (O'Donnell, 2001; English et al., 2009; Curtis & Denby, 2011). However, rarely is the father considered the focal

point in child welfare case management. Often times, parent involvement is limited only to the mother and emphasis is placed on reestablishing the mother's relationship with the child (Coakley, 2013). In a system that is primarily focused on the mother, it is quite possible that fathers are left to question where they fit in the equation. Ethically, this is not appropriate – even if fathers' exclusion is done inadvertently and without deliberate intention. The recognition of a significant lack of father involvement, in general and in child welfare, undoubtedly contributed to the establishment of fatherhood initiatives to ensure best practice (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010).

Including the biological father should be a child welfare mandate, but endeavors to regularly solicit their participation many times is near the bottom of the long list of case management priorities (English et al., 2009; Greif et al., 2011). Despite the functionality of nontraditional families, research indicates that children need both a mother and a father to contribute to their emotional, psychological, and social development (English et al., 2009). Fathers contribute to their children's psychological and emotional growth when fathers are accessible, responsible, and invested in the well-being of their children (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; O'Donnell, 2001; English et al., 2009; Greif et al., 2011). Evidenced-based research confirms that paternal involvement is essential to child development. If fathers play a valuable role in their children's development, it begs the question as to why there are so few fathers involved in child welfare.

There continues to be a drastic increase in the number of children residing in fatherless households (O'Donnell et al., 2005). According to 2009 U.S. Census Bureau data, the highest ethnic group of children living in father-absent homes are African American at 64% (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2009). Having fathers as active participants in a case plan could likely avert the succession of absentee fathers and lessen perpetual cycles of single-mother households – a

highly visible family paradigm within the child welfare system. Social workers have a prime opportunity to promote positive images of single parents and their ability to co-parent. It is believed that the collaboration of decision-making and a supportive partnership, or co-parenting, is an important aspect of family life (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; O'Donnell, 2001; Hines, Lee, Osterling, & Drabble, 2006; Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010). By supporting the notion of dual-parenting, service providers can help diminish the marginalized parental role that some fathers may face. Promoting fathers could potentially decrease the exceedingly high number of (African American) children who enter the foster care system by supporting parental models, such as co-parenting, and more aggressively facilitating fathers' full inclusion and participation in case planning (American Humane Association, 2013; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010).

### **3. Relevant Theoretical Frameworks**

#### **3.1 Family Systems Theory**

Family systems theory should be considered as a basis for understanding the importance and value of father involvement. Within the context of family, a father's role is critical to establishing and maintaining the structure of the unit. This theory views the family as an emotional unit that is complexly interconnected (Franck & Buehler, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). A family systems perspective must be taken into account when discussing a father's role not just in relation to his child but also in relation to the child's mother (Franck & Buehler, 2007). As such, the mother–father dyad, the father–child dyad, and the mother–child dyad are critical subsystems, because each structural relationship has a direct and indirect influence on the others (Franck & Buehler, 2007). Family systems theory articulates the importance of co-parenting; the theoretical framework applies whether or not the biological father lives in the home with the mother and the child. Emotional issues and conflict are an integral part of a family's

development and how that family interacts within their environment (Coakley, 2013). Removal of the father, or exclusion of his involvement, challenges the family's structure and, likewise, the return of the father to a family that is not intact requires support in order to assimilate the unit back into its optimal level of functioning (Coakley, 2013).

### **3.2 Empowerment Perspective**

As a way to actualize paternal involvement and to ensure greater representation of fathers in the child welfare system, the empowerment perspective is another framework from which to build. The empowerment perspective has a "...dual focus on people's potential and on political/structural change" (Lee, 1996, p. 219). Although empowerment is a concept that can mean different things to different people, at its core lies the ability to build on strengths and work in partnership rather than in conflict [with fathers] (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999). Some of the basic assumptions about the empowerment approach are that (1) people are fully capable of solving problems and analyzing the institutional oppression causing these problems, and (2) [workers] are able to strengthen internal resources and work collaboratively with individuals, groups, and communities to change oppressive conditions (Lee, 1996). These tenets should mirror the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of social workers who engage families in resolving child welfare dilemmas.

Knowledge of the history of disenfranchised populations and an understanding of how to create systemic change is a process within itself. Underrepresented groups, some of which have adapted to the structure of domination, have often become resigned to it and are inhibited from waging in the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires (Friere, 2002). The result of empowerment is that there is equal opportunity and access to resources for people who are poor, oppressed, and stigmatized (i.e., fathers involved in the child welfare system). In the empowerment perspective,

power is present at three levels – personal (feelings and perceptions regarding the capacity to influence and resolve one's own problems); interpersonal (experiences with others to facilitate problem resolution); and environmental (societal institutions can facilitate or thwart self-help efforts) (Pillari, 2002, p. 13). An understanding of these components is needed to assist workers with a means to empower fathers and actively involve them in social service case management. Receiving input from men who are fathers with children in the child welfare system is essential, especially hearing the voices of fathers from non-White ethnic backgrounds as their children are impacted the most in terms of foster care rates (McRoy, 2008; United States Government Accountability Office, 2007).

