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African American Fathers with Children Involved in the Child Welfare System and the Perspectives of their Paternal Engagement

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African American Fathers with Children Involved in the Child Welfare System and the Perspectives of their Paternal Engagement.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Alan-Michael Scott Graves

2019
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

African American Fathers with children in Child Welfare and their Perceptions of their Engagement with their Children

by

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Doctor of Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2019
Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair
Professor Christina A. Christie, Co-Chair

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives and lived experiences of African American fathers who were previously involved in the child welfare system and to gain insight into the extent and rationale of their engagement and involvement with their children. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews of 25 African American previously involved with the child welfare system, this qualitative study involved fathers' perceptions of fatherhood and factors that facilitate and inhibit father engagement and father involvement with their children. The findings are discussed in light of current literature about father involvement in child welfare, and African American fathers in particular. Implications of the findings are discussed for the field of fatherhood and future research and practice. It is my hope that the information obtained from this study will help inform current practices within child welfare to
more effectively engage African American fathers in the child welfare system thereby improving outcomes for African American children. Recommendations are provided for child welfare policy, practice, and research.
The dissertation of Alan-Michael Graves is approved.

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2019
DEDICATION

To my wonderful family, Alfred, Chris, Kevin and Matthew, I could not imagine going through this experience without your unwavering love and support. You all are my inspiration now and always.
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VITA

Academic Preparation

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

African American children involved in the child welfare system and foster care are among the most vulnerable children in the nation. The factors leading to their entry into foster care, along with their experiences in the child welfare system, place their outcomes at great risk (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). They often lack stability in school placement, continuity of educational services, and parental participation and advocacy in their personal and school lives, each a critical ingredient for success. Given the range of risks they face, the vast majority of children in foster care fall extremely behind their peers socially, emotionally and academically. Foster children drop out of school at twice the rate of children in the general population (Conger & Rebeck, 2001).

Parent involvement, especially with families involved in the child welfare system, is consistently found to be positively associated with a child's academic performance and seen as a major influence on their children’s future (Hara & Burke, 1998; Hill & Craft, 2003; Marcon, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Noting the strength of involving both parents, it is widely recognized that there tends to be relatively poor engagement of fathers in the child welfare system and this is thought to be detrimental to the overall wellbeing of children as well as to their academic success (Scott and Crooks, 2004). Despite previous findings that father involvement appears to be a significant factor in the success of African American children, resulting in positive psychosocial, behavioral, cognitive, and academic achievement outcomes, the majority of parent involvement research is still focused on mothers and their involvement (Goldman, 2005). Typically, the results of these studies consist of data solicited from the children’s mothers, teachers, or social service workers but not from the fathers. Family involvement has been a key theme in early childhood education and early childhood
development for more than three decades (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). However, because educators and researchers tend to engage more with mothers than with fathers, the study of fathers' involvement and engagement in children’s development has been neglected. The goal of my research is to explore African American fathers’ perceptions of their engagement and how it helps to facilitate their ability to play a positive and active role in their children’s lives. Exploring perspectives of father engagement will involve identifying barriers that prevent involvement and highlight the role child welfare system in efforts to increase father involvement.

**Background of the Problem**

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), which is the nation’s largest public child welfare agency, reports that while African American children represent only 6% of the County’s population, they make up almost 37% of the children in care. These children suffer enormous unmet social, emotional and educational needs (Los Angeles County Children’s Planning Council, 2015). The experience of child welfare involvement itself, with frequent movements in care, disruptions in schooling and educational services, and isolation from friends and family members, can disrupt the rhythms of the already fragile life of a child in foster care and heighten the risk for poor outcomes (Barth, 2004).

One reason for poor educational outcomes relates to father involvement, which 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). The impact a father has on his children cannot be overstated. Positive fathering has been associated with positive outcomes in children, from higher self-esteem to reduced likelihood of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. However, if involvement does not occur or a father does not understand the importance of his involvement, the outcomes
for his children can be devastating. As it relates to children involved in the child welfare system, Maxwell, Featherstone & Tolman (2012) report that it is usual practice for child welfare agencies to have little or no contact at all with fathers and minimal contact has huge consequences. 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.

Statement of an Example of the Problem

A fundamental challenge for engaging fathers relates to problems in agency practices and social worker attitudes (Coakley, 2013). Unfortunately, there have been minimal efforts to optimize the strengths of fathers, especially those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds with low incomes (Behnke et al., 2008; Earner, 2007). In the 1990’s there was a significant increase in attention to fatherhood and fatherhood involvement in the US. This emphasis, however, focused on father involvement primarily associated with efforts to increase the collection and enforcement of child support payments. Since that time, societal efforts to engage fathers in parenting have primarily focused on their economic contributions. Researchers have frequently noted that children in child welfare too often lack the most fundamental resource for ensuring educational success: a lasting relationship with a caring adult who can observe their development over time, participate in their school lives, advocate on their behalf, and consent to evaluations and services (Noonan, Matone, Zlotnik, Hernandez-Mekonnen, Walls, Rubin, & Mollen, 2012). While research shows that involved parents assist with better outcomes for children, as previously stated, most of the data reflects that of mothers (Goldman, 2005). Expanded researched is needed to study the motivations and impact of a father’s participation in the life of his child, especially if that child is involved in the child welfare system. This need is
particularly significant for African American fathers, who are depicted as the most irresponsible and chronically absentee fathers in the nation. In this depiction Black masculinity is used as opposition to White masculinity due to the racism on which this country was built. Historically, African American men were not allowed to perform the duties that were considered masculine because it would allot power to the Black race. Then and today, they are held to a very low and dangerous standard of being too toxically masculine to the point that they can’t express themselves, live life, or do things without being challenged socially about their appearance, sexuality, or validity.

The historical context of African American men is not often included in discussions when we talk about their engagement along with the role of providing for and protecting their children, a context that involves issues of trauma, pain, and low self-esteem that have been passed down through generations. African American men suffer a unique historical scar. The legacy of slavery and legal segregation affects their view of themselves and the view of other Americans towards Blacks, especially Black men (Boyd-Franklin, 2013). Throughout America’s history, Black men have been depicted as buffoons, criminals, or oversexed animal-like creatures who lust after White women. That followed a design in this country to maintain an inferior, second-class status for Black people, dating from slavery on through the twentieth century (Diuguid & Rivers, 2000). These negative perceptions are sometimes held unconsciously by teachers, health care professionals, police officers, lawmakers, members of the media and in reality, by all of us. Such perceptions fuel discriminatory practices in nearly every sphere of our society, including child welfare where African American fathers are struggle with engagement.
Statement of Project

The goal of my research was to conduct a qualitative study to engage African American fathers who have children involved in the child welfare system and examine their beliefs about how their influence and engagement affects their children. Additionally, because historically child welfare agencies have had limited success in reaching and engaging the fathers of the families they serve, I investigated the role of the child welfare system in reducing barriers to father involvement and educating fathers on the importance of their involvement in their children’s lives. The following research questions guided my study:

Research Questions

1. According to African American fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system, how do they view their role and how does their engagement influence their children’s outcomes?
2. What do child welfare-involved fathers report as obstacles in maintaining engagement/involvement in the lives of their children?
3. According to African American fathers, what role, if any, does the child welfare system play in allowing African American fathers to demonstrate stronger parental involvement to improve outcomes for their children?

Research Design

In this research study, I employed a qualitative design (Creswell, 2014). Data was collected to explore and obtain firsthand knowledge and information from the perspective of African American fathers regarding their level of involvement and subsequent influence in the outcomes of their children. The goal was to obtain fathers’ views on their influence in their children’s wellbeing and provide an opportunity for them to share thoughts and feelings about
their experiences working within the child welfare systems that might be barriers to their influence. Given the array of anticipated variables the fathers described and the lack of information available, I chose to employ qualitative methods to address my research questions. These methods included both focus groups and individual interviews.

