

An Appraisal of Fathers' Perspectives on Fatherhood and Barriers to Their Child Welfare Involvement

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Abstract:

The present study provides insight into the extent and rationale of fathers' involvement with their children and the child welfare system. This qualitative study explored 12 child welfare-involved fathers' perceptions of fatherhood and factors that facilitate and inhibit case planning involvement. The findings indicate that most fathers strongly desired to stay involved with their children but felt they needed to overcome social workers' negativity, unfair agency policies and practices, and economic difficulties in order to complete their case plan goals and remain in their children's lives. Recommendations are provided for child welfare policy, practice, and research.

Keywords: Fathers | fatherhood | permanency plan | father involvement | foster care

Article:

INTRODUCTION

Child welfare agencies have the potential to create favorable permanency outcomes for children in out-of-home placements when they engage fathers in the case-planning process. However, because of unaddressed agency barriers, there has been only minimal progress in their efforts to optimize fathers' strengths. Within the child welfare system, there is an unfortunate norm where many of its children do not have contact with their birth fathers. Malm (2003) reported that only 54% of nearly a half-million children in foster care had contact with their fathers in the span of a year compared to 72% of children from the general population.

The dearth of empirical research on child welfare-involved fathers does not sufficiently include fathers' account of their experiences with the child welfare agency. To date, most studies are limited to surveying case workers for their opinions about fathers (see Malm, Murray, & Geen,

2006; O'Donnell, 1999; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005) or examining agency case records with fractured father data (see Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Coakley, 2008, 2012) in an attempt to piece together an accurate picture of father involvement. Unquestionably, the use of these methods has provided invaluable descriptive and corollary data on father involvement from an agency perspective, which has resulted in prescriptive steps to identifying, locating, and engaging fathers. However, those studies fail to tap into the most important source of information—fathers—regarding the ways and reasons they participate or do not participate in case planning efforts toward children's safety, well-being, and permanence. Without an understanding of how fathers perceive barriers to fulfilling their fatherhood role, child welfare agencies cannot tout that their efforts with fathers are effective or even realistic.

The present study provides insight into the extent and rationale of fathers' involvement with their children and the child welfare system. The purpose of this study is to explore fathers' perceptions of fatherhood as well as factors that facilitate and inhibit case planning involvement.

BACKGROUND

Father Involvement

Father involvement positively impacts children's psychosocial, academic, and permanence outcomes (Cryer & Washington, 2011; Flouri, 2005; Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994; Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008; Palkovitz, 2002; Pleck, 2010). As it relates to foster care, father involvement outlines specific contributions such as visitation with their children and their financial or nonfinancial support to their children (Malm et al., 2008). This explains what it is that fathers must do to meet child welfare agencies' expectations regarding their readiness to promote children's development and well-being in stable, permanent families.

Although, the fatherhood role is multifaceted and involves, among other things, important emotional and social contributions, societal expectations for them are predominantly focused on their financial obligations as a provider (Harris & Marmer, 1996). Moreover, the emphasis of public policy is mainly on identifying the fathers of children in care in order to enforce orders for child support payments (Day & Lamb, 2004). Beyond that, it is usual practice for child welfare agencies to have little or no contact at all with fathers. Fathers are rarely identified in the case records, and there is a tendency for child welfare agencies not to view them as viable participants in their efforts to ensure children's safety, well-being, and permanence. As a result, they are not usually included in the case-planning process (see Malm et al., 2006, 2008; O'Donnell, 1999).

Barriers to Involvement

Fathers experience a number of barriers to their child welfare involvement, which adversely affects their children's permanency outcomes (Coakley, 2008, 2012; Malm et al., 2008). Some barriers are attributed to their own personal problems, such as substance abuse and mental illness

(Jaffee, Caspit, Moffitt, Taylor, & Dickson, 2001; Waller & Swisher, 2006), and familial problems, such as, co-parenting and domestic violence issues (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; McLanahan, & Beck, 2010). However, societal factors, such as racism and economic disadvantages (Behnke, Taylor, & Parra-Cardona, 2009; DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith, & U. S. Census Bureau, 2011), and ineffective child welfare agency practices and policies negatively impact their involvement as well (Brown et al., 2009; Earner, 2007; O'Donnell, 1999).