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Research Design**

In order to gain firsthand knowledge and information from the perspective of fathers, these researchers conducted an exploratory/descriptive study and employed a qualitative research design. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe fathers' views on their level of involvement with their children, and their experiences with social workers. It was important to have men of color articulate their perceptions of paternal involvement, and to capture the sentiments of these fathers regarding their interactions with social work case managers. The two research questions guiding this study were: (1) *How are fathers involved with their children?* and (2) *How do fathers describe their interactions with social workers?* Focus groups were used in this study to address these research questions.

### **4.2 Instrumentation**

Regarding construction of the focus group questions, face validity and content validity were determined based on input from those familiar with social work practice and research methodologies. Feedback was obtained from managers of child welfare organizations, child welfare staff persons,

and social science researchers in formal meetings and through structured conversation and dialogue. In conjunction, a review of the literature provided credence to the appropriateness of the two overarching research questions which addressed father involvement and social worker interaction (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010; Coakley, 2013; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010; English et al., 2009; Greif et al., 2011; Hines et al., 2007; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2005). These research questions guided the development of probing questions used in the focus groups. Specifically, the probes were designed to elicit fathers' opinions about: co-parenting, child support, visitation, discipline, societal expectations of fathers, and how they felt they were treated by social workers.

### **4.3 Sampling**

Since the number of African American children in foster care is still disproportionate to their number in the general population, and they are adversely impacted more than any other ethnic/racial group in child welfare, these researchers primarily sought to highlight the voices of African Americans. Due to the marginalization of many fathers in the child welfare system, this study used purposive sampling to recruit male participants. The sample consisted of 37 fathers over the age of 18 involved in parenting classes at a community-based organization in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. The majority of fathers represented in this sample were African American (n=31). The other focus group participants were Latino (n=2), Asian (n=2), Middle Eastern (n=1), Pacific Islander (n=1), Latino & African American (n=1), and one declined to state his race/ethnicity but did clarify that he did not classify himself as being White, Anglo, or Caucasian.

## **5. Results**

Two qualitative themes emerged from the focus groups: "environment" and "culture". In relation to the *environment*, participants

described a disconnect between their day-to-day life encounters and workers' inability to relate due to cultural backgrounds. The participants shared some of the regular occurrences in their neighborhood that involved physical safety as a concern (e.g., shootings and robberies) and housing-related issues, for example. According to the participants, these types of circumstances in their immediate surroundings did not elicit an empathic response from social workers. The men revealed that social workers often deemed them ineligible for certain local resources (e.g., housing vouchers). The fathers commented that it seemed as though mothers were always given precedence. The participants did not believe there was uniformity in the types of community services offered to them versus women.

As the term *culture* can involve many facets, in this study, culture appeared to be associated the most with prescribed gender roles and socioeconomic status (SES). According to the male participants, female social workers were unable to relate to the struggles and challenges faced by fathers from disenfranchised backgrounds. Participants expressed a lack of compassion by the social workers they had involvement with. The daily obstacles encountered by participants living in low income areas seemed to create additional barriers where inaccurate assumptions perpetuated miscommunication between the fathers and their social workers.

### **5.1 Father Involvement**

The focus groups also captured responses related to the men's perspective on their level of engagement with their children's social activities, the degree to which paternal relatives were involved, and the general public's opinion of fathers who are from ethnic minority backgrounds. There can often be a strain between the maternal and paternal sides of a child's family regardless of whether or not the biological parents are together as a couple. The participants did not describe any discord between their relatives and the family members of the mother of their children.

Comments indicated that paternal relatives were regularly involved in their children's social events (i.e., birthday parties, school activities, and sporting events).

Not only were the responses resounding in agreement that society expects them to be active fathers, but the participants felt they should equally share in the daily responsibilities associated with raising their children. These researchers wanted to understand the participants' definitions of co-parenting. Most described co-parenting as all responsibilities evenly divided between the parents. It appeared that the majority of the participants had lived with the mother of their children at some point. However, many of the participants were confident they could raise their children without living under the same roof as the mother of their children.

Among other focus group responses, there was an apparent division between those who consistently had conflict around where the children lived, how both parents spent money (or did not spend money) on their children, a visitation schedule, and child support. Two of the four focus groups expressed no issues or concerns related to the aforementioned areas; whereas the remaining half described constant discord with the mother of their children. Several of the male participants stated they made important decisions with the mother of their children quite frequently. Discussions with the children's mother related to academic progress varied as did conversations about appropriate methods of discipline. There did not appear to be regular communication between the parents regarding these two specific issues – progress in school, and the best way to correct their child's unwanted behavior.

