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SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS TO FATHER
INVOLVEMENT IN CASE PLANNING IN SAN BERNARDINO
COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Deborah Ann Kay
Tina Marguerite Wright-Ervin

June 2009

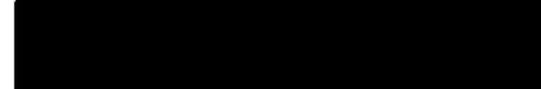
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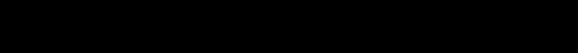


Dr. Janet C. Chang, Faculty Supervisor
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6/10/09
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Dr. Janet C. Chang,
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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to study social workers' perceptions of barriers to father involvement in case planning. Data for this study was gathered from two focus groups which were conducted utilizing a sample of eleven social workers from two Children and Family Services offices in San Bernardino County, California. The participants were asked a series of open ended questions to prompt open group discussion regarding barriers to father involvement. Ultimately, the study found that social worker bias, systemic bias, paternity issues, and father's lack of motivation are the four major barriers to father involvement.

The results of this study suggest the need for more education regarding father involvement both for social workers and clients as well as education for young males to provide preemptive measures to ensure father involvement. Additionally, the study suggests the need for a shift in the maternally driven nature of the child welfare system itself. Finally, suggestions for future study include the need for more research regarding permanency and well being outcomes related to father involvement as well as the need for more research involving larger and more representative samples.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Deborah Kay and Tina Wright-Ervin would like to acknowledge the fact that this project was completed with the assistance of many important people.

We would like to give special thanks to Dr. Janet Chang. Thank you for your guidance and assistance and for taking us on when your plate was already full.

Thank you to all of the faculty and staff of the School of Social work and especially those involved in the Title IV-E program. We are better social workers because of you.

Thank you to our Stipend Sisters, each of you will always hold a special place in our hearts.

Thank you to San Bernardino County Children and Family Services for their support and approval of this project. Specifically we would like to thank Kathy Watkins, her staff, and all of the social workers who took part in this project.

Finally, thank you to Sally Richter, LCSW. For the support and understanding you have provided us throughout this year.

DEDICATION

God has blessed me with so much..

Thank you to my wonderfully supportive husband, Steve, who has walked this road before me and understood the journey.

Thank you to Brittany, Jennifer, Samantha, and Kristin; you each have given me a reason for attaining my goal. You make me smile. Always remember it is never too late to reach your goals!

Thank you to my parents, Walt and Joan, who have always supported me in every endeavor and been such a great example to me.

And, finally I would like to thank Tina, my wonderful thesis partner. We did it! I couldn't have chosen a better person to share this accomplishment with.

Love you all,

Deborah Kay

Thank you to:

My mom for your support when I was too tired to
continue on my own

My husband, Doniel, for your love which filled my
heart when it was heavy

My daughter, Olivia, for you light on my darkest
days

My family, for you acceptance when my emotions
overflowed

My friends, for you understanding when I was too
busy to play

My Stipend Sisters for sharing this journey with me

My Thesis partner Debbie for picking up my slack
when the real world stepped in.

I love you all and know that I couldn't have done
this without you.

Tina Wright-Ervin

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Within the field of Child Welfare, there is currently a lot of administrative and legislative emphasis on the promising practice of father involvement. Both the Temporary Assistance of Needy Families (TANF) program and The Adoptions and Safe Families Act include consideration for father involvement. Additionally, there are several programs and policies that promote the practice within Child Welfare. In San Bernardino County Child Welfare programs such as Family to Family and Team Decision Making (TDM) are utilized to encourage all family members, including fathers, to participate in case planning.

For the purposes of this study father involvement shall be defined as some period of active involvement in a child welfare case plan by the presumed father of the child. Active involvement can include but is not limited to; financial support, visitation, and assistance with permanent placement.

The Bush administration has had a strong focus on families and the strengthening and maintenance of families as evidenced by The Promotion and Support of Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage Act of 2002. This act was designed to "authorize \$64 million over FY2002-FY2006 for various fatherhood initiative projects" (Sonenstein, Malm, & Billing, 2002). The Bush administration's focus on fatherhood has helped shape additional legislation and Child Welfare policy which support father involvement.

The emphasis on father involvement is derived from research that suggests positive developmental outcomes of children based on father involvement (Sonenstein et al., 2006). According to Coakley (2007) children spend less time in foster care and are more likely to be united with their birth families when fathers are involved.

Despite both legislative and organizational incentive for Social Workers to reach out to fathers and include them in case planning, the percentage of cases that do include some involvement by fathers is significantly low. The lack of father involvement in case planning, despite efforts to the contrary suggests that there are obstacles that need to be studied.

Since Social Workers are directly involved in developing their clients case plans with the family, it is necessary to discover what social workers believe are the barriers to including fathers in that process. This is necessary in order to establish a foundation from which policy and legislation can be formed in order to overcome those barriers in the future.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine social workers perceptions of barriers to the involvement of fathers in case planning. Since there had been no prior research done on this area in San Bernardino County, this study was exploratory in nature and took a qualitative approach. Two focus groups were conducted. One was comprised of six Social Service Practitioners (SSPs) and Social Worker IIs (SWIIs) and one was comprised of five SSPs and SWIIs within San Bernardino County. Participants were asked to express their opinions on what the barriers to father involvement have been in their work experience. As this was an exploratory project, researchers utilized an interview guide to prompt open discussion.