**Site Selection and Target Population**

The target population for this research project was African American men who are fathers of children who had an open case with one of the 20 regional offices within the Department of Children and Family Service of Los Angeles County (DCFS) and that case closed within the last year. In order to conduct the research needed to answer my proposed research questions, I outlined two areas of need: 1) securing a location and 2) gaining access to at least twenty African American fathers who were willing to take part in one-on-one interviews and participate in one of three focus groups.

I identified two areas that could provide the access to fathers and potential participants for my study. Project Fatherhood of the Children’s Institute, Inc., which provides comprehensive parenting skills to men in caregiving roles, including fathers, stepfathers, foster parents and relative caregivers. Project Fatherhood seeks to equip fathers with the tools to participate actively in the rearing and well-being of their children. The program that conducts 22 weekly support groups throughout Los Angeles County is designed for fathers of all ages, races and educational backgrounds. It serves approximately 1000 fathers per year and 90% of them are involved with the child welfare system. Project Fatherhood differs from other fatherhood programs in its approach to the father-child relationship. Virtually all other existing fatherhood programs focus on the father’s needs, with the assumption that the father’s improved functioning will “trickle down” to the child. Project Fatherhood, in contrast, addresses the needs of the
father and the child, as well as the father-child relationship, through ongoing therapeutic children’s groups as well as individual and conjoint counseling. Many of the children are in the child welfare system and are at great risk of – or are already exhibiting – a range of emotional and behavioral problems as a result of past abuse or neglect. The major component of the Project Fatherhood program is the Men in Relationships Group (MIRG).

MIRG is a therapy group designed to help fathers parent their children appropriately. It helps fathers of “at-risk” children to become not just dads, but parents. With the help of licensed clinical professionals and a peer group of other fathers, Project Fatherhood MIRG helps men begin the process of growth and training necessary to learn how to parent effectively. Members of these groups learn to provide vital support for each member’s efforts to become a capable father to his children. Through the MIRG experience, the project provides a new approach to the services typically available to families by addressing the importance of the fathering role. The supervisors and facilitators of the program granted me access to the members of their groups.

In addition to Project Fatherhood, I also identified, “Parents in Partnership” (PiPs), a program within DCFS, that agreed to participate in the study. The program is led by fathers who previously had children involved in the child welfare system and have successfully closed their cases. These men now assist other fathers in successfully navigating the child welfare system and becoming more involved with their children. The PiPs provide support, information, and mentorship to parents who have recently lost custody of their children or have children that are in the foster care system without permanency. These individuals assisted me in recruiting fathers for the study by identifying fathers that recently and successfully navigated the child welfare system and closed their cases. Participants were recruited from regional offices throughout LA County, from Palmdale/Lancaster to Long Beach.
To address the role of DCFS in positively engaging fathers in an effort to help fathers improve outcomes of their children, I was given permission and worked with the Regional Administrators (RAs) of the twenty regional offices to poll fathers about what role, if any, does the child welfare system play in encouraging African American fathers to demonstrate stronger parental involvement to improve outcomes for their children.

➢ Palmdale ➢ Santa Fe Springs
➢ Lancaster ➢ Metro North
➢ Van Nuys ➢ West Los Angeles
➢ Chatsworth ➢ Vermont Corridor
➢ Santa Clarita ➢ Compton
➢ Glendora ➢ Compton West
➢ Pasadena ➢ Belvedere
➢ Pomona ➢ Water Ridge
➢ El Monte ➢ Torrance
➢ Covina ➢ South County

**Participant Recruitment**

To address research questions of this study, fathers were purposefully selected for participation in the study if they self-identified as African American, in a fathering role, at least 18 years old, and had at least one child between the ages of one and 17 years old that had a DCFS case closed within the last year.

**Data Analysis**

All data collected through multiple focus groups and individual interviews with fathers were analyzed and coded by themes and frequency of responses. Responses were categorized based on the three research questions of study. Participants were actively engaged in the data analysis throughout the study and a coding analysis was conducted from the participant fathers to capture themes that might not have emerged in the original data collection.
Public Engagement

A summary of the study will be disseminated to parents, community organizations, schools and child welfare systems with three goals: 1) communication of the perceptions of fathers regarding their involvement and impact on the education of their children, 2) use as a training tool to assist systems on the importance of father involvement and lastly, 3) help for child welfare systems and fathers to address perceived barriers that prevent father engagement. Additionally, this study may provide an impetus for future research in examining more precise predictors of father involvement and fathers’ influence on the academic achievement of their children. With implications for applied settings, this knowledge might help to inform much-needed individual and systemic interventions, serving the primary goal of encouraging healthy contexts that foster positive fathering and healthy, thriving, productive children.
African American children involved in the child welfare system and placed in foster care are among the most educationally vulnerable children in the nation (Davis, Kilburn & Schultz, 2009) and unfortunately, are a growing population. These authors also found that these children often lack social and emotional stability and continuity of educational services, and experience higher rates of drop-out and suspension, which results in lower rates of literacy and graduation. The factors leading to their entry into foster care, along with their experiences in the child welfare system, place them at great risk for negative outcomes in the future. According to a growing number of studies, one way to reduce a high risk of negative outcomes (criminal justice involvement, poor schooling, substance abuse, behavioral problems, early sexual behavior, and suicide) is parental involvement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2008). Yet, even with the growing research, few of the studies focus specifically on father involvement, and there remains a challenge faced by scholars to aptly identify and measure the explicit attributes of fathers and how their level of involvement in their children’s lives may be a factor affecting children’s development and academic success (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). Having a father present can positively influence youth later in life (Dubowitz, Lane, Greif, Jensen, & Lamb, 2006; Roy 2006; Pate, 2005). For children in foster care, paternal involvement increases the likelihood of reunification and decreases the likelihood of long-term foster care (Coakley, 2008). Key components to cultivate positive outcomes for youth include assisting children in developing positive relationships (Malm, Murray, & Green, 2006) and healthy attachments to their fathers (Carter and Almarez, 2014). Carter and Almarez (2014) report attachment as a major factor in reducing negative outcomes during adolescence such as teen pregnancy, dropping out of high school, and depression. This literature review seeks to examine and synthesize the
existing literature specific to African American father involvement and child welfare policies and practices that have an impact on the involvement of fathers in their children’s lives and which been associated with a range of positive outcomes for the children.

The first section of this literature review synthesizes the outcomes of African American children involved in child welfare through the perspective of their fathers and father involvement. There is a growing body of research that offers a critical assessment of the central and unique role of fathers, the positive benefits of father involvement, and explains African American father absence as a far more complex issue than frequently acknowledged. Next, I explore the literature on the current problems faced by fathers and the support they need by reviewing barriers and biases that hinder healthy and positive father engagement. I then examine historical and cultural factors discussed in the literature which impact father involvement and subsequent child outcomes. I discuss socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural variations among fathers and differences in family structure that may affect fathers' roles and their level of involvement with their children. In the next section, I conduct a review of what the literature outlines as a mother’s role as a facilitating factor in a father’s parental involvement. Although maternal beliefs and attitudes may inhibit father involvement with children, studies suggest that they may also encourage and support this critical relationship (Arendell, 1996; De Luccie, 1995). The quality of father-child engagement as well as the frequency are strongest when mothers value the fathering role (Arendell, 1996; Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008). Finally, in the last section, unlike most of the existing literature, I examine the father’s perspective. I specifically seek to understand how African American men perceive the role of fatherhood and their influence on positive outcomes for their children.