METHOD

The purpose of this present study is to provide qualitative information about fathers' perceptions of fatherhood and factors that facilitate and inhibit case-planning involvement. There are two main objectives: (1) to explore fathers' perceptions of their fatherhood role and (2) to explore possible supports and barriers to father involvement.

Design and Sample

This cross-sectional study was conducted from July 2008 to September 2008 and was part of a larger study that involved multiple data collection methods. The focus of this paper is on the qualitative research only. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board approved study procedures involving recruiting and studying human participants.

To protect their clients' privacy, the child welfare agency was responsible for identifying and making the initial contact with fathers from child welfare cases to invite them to participate in the study. Agency administrators and supervisors distributed the study flyers to child welfare social workers and instructed them to present the flyers to fathers from their cases during routine contact with them. They also were encouraged to share the study information with fathers whose children had received services in the past. Fathers from all racial and ethnic backgrounds were invited to participate.

Fathers who were interested in being participants or who wanted additional information about the study either called or e-mailed the researcher or permitted their social workers to forward their contact information to the researcher who, in turn, contacted them. All inquirers were asked to verify that he was a father older than 18 years and that he or his child's mother had been investigated by the Department of Social Services (DSS; i.e., child welfare agency) for child abuse or neglect. The researcher accepted the legitimacy of their statements and scheduled eligible and willing fathers for the interview. Male inquirers who were not fathers or whose children did not ever receive child welfare services were not permitted to participate.

Data Collection

The study was conducted at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in a private conference room. The fathers completed a background information form that solicited sociodemographic information. Next, they participated in an audio-taped interview that consisted

of 29 semi-structured questions concerning fathers' perceptions about the child welfare system and their role as fathers (Appendix).

The interviews were conducted by three interviewers: one project coordinator and two research assistants. The three interviewers conducted 10 of the 12 interviews separately. The project coordinator conducted two of the initial interviews in the presence of the two research assistants in order to ensure consistency with interviewing methods, thus reducing any potential bias from interviewers' influencing response themes. Two of the interviewers were African American women, and one interviewer was an African American man.

The interviewers informed the participants that they were interested only in their honest thoughts and opinions; there were no right or wrong answers to the questions; and they could ask for clarification of questions if needed. The time allotted for each interview was 1.5 hours. During the interview, participants were given ample time to think about the questions and respond thoroughly without interruption. At the end of the interview, the interviewers asked, "Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with DSS?" The average time of completion was approximately 1 hour. Fathers received \$75 cash immediately following the completion of their interviews and other study materials.

Analysis

A qualitative analysis was used for the audio-taped interviews. The interviews were transcribed by an administrative staff person and a research assistant who typed them verbatim. Relevant text segments were identified and extracted by the researcher. Highlighted text from the transcripts was coded into one of three categories: fatherhood role, factors that facilitate involvement, or factors that inhibit involvement. These categories served as a "start list" for coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, narrative segments were assigned secondary codes reflecting a specific type of each category.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Of the 12 fathers in the study sample, 11 were the birth fathers (91.7%), and 1 was a stepfather (8.3%). The majority of the men were African American (9, 75%), two (16.7%) were multicultural, and one (8.3%) self-identified as "Other." Most fathers were single (66.7%), and they had various religious preferences, though primarily Christian (41.7%) and nondenominational (41.7%). The median age of the men was between 21 and 30 years. Most had completed some high school or earned a high school diploma or GED (58%). Fifty percent reported that they were unemployed, disabled, or not working, and the other half reported they were working full-time. And half reported earning between \$0 and \$9,999 annually.

Most men rented their home (66.7%), one rented a room (8.3%), one owned a home (8.3%), and two were incarcerated or detained at some point while their children were in care (16.7%). When the child welfare agency became involved with their families, the children lived with their fathers (41.7%), mothers (33.3%), or grandmothers (8.3%). Ten fathers have or had children involved with either Child Protection Services (CPS) or foster care, and two had children who received public assistance or food stamps. Half of the men reported that they were reunited with their children who were in foster care, and 41.7 percent were not reunited. Most men described their relationship with their child as close or very close (83.3%). Others said they were not close to their child or did not have a relationship with their child (16.7%).

