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Does fathers' involvement in services affect mothers' likelihood of reunification with children placed in foster care?

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The effect of fathers' involvement in services
on mothers' likelihood of reunification with children placed in foster care

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Abstract

Social science literature shows associations between fathers' involvement with their children and beneficial developmental outcomes of those children. A related but smaller body of research in the child welfare services arena has found measures of father involvement to be positively associated with beneficial child welfare outcomes, including child's reunification with parent after placement in foster care. However, the pathway by which father involvement affects reunification likelihood has not been determined. This study builds on the existing body of literature by testing a theoretical basis for the relationship between father involvement (measured as service use) and mothers' reunification in a model controlling for family structure. I find that fathers' involvement in services improves mothers' likelihood of reunification, independently of family structure. Results suggest that agency efforts to involve fathers in services make sense both when the aim is to prepare the father for possible custody, and when the aim is to reunify the mother.

Keywords

Reunification; father involvement; child welfare; service use.

1. Introduction

Social science studies have generally found beneficial effects associated with fathers' involvement with their children. For instance, children living with a biological mother and father have been found to fare better on a range of developmental outcomes than children living with single mothers (Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; Golombok, 2000; Lamb, 2010; Pleck, 2010). Similarly, when there are two parents in the home, children whose fathers are more involved in their care fare better on outcomes like delinquency, cognitive development, educational attainment, and psychological development than children whose fathers are less involved (Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; Golombok, 2000; Lamb, 2010). Fathers who reside out of the home can have positive effects on their children as well; positive associations have been found between child well-being and nonresident fathers' payment of child support, and active parenting (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pleck, 2010). In low-income families, father involvement has been found to be associated with a lower likelihood of behavior problems, smoking or high school drop-out for older children, and a higher likelihood of positive language development, cognitive functioning, and socio-behavioral behavior for young children (Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; Carlson & McLanahan, 2010).

In the child welfare context, measures of father involvement have also been found to be positively associated with relevant beneficial outcomes. Children living in homes with a biological father present have been found to be at lower risk of CPS involvement (Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009), placement in out-of-home care (Berger, 2006), and maltreatment (Berger, 2004) than children living in other types of family structures. For children living in homes without a father present, those who have had recent contact with their fathers have

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been found to be less likely to enter foster care (Bellamy, 2009). In a recent study, father involvement in a child welfare sample was also shown to be associated with a decrease in externalizing behavior in children (Leon, Bai & Fuller, 2016).

Another important child welfare outcome frequently examined in the child welfare literature on father involvement is reunification of the child with a parent after placement in foster care. Identification of the father by agency caseworkers (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan, & Furrer, 2012), fathers' residence in the home (Harris and Courtney, 2003; Wells & Guo, 1999), fathers' provision of financial support during the case (Malm & Zielewski, 2009), and fathers' high degree of involvement (Malm, Zielewski & Chen, 2008) have all been found to be positively associated with child reunification.

While a positive association between various measures of father involvement and the outcome of reunification has been found in multiple studies, the pathway or mechanism by which involvement affects child reunification has not been determined. Two primary issues confound our understanding of this connection. First, most studies used administrative data that did not distinguish into which parental home a reunified child was ultimately placed. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether the association found between father involvement and reunification is due to children being reunified with the mothers from whose care they were removed, or to their being placed with previously nonresident fathers. Burrus and colleagues (2012) propose the latter as an explanation in their discussion following their analysis of the relationship between identification of the father by the agency and child reunification, while Malm and Zielewski [2009] find this theory unlikely, noting that only 4% of cases in their study had as their goal reunification with the father. Secondly, if in fact the positive association found between father involvement and reunification is due to placement of

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children with mothers, the causal connection is not at all clear. Most child welfare-involved fathers are nonresident (Bellamy, 2009; Dufour, Lavergne, Larrivee, & Trocme, 2008; Harris & Courtney, 2003); what is the mechanism by which nonresident fathers' involvement with their children or with services would contribute to those children being returned to their mothers?