According to the Children's Services Handbook (CSHB) in San Bernardino County DCS, a case plan is implemented when the department has investigated a referral and has determined that the children involved are at risk of abuse and a case is opened (Department of Children's Service, 2009). A case plan is defined as "a set of goals, objectives, and services to help the family resolve issues which place children at risk of abuse" (Department of Children's Services 2009, p. 3-BB-1). The current practice standard requires that the social worker "involve the parent(s), child and/or additional family and community resource persons in the development of the Case Plan" (Department of Children's Services, 2009, p. 3-BB-1). It is also stated in the CSHB (Department of Children's Services, 2009) that social workers should make every attempt to "identify all possible fathers" (p. 3-CC-4) and should "offer reasonable services to statutorily presumed fathers" (p. 3-CC-4) and may "offer [services] to biological fathers" (p. 3CC-4). The CSHB does not go into detail as to what DCS considers "reasonable" services or how far attempts to identify possible fathers should go. This study attempted to address and illuminate disparities that might result from

the ambiguous language in the CSHB. The researchers wanted to allow social workers and opportunity to discuss amongst themselves how they interpret the concept of father involvement and the road blocks that they and fathers face during the case planning process.

In their 2002 comprehensive literature review of all current material related to father involvement, Sonenstein et al. found that the concept of social worker bias as a barrier to father involvement has been minimally examined. This literature review was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and focused on all of the available literature pertaining to non-custodial fathers and their involvement with their children involved in the child welfare system. As previously mentioned, however, it is important to discover the origin of possible biases as well as other barriers that social workers experience in order to further understand the difficulties associated with father involvement in case planning. This study attempted to accomplish this task.

Finally, it is imperative that more research specific to the state of California be conducted due to the sheer numbers of children involved in the Child

Welfare system within this state. As suggested by Malm et al. (2006) it may be important to take into account specific regional and cultural factors when assessing father involvement in case planning as these may affect the outcome of the research. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008) there were 510,000 children in foster care in the United States in Fiscal Year 2006. California was home to 78,373 of these children. That is more than twice the number of children in any other state and further supports the need for regional studies specific to this state and the policies of individual county agencies. Thus this study has attempted to fill a void in region specific research that is directly related to San Bernardino county California.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The findings of this study benefit Child Welfare agencies as well as the social workers within those agencies who work most closely with families during case planning. Particularly, the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services who will be able to utilize the findings to assist workers in overcoming the perceived barriers to father involvement by addressing

issues that arise related both to policy and individual social worker practice.

The assessment and planning stages of the generalist model of social work are where the findings of this study are most beneficial. It is during these stages that father involvement can be achieved. By raising awareness of barriers that social workers face in accomplishing this achievement and by compiling suggestions for change directly from the social workers involved, steps can be taken to assist in overcoming these challenges or dealing with them in a different way in order to increase the level of father involvement during case planning.

Despite the availability of resources such as a team designated to assist in the location of presumed fathers, paternity testing, Family to Family, and Team Decision Making (TDM), the number of fathers involved in case planning remains low. This study attempted to discover social workers views about why that is and to provide some suggestion on how to improve father involvement throughout San Bernardino County through policy changes as well as provide suggestion for future studies.

Almost all of the available research on father involvement cited the need for more detailed qualitative

studies on this topic. This study provides a basis for future research by providing an exploratory analysis of social workers perceptions of barriers to father involvement. Thus, this study provides a foundation from which future studies can build.

Ultimately, this study attempted to answer the question "What do social workers perceive as barriers to father involvement?" By answering this question the study will benefit Child Welfare agencies by illuminating what causes a lack of father involvement and providing suggestions to address these issues thereby increasing father involvement in case planning in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, we will examine some of the current literature on the topic of barriers to father involvement in case planning. Included in this section is a variety of literature, including empirical research, scholarly articles, as well as statistics relating to the foster care system that support the notion of barriers impacting father involvement in case planning and the enormity of the problem.

In addition to literature related to the theories which guided this study, there were four main recurring themes. These themes include hypothesized barriers, current methods utilized by social workers to locate and include fathers in case planning, policies and legislation regarding father involvement, and efforts to include fathers in Permanency Planning. These are the four areas that this literature review will focus on.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007) refer to the systems theory as being essential to understanding the world

through interactions and relationships with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

Homeostasis or a constant state of balance is achieved when the family system is functioning in a consistent manner.

This theory is central to the concept of the traditional family unit and its' well being. This idea supports the need for the involvement of both parents in regard to children, therefore guiding the conceptualization and implementation of this research.

A recent study questioned whether fathers had an important role in the development of their children, especially with their daughters (Featherstone, 2001). Upon completion of the study, it was noted that fathers and mothers seem to influence their children in comparable ways rather than different ways (Featherstone, 2001). However, the study's conclusion that children who have secure, give and take relationships with both of their parents are more likely to be well adjusted than those without is echoed in the study that was previously mentioned which found that positive developmental outcomes of children have been documented based on father

involvement (Sonenstein et al., 2006). Studies such as these are what drive the push for father involvement.

Unfortunately, within the foster system, there are many families whose homeostasis has been out of balance due to the absence of a father who has found himself in prison or no longer in the home. This absence has been proven to be damaging, and according to Coakley (2007), children spend less time in foster care and are more likely to be united with their birth families when fathers are involved.