Fathers' Perspectives

Fatherhood Role

The fatherhood role is explained here as those parenting responsibilities assumed by fathers to ensure children's development and well-being. Eight general themes described the fatherhood role (Table 1). Fathers perceived their role as a financial provider, nurturer, teacher, and disciplinarian.

In describing how they perceived their role, fathers discussed their commitment to preserving their family and responsibility to being in their children's lives permanently.

Table 1. Fatherhood Role

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|----------|
| Being there for children | 10 | 83.3 |
| Providing financial support/food | 9 | 75.0 |
| Teaching child to do things/sports | 6 | 50.0 |
| Preserving family | 5 | 41.7 |
| Disciplining/helping children maintain good behavior | 5 | 41.7 |
| Meeting children's basic care needs | 2 | 16.7 |
| Showing their children love | 2 | 16.7 |
| Providing emotional support | 1 | 8.3 |

I mean, regardless of who raises my kids they are my kids. That's my blood. That's my heart and my lungs until they are 18. I would be with my children, like I said, if I wasn't

at work or if I wasn't trying to take care of things to try to get them back into my household. I'd be with them as long as I was allowed.

There was a similar response from a different father:

It wasn't no big deal to meet her [social worker]. But it was uncomfortable for me to go to different meetings. And I had to take drug tests and stuff like that. And I felt like, I don't know. I mean, I'm gonna do it anyway, because no child should be in foster care if they got parents, you know, living or family around. You know, foster care taking care of the child is nothing like family.

There are several accounts from fathers about the importance of discipline, having a strong presence, and taking needed steps to ensure their children were well-behaved. Fathers wanted to curb their children's delinquent activities so they would not face more serious trouble in the future:

Me personally, um they look at us as, us men as, we are not able to do the things that womens can do. But, me personally, I think a man can do more than a woman can do, because, every child needs a father. Because, a woman can say, "*Stop this,*" and the child is like, "*Aww, that ain't deep enough.*" But, the father say, "*Stop it!*," and the more they will listen, more to the authority of our voice.

Another father uses professional help to help his son address his behavioral problems:

He used to steal when he was with his mother to eat. You know, to get money to eat, and whatever so. And it became you know, like normal to him, you know what I'm saying. But, he don't have to do that, you know. So I mean, we seeing a therapist—clinical psychologist—and stuff. So, I mean, he's doing much better.

Fathers were critical about how the child welfare agency handled their cases. Two fathers discuss how their discipline techniques led to CPS investigations:

From the minute they saw a bruise on his face and said I did it—it was over. They show up because he's a light-skinned child and say it's inappropriate discipline. If you get a kid with a bruise who the doctor says it's a superficial bruise, then it ain't no reason to pull a kid out the house. It is if your child is getting bones broken, you know, burnt or some major thing is going on.

A different father expressed a similar dilemma with disciplining being considered abuse by the child welfare agency:

The biggest thing would be they would tell me not to discipline them. Not to spank. I can feed them, buy clothes for them, provide a place for them to stay. But, I'm not supposed to discipline to raise them to grow up to be good adults. Because I'm a big guy to begin

with, they say I'm intimidating the kids. They want my wife to do it. They don't want me to be the one to discipline.

The substantiated report against one father was the beginning of a downward spiral for his son, who was placed in foster care where he did not adjust well. His son was later placed in a group home facility and ultimately placed in a detention center:

My son is light-skinned and yes, when I did discipline him he did had belt marks across his buttocks and back. At the hospital DSS came and said, "*You're an abuser.*" I found that to be very offensive and that stung, because no one knows the depth of love that I have for my son.

Another father felt the child welfare agency inappropriately questioned his wife during an agency visit for other services about whether he ever harmed his children:

They come to my wife and they separated my wife like she wasn't gonna tell me what was said, you know. And she—my wife said the first five questions if I remember them correctly was, "*Well what does your husband do to discipline your children?*" That's not what we are here for, you know. I don't discipline my kids really. I let my wife do it. Because, I mean, they are daddy's girls.