In the psychology literature, researchers have identified that fathers influence their children both directly, through their active parenting and financial support, and indirectly, "...through their effects on other people and social circumstances that bear on children's development" (Lamb, 2010, p.9). Fathers are "...contributors to complex social systems, reciprocally affecting and affected by other family members" (Cummings, Merrilees and George, 2010, p. 155). For instance, fathers' involvement with children may affect the functioning and well-being of the mother, who in turn influences the child. "...Such arguments claim that when fathers undertake substantial care and responsibility for children, as well as provide financial resources to the family, mothers should function more effectively and families should provide more stable, stimulating, and supportive environments for children" (Coley & Schindler, 2008, p.309). And indeed fathers' involvement in parenting has been shown to be positively associated with mothers' decreased psychological distress and decreased parenting stress, in essence operating as a support for maternal functioning (Coley & Schindler, 2008).

In addition to fathers' involvement in parenting, another aspect of involvement relevant in the reunification context is fathers' involvement in case planning and treatment services. A number of reunification studies construe father involvement in this way: Burrus et al. (2012) use a measure representing identification of the father by the child welfare agency, Coakley (2013) uses a measure indicating compliance with the case plan, and Malm and colleagues (2008) use level of involvement as defined by caseworkers. While initially these measures may

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Like fathers' involvement in parenting, fathers' involvement in services may also contribute to children's development through effects on the mother. The available literature suggests that parental relationships in child welfare-involved families are seldom harmonious (Malm et al., 2006; Reynolds, 2011), and marital (or relationship) discord has been found to have a negative effect on both fathering and mothering (Cummings et al., 2010). When fathers use and benefit from services, they address not only the problems that interfere with their own effective parenting, but also the issues likely to influence their ability to contribute financially to the household and to negotiate and co-parent with the child's mother without hostility or conflict. Improvements in these areas would be likely to decrease stress and burden on the

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mother and create an environment conducive to positive parenting, thereby increasing the
likelihood she is able to reunify with her child.

I hypothesize that the association between father involvement and the outcome of
reunification seen in previous child welfare studies is due to positive effects on the mother
through the father's involvement in services, and not due to placements with fathers as Burrus
and colleagues suggest. Would this effect, if it exists, differ by whether or not a father lived in
the home? Child welfare studies have not addressed this question. In the broader social science
literature, higher rates of involvement have been found for resident versus nonresident low-
income fathers (Carlson & McLanahan, 2010), but the recent study by Coley & Schindler (2008)
found no differences in the beneficial effects of fathers' involvement on mothers by fathers'
residential status.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether and how father involvement affects
mothers' likelihood of reunification, and whether this effect (if any) varies by fathers' residence
in the home. Data are structured to rule out the possibility that any effect seen is due to
placements with fathers. I hypothesize 1) that fathers living in the home of the child will have
higher service use scores than fathers not living with their children 2), that the effect of fathers'
service use will increase mothers' likelihood of reunification; and 3) that any effects of the
involvement will not differ by fathers' residence status.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

This study uses data gathered for a previous study on service use in child welfare funded
by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) and conducted by the author. Data
on parent problems, case characteristics and process, and parent-specific as well as child

The effect of fathers' service use on mother's reunification outcomes were gathered from case files of a random sample of 200 children removed from parental care due to maltreatment during a one year period in one urban jurisdiction. In this study, I consider the effects of fathers' service use on mothers' likelihood (hazard) of reunification, while controlling for family structure at outset of the case.

2.1 Sample

A sample of 200 children was randomly drawn from the population of children between the ages of 0-18 entering foster care in one urban county between January 1, 2004 through December 31, 2004 who remained in foster care at least 7 days and had at least one parent who received reunification services. In 55 cases, case files were too incomplete to use, unable to be located, or both parents were deceased or whereabouts unknown. From the 145 children remaining, mothers who were offered reunification services (n=137) were used as observations.