Child welfare agencies have a poor track record for successfully reaching and engaging the fathers of the families they serve (Maxwell, Scourfield, & Featherstone, 2012). Despite current research connecting children’s well-being to the inclusion of father involvement, few fathers are involved in the child welfare system as noted in the brief “Child Welfare Casework with Nonresident Fathers of Children in Foster Care” prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in December (Malm, Murray, & Green, 2006). This is the most recent national study looking at the participation of fathers whose children were involved in the child welfare system. Importantly the report notes that a significant number of children removed from their homes by child welfare staff are not living with their fathers, and although paternity is known for more than 80 percent of foster children with noncustodial fathers, only 54 percent of these children have had contact with their fathers in the year following placement (“Child Welfare Casework,” 2006).

While research shows father involvement benefits children’s well-being, the practices of the child welfare system ignore this finding, and particularly with African American fathers (Coakley, 2008). African American children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and the statistics for the lack of father engagement are higher than any other population (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Historically, the child welfare system has never really agreed with fathers on what it means to be a father and this lack of agreement has negatively impacted the role of the African American fathers in the system (Brown, Mangelsdorf & Neff, 2012). There is some research in the professional literature that confirms that the child welfare legal definition of fatherhood (i.e., financial support, cohabitation, legal documentation of paternity) is not aligned with African American fathers’ perspectives on what it means to provide
for their children (Johnson & Bryant, 2004). The child welfare system’s reliance on financial support as a marker for paternal involvement can have the unintended impact of discouraging those parenting activities which are not tied to the father’s ability to serve as breadwinner (Johnson & Bryant, 2004; Perry, 2009) and puts those fathers who are from lower socioeconomic status at a disadvantage as they seek alternate ways to provide for their children (Weininger & Lareau, 2009). As a result, many men have been conditioned to believe that if they cannot contribute to their children financially, then their presence is not wanted (Greif et al., 2011).

The relationship between African American fathers and child welfare agencies is critical to how involved fathers stay involved in their children’s lives. The agencies’ climate and practices often convey how open they are to working with fathers. If fathers do not feel comfortable, respected, or valued in their dealings with the child welfare system, then they might not choose to work with social workers toward permanency (O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). With little research specific to African American fathers' involvement, it is difficult to understand the relationships among fathers' involvement, agency practices, and children's outcomes or to identify which types of interventions are most effective to involve African American fathers.

**Barriers and Biases to Healthy Engagement**

The National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare (2013) reports that fathers encounter numerous barriers when their families are involved with child welfare, including the workers’ lack of skill in how to engage dads. Research shows that fathers can be as competent as mothers in their direct (e.g., caretaking) and indirect (e.g., financial support) parenting (Lamb, 2010). However, fathers face a number of barriers with parenting their children, including lack of parenting skills, personal problems, issues with the children’s mothers, and societal impacts such
as economic challenges. There is a fair amount of research about barriers to father involvement that often reveal others’ negative views about fathers’ contributions and potential (Malm et al., 2006; O’Donnell, 1999; O’Donnell et al., 2005). Typically, these studies consist of data solicited from the children’s mothers and social service workers, but not from the fathers.

**The Role of the Father**

Typically, fathers are assumed by society to be in the role of protector and breadwinner. However, they are increasingly supporting their families in a nontraditional caregiving role. Some researchers assert that the distinctiveness of gender-specific roles is important, while others contend that the characteristics of the father as a parent are more important than the characteristics of the father as a man (Lamb, 2010). Once men become fathers, their perspectives on fathering and fatherhood are influenced by their personal experiences, which include their relationships with their children, the children’s mothers and their own relationships with their fathers. Current research highlights how previous studies have underemphasized the role of the African American fathers in the lives of their children (Miller & Maiter, 2008). This is particularly salient when one considers the economic and structural barriers that African American men face that make it difficult for them to successfully fulfill what the North American culture sees as the role of fatherhood, namely, financial provision (Miller & Maiter, 2008). The confusion about fathering in the Black community stems from misunderstanding the definition of what a father is or is not (Connor & White, 2005). Most African American men receive strong messages about providing for their families and have been led to believe that providing financially for their child is the key to fatherhood. The majority of Black men accept the breadwinner role (Connor & White, 2005) and understand their responsibility as a father to provide for their children but often minimize other important factors of fatherhood, such as
creating nurturing environments, taking part in educational development, establishing socialization skills and maintaining good relationships.

The research that exists on African American fathers suffers from several limitations. It focuses more on their roles as providers or breadwinners (Dubowitz et al, 2006; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999) than on other roles they might play in their families emotionally and with child rearing activities (e.g., caregiver, teacher). The feelings or affective components that African American fathers have toward fatherhood are not often represented in this research nor have they shaped a public narrative about African American fatherhood.

The literature on fathers and fatherhood highlights a long list of potential barriers to involvement. In U.S. society, fathers are often viewed negatively in regard to nurturing and emotional support, because these roles are historically delegated to mothers (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). The literature also tells us that fathers may also struggle with their own beliefs and expectations for relationships with their children. Before men become fathers, they form their ideas about fathering based on the way their own fathers parented them (Coakley, in press; Lamb, 2010; Marsiglio, 2004). In a seminal study on the systemic predictors of paternal parenting, Belsky (1984) affirmed that a parent’s prior and present attitudes about childrearing affect his competence in childcare tasks and influence childrearing goals, which in turn ultimately affects direct paternal engagement with his child. Other research has suggested that paternal self-efficacy plays a significant role in paternal involvement (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999) as well a father’s perception of the value and purpose of paternal involvement (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). These findings suggest that fathers’ parenting attitudes are meaningful and correlate with their future parenting behaviors. Holmes and Huston (2010) expand this
finding to suggest that paternal attitudes not only affect parenting behaviors, but that they also play a role in father-child interaction.

**Barriers**

Potential barriers impacting African American fathers extend beyond the social level and are also prevalent at the child welfare agency level. According to the landmark quantitative study by the Urban Institute on fatherhood and child welfare practices (Malm et al., 2006), child welfare administrators cite a reluctance to involve fathers in cases because they fear introducing a person who was possibly a previous abuser to an already destabilized family. Another concern of child welfare administrators includes increasing caseloads of their workers by increasing the number of people they must contact, a concern which is supported by Johnson and Bryant’s (2004) case study of child welfare workers in which workers reported feeling relief upon hearing that a father was uninterested because it reduced their workload. Ethically, these barriers are inappropriate, even if fathers’ exclusion is done inadvertently and without deliberate intention.

The recognition of a significant lack of father involvement, in general and in child welfare, undoubtedly contributed to the establishment of fatherhood initiatives to ensure best practice (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010). In addition to gatekeeping by mothers, which will be discussed later, child welfare professionals report additional barriers to father involvement:

- Difficulty identifying and locating fathers.
- Lack of interest by fathers.
- Lack of paternity establishment.
- Lack of resources and services to refer fathers to.
- Difficulty knowing how to get fathers more involved.
- Lack of staff time.
• Lack of clear policy on when and how to involve dads.

These barriers are especially problematic because when fathers do not participate in the case planning process, the child welfare agency considers them noncompliant or unsuitable as a permanent placement option. Child welfare agencies can create favorable outcomes for children in out-of-home placements by minimizing barriers and engaging fathers in the case planning process. A fundamental challenge for engaging fathers relates to problems in agency practices and social worker attitudes. Unfortunately, there have been minimal efforts to optimize the strengths of fathers, especially those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds with low incomes (Behnke et al., 2008; Earner, 2007).