Barriers of the Uninvolved Father

In examining the literature, there is a re-occurring theme that emerges as the main barrier to father involvement in case planning. The barrier is incarceration. Since 1973, rates of imprisonment have grown "four-fold" (Sonenstein, Malm, & Billing, 2002). "In 1999, 1 in every 110 males and 1 in every 29 African American males in the U.S. was sentenced to at least a year of confinement" (Sonenstein et al., 2002). Approximately 55 percent of male State and 63 percent of male Federal prisoners are fathers and have children under 18 years (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). With the

increasing imprisonment rates of fathers, it is estimated that 1 in 10 US children have a parent in prison, jail, on probation or on parole. (Sonenstein et al., 2002) With one or more parents incarcerated, this places an extra burden on the child welfare system. Approximately 2 percent of fathers and 10 percent of mothers who are in prison have a child in foster care (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). It is imperative to discover how social workers are dealing with this issue and how they perceive this barrier when attempting to encourage father involvement.

According to Woldoff and Washington (2008), additional factors affecting incarceration and father involvement with their families are race, age, education, and work. The "non-white populations (Black and Latino) are less likely to be married, and among the unmarried parents they are less likely to live with the child's other parent" (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). It has been shown that there is bias at every level of the criminal justice system which has resulted in an unbalanced amount of Blacks and Latinos in the system. Combine that with the fact that Latinos are the fastest growing group of inmates, it is easy to see where bias can be an issue with engagement and involvement with their families

(Woldoff & Washington, 2008). Again, this study draws attention to possible biases and social workers perceptions of the impact that systemic biases as well as their own have on including fathers in case planning.

Age is another barrier for fathers' involvement in case planning. Several studies have suggested that the younger the fathers are, the less likely they are to be involved (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). They have been found to be "emotionally immature, impulsive, and unable to see the consequences of their sexual behavior than those who become fathers at an older age" (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). Furthermore, in younger fathers, the likelihood of having contact with the criminal justice system is great (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). This study attempted to discover if age is perceived as a barrier by social workers in San Bernardino County DCS.

An additional factor in fathers' incarceration and thus a barrier to involvement is their level of education and work. Studies have shown the more education the fathers have the better parenting skills and more positive relationship with the mother of their child (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). On the flip side, the fathers with a lower level of education are more likely

to be arrested and incarcerated. High school dropouts and men who have never attended college are greatly represented among male inmates also. In 2003, approximately 70% of state prison inmates did not have a high school diploma (Woldoff & Washington, 2008). This study includes findings regarding social workers feelings about fathers' level of education and its' affect on their attempts at including fathers in case planning.

Overall, there has been little research on father involvement in child welfare social work case planning. A study by Franck (2001) suggests that social workers tend to show partiality to mothers. Franck (2001) suggests that social workers did not have a difficult time overcoming barriers to maternal involvement however these same social workers found barriers to father involvement more challenging and harder to overcome. In a recent study, (Malm et al. 2006) did not find evidence that social worker bias is a significant barrier to father involvement. This project attempted to address this issue.

Services and Programs to Locate and Include Fathers in Permanency Planning

A study was conducted by Malm, Murray, and Geen (2006) to examine Child Welfare agencies efforts to include fathers in case planning. This study extensively examined the steps that child welfare agencies take to locate fathers, how fathers are involved in case planning, as well as policy and practice which affect father involvement. This study was conducted in four states (Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Tennessee) and utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods including face to face interviews with administrators as well as case workers and analyzing secondary data. The researchers found that incarceration and proving paternity are two barriers to father involvement. The authors of this study noted that "more detailed state-specific analysis would be helpful in examining how different policies affect case work practice toward non-resident fathers" (Malm et al., 2006, p. 167). This is the void that this study attempted to fill within San Bernardino County.

Social workers and child welfare agencies work hard along with child support enforcement to identify and

locate non-custodial fathers and other relatives. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act allowed and encouraged states to use the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) to try and locate fathers and other relatives (Sonenstein et al., 2002). The coordinating efforts of child welfare and child support services offers hope to the investigating social worker. In South Carolina's department of social services' diligent search project showed that missing parents were located 75 percent of the time. The project also showed that 10 percent of the fathers were found in prison, probation or on parole. Using this same diligent search, social workers also found relatives in kinship placements (Sonenstein et al., 2002).

Despite the availability of these resources, however, Social Workers may question the safety and wellbeing issues that surround the practice of contacting previously non custodial fathers. This study made an attempt to discover if Social Workers have these feelings and if they pose a barrier to father involvement.

Communities who have received Model Court project grants from the office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Sonenstein et al., 2002) hold

promising new approaches in order to expedite permanency for children. Among the projects included in the grants is establishing paternity, locating absent parents, establishing responsible fatherhood programs and programs for incarcerated parents to provide some promising practices. "Long Distance Dads" is a program established in Pennsylvania that addresses the needs of incarcerated fathers. It is 12 weeks long, designed to promote fatherhood and empower fathers to assume responsibility for their children both during and after incarceration (Sonenstein et al., 2002). Other promising models include the F.A.C.T. Program in Kentucky- a program combining Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky and the Blackburn Correctional Complex. The program teaches fathers who are incarcerated to be responsible parents and prevent further abuse. A benefit to the program is that participants are allowed to have special visits with their children in less restrictive surroundings. Papas and Their Children (PACH) has been used in Texas. This weekly program helps promote activities between children and their incarcerated fathers (Sonenstein et al., 2002).