Just under one half of the mothers were Latino, over a third were White, almost 10% were Asian or other ethnicity, and almost 6% were Black. One-quarter of mothers were living with the biological father. For about 8% of mothers, the father had either not been identified by the agency or the father was deceased. In 44% of the cases in which fathers were identified, fathers made some use of treatment services. Less than half of the mothers reunified with their children (see Table 1).

--- Table 1 about here ---

2.3 Measures

Father involvement. In this study, father involvement is measured by fathers' degree of compliance with court ordered reunification services. Compliance or use of each service ordered on the case plan was recorded on the data collection form with a 1 if the social worker

The effect of fathers' service use on mother's reunification described the parent's compliance with that service at the last available court report as "poor," 2 if the social worker described the parent's compliance as "moderate or partial", and 3 if the social worker described compliance as "complete or full." As most parents were ordered to use multiple services, a continuous variable consisting of the average compliance score across all services ordered for the father was created. Cases with no identified father or with fathers who were not ordered services were given the lowest possible score of "1." Services such as the initial orientation to the system and domestic violence and drug use assessments were excluded, as their one-time nature didn't reflect on-going engagement with services. If no compliance was recorded on the data collection form, compliance was assumed to be poor and coded a 1.

Mothers' reunification. Reunification was measured with a dichotomous variable coded "1" if the child was placed, informally or formally through court order, in the mother's home subsequent to the child's placement in foster care by the time of data collection, and "0" otherwise. A continuous *time-in-care* variable measured the time in months from the date the child was removed from the parent's home until the experience of a permanency event (reunification, adoption, finalized guardianship, termination of parental rights, or emancipation). This variable was used in conjunction with the reunification outcome variable to estimate the likelihood of reunification using Cox proportional hazards regression analysis.

Family structure. A nominal variable with three mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories was used to measure family structure at the time of the child's removal from the home. Categories were: a) father in home, b) father identified but not in home, 3) no father identified or father deceased.

Ethnicity. Dummy variables were used to represent African American, Caucasian, Hispanic /Latino or Other ethnicity of the mother, based on codes from the administrative database of the agency.

2.4 Procedures and Analysis

Court reports written by social workers regarding case circumstances at the time of the child's removal into foster care and through the several years of the observation period were reviewed by four student workers and the primary researcher using a structured data collection form. Inter-rater reliability was assessed by having the five researchers review the same two cases, and calculating the proportion of answers with identical responses on the data collection form. A predetermined level of acceptable interrater reliability (four out of the five raters answering 85% of all questions identically for both cases) was met prior to the start of data collection.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to test whether fathers in the home have higher service use rates than fathers out of the home, and a multivariate Cox survival analysis was used to test the relationship between fathers' service use and mothers' reunification, controlling for family structure. A model with an interaction term tested whether the effect of fathers' services use varied based on family structure; if fathers' service use was due to fathers' efforts to reunify with the child themselves, we would expect to see a statistically significant coefficient on the interaction term, as fathers service use would have a positive effect on mothers' reunification for fathers in the home, but a negative effect on mothers' reunification for fathers out of the home.

2. Results

The first research question was whether service use higher for fathers in the home. As expected, the independent samples t-test indicated that fathers in the home had a higher service use score ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.83$) than fathers who did not live in the home ($N=1.47$, $SD=0.76$; $t(124)=2.57$, $p=.011$)

The second research question was whether fathers' service use influenced mothers' likelihood of reunification, controlling for family structure. Indeed, fathers' service use showed a positive association with mothers' hazard of reunification. When fathers' had higher service use scores, the likelihood that a child would be returned to the mother increased (HR 1.41; see Table 2).