Biases

The nature of social work practice can be challenging and leave room for unintentional bias, which poses an additional threat to fathers who have children in the child welfare system (Brodie & Cole, 2008; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007). There are mandates in place which state that child welfare practitioners must operate from a family-centered perspective, implying minimal value judgment and limited subjectivity (English, Brummel, & Martens, 2009; Curtis & Denby, 2011; O’Donnell, 2001). However, rarely is the father considered the focal point in child welfare case management. Often times, parent involvement is limited only to the mother and emphasis is placed on reestablishing the mother’s relationship with the child (Coakley, 2013). Child welfare agencies historically have focused on the relationship between mothers and their children. This institutional bias is supported by the fact that mothers are recognized as the primary caregivers/nurturers and compounded by the fact that child welfare staff are predominantly women and tend to focus on mothers and exclude or at least make little effort to include fathers (Brandon et al., 2009; Davidson-Arad et al., 2008; Strega et al., 2008).
Findings from a survey of 148 social workers in the US found that regardless of gender, workers assumed that mothers were responsible for the care of children. Workers were also significantly more likely to involve mothers in social work interventions than fathers (Lazar, Sagi and Fraser, 1991).

Unintentional bias can inadvertently affect paternal involvement and create ethical concerns in child welfare case management. If fathers do not feel comfortable, respected, or valued in their dealings with the child welfare system, then they might not choose to work with social workers toward permanency that could result in improved child outcomes (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Similarly, if social workers do not feel comfortable with fathers, then they are unlikely to involve fathers. Social workers’ apprehension and unwillingness to work with fathers may be racially based or influenced by agency practices that are not culturally competent. According to Leashore (1997) as cited by Coakley (2008), some Caucasian social workers spend less time working with African American fathers because of their negative perceptions about their race. This kind of discrimination is consistent with the disparities in how African American men are perceived and treated in the larger society compared to Caucasian men. In the United States, 82.3% of social workers are female, making them the more common gender in the occupation (Jacobs, 2008).

In the United States, 67.3% of Social workers are White, the most predominant race or ethnicity in the occupation, (Icard, Fagan, Lee, & Rutledge, 2014). Fathers of children involved in child welfare services consistently report their interactions with child welfare workers as challenging. When studying fathers’ experiences with child welfare workers, fathers felt ignored or not listened to by workers. Fathers reported being viewed more negatively than mothers in child welfare practice and child welfare workers did not believe fathers’ behavioral changes
(Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2014). Fathers also felt that workers were uncaring and prejudiced against them (Coady, Hoy, & Cameron, 2013), viewed the system and services as biased against fathers (Icard et al., 2014), and had their ability to parent continually questioned (Dominelli, Strega, Walmsley, Callahan, & Brown, 2011).

**Cultural Factors that Influence Father Involvement**

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) allows one to explore the historical, political, and familial influences on African American fathers. Peters (1988) notes that ecological systems theory allows researchers to observe paternal role functioning in the environment in which it occurs. In the case of my study, the environment is the child welfare system. Despite discussions about the distinct social background of African American men, there needs to be continued and updated research to connect how the experiences within the larger social context influence a diverse range of parenting practices. To understand the developmental processes of parents and children of color, it is necessary to explore the intersection of social class, culture, ethnicity, and race to create integrative models for developmental competence (Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, Wasik, Jenkins, Garcia, & McAdoo, 1996).

Historical and cultural factors play a large role in shaping fathers’ embodiment of the parenting role, reflecting individual values and experiences shaped by larger social forces. Connell’s (2005) definition of hegemonic masculinity argues that specific groups of men are privileged more so than others based on power structures such as race, gender, ethnicity, and social classes. This means that masculinity of groups that are not privileged, such as fathers of African descent, require study within their own cultural constructions. This is based on the idea that hegemonic masculinity is often defined by idealized notions of masculinity of White,
heterosexual, and economically successful men (Connell, 1995). Consequently, hegemonic masculinity is a not suitable frame in which to define and examine African American fatherhood.

While Connell (2005) found that the parenting styles of men were intergenerational and heavily influenced by their level of positive contact with their fathers, he also explored how their culture and cultural behaviors and beliefs influenced their fathering and introduced several universal fathering skills, such as nurturing. Knowledge of such behaviors and beliefs are particularly useful for working with fathers who are members of American subcultures (e.g., African American and Hispanic American) and who are members of subcultures that are not well acculturated or are not acculturated at all (e.g., recent immigrants).

While some researchers argue that cross-cultural comparisons provide a starting point in examining fathering practices, others argue that care must be taken to allow for a fluid and contextual definition of fatherhood in different cultures (Miller & Maier, 2008). They suggest that a more expanded notion of diversity will allow the view of parenting to move beyond stereotypical notions of fathering in diverse cultures to more complex and nuanced understandings. Now more than ever, we have to appreciate the diversity of fathers, including cultural and ethnic variations in the meaning of fatherhood, roles of fathers, sexual orientation and their influences on children. No single definition of successful fatherhood and no ideal father’s role can claim universal acceptance or empirical support. Rather, fathers’ expectations about what they should do, what they actually do, and their effects on children must be viewed within the contexts of family, community, culture, and current history. These ethnic and culturally diverse conceptions of fatherhood have differential effects on children’s outcomes and might work through different pathways (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000).
Family Structure

In addition to the cultural factors that influence father involvement and affect the outcomes of children in child welfare, research has shown that family structure plays a very important role in the perception and reality of how fathers perceive their influence in the lives of their children. The family structure of African-Americans has long been a matter of national public policy interest, especially when children are in the child welfare system (Thomas, Krampe, & Newton, 2007). In the face of social trends, structures and functions of family life are rapidly changing. According to the Pew Research Center, two-parent households are on the decline in the United States as divorce, remarriage and cohabitation are on the rise. In addition, more women are moving out of the home and show an increase in the labor force. Also, the heightened absence of fathers in the home has led to different family structures as well as different expectations and beliefs about the roles of fathers. Different types of fathers shape children’s attachments, social-emotional competencies, linguistic and cognitive attainments, and theoretical models of parenting must be reformulated to accommodate new family structures well as perceptions of fatherhood.

Dr. Wade F. Horn, co-founder and former president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, coined the phrase “the myth of the superfluous father.” By this, he was referring to the fact that too many fathers become convinced that they are simply an extra set of hands to help around the house, rather than irreplaceable to their children. As men continue to become integral to domestic and child rearing activities, they will take more responsibility for the organization and planning of their children’s lives and African American fathers with children involved in child welfare are no exception. Regardless of how the family structure looks, helping men understand what an invaluable and irreplaceable role they play in the development and lives of their children
can lead them to have positive perspectives of their influence and to make a greater commitment and investment in their family (Horn, 2007).

A Mother’s Role in Facilitating Father Involvement

The concept of paternal involvement has been a focus of tremendous research in the past few decades, stemming from the idea that maternal affection is not the only factor necessary for advances in child development. Perhaps the greatest area of focus has been on the factors responsible for inhibiting or encouraging paternal involvement with children. Literature supports the assumption that a father’s role is increased when a mother provides an encouraging response to such interactions (Cabrera et. al, 2007) and that her general appraisal of a father’s overall parenting skills is a contributing factor for father involvement (Beitel & Parke, 1998).

Researchers examine “mother gatekeeping,” which is the tendency of some mothers to be reluctant to encourage their partners to be more involved in childrearing for any number of reasons: fear of loss of control, doubts about the father’s competence, and discomfort altering their standards (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Unsurprisingly, mother gatekeeping stands in the way of fathers becoming more involved with their children, while also making fathers feel less competent (Allen & Daly, 2007). For all these reasons, one of the best ways to improve a father’s relationship with his children is to strengthen his relationship with the child’s mother. When fathers feel supported, empowered, and viewed positively by their partners, they are much more likely to be involved fathers.