Factors That Facilitate Involvement

There were eight themes that emerged that fathers' perceived as factors that facilitated involvement (Table 2). Fathers reported that social workers who were compassionate, respectful, and possessed good helping skills supported them to successfully complete the case plan goals:

Um, at the time of my son's situation um, they didn't give me a hard time about me being a man and not being a woman. And I like the way they made me feel comfortable. Um, I could call her at anytime and tell her I needed to talk to her and she really was, this young lady, she was, she put in effort ... I mean, she was just basically, I mean, once DSS actually got into our lives she did everything she possibly could to get them right back out. I mean, without a shadow of a doubt, she was a lifesaver there.

Fathers discuss both the difficulties and benefits of completing the case plan goals and doing whatever was needed in order to show that they wanted to be a part of their children's lives:

I had to go through certain steps as far as taking classes, parenting classes. And they had to come do a home evaluation and stuff like that so I could get my son. But, some of the classes, though, I did felt like, you know, why did I have to do it? Or whatever. But, you know, I had to make some sacrifices to get my son, so.

A father expresses how helpful the agency was even though he did not realize it in the beginning: "They make you do things sometimes that you don't really wanna do. But when you do them

when you do them after awhile you learn that, you know, you will see why they ask you to do them, so, you know what I mean.” A different father also recognizes the benefits of working with the agency, although it was challenging:

They don't give you any outside help unless you absolutely, positively need it. You know they want you to do pretty much everything on your own. That way, not only are you proving to DSS that you got this when it comes to those kids. But, you are proving to whoever keeps calling on you like look, that they got this, leave them alone.

Table 2. Perceived Factors That Facilitate Involvement

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--|----------|----------|
| Resources/providing assistance that helps fathers help their children | 10 | 83.3 |
| Workers' helping skills | 8 | 66.7 |
| Workers' understanding and compassion | 6 | 50.0 |
| Fathers' confidence as a parent | 5 | 41.6 |
| Workers' being open and honest/telling fathers exactly what is expected and how to get it done | 4 | 33.3 |
| Workers' availability to meet with fathers and answer their questions | 4 | 33.3 |
| Realistic/appropriate case plan goals | 2 | 16.7 |
| Fathers' support and guidance from their own mothers | 1 | 8.3 |

Additionally, fathers reported that they did whatever it took but did not like the pressure of having to complete the goals to the level of the child welfare agency's satisfaction and in a specified timeframe or risk losing their children: “Um, well with everything that they want me to do and require me to do ... and when I try to do it, they should give me an opportunity to see my kids. And they should give me a chance to have a family.”

They also reported that they have benefitted from participating in a father support group: “Men talk about what can we do to help, you know, do better with your kid. What can we do to help benefit. To, you know, to be able to talk and not have problems. 'Cause it's not easy.”

Factors That Inhibit Involvement

Ten themes emerged that fathers' perceived as factors that inhibited involvement (Table 3). Fathers felt they were at a disadvantage because of the agency's unfair policies and practices,

including social workers' disrespectful and judgmental attitudes. Negative behavior from their children's mothers' and fathers' own negative behavior also were problematic. Additionally, fathers said their economic situation was a serious barrier.

There are fathers' accounts about the unprofessional manner in which child welfare agency workers (not necessarily the child welfare social worker) conduct business with them. Examples include how they talk to or treat fathers:

I would say the most, probably the most uh, I'd say the most interference that we really had was when it was the most uncomfortable situation I'd say was probably the very first time we met, and basically she played off almost your basic stereotype: *"I got a title, I gotta place, so I'm gonna be an [expletive]."* Excuse my language. *"But, I'm gonna be an [expletive] just because I can."*

There was a similar occurrence for another father:

Like it's not really so much how you say it but how you act. I mean she was straight forward with her questions and what not, but when, if we said something that she didn't believe even though it was proven, it was a roll of the eye or a smack of the teeth.