In another review of responsible fatherhood programs, there were two that address child abuse and

neglect. A fatherhood program in Hawaii was providing parenting skills for fathers in families who were identified as at risk for child abuse and neglect. The participating fathers were being served by a Healthy Start child abuse prevention program. In Chicago, the Paternal Involvement Project has been an advocate for fathers since 1992. It was active in writing legislation that created the state's first Non-custodial Parent Services Unit. The latest project in Illinois is an effort to use non-custodial fathers as an option to mothers who are unable to care for children (Sonenstein et al., 2002).

Legislation and Policies Related to Father Involvement

According to Sonenstein, et al. (2002), The National Fatherhood Initiative was enacted on March 7, 1994 as an effort to help promote responsible fatherhood. The mission of this initiative and the organization that supports it is to:

"Improve the well being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers." (Sonenstein et al., 2002, p. 1)

The mission is accomplished through educating all Americans, equipping and developing leaders on all levels through training and engaging every part of society through alliances and partnerships (Sonenstein et al., 2002). This research attempted to discover if Social Workers feel they have obtained this training and if they feel adequately equipped to engage fathers and what they think can be done legislatively or policy wise if they feel they have not.

Summary

In this literature review, the evidence has shown that fathers are an important part of the family system. When the homeostasis of the family is changed by the absence of the father for whatever reason, an imbalance is created that effects the children in the household. The barriers to involvement among the fathers are of great interest to the child welfare system and other agencies affected by the extra load that has been placed on the system because of the lack of father involvement. Accordingly, this is the reason that the researchers conducted this exploratory study of social workers'

perceptions of barriers to involvement of fathers in case
planning in San Bernardino County, California.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This section will address the research methods that were utilized in conducting this study. Specifically, this section will describe in detail the design of the study, sampling methods used, the interview instrument, data collection, procedures, as well as protection of human subjects. Additionally, this chapter will discuss issues regarding qualitative data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore what social workers believe to be barriers to father's involvement in case planning. Available literature on the subject of father involvement in child welfare case planning has suggested that social worker bias is one of the major barriers and states that social workers tend to provide more services to mothers as opposed to fathers and work harder at engaging mothers. This study allowed Social Workers themselves to address these issues as well as providing some insight into barriers that may be directly

related to local policy, procedure, and population in San Bernardino County.

This study employed a qualitative design utilizing two separate focus groups. One focus group contained 6 social workers and one contained 5 social workers in child welfare agencies in San Bernardino County. Eleven social workers were interviewed in total. Through the focus groups, open discussion occurred between the social workers allowing them to bring to light and discuss issues that might not have been addressed in one on one interviews. Thus, focus groups provided the most practical means through which to obtain social workers perceptions in regard to barriers to father involvement. The focus group design allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere, eliciting discussion among colleagues, and evoking a candor that might not have been met through another research method. Due to time constraints this study was limited to a maximum of twenty participants however researchers were only able to obtain eleven participants in total. Thus this study is not fully representative of the social workers in San Bernardino County.

Sampling

The study sample consisted of eleven Social Service Practitioners (SSP) and Social Worker IIs (SWII) who are currently employed within San Bernardino County.

Convenience sampling was utilized to recruit participants from two Department of Children's Services offices within the county which are located on Gifford Street and at the Carousel Mall in San Bernardino.

To recruit participants for the study, announcements were posted and emails were sent in both offices describing the nature of the study and inviting qualified participants to sign up for the focus group in their office. Criteria for sample selection were that participants hold SSP or SWII titles, hold active caseloads, and have worked with children and families for at least one year. One challenge in regard to the sampling method was the possibility that no qualified participants would volunteer. To encourage participation, lunch was provided to all participants at each focus group. Additionally, participants each received a \$5.00 Starbucks gift card at the conclusion of the focus group for their participation.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection for this study was conducted using two focus groups. Focus groups were conducted in two DCS offices within San Bernardino County. An interview guide comprised of nine open-ended questions was used to elicit comprehensive discussion among participants. The questions were ordered in such a manner as to lead the discussion in a logical manner and to encourage reflection on personal and shared experiences. The participants were asked questions which addressed how important the participants felt father involvement is, what barriers to father involvement participants considered the most relevant, how incarceration and establishment of paternity affect father involvement, and if participants felt fathers are treated differently than mothers. Please see Appendix A for a list of questions that were used on the interview guide).

At the end of each focus group participants were asked to complete a demographic worksheet on which they were asked their age, gender, years employed with DCS, and level of education. Due to the small sample size and the lack of random sampling, the sample population was

not an equal representation of the general social worker population.

Procedures

To obtain the sample, researchers submitted necessary paperwork to obtain permission from San Bernardino County DCS to conduct this study with San Bernardino County personnel. Once permission was obtained, announcements were emailed and posted in early January in both offices describing the nature of the study and inviting qualified participants to sign up for the focus group in their office. Participants were informed that they would receive lunch and a \$5.00 Starbucks gift card for their participation. The first qualified participants to respond were notified of their acceptance into the focus group.

Focus groups were conducted in mid February in two DCS offices within San Bernardino County, the Gifford office focus group was conducted on February 19, 2009 and the Carousel Mall office focus group was conducted on February 24, 2009. Focus groups were conducted using an interview guide comprised of nine open-ended questions and will lasted approximately one and a half hours each.