According to the research, the single most important variable regarding fathers who do not live with their children is the quality of the fathers’ relationships with the children and their mothers; children do better when the parents have a consistent, respectful, and high-quality relationship, even if it is not a romantic one. Even after a divorce, if mothers are more positive
and supportive about the fathers’ abilities and fathering benefits, then visits are more frequent and the relationships between fathers and children are stronger (Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

**Fathers’ Perspectives**

Based on the identity theory’s assumption that an individual will identify with the role that they occupy (Stryker, 1980), the first expectation is that African American men will identify with the parenting role. As cited in the literature by Rosenberg & Wilcox (2012), fathers are far more than just second adults in the home, and involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring. More than mothers, fathers have always been afforded discretion in defining their parental roles and responsibilities; the major roles that African American fathers play are marital, provider, and child-socializing.

In spite of the more recent increase in research on African American fathers and their parenting such as effective caretakers, the direct perspectives of the fathers have often been missing because the primary focus has been on the viewpoint of mothers, systems and children themselves. However, the need to tell the story from the father’s perspective and his perceived influence in the lives of their children is an especially important and much needed area of research that I address in this study.

Research suggests that the negative depictions of African American men as fathers are inaccurate. As revealed in the Healthy Attachment Promotion for Parents and Infants (HAPPI) Father Study (Cabrera, et al., 2000), African American men are not uninvolved, financially irresponsible, absent, and uncommitted to their children. Instead, 75% of these men report being loving, responsible, present, and involved in the lives of their children. They want to be better people so that their children will have a positive image to idolize. The study, which was framed by identity theory, posits that individuals will identify with the roles they occupy and behave
accordingly. For example, men who identify with the role of being a father are more likely to act in a way that fulfills that role. In American culture, an involved father provides for his children economically and emotionally. Fathers in our culture play out many roles including economic provider, teacher, moral guide, caregiver, and provider of nurturance and emotional support. Applying this theory to African American fathers, we expect that African American men who identify with being a father will articulate what being a father means and how it has influenced their lives and the lives of their children.

In the HAPPI study, one father wanted to reinforce a positive father image for his child because he was aware of the many negative images of fathers in society. At times, he felt as though he did not receive any appreciation for all that he did as a father and it hurt him because he received no acknowledgement for his hard work. This sentiment was communicated by the 11 of the 15 fathers in the study and despite the lack of praise, the fathers felt as though the role of a father was not only beneficial to them as individuals but more importantly, provided them an opportunity to give to their children something that they were not privileged to have: a positive male role model. All participants expressed that a primary benefit of fatherhood was that it made them better people. They were able to share love with their child, teach them right from wrong, and feel the ability to care for another life. Their children brought satisfaction and fulfillment into their lives.

Receiving input from men who are fathers with children in the child welfare system is essential—especially hearing the voices of fathers from non-White ethnic backgrounds, as their children are impacted the most in terms of foster care rates (McRoy, 2008; United States Government Accountability Office, 2007). As outlined in this literature review, the fathering literature is very complex, with a variety of important issues and perspectives. Inadvertently or
deliberately, African American fathers have been excluded from the research, but as a significant part of the child welfare system they are central, and it is essential that we understand their perspectives. While there is some recent research on this topic, I hope to expand the field of study use fathers’ perspectives about factors that facilitated or inhibited their ability to play a positive and active role in their children’s lives.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

African American children involved in child welfare system and foster care are among the most vulnerable children in the nation (Davis, Kilburn & Schultz, 2009) and unfortunately, are a growing population. According to an increasing number of studies, one way to reduce their risk is parental involvement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Parent involvement, especially with families involved in the child welfare system, is consistently found to be positively associated with a child's academic performance and seen as a major influence on their children’s future. Noting the strength of involving both parents, it is widely recognized that there tends to be relatively poor engagement of fathers in the child welfare system and this is thought to be detrimental to the overall wellbeing of children as well as their academic success (Scott and Crooks, 2004). I argue that African American fathers are not properly engaged by child welfare system and the lack of engagement affects the father’s perspectives on their influence in parent and the contribution of that influence to produce positive outcomes for their children.

By describing the obstacles encountered in parent engagement and fathers’ observations of their roles, this study sought to draw from the personal experiences of African American fathers to convey the level of influence that their participation in parenting has on their children. The overall goal in this study was to add to the literature highlighting the perspectives of fathers involved with child welfare.

**Research Questions**

1. According to African American fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system, how do they view their role and how does their engagement influence their children’s outcomes?
2. What do child welfare-involved fathers report as obstacles in maintaining engagement/involvement in the lives of their children?

3. According to African American fathers, what role, if any, does the child welfare system play in allowing African American fathers to demonstrate stronger parental involvement to improve outcomes for their children?

**Research Design and Rationale**

The goal of this study was to explore African American fathers’ perceptions of the factors that facilitate their ability to play a positive and active role in their children’s lives to promote positive outcomes. Through a qualitative approach to best capture the direct viewpoints of the fathers, interviews and focus groups were utilized to identify perceived barriers and system biases and potential influence. The addition of individual narratives with historical and cultural viewpoints provided valuable information about the impact of a father’s influence that is normally missing from standard questionnaires. Drawing on fathers’ personal experiences adds to previous studies that by design, omit the collection of information about behaviors or attitudes. In order to fully answer the research questions of this study, I chose a qualitative design to provide an in depth understanding of the perceptions of fathers and how their perceptions might influence their children toward positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.

**Site Selection**

Interviews and focus groups with fathers of this study took place at regional child welfare (DCFS) sites and Children’s Institute (CII) locations throughout Los Angeles County, where the fathers participate in fatherhood programming. Because of the nature of the study, it was not methodologically necessary for the sample to be representative of all child welfare sites but more
important is to identify and select sites where current programming exists and trust and rapport had previously been established between sites, fathers and the researcher.

Choosing to host interviews and focus groups from the existing 20 DCFS offices and the nine CII Offices in the county not only provided me with access to a substantial pool of participants from across LA County but helped to ensure that I could identify individuals who fit the demographic requirements of the study (African American fathers).

The Children’s Institute, Inc. (CII), a local nonprofit organization that facilitates fatherhood support groups and the Los Angeles Department of Family and Children’s Services (DCFS) were approached about collaborating on the research project to examine the influential perceptions of African American fathers who have children who are or have been involved in the child welfare system. Both agencies, who have fathers participating in Project Fatherhood programing (described in Chapter 1) within their organizations, agreed to take part in my research study and provided me a list of fathers who I could contact to inquire about their willingness to participate in the study.

**Sample Selection**

African American fathers in Project Fatherhood programs mirror that of the general population, about 6%. To ensure a response large enough to complete the study, I recruited from multiple locations throughout Los Angeles County (Watts, Palmdale/Lancaster and the Vermont Corridor). At the same time, I wanted to keep the sample small enough to allow for in-depth interviews and focus groups, so my study was limited to 25 participants, which accounted for three focus groups and three individuals from each focus group participating in individual interviews.
All participants were given pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researcher.
Figure 3.3 Marital Status of Study Participants

Table 3.1
Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwayne</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D'Shawn</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dale</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byron</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Bi Racial/African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carver</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melvin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bi-racial/African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eric, a divorced father with two children, had his children detained by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) for allegations of child neglect in 2015. He successfully worked to regain custody of his children and had his case closed in 2017.