One father felt the social worker's negative treatment toward him was motivated by prejudice. "That's how they look at you. They see the color of your skin. People go off of stereotypes. They think that all black men are bad people because we don't have anything good going on for us right now." It also appeared that gender was a factor in workers treatment of fathers in that there was an inability on their part to work with men in a respectful or inclusive manner:

Table 3. Perceived Factors That Inhibit Involvement

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---|----------|----------|
| Economic problems/housing issues/inability to find a job/can't make ends meet | 10 | 83.3 |
| Unfair policies/practices/system favors mothers and not fathers | 7 | 58.3 |
| Fathers' negativity/not friendly toward worker/working with DSS | 6 | 50.0 |
| Workers' negativity/unprofessionalism | 6 | 50.0 |
| Too frequent visits/unannounced visits | 5 | 41.6 |
| Stereotypes of black men | 5 | 41.6 |
| Workers' lack of understanding/critical of fathers' discipline style | 4 | 33.3 |
| Ignores or does not acknowledge or value fathers' presence | 4 | 33.3 |

| | | |
|--|---|------|
| Children's mothers' negativity and noncompliance | 3 | 25.0 |
| Jail/criminal history | 3 | 25.0 |

But everybody I talk to basically looks at my wife and holds conversations with my wife when it's me, you know what I'm saying, I am the one who took the initiative to come here. I took the initiative, swallow my pride and say, hey look I need some help. My wife didn't, it was me. You know, but I mean it's like social services is very female-oriented there. They want to help the female.

Another father expressed how he felt ignored and disrespected by the worker

I feel a little disrespected because a lot of times if you are sitting there with your girls and your kid, they, uh um, they really not really paying attention to you. They asking her questions then uh a lot of things I found out. They didn't see the father. Uh, I feel a little disrespected actually ... Like I wasn't even there they really didn't pay me any mind.

A different father also shared that view of being ignored: “They rather talk to my wife about me even though I'm sitting right there beside her. They seem timid. They don't want to talk to me directly.”

The vast majority of fathers believed that the child welfare agency favors women for helpful services and financial provisions. Fathers think the agency's sentiment is that mothers—not fathers—are deserving of help:

Me personally, I think that uh, the majority of social services uh, pretty much cater to the women more than the men because a lot of women show up more than men and I'm not saying it's because of the male ego or anything like that uh I just feel that social services cater towards women than they do men.

They express how fathers' lack of financial stability and need to care for their children should also warrant social services assistance:

Well I mean it was helpful in certain areas as far as getting my son. But some areas like when I went to go try to get help for him because I made I guess more money a little bit and they could not help me with certain things and I felt like you know when you take care of bills and stuff I still need some other assistance. Oh, but no offense but I think they lean more towards the mother than they do fathers on everything just because.

Another father has a similar experience:

I mean and then you got people in there they look at every guy that walks in there like ok well he can't take care of his family. That may not be the issue you know that may not be

the case I mean just because we are at Social Services there could be other things like you know where I have a wife and two children at home, I work at a fast food restaurant I mean ends don't meet like they are supposed to so I mean I go and get a little bit of help.

The following is one father's account of an unpleasant experience when his child's mother interfered with the child welfare case:

Yeah I did have that problem, because I had the mother calling up there saying, um a bunch of negative things towards me, but know it was not right and so ... the lady came by my house. She really sat down with me and talked to me and seen what kind of living I was in compared to the living that she was in and she couldn't see my son going nowhere else but to the father.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The criteria used here to help substantiate the trustworthiness of qualitative findings include credibility in accurately describing and interpreting participants' accounts, variability of participants' accounts, neutrality/unbiased methods, and generalizability of findings (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1990, p. 215; Sandelowski, 1986). The strengths and limitations of the study's methodology will be discussed in this context.

The following strategies helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the study's findings. In order to accurately describe fathers' perceptions about their experiences, the interview process was designed to make participants feel comfortable talking openly and honestly. First, the interviews took place away from the child welfare agency, and participants were further assured that the study was independent of the agency. Additionally, fathers were interviewed by persons from minority cultural backgrounds. Their audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and accurately quoted. Variability of data was achieved as all themes that emerged were included, even if it were reported by just one father. It was important to include all themes, because it is rare to have accounts from child welfare-involved fathers about the child welfare agency; therefore, any new information is important so that future research can build on this work about fathers' experiences. Additionally, neutrality was enhanced with the use of three different interviewers who received identical training. There was little room for interviewer bias as the interviewers strictly followed the script provided. The subsequent audio-tape review and transcription revealed that there were no deviations from the script.

In terms of generalizability, the findings for the father interviews are limited due to the use of a convenience sample and small sample size. Although it is evident that there was a saturation of themes where all accounts from fathers fully described the universe of experiences that fathers could have, this convenience sample might not represent opinions and characteristics of fathers who might not have been as involved as these participants were.