Researchers utilized a recording device to keep a record of each focus group, upon the participants' permission and are in the process of transcribing the data. Data analysis began once transcription was completed.

Protection of Human Subjects

Since this study required the direct questioning and participation of currently employed social workers within San Bernardino County, it was not possible to protect participant's anonymity. However, every effort was made to maintain participant confidentiality. Participants were assigned random numbers between one and twenty and these numbers were utilized in field notes and transcription. At no time were participant's names connected with any data provided.

All participants received an informed consent form in which the nature of the study, voluntary participation, risks and benefits were outlined. Additionally, all participants received a debriefing statement at the conclusion of each focus group and were provided with a phone number to call should follow up be necessary.

All data, including recordings of focus groups, field notes, and transcribed data, are securely stored in a locked file cabinet and were not accessible to anyone who was not involved in the conducting of this study. Additionally, all data that could be utilized to identify any participants was destroyed by the researchers at the conclusion of this study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted using qualitative analysis techniques. Two separate focus groups with eleven participants total were conducted. The participants were Social Worker IIs and Social Work Practitioners employed by the County of San Bernardino at the time of the study, specifically from the Gifford street and Carousel Mall offices. Lunch was provided as nine prepared questions were asked to elicit discussion of social worker perception of barriers of father involvement in case planning in the County of San Bernardino. An audio tape was utilized during the focus groups to record the entire session and insure the accuracy of the information obtained. The data from the audio tapes along with any hand written data collected in

a journal were transcribed verbatim. The researchers then went over the transcripts in order to identify the categories and recurrent themes in the discussion. These themes were grouped and coded in order to identify any possible relationships, as well as similarities and differences that existed within the data set. In addition to the information gathered from participant discussion, researchers compiled nominal descriptive statistics on the participants themselves such as gender, length of employment, level of education and age. Furthermore, researchers incorporated several descriptive statistics, in the study analysis such as frequency distribution tables and measures of central tendency.

Summary

In this chapter, we have addressed the research methods that were utilized in conducting this study on father's involvement in case planning. The design of the study, sampling methods that were used, the interview instrument, data collection, procedures, as well as protection of human subjects and confidentiality were discussed. Furthermore, because this was a qualitative

study, the technology affiliated with it was incorporated in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This study explored barriers to father involvement in case planning as perceived by social worker in San Bernardino County. Participants in this study represented various age groups, years of experience, genders, ethnicities, and education levels. Additionally the group represented social workers involved in all aspects of case planning from beginning to end.

Presentation of the Findings

The eleven participants in this study were divided into two focus groups with one group consisting of six participants and another group consisting of five participants. Each of the participants was asked to complete a demographic survey to obtain the following information: gender, age, ethnicity, education, years of experience, and job title.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are as follows: Two males, and nine females. The ages of the participants range from 29 to 60 years old with 54.4% with the average age of the participants being 41.5

years. Over half of the participants (54.4) identified themselves as African American, 9.1%, as Asian/Pacific Islander, 18.2%, Hispanic, and 18.2%, as White/non-Hispanic. With regard to education, all of the participants indicated that they were college graduates. Over 27% indicated that they had graduated college and 72.7% indicated that they had also received a graduate degree. The level of experience in child welfare ranged from 1 year to 13 years with 45.5% indicating that they had five or less years of experience and 36.4% indicating that they had from six to ten years of experience. The remaining 18.2% indicated that they had eleven or more years of experience.

As previously discussed, the criteria for participation in the study required that the social workers job title be that of Social Service Practitioner (SSP) or Social Worker II (SWII). These two titles are distinguished within the Department of Children's Services in San Bernardino County based on a minimum requirement of a bachelor's level degree for SWIIs and a master's level degree for SSPs. In this study there were nine SSPs (81.8%) and two SWIIs (18.2%). Demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 2 | 18.2 |
| Female | 9 | 81.8 |
| Age | | |
| 29 and under | | 9.1 |
| 30-39 | 16 | 54.5 |
| 40-49 | 1 | 9.1 |
| 50-59 | 2 | 18.2 |
| 60 and over | 1 | 9.1 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| African American | 6 | 54.5 |
| Asian/Pacific Is | 1 | 9.1 |
| Hispanic | 2 | 18.2 |
| White/non-Hisp. | 2 | 18.2 |
| Education | | |
| College Graduate | 3 | 27.3 |
| Graduate Degree | 8 | 72.7 |
| Experience | | |
| 5 or less years | 5 | 45.5 |
| 6-10 years | 4 | 36.4 |
| 11 or more years | 2 | 18.2 |
| Job Title | | |
| SSP | 9 | 81.8 |
| SWII | 2 | 18.2 |

Focus group participants were asked to address nine open ended questions to elicit their responses regarding barriers to father involvement. The questions addressed the social workers perceptions of the importance of father involvement, specific barriers to father involvement, and the effect of father involvement on outcomes.

Importance of Father Involvement

Participants were asked to express how important they believe father involvement to be in case planning. There was a consensus among all eleven participants that father involvement was a very important aspect of case planning. One social worker stated "It is very important if they are willing to participate" and another stated "I think that studies show that an intact family with mom and dad has the best results. Success rates are higher and there are better outcomes." Another worker stated, "it is most beneficial for the child to have both parents go with the plan to reunify or whatever the plan is." None of the social workers stated that father involvement is unimportant.