Dwayne, a single father of one, lost custody of his child to allegations of child abuse in 2017. After a year of working with DCFS and attending parenting classes with Project Fatherhood, he successfully reunified with his child in the Fall of 2018.

Marcus, a married father with three children, had his children detained by DCFS in 2016 for allegations of child endangerment. He and his wife spent the next two years attending parenting classes and he was successfully reunified with his children in December of 2018.

D’Shawn is a married father of one child who was detained by DCFS is 2017 for allegations of child neglect. Despite his stringent working schedule, D’Shawn completed all court requirements and was reunified with his son in the summer of 2018.

Dale, a single father of a teenage girl, had his daughter detained by DCFC in 2015 after her 6th time of running away from home. The department cited child neglect and his daughter...
was removed from his custody for almost 3 years. Dale successfully navigated the system and was reunified with her in 2018.

Byron is a single father of two and lost custody of his children in 2018 to the foster care system for allegations of child neglect. He worked closely with his social worker and participated in Project Fatherhood programming to successfully regain custody of his children in 9 months.

Reggie is a single father of twin boys had his sons detained by DCFS after allegations of child abuse at the hands of their mother. Despite being a non-offending parent, Reggie had to participate in parenting classes in order to regain custody of his boys. After two years of trying to meet the assigned requirements, Reggie gained custody of his children in January of 2019.

Anthony is a single father of a 2-year old girl of whom he lost custody in 2017 due to allegations of child neglect. Partnering with the mother of his daughter, he and the mother both completed domestic violence classes and regained custody in December of 2018.

Ronald is a divorced father to two children who entered the foster care system in 2016 for allegations of child abuse. By participating in Project Fatherhood and anger management classes, Ronald has learned appropriate forms of discipline and regained custody of his children in November of 2018.

Aaron is a single father of two children and successfully reunited with his children after being detained by DCFS for allegations of child neglect in 2018. Aaron and the mother of his children are currently co-parenting.

Arthur is a single father of a 2-year old girl who lost custody of his daughter in 2017 to DCFS for allegations of child neglect. Along with the mother of his daughter, he completed all
the requirements from DCFS and the courts and they were reunified with their daughter in October of 2018.

George is a father of a teenage boy and recently separated from the mother of his child. They have had ongoing issues with domestic violence and recently completed mandated classes. George’s son recently reunified with his mother and George and his wife are taking healthy marriage classes to reunify the entire family. George is part of Project Fatherhood in Watts, CA and contributes his new outlook on parenting to the work with the group.

Darius is a father of five children who had all his children detained in 2017 for allegations of child neglect. After adhering to the list of requirements from the court and DCFS that included individual therapy and parenting classes with Project Fatherhood, Darius was reunified with his children in early January of 2019.

Carver is a single parent of a one-year old girl who was detained in 2018 after her mother was incarcerated. Carver had to enroll in parenting classes in order to assume custody of his daughter. After completing the assigned 24 weeks with Project Fatherhood, Carver was given sole custody of his daughter.

Marshall is a single father of two toddlers who were detained by DCFS in 2018 for allegations of child neglect. His toddlers are special needs and he has worked with the local Regional Centers and Project Fatherhood for the last year to reunify.

Keith is married father of two children who were detained by DCFS in 2017 for allegations of inappropriate discipline of his children. Keith and his wife have participated in Project Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage classes and successful reunified with their children in February of 2018.
Scott is a single father of a three-year old who was detained from DCFS in 2018 after mother of his child was arrested for substance abuse. Because of a previous arrest record, Scott had to enroll in parenting classes for 6 months prior to gaining custody of his son in January of 2019.

Melvin is a single father of a two-year old girl who was detained by DCFS in 2017 for allegations of child neglect. After being made to establish paternity, Melvin joined Project Fatherhood and completed classes in order to gain 50% custody of his daughter and co-parent with his child’s mother.

Donald is a married father of five children who were detained by DCFS in 2016 for allegations of child neglect. It has taken Donald three years to complete the requirements given to him by the courts, but in 2019 his children were released from foster care and back into the custody of him and his wife.

Sean is a married father of one who lost custody of his child to DCFS in 2017 for allegations of child endangerment. Sean successfully reunified with both his wife and child in 2019 after completing the 26 weeks for parenting classes with Project Fatherhood.

Jonathan is a married but separated father of two children who were detained in 2016 by DCFS after allegations of child abuse. Both Jonathan and his wife were mandated to attend parenting classes to learn appropriate discipline. The couple reunified with each other and their children in 2018.

Mark is a single father of two children who were detained by DCFS after allegations of child neglect in 2018. With the incarceration of the children’s mother, Mark completed all mandates of the court to successfully gain custody of his children in 2019.
Troy is a single father of two children who were detained by DCFS in 2018 after allegations of child neglect were reported by their school. After 10 months in foster care the children were reunified with Troy after he completed his parenting class mandates with Project Fatherhood.

Alfred is a single father of two children who were detained by DCFS in 2018 after allegations of child endangerment. Alfred completed a 52-week program for substance abuse and was reunified with his children in 2019.

Christopher is a single father of a seven-year old girls who were detained by DCFS after allegations of child neglect. As a non-resident father, Christopher attended classes with Project Fatherhood and nutrition classes at CII and was awarded custody of his daughter in 2019.

Larry is a single father of two toddlers who were detained by DCFS after allegations of child neglect. As the non-offending parent, Larry enrolled in Project Fatherhood at the request of the children’s social worker and was given custody of the children after 4 months in the program.

**Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods for this qualitative study consisted of the previously described individual interviews and focus groups. Individual interviews were scheduled for each participant and conducted at one of the nine Children’s Institute Inc., offices or twenty Regional DCFS offices, coinciding with the weekly (MIRG) Men in Relationship Group of the fathers. These groups held at weekly at the different sites from 6pm – 7:30pm. My goal was to interview seven to ten fathers from the various sites, prior to or following their regularly scheduled group meetings.
Each participant was interviewed and asked 10-15 open-ended questions regarding their perceptions on fatherhood, how their parenting influences the lives of their children and the barriers they encounter to parenting. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and each participant received a $10.00 gas card along with a fathers’ resource guide for their participation. In addition to the notes I took during the interviews, I recorded the interview sessions on an audio recorder and used my iPhone as a backup.

I initially intended to only conduct interviews. However, after further consideration, I felt that focus groups would also be helpful, not only as a way to ensure that my bias did not influence the interviews, but that it would also allow the fathers to speak and provide feedback in the presence of their peers, which was a normal setting for them. Limiting my data collection to only interviews might have weakened the study’s credibility. Therefore, following the individual interviews, I hosted three focus groups. The focus groups consisted of six-to-eight participants, some who had previously been part of an individual interview and others who were only participating in the focus group. The focus groups provided the fathers with an opportunity to qualitatively express their thoughts and feelings in their normal group setting, among their peers, about the influential perceptions with their children that may or may not have been communicated during the individual interviews. Additionally, fathers were able to expand on topics not originally planned for discussion that another father brought up and added to the rich data collection. Questions for interviews and focus groups were designed to capture responses related to the fathers’ perspectives on their level of engagement with their children, with hopes of establishing themes regarding these viewpoints about their parenting experience.
Data Analysis Methods

Interviews were recorded and sent for transcription via Rev.com upon completion of each interview. Once all interviews had been transcribed, the interviews, along with notes and observations made during the interviews were reviewed and analyzed for themes and patterns from the fathers’ narratives that began to emerge for initial coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the focus group conversations had been transcribed by Rev.com, they were compared with the original recording for accuracy of transcription. Transcription responses along with notes and observations made during the focus groups were coded and analyzed by the researcher to see if they fit into emerging themes established in individual interviews or if new themes needed to be created to answer established research questions.