IMPLICATIONS

Most fathers in this study strongly desired to stay involved with their children, and they expressed a commitment to preserving their family heritage. However, finding ways to effectively engage fathers in the case-planning process continues to be an enormous challenge for child welfare agencies. The incongruence between what fathers say they want and what the agencies feel fathers are capable of is a critical issue that affects children's permanence; therefore, the agencies bear primary responsibility to finding a resolution.

Several fathers attributed working with social workers who were compassionate, respectful, and competent to their successfully completing the case plan goals. However, conversely, fathers reported negative case plan experiences when working with social workers who they felt ignored them or did not respect them as men. Research has shown that fathers who do not feel welcomed or valued by the child welfare agency are not likely to work toward permanency (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Therefore, in order to facilitate fathers' becoming involved and staying involved, child welfare agencies must address their practices concerning how they work with fathers (Brown et al., 2009). It is imperative that they understand how fathers define their fatherhood role and incorporate child welfare practices that highlight fathers' parenting strengths as well as encourage them to engage in services to improve them. In addition, there must be a commitment to enhancing social workers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills around working with fathers.

Admittedly, fathers stated that their own negative behavior toward social workers inhibited their involvement. Differences in communication styles or lack of understanding of fathers' points of view may connote that fathers are disinterested in being involved or that they are aggressive or can be potentially violent; at any rate, it is interpreted by agencies that they cannot be worked with. There is evidence showing that fathers perpetrate domestic violence and have illicit substance and alcohol use issues that affect their family involvement functioning. However, only one of the fathers in this study intimated having such issues as he discussed being drug-tested and going to classes, and none mentioned issues regarding domestic violence. Future research that explores barriers to father involvement might probe more deeply about fathers' negative behaviors and ask specifically about their substance use and domestic violence issues, since these issues are of serious concern to social workers and influence how they work with fathers (O'Donnell, 1999).

As child welfare agencies work to enhance their relationship with fathers, they must take into consideration that fathers experience grief about the imminent possibility of losing custody, and that they become frustrated because they do not understand agency protocol regarding acceptable behavior, which puts them at a disadvantage for advocating for the children and themselves. Throughout the case-planning process, social workers can potentially diffuse a bad situation by empathizing with fathers, especially when they are not the perpetrator of abuse, and show compassion about their predicament. In addition, they should use empowering, culturally and gender-inclusive practices while working with fathers in a respectful manner to convey that they are open to working with men who are racial/ethnic minorities with low income.

Another common experience reported by fathers from this study was that they felt they were inadequately and unfairly treated by the agency. Research supports their position that many public policies and practices are preferential toward women and not men (Brown et al., 2009). To reduce disparities, agencies can consider providing to more fathers supportive services that are equitable to those that mothers receive, such as temporary financial assistance and assistance with subsidized housing.

Societal factors also played a key role in inhibiting father involvement. To begin, fathers from this study who were predominately African American (75%) reported that they experienced financial challenges (83.3%); incarceration or a criminal history (25%); and racism and discrimination (41.6%) that they felt were barriers to their involvement during the case-planning process. The research suggests that if noncompliance is primarily due to financial difficulties or societal factors beyond their control—not safety or lack of interest—the agencies should employ an ecological approach by employing innovative, creative practices that link them to, for instance, community employment services to assist with them getting a meaningful job or job skills; community programs that help those with a past nonviolent offense restore their credibility as a productive citizen; and relax agency policies by postponing child-support payments and termination of parental rights decisions (Behnke et al., 2009; Earner, 2007; Ryan, Marsh, Testa, & Louderman, 2006). This type of intervention has demonstrated success in a few agencies that attempted to improve fathers' involvement activities while they were in the process of gaining better control of their lives (Ryan et al., 2006).

The findings also showed that more than half of fathers were nonresident, of whom two disclosed that they did not have a close relationship with their children. Research indicates that nonresident fathers who are not in a romantic relationship with the children's mothers have the greatest barriers to engagement (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). Mothers can influence the manner in which child welfare agencies view and work with fathers. A fourth of the fathers from this current study reported having difficulties with their children's mothers. Further, a third of the fathers felt that the social workers preferred to speak with the children's mothers instead of them, which made them feel as though they did not respect them.