Barriers Experienced by Participants in Father Involvement

The next question addressed what barriers participants have experienced when trying to involve fathers in case planning. Ten participants responded to this question. The major category that emerged was mothers' interference. The fact that mothers often interfere with father involvement was addressed by three participants. In regard to this category, one worker reported having problems when "Mom won't tell me who he is." Another worker stated, "Some moms are vindictive towards the father." "In one case mom would not give a name or address, but a fake name; manipulation on mother's part" stated another worker.

There were three minor categories that emerged in the focus groups in response to this question. These were incarceration, systemic bias, and paternity. Of the two respondents who addressed the issue of incarceration one stated "I have a lot of dads in jail. In for a long time, beyond the time frame we have." Another worker agreed and echoed the same concern. Of the two participants who spoke about systemic bias one stated "I have a lot of fathers who say 'oh they don't listen to me, they don't

listen to dad'" and the other agreed saying "our cases are maternal driven, the investigation begins that way. Dad begins as a second class citizen." Finally, one of the two participants who cited paternity as a barrier stated "One thing that I face is first of all locating the father." Another worker elaborated explaining, "I had a case where mom had one child and listed a possible six fathers. Like a Jerry Springer situation. None were the father and she had to start again and find more names."

Social Worker's Perceptions of Fathers

The next area of questioning for the focus groups involved several questions regarding bias. The participants were asked if they or their colleagues viewed or treated fathers differently. Nine participants responded with an emphatic "yes" admitting that they and their colleagues do view and treat fathers differently thus yielding a major category of social worker bias. Of those who admitted personal bias against fathers, responses varied from biological views including statements that "women are the nurturers, and their bond should be stronger than with the father" to statements such as "I am a little hard on the father...because I think you should be there." One participant stated "Well with

me, I am a little harder on the fathers". Another worker said "I have to catch myself; I need to do more and reach out more to this dad. It's kind of sad that we tend to work with moms more." Additionally, one worker stated "I guess it depends on the situation, some families that have four or five kids, where is the daddy? They were there in the making, but where are you now? Sometimes workers can be harder because I think dad should be involved and step up to the plate and be a man."

The secondary category related to the main theme of bias that emerged during the focus groups was systemic bias. Three workers made statements that specifically addressed bias inherent to the child welfare system. One worker responded by saying "our system treats them differently; you don't have alleged mothers, because a woman is the mother. The system has cases in mother's name, not dad's name, and has a process to find out who the dad is. Yes, they are treated differently by social workers and the system even if the mom is deceased; cases are still under mom's name."

Although two of the social workers denied treating or viewing fathers differently, one of these workers

admitted that "the courts do [treat fathers differently]."

Do you Think Father Involvement Affects Case Outcomes?

All eleven participants responded "yes" to the question about whether father involvement affects case outcomes. The theme of bias emerged once again with six participants commenting on issues surrounding the major category of social worker bias as a barrier to father involvement which in turn affects case outcomes. One worker stated that workers need to "check our biases. From a worker's standpoint, recognize your biases and deal with them. Do what you would do to help dad like you would mom. Workers need to deal with biases."

Two minor categories emerged in the discussion regarding how father involvement affects case outcomes. These were paternal motivation and relationship status of the parents. Five participants cited a lack of motivation by the father as a barrier affecting case outcomes. One worker said "If a child sees the parent is trying and participating, the outcome is better for the child. Even if the parent does not get the child back, the child sees the parent did something." Another participant agreed

stating, "When fathers or mothers are motivated, I will go all out to help them. If they are not motivated, I will do what I need to do but not go overboard."

The second minor category was relationship status of the parents. This category was addressed by five participants and all of the comments regarding relationship status connected to the underlying theme of motivation. One worker stated "A lot depends on if the parents are together. Sometimes if mom is doing the plan, dad will get on board and support each other." Implying that parents can motivate each other leading to improved outcomes. Another worker cited a case where the "parents broke up during reunification. I tell them it is an even playing field and you each have a chance; focus on what you need to do." Again motivation is a factor in that the most motivated parent is the one most likely to reunify.

In your View, what Needs to be Done to Increase Father Involvement in Case Planning?

When asked what needs to be done to increase father involvement in case planning, the participants had much to say. Again, the social workers responses dealt with the major theme of bias. Additionally, various categories

including education, paternity and motivation were all addressed.

Eleven responses dealt directly with bias. This theme was further broken down into sub-categories that included social worker bias, systemic bias, and cultural bias.

In regard to social worker bias, one worker made this statement about fathers, "We don't give him the benefit of the doubt. We just assume he doesn't care." Another added, "we have to remember these people are going through a hard time and we don't want to compound their problems by being a barrier." In the category of cultural bias, one worker stressed that "we need to consider the way society looks at the fathers." And another agreed, stating "We need to look at gender roles...we need to have cultural competency classes to remind us that dad brings different things to the table" Systemic bias was addressed by participants who had concerns regarding the way that men who had been raising children, but were not biologically their fathers, were treated. One participant stated "if you have a father and he knows he is not the biological father we should not eliminate him just because he is not the biological

father" another agreed stating "the father has to jump over many more hoops. All the foster parent has to do to become the defacto parent is have them for six months...there is something wrong with that, if a man has been in this child's life for six months, at least give him defacto status." These statements imply that the social workers do see a need for systemic change.