The analysis and coding of the interviews and focus groups were categorized by fathers’ deep personal perspectives in order to see if any patterns or themes emerged from their responses regarding factors that influence their children. Through a constructivist lens, I asked more broad and general open-ended questions to uncover father’s overall perspectives and more detailed questions to identify specific obstacles that impeded their engagement and their perceived influence.

Through communications of stories about particular experiences during the interviews and focus groups, themes developed that helped address my research questions. Themes included: personal stories that collectively outlined a perspective of their influence toward positive academic and social-emotional outcomes of their children, and stories that shared common viewpoints of the obstacles they encountered in maintaining involvement in the lives of their children. An additional theme emerged about the child welfare system’s role with African American fathers to demonstrate or facilitate stronger involvement to improve outcomes for their
children. Absent the literature surrounding fathers and their perceptions of their children involved the child welfare system, this narrative research method may be a way to establish links with other disciplines such as the historical and cultural viewpoints that were previously mentioned and possibly enhance the research to lead to a creation of policy and practice changes.

**Access/Role Management**

As a previous employee of Children’s Institute and former director of the Project Fatherhood program, I was granted access to both the Children’s Institute, Inc., (CII) and Regional DCFS offices to conduct this research project. On several occasions, I met with the Executive Director of CII and Regional Administrators of the DCFS offices to communicate the plans of my study and reconfirm their organizational participation. The administrators of both organizations confirmed their ongoing commitment for the study and offered additional resources as needed.

In addition to the lists of possible participants, I was granted access to meeting rooms to conduct interviews and focus groups at all locations. Because fatherhood work is part of the organizational services already being offered, there is a strong interest in how this research might better inform and enhance service delivery within these organizations.

Given my established access as a previous employee of the organization facilitating the intervention program to which the study participants belonged, it was important for me to clearly and completely articulate my role in this study. Although I had no prior interactions with potential participants, I made sure that both facilitators and participants were aware that the program/intervention that I previously oversaw was not being evaluated and not part of this study. My goal was to create research questions and gather information from fathers that reflected their perceptions about the parenting influence of their children and not the activities
and/or skills obtained from program services. It was my intention to eliminate conversations about my previous role as a program administrator and instead highlight that my role in the study was that of a graduate student researcher—and also an African American father with an adopted son from the child welfare system—who seeks to expand research and literature on the topic. I ensured anonymity and stressed that this study is voluntary. Lastly, at the conclusion of my study, I presented my findings and recommendations to both administrators at both CII and DCFS.

**Ethical Issues**

I did not anticipate any ethical issues arising as a result of my study. Both Children’s Children’s Institute, Inc., (CII) and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) were provided with a copy of my proposal outlining the details of how and why I conducted the study. Participants were made aware of the intent and purpose of my study in the introductory letter. A copy of my findings will made available for all participants, and I will make myself available to review and answer questions upon the completion of the study. All participants were fathers who had previous cases in DCFS and none of the participants were employed by CII or DCFS and therefore did not encounter any employment “risks” by their participation.

I went to great lengths to ensure participant confidentiality, and only moved forward with the interview process after receiving consent from participants. Confidentiality was protected by conducting interviews in closed and private rooms at each location. Pseudonyms were created before interviews are transcribed, and all audio and transcription files were saved on my computer with password protection. Any file that contains actual names were password-protected and destroyed as soon as all interviews were transcribed.
Credibility and Trustworthiness

As mentioned previously in my role management, one of the challenges of the study was how I would be viewed by participants. There existed the chance that participants would say and share comments that they think I wanted to hear as a previous administrator of the intervention program they took part in. This didn’t happen and didn’t compromise the credibility of the study and render the data useless. That being said, I made the following provisions to promote confidence in my data:

- **Purposeful sampling** of individuals to serve as participants. Purposeful selections were made to ensure a diverse and representative sample.

- **In-depth interviews** – Each participant took part in a 60-minute interview with the researcher in privately established meeting rooms.

- **Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants** - I provided opportunities to refuse participation in the study so that the data collection sessions involved only those who are genuinely willing to take part and prepared to offer data freely. Participants were encouraged to be frank and from the outset I advised that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions asked. All sessions, both interviews and focus groups, took place in private rooms with no chance of participants being overheard or interrupted.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

To illustrate the engagement experiences of African American fathers who have had children involved in the child welfare system, I used a qualitative design to gather perspectives and perceptions of paternal engagement and their child welfare involvement from 25 African American fathers. The focus group and interview protocols I developed can be found in Appendix A. During the focus groups and individual interviews, participants described their definitions of father involvement, highlighted their roles and responsibilities towards their children, described personal/family and external factors that influenced their engagement in their children's lives, and articulated the barriers in working within the child welfare system during their attempts to reunify and strengthen their involvement in their children's lives.

To answer the research questions, data was collected from 25 African American fathers which made up three focus groups and six individual interviews. A combination of both focus groups and individual interviews were utilized to determine if the responses from participants would be more in depth in individual interviews compared to focus groups. The study revealed the opposite and participants provided more in-depth answers and spoke more freely in the focus groups. I contributed this to the familiarity of the weekly Men in Relationships Group (MIRG) sessions of Project Fatherhood that the participants attended and were recruited from. Despite the sensitive and personal information discussed, the participants bonded over the common interest of their children and then I was able to guide the group in an exchange of ideas, feelings, and experiences. Results for each of the research questions are presented along with themes and descriptions gleaned from the analysis of transcripts.

Table 4.1
Emergent Themes by Research Question
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to African American fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system, how do they view their role and how does their engagement influence their children’s outcomes.</td>
<td>• Roles &amp; Responsibility &lt;br&gt; o Provider &lt;br&gt; o Educator &lt;br&gt; o Mentor &lt;br&gt; • Intergenerational child welfare involvement &lt;br&gt; • Race &lt;br&gt; • Experience/Knowledge &lt;br&gt; • Mother gatekeeping &lt;br&gt; • Feelings of helplessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do child welfare-involved fathers report as obstacles in maintaining engagement/involvement in the lives of their children?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>According to African American fathers, what role, if any, does the child welfare system play in allowing African American fathers to demonstrate stronger parental involvement to improve outcomes for their children?</td>
<td>• Empathy for Father &lt;br&gt; • Father engagement practices &lt;br&gt; • Male/Father Bias &lt;br&gt; • Case worker attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Major Themes**

Five major themes emerged during the process of data analysis that illuminated the lived experiences and perceptions of fathers who were previously involved in the child welfare system. The themes were emerged in coding include: (a) redefining fatherhood and male involvement, (b) roles and responsibilities, (c) race, culture and family, (d) barriers to engagement/involvement and (e) the impact/role of child welfare involvement. The following sections provide detailed descriptions of each emergent theme to answer the study’s research questions.

**Research Question 1: According to African American fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system, how do they view their role and how does their engagement influence their children’s outcomes?**

**Re)Defining Fatherhood and Father Involvement.** To understand participants' personal definitions of fatherhood and father involvement, each father was asked to describe and explain what the terms fatherhood and father involvement meant to him. Initial responses contradicted societal views and revealed that of the fathers who participated in the study,
collectively they provided definitions of fatherhood and father involvement that included a broad range of relationships with their children and did not immediately cite anything about finances.