A possible solution offered to address these complex issues is threefold. First, it is necessary for child welfare agencies to implement intensive social worker training to help identify their biases and improve their attitudes about working with fathers. Next, there needs to be an inclusion of a neutral mediator to ensure that both parents feel that they are being heard and their needs are being addressed. Finally, agencies should consider tailoring their strategies to engage fathers depending on their residency status and any other aforementioned barriers. For those fathers who do not have a relationship with their children or fathers with limited contact with their children, wrap-around, intensive services and counseling are recommended so that they can gradually strengthen the father-child relationship. Additionally, fathers who do not have legal custody of their children could benefit from receiving advocacy services, perhaps from a support group, that can help them understand their legal rights as fathers and custodial issues. Fathers reported that

belonging to a support group was helpful or would help them learn from others who have had an experience similar as theirs. They felt that such a group would provide a place where they could confidentially talk about issues that affect them and not be judged and could provide them with proven ways to handle their own situation. According to Sheppard, Sims-Boykin, Zambrana, and Adams (2004), men feel comfortable getting advice and emotional support from their male peers or mentors. They also feel open to discussing sensitive information with a group as well as individually. A father support group in conjunction with interventions with fathers would be beneficial to help fathers advocate for their parental rights, understand child support issues, and properly navigate the court system and social services agencies to obtain needed supports for their children. Having the option to access a support person around the clock to assist with possible crises was found to be an important feature for African American fathers with low-income who participated in father support (Sheppard et al., 2004).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study are a beginning to understanding the reasons fathers have difficulty complying with the case plan goals. Moreover, they provide direction on how agencies should respond to those challenges. Several suggestions were offered for agencies to enhance their policies and practices regarding engaging fathers and adequately supporting them to successfully complete the case plan goals while they improve their own personal and financial circumstances. Suggested creative and collaborative interventions could potentially lead to more fathers' having a purposeful role in efforts to reduce the amount of time their children spend in foster care and ensure that their children grow up in safe, permanent placements with birth parents or relatives.

APPENDIX

Fathers' Interview Questions

1. People have different views and opinions about the Department of Social Services (DSS) Child Welfare. What is your opinion about your experience with the child welfare system as an African American male?
2. Why do you believe you had this type of experience?
3. What was your biggest obstacle/problem when working with DSS child welfare towards your child's permanence?
4. What/who was the biggest help when working with DSS child welfare?

5. What kinds of things would you like to see more of when working with DSS child welfare?
6. What kinds of things would you like to see less of when working with DSS child welfare?
7. How would you describe your role or purpose in your child's life while he/she is/was in foster care?
8. What are some ways that you have been involved with your child while he/she was involved with CPS or foster care?
9. Tell me about your working relationship with the child welfare social worker/staff.
10. What made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable during that working relationship?
11. Did you fully understand the purpose of the case plan and goals for your child's permanence?
12. Who was your child reunified with?
13. Do you feel that you could have done more with the case plan goals toward your child's permanence?
14. What kinds of barriers do you think affect African American fathers (or fathers from minority racial backgrounds) working with social workers/staff?
15. Would you want to be involved or have contact with your child even if the decision was to place him/her with someone other than you?
16. Approximately how long was your child in care?
17. At which point during your child's case with DSS were you most involved with DSS/child welfare? (ex. soon before petition, soon before decision to place child,

during foster care, other? Specify _____)

18. In the beginning of my child's involvement with DSS I wanted to be involved because: _____
19. Right before my rights were terminated I was not involved because: _____
20. The reason I was no longer involved was because: _____
21. The reason I continued to be involved until the end was because: _____
22. I feel more comfortable working with a worker who is: _____
23. What bothers me about the way DSS works with me is: _____
24. What pleases me about DSS is: _____
25. Have you had any other children since you lost custody of your child? Yes No
26. If so, are you raising that child (children)? Yes No
27. If you have other children, have any of them gone into DSS care? Yes No
28. What have you done differently with this child (if you are raising child) than the child involved with DSS? _____
29. What types of supports do you currently receive to help you as a father or provider or support for your child? _____

Notes

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