## **5.2 Interaction with Social Workers**

The focus groups concluded with a discussion related to the participants' experience with social workers. Roughly half of the participants indicated they had not worked with social workers in the past. This information seemed in contrast to the stories that many of the

men shared. Several described having supervised visitation and sessions with a "therapy counselor", but verbalized that they had no dealings with a social worker. Granted, a paraprofessional, college intern, or psychologist may have facilitated the counseling sessions and the monitored child visits, but the participants did not differentiate the professional's academic background or field of study. The focus group members may not have been aware that someone referred to as a case manager, therapist, eligibility worker, mental health clinician, group counselor, or child welfare worker are positions commonly held by someone with an academic degree in social work, or are titles that may be considered synonymous with the role of a professional social worker. Nonetheless, of those who recognized dealings with social workers, they primarily described unequal treatment when compared to the mother of their children. There was an almost even division between fathers who felt important, respected, and valued by their social workers, against those who did not. Additionally, for the few participants who had worked with male social workers, none of them described their experience as having been significantly different than with female social workers. Collectively, the focus group members did not think the gender of the social worker really mattered. Participants noted comments, such as, "the courts are biased against men", and "it doesn't matter if [the] worker is a man or a female, they still are *the system*."

## **6. Implications**

This article has implications for child welfare practice, social work education, and future research studies. In relation to practice, the findings suggest that social workers should continually communicate and maintain connections with paternal relatives. The relationship with the fathers in this study and their extended family was resoundingly strong. Although a case file may initially have limited information on the whereabouts of a father, or written information about the father that is less

than positive, there exists an ethical responsibility to diligently search for and actively include fathers in the case planning process. This type of effort could mean having face-to-face contact with known collateral contacts versus communicating with them via mail or by telephone to ascertain any possible new developments regarding the father. The goal is to maximize key social work principles – rapport building and engagement (Zastrow, 2008). For a paradigm shift to occur, a higher value must be placed on fathers.

The professional training of child welfare workers can occur on the job and through facilitated in-service workshops. However, it is often learned in a formal academic setting. Regarding social work education, a keen understanding of empowerment and the family system requires viewing this dynamic exchange within an environmental context. The worker's behavior interacts with the behaviors of the parents and both influence each other. It may be difficult for emerging practitioners to recognize the impact that a worker's values can have on case outcomes. According to Sheafor and Horejsi (2006), "the worker brings unique personal characteristics to the change process when working with clients" (p. 13). This notion is why it is important to critically explore interpersonal underpinnings and biases in an academic setting where faculty support is available (e.g., field instructors, professors, and academic advisors).

It is exceedingly important for social work educators to assist students in achieving a high level of self-awareness. This is a key skill required for a competent social worker (Zastrow, 2008). Guiding students to a place where they can critically reflect on their biases is helpful to their learning of how to be ethically responsible social workers. Students' interpersonal reservations or, in more colloquial terms, "baggage", can hinder progress when working with parents, namely fathers, on their caseloads. Without astuteness to the self-reflection process, it will be very difficult for a practitioner to empathize with a father's situation or be able to understand what that father

may be thinking and feeling (Zastrow, 2008). Content areas within the social work curriculum (especially generalist practice, field practicum, and human behavior and the social environment) provide a setting and context for depth of personal and professional discovery.

Future studies should focus on involving fathers from ethnic minority backgrounds as these men tend to be excluded in research, yet are often active in the lives of their children whether the system has knowledge of their involvement or not. Focusing research on strategies that specifically highlight the value of fatherhood engagement could prove beneficial in the way public child welfare cases are managed. A paradigm that embodies the best mode to achieve research inclusive of fathers from racially underrepresented backgrounds is by way of participatory action research (PAR). PAR creates a partnership with the key stakeholders (fathers of color) to create joint ownership of the research methodology (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The traditional experts (social science researchers) would redefine their role as that of partners or consultants (Fleras, 1995). Friere (2002) postulates a strong viewpoint that mirrors the values of PAR, which is "faith in people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue" (p. 90). To dismantle barriers to communication, one must have confidence that, with appropriate tools and support, even the most disenfranchised persons have the ability to contribute to and ultimately create thorough research studies of sound quality.

In concert with the PAR model, qualitative studies can offer a platform for fathers who feel marginalized and provide a semi-structured opportunity for expression. Some of the male participants in this study felt that their value and worth had been demeaned by society and many governmental institutions. An open forum in a research setting may facilitate stronger communication and understanding between social service workers and fathers from a mid-to-low socioeconomic status. Additionally, focus groups could allow for increased knowledge and sharing

of what a child welfare worker's role is – to empower and support the family system.

## 7. Conclusion

Paternal involvement, in addition to worker introspection, provides a foundation for equitable child welfare case management. Although federal legislation has been enacted to assist agencies and their workers with addressing parental participation and the racial disparities that directly affect foster children, the enforcement of these laws can be more stringent, thus strengthening accountability. One particular strategy could be for individual states, counties, and local foster family agencies to mandate a minimum number of trainings for novice and experienced workers on the topic of fathers and to promote arenas for continual self-reflection that thwart instances leading to worker bias. Trainings have the capacity to build awareness among staff regarding how to be more inclusive when working with fathers of diverse ethnic backgrounds and can help create cultural shifts in an agency's climate. Being a critical thinker about biases and its influence on case management should be a paramount expectation of any trained social worker.

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