As a minor category, three responses included statements regarding the need for education. One participant stated, "We need to be more educated, on basic things to get them more involved." Another worker added "we need to educate the fathers on their rights."

The category of paternity was again raised in a mutual concern from participants regarding families with multiple fathers. This was summed up in one participant's statement that "if there are different dads and they do their services and mom does too, it is more than likely mom will get the kids to keep them all together. It's not fair for the father." This, stated the worker, is done to "look at the best interest of the child."

Finally, the category of motivation was discussed by one social worker who stated "I think that if a father is not real involved and not motivated does not mean they do

not want to be. Sometimes we must try something different" supporting the idea that change is needed in regard to the way fathers are treated.

In your Opinion, What is the #1 Barrier to Father Involvement in Case Planning?

The final question asked of the focus group participants was to name the number one barrier of father involvement in case planning.

Again, the major theme that emerged as addressed by seven participants was bias. This issue was further broken down by the participants into two categories which included personal and systemic biases.

Seven workers stated that their number one barrier was "our biases" indicating personal bias. One worker cited "my initial approach to the case, how I present myself" as a barrier. Another worker spoke to the issue of systemic and personal bias in the statement, "What we bring to the table; our training, the fact that our case investigation is maternal driven. Training alone and what we bring to the training incites a barrier in terms of how we see dad."

A minor category citing the number one barrier to father involvement was education. As one participant

stated "not only educating the dads, but educating the young women the way they approach men... We need to teach the little girls this is supposed to be a give and take relationship." "Boys too" said another worker, "at an early age they have a lawn mower and truck, and the girls are inside playing with dolls and cooking. We need to retrain [society]."

A second minor category citing the number one barrier as noted by two of the workers was paternity. "I think actually locating them. We don't find a lot of fathers."

Finally, one participant cited motivation as her number one barrier to father involvement. While discussing the category of motivation, this worker also addressed the category of incarceration. She stated "I think it is motivation and determination, but that could be because of them feeling like second class citizens, or being incarcerated."

Summary

The barriers to father involvement as seen through the eyes of the social workers participating in the focus groups of this research project became very clear. The

theme of bias emerged as the number one barrier to father involvement with most of the participants citing it as such. The participants referred to three categories within the theme of bias including personal or social worker bias, systemic bias, and cultural bias.

In addition to bias, issues related directly to the fathers emerged as a secondary theme. These issues included the major categories of paternity and motivation. Minor categories including, lack of education for fathers and social workers, and incarceration also emerged throughout the discussions.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this section the findings presented in chapter 4 are discussed. Additionally, the limitations of this study including small sample size, non-representative sample, and a lack of random sampling are also addressed.

Discussion

Throughout the research process, several themes continued to emerge as barriers to father involvement in case planning as perceived by social workers. There were four main barriers that were discussed continually by participants in response to the open ended questions that were posed to them throughout the sessions. These four barriers were: systemic bias, social worker bias, paternity issues, and father's lack of motivation.

Again and again social workers stressed the lack of consideration for fathers within the Child Welfare system. Included in the discussion of systemic bias were that all aspects of the child welfare system are maternally driven. This view is consistent with the findings in the literature examining some of the reasons

why birth fathers have not been more involved in case planning (Sonenstein et al., 2002).

In addition to systemic bias, the focus group participants were very forthcoming in regard to their own personal bias as well as bias perceived in coworkers. Previous research has discussed social worker bias as a possible barrier to father involvement as indicated in the study by O'Donnell (2001) regarding paternal involvement in kinship foster care services.

Paternity issues emerged as a third major barrier to father involvement in case planning. Again this has been addressed in previous research such as cited in the Sonenstein et al. study (2002). Difficulties locating and identifying fathers when presented with multiple candidates or the complete absence of candidates was a concern that was shared by all participants.

Many participants stressed the importance of motivation of the fathers in issues related to case planning. It was stated again and again that if the father was not motivated to participate it was difficult to involve him in case planning and services. This finding is consistent with Feathersen's study (2001) that

engagement and motivation were found to be key to father involvement in case planning.

Much of the literature presented incarceration as a major barrier to father's involvement in case planning (Woldoff & Washington 2008). Interestingly, the issue of incarceration was lukewarmly espoused by the participants in the study. The participants only addressed the issue of incarceration as a barrier to father involvement in case planning when prompted by the interview questions. Once engaged in discussion, however, participants invariably returned to discussion of the four previously mentioned themes. Incarceration was, for the most part, not discussed and as a result this study suggests that it was not perceived by social workers as a major barrier to father's involvement in case planning.

Limitations

In this research project, the small sample size can be considered a limitation. The initial projected sample size for this study was twenty with ten participating in each of two focus groups. Due to a lack of response, eleven social workers actually participated with five social workers in one focus group and six in the other.

This may compromise ones ability to generalize and validate the study.

Another possible limitation was the demographics of the study sample. The sample consisted of 81.8% female social workers, 54.5% of the sample was between the ages of 30 and 39, and 54.5% of the sample was African American. This in conjunction with the small sample size may have created a non-representative sample.

These limitations resulted from the inability of the researchers to conduct completely random sampling. Convenience sampling was utilized and subjects were recruited via postings and emails and respondents were selected on a first come first serve basis. As previously mentioned, this study was intended to include twenty participants. Only eleven social workers who met the predetermined criteria responded and all were included in the sample.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

While the professional literature related to father involvement in case planning is sparse, the literature that does exist focuses on social workers efforts to include fathers in case planning and programs designed

for fathers to participate in as part of a case plan. There has been previous discussion of barriers to father involvement however; the researchers were unable to locate any studies that dealt directly with outcomes regarding father involvement.