The last research question was whether the effect of service use would differ between fathers in the home and fathers living out of the home. Using an interaction term to test this, there was no evidence that the effect of service use varied based on whether the father was in the home or not. When examined separately, the hazard ratio for the effect of fathers' service use on reunification is positive both for fathers in the home and for fathers out of the home. In other words, when fathers of children in foster care comply with the services to which they have been ordered, the mothers of those children are more likely to reunify with those children, regardless of whether the fathers were in the home at time of child removal or not.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

This study uses a sample drawn from a single county at one point in time. There is the possibility that there is something unique and unusual about either the time period or the county sample, such that results would not be representative of the population of interest. In addition, data are drawn primarily from case files, not originally intended for research purposes. However, the similarities of these data and data patterns with those other studies on

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similar phenomena suggest that the data are reasonably reflective of the population of reunifying mothers. In addition, the sample size is relatively small, limiting the power of the analysis. In hazard or survival analysis, statistical power is related to the number of events rather than to the size of the sample. A viable model generally needs at least 10 events for every covariate in the model (Bradburn, Clark, Love and Altman, 2003); to comply with this general guideline, models used here contained a limited set of control variables. The measure of service use here may only reflect attendance or compliance; a parent could conceivably comply with service orders without truly making use of and changing behaviors.

In this study as in others on the topic, an association was found between reunification and fathers' involvement. Because of the structure of the data, it is clear that the association is due not to the child's ultimate placement with the father, but to placement with the mother. By controlling for family structure, we can also ascertain that the positive association was due not to the presence of the father in the home, but rather to the father's service use. And finally, fathers' service use appeared to be beneficial to the mother both when the father was living in the home, and when he was not.

These results support Pleck's theory that the auxiliary domain of indirect care is a relevant and significant aspect of paternal involvement, and suggest that it has positive benefits to children in the child welfare context through effects on the mother. Fathers' service use appears not to be done in "competition" with mothers, with the intent of gaining custody of the child, but rather in support of the familial context – to improve the relationship the father has with the mother, the child, or both. Services ordered by court to improve a father's parenting ability may also improve his capacity to co-parent, decreasing stress on mother and enhancing

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her ability to access and make use of court ordered services in order to resolve her own
parenting challenges and reunify with the child.

Effects of service use suggest fathers' service use benefits mothers across all family structure types. There appears to be change in the fathers' capacity that occurs with service use that improves or enhances his ability to co-parent, contribute to a positive familial environment, and/or support the mother in her efforts. These changes appear to occur for fathers in the home as well as for fathers out of the home. This suggests that non-residential fathers should be provided services even if they don't intend or are unlikely to reunify. Of course if they do need to take custody, services can help them prepare them to do so – but even if they do not, services to fathers will help improve the familial environment to which children return. A healthier familial context with harmonious relationships and effective co-parenting would also be less likely to result in a failed reunification and a re-entry to care.

While these results suggesting fathers' active involvement in court ordered services enhances mothers' abilities to reunify are intriguing, still much remains to be understood about how this process might work. Qualitative studies with interviews with mothers and residential and non-residential fathers could provide a rich understanding of the nature of father involvement, and how it affects and influences the mother and her abilities to resolve her problems and reunify. Quantitative studies exploring the nature, quality, and inter-connected aspects of the parental relationship are needed as well (Malm & Zielewski, 2009). How does a parent's problems, service use, child involvement, and general well-being affect the other parent and his or her progress toward reunification? How does the intrusion of the child welfare system into family life affect the couples' relationship, and how can that relationship be supported by the system? What can help foster productive co-parenting?

This study explores the auxiliary domain of indirect care in Pleck's model of paternal involvement. Additional studies of indirect care as an aspect of paternal involvement - what it consists of in the child welfare context and how it may affect the intermediate outcomes of parenting stress and co-parenting quality - are needed. Studies examining paternal involvement in its more direct form, using measures that capture the nature, amount and quality of the contact during the child welfare case and post-case closure are also needed. Of course, other men besides biological fathers play important roles in children's lives. More research is needed too on the role of "social fathers" in disadvantaged households (Berger & Langton, 2011) and in child welfare services involved families (Bellamy, 2009). Finally, while there is generally consensus that increasing father involvement in child welfare is important and valuable, how best to do this is less clear. Studies are needed that can help agencies identify effective strategies and techniques for engaging fathers in services (Bellamy, 2009; Franck, 2001; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005).

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