Based on the results of this study and the direct response of social workers who participated in the two focus groups conducted for this research, there is currently a need for more education regarding father involvement for both the social workers as well as the fathers. The education of social workers could occur through the implementation of training courses designed to address social worker bias toward fathers and to educate social workers to the specific cultural and systemic challenges that are faced by fathers who are involved in the child welfare system. It would be beneficial to include in this training information on male communication styles and how best to engage fathers.

To address the education of fathers, agencies could benefit from the use of a self help and mutual aid format to create a support system for fathers by utilizing peers who are or have been involved in the child welfare system. By utilizing this format, mentor relationships

could evolve and fathers would have additional assistance in navigating the child welfare system.

Furthermore, education could include the implementing of a mentoring program in local high schools utilizing senior members of the father support group as well as male social workers to serve as facilitators and mentors for teenaged boys who may become fathers one day. These groups would serve a proactive role in educating young men about responsible fatherhood and providing them with a foundation which may serve to prevent their future involvement in child protective services. It is only by including this preemptive piece that the systemic and cultural bias might eventually be positively affected.

Suggestions for policy change should include consideration of the current language of the child welfare system and the juvenile court which is maternally based. By changing this language to more inclusive terms that serve to include rather than alienate fathers, the child welfare system might see an increase in father involvement.

Future research could benefit from additional studies with larger and more representative samples.

Additionally, the lack of quantitative research in this area is should also be addressed.

Research specifically directed towards fathers' attitudes regarding their experience in the child welfare system is needed. In addition, research designed to obtain fathers perceptions of the barriers they face in regard to their participation in case planning would provide valuable insight into this population.

Additionally, there is a lack of qualitative research specifically related to the effects of father involvement in case planning on permanency outcomes. Studies specifically related to the rate of reunification, relative placement, and child wellbeing would be invaluable in providing a stronger basis for the practice of father involvement in case planning.

Ethical issues including but not limited to cultural competence further support the need for continued research, in the area of father involvement.

Conclusions

This research was conducted to study social workers perceptions of barriers to father involvement in case planning.

Data for this study was gathered from two focus groups which were conducted utilizing a sample of eleven social workers from two Children and Family Services offices in San Bernardino County, California. Convenience sampling was used by posting bulletins and sending emails to social workers who met pre determined criteria. Participants were accepted on a first come first serve basis.

The participants were asked a series of open ended questions to prompt open group discussion regarding their perceptions of barriers to father involvement.

The results of this study support previous research that indicates that social worker bias, systemic bias, and client motivation are the three major barriers to father involvement.

The results of this study suggest the need for more education regarding father involvement both for social workers and clients as well as education for young males in high school to provide preemptive measures to ensure father involvement. Additionally, the study suggests the need for a shift in the maternally driven nature of the child welfare system itself.

Suggestions for future study include the need for more quantitative studies regarding permanency and well being outcomes related to father involvement as well as the need for more exploratory research involving larger and more representative samples.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

1. Is father involvement important in case planning? Why or why not?
2. What are some barriers you have experienced when trying to involve fathers?
3. Is incarceration a factor?
4. How does paternity affect father involvement?
5. Are fathers viewed differently than mothers by yourself or other social work professionals? Why?
6. Are fathers treated differently than mothers by yourself or other social work professionals? Why?
7. How do you think father involvement affects case outcomes?
8. What, in your view, needs to be done to increase father involvement in case planning?
9. What is the #1 barrier you see in father involvement?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

The study in which you are being asked to participate in is designed to explore what Social Workers believe to be barriers to fathers' involvement in case planning. This study is being conducted by Deborah Kay and Tina Wright-Ervin, MSW students, under the supervision of Associate Professor Janet Chang, School of Social Work at California State University San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the School of Social Work subcommittee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you are invited to attend one of two focus groups consisting of experienced SSPs and SWIs from the Gifford Street and Carousel Mall offices in San Bernardino. While enjoying lunch, you will be asked several open ended questions regarding the barriers to fathers' involvement in case planning. The lunchtime focus group is estimated to take approximately one hour to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. You may receive the group results of this study upon completion on September 30, 2009 at the Pfau Library, California State University, San Bernardino or through the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions at any time during this study without penalty. When you have completed the focus group, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. You will receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card for spending your valuable time to participate in the study. Any foreseeable risks or discomforts to you as a result of participating in the study are not anticipated.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Associate Professor Janet Chang at 909-537-5501.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place a check mark here

Today's Date

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

The study you have just completed was designed to explore what social workers believe to be barriers to father's involvement in case planning. This study has allowed you as Social Workers to address these issues as well as providing insight into barriers that may be directly related to local policy, procedure, and population in San Bernardino County.

Thank you for your participation in the study. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang at 909-537-5501. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Dr. Chang after September, 2009.

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Deborah Kay & Tina Wright-Ervin

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Deborah Kay & Tina Wright-Ervin

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Deborah Kay & Tina Wright-Ervin

b. Methods

Team Effort: Deborah Kay & Tina Wright-Ervin

c. Results

Team Effort: Deborah Kay & Tina Wright-Ervin

d. Discussion

Team Effort: Deborah Kay & Tina Wright-Ervin