Table 4.2
What Role Has Priority in Your Parenting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unconditional love for a child</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being available when the children are needed</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing and providing resources (doctor appointments, school and activities)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling manhood for both boys and girls (dating &amp; manners)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction between a father and his kids (nurturing, caretaking and playing)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the summary listed above, fathers reported that these were descriptions that they created themselves, as they did not have fathers in their lives to draw on. They concurred that fatherhood is more nebulous and difficult to define:

Growing up, I didn't really have a father figure, so I had a distorted view of a father. I was raised by my mom. I got to see the kids around the neighborhood and what their fathers were doing, and that's how I kind of learned little attributes of what a father does. He's a provider, he's the strength of the family - the head of the household kind of deal. In those observations, I was taught certain things that are not true today, like don't cry when you fall, or be tough. Toughen up. That's not what it is for me. I define fatherhood as providing paternal support for my son, that means, everything that he's going through, and embracing it, whether it's good, whether it's bad. Like if he falls, letting him know that it's okay to cry because daddy is here. (Respondent 25)
Participants reported that their current engagement offered them the opportunity to be the father that they never had. It motivates them to bond with their sons and daughters and heal their own painful childhoods. By loving their children so deeply, they also stop letting their past define them.

I always thought fatherhood had to do with being a family man and being the head of the household. And if you weren’t living with your children, you were still their “dad” but that wasn’t fatherhood. I never knew my father and what I know today is that fatherhood is a relationship between a man and his children, it has nothing to do with situations. Fatherhood is about having unconditional love for your children, no matter what. Being an involved father is about being there when they need you and not just when it is convenient for you. I practice fatherhood by making sure I’m engaged with my children at all costs. I won’t let the system, a social worker or their mother affect my fatherhood.

(Respondent 1)

Fatherhood is about just being there for your child. It is not about some role that people tell you that you have to fulfill. Unlike my father, my father involvement is about making sure that I’m there when my child needs me. That means fatherhood is about doctors’ visits, drop offs at school, helping with homework, playing games and giving those nurturing hugs when my son is feeling down and needs encouragement.

(Respondent 6)

As a fatherless man, what I know is that fatherhood isn’t what DCFS tells me it is. I am a father even when I have nothing to give. My love and care for my children makes me a father or “Daddy.” Despite the resources I bring to the table, my personal involvement
and interactions with my children define my fatherhood. Not child support. (Respondent 12)

Fatherhood is a personal journey with you and your children. My father never experienced fatherhood because he wasn’t part of our journey. Despite making multiple mistakes and landing in the child welfare system, I honor my fatherhood with my children. I honor our journey. (Respondent 9)

Fathers across the board tended to emphasize the importance of social and emotional roles in defining fatherhood and while there was mention of being providers, they rarely mentioned child support or economic provisions unless prompted by the researcher.

**Roles and Responsibilities.** In discussing fatherhood roles and responsibilities with the participants of this study, I found that African American fathers with child welfare involved children expressed a strong desire to be a part of their children’s lives and used definitions of roles and responsibilities to describe the impact of their presence in their children’s lives. Despite the existing stereotypes of being a visitor to his family, underemployed, marginal to his family, inattentive to his children, rather violent, and plainly not in the family picture, participants of this study communicated uniquely that as fathers of child welfare involved children, they are completely the opposite of societal myths. In fact, because of the forced separation from their children through DCFS detention, they perceived themselves to be more attentive and willing to assume both traditional and non-traditional fatherhood roles. Participants emphasized a desire of accountability to family unity, stability, and adaptability. Participants highlighted providing resources, academic support, and moral guidance to their children as the greatest desire in their fathering roles and responsibilities. Three specific paternal roles emerged from participants' responses: protector/provider, academic supporter, and mentor/guide.
Participants described each role, including responsibilities to foster their children's overall development and academic achievement (Figure 4.1).

![Role and Responsibilities](image)

Figure 4.1 Number of Participants who Noted Category as a Key Role/Responsibility

**Provider/Protector.** Fathers in this study reported that providing for their children was most important to their fathering roles and their children's overall wellbeing. Making sure to note that being a provider was more that providing financial support, fathers described their role as providers/protectors, a major influence in their fathering experience. For example, one father stated, "Although I don’t always have the means to provide financially, as a father, it’s my job to make sure that my children are safe and loved. Because of the time that they were taken away from me and being cared for by strangers, it is my number one responsibility today to make sure that my contributions influence positive outcome” (Respondent 3). Another father shared, "Providing for my children reinforces my commitment to my kids; I feel so connected to them knowing that I now have a part in their wellbeing. As their provider and protector, my children know that they are a priority in my life” (Respondent 23). Nearly every participant (n=21)
echoed a father who shared, "While I accept responsibility for allowing my child to enter the child welfare system, today, my goal is to be a provider and improve the quality of life for myself and my child" (Respondent 4).

**Educational Supporter.** Strong beliefs and values towards the role of education in their children’s academic success was expressed by every participant (n=25). All participants believed that being involved with their child's education was an important aspect of their involvement and something over which they had a strong influence. Participants communicated that successful educational experiences would help their children stay focused in life and refrain from negative behaviors such as gang activity and incarceration. Several participants (n=8) shared examples of educational experiences with their children and described their role of a supporter of education. Responses included participants' description of the importance of education for their child's overall life success and methods in which they advocate and support educational efforts. As one father expressed, "I stress education a lot to my kids. I use my lack of education and subsequent struggles to voice how important it is for them to get a good education and not end up like daddy" (Respondent 21). "I tell my children that if I had stayed in school and got a good education, I might not have ended up in the system.” Another father stated, “Education is really important and I want to influence my baby girl and little man to stick with it” (Respondent 9).

Study participants described their educator role in their children’s lives through a range of activities. They discussed engagement in literacy activities such as reading and listening, meeting with the child's teacher to discuss the child's educational progress, participation in school activities, assisting the child's teacher in school activities, and providing verbal encouragement to their children to attend and stay in school. The desire for their children to
successfully complete higher education was evident throughout all interview and focus group responses.

**Guide and Mentor.** Collectively, participants saw discipline as a very central paternal task but voiced a strong desire to be more than a disciplinarian. Fathers discussed the passion to provide guidance and were concerned about teaching their children the skills they needed to survive. Fathers communicated that their children would learn how to live from one of two places: their father or the streets. The fathers who spoke about this topic were determined to avoid the latter. To them, providing for their children included the transmission of knowledge relating to life in an urban neighborhood. One father mentioned how he believed a major aspect of his paternal role was to "to help teach and guide his children the facts of life" (Respondent 9).

In this way, fathers in both focus groups and interviews articulated that they not only wanted to provide and protect their children but also wanted to be role models. Respondent 14 stated, “I want to be the role model for my children that I never saw in a Black man. Despite the failed relationship with their mother, I want to mentor my son about how to be a good man/husband and show my daughter what a good Black man looks like” (Respondent 21). Another father shared, “it is important to set good examples for my children. I have a responsibility to teach them not to do the things I did in the past, so they won't wind up in my situation” (Respondent 8). Several fathers (n=8) relayed that they engaged in meaningful communication with their child to provide moral guidance.

**Research Question 2: What do child welfare-involved fathers report as obstacles in maintaining engagement/involvement in the lives of their children?**

**Barriers to Engagement.** Barriers to engaging men serve as strong obstacles for father
engagement as well as father involvement. Fathers in this study experience a number of barriers to engagement, which they feel adversely affects their children's outcomes. After gaining a perspective of what they defined as fatherhood and father engagement, I inquired from the participants about specific obstacles in maintaining engagement with their children. The participants noted both personal obstacles such as substance abuse, incarceration, mother gatekeeping (maintaining positive relationships) and lack of parenting skills as well as societal factors such as intergenerational child welfare involvement, racism and social worker bias, that negatively influence their involvement.

![Barriers to Engagement](image)

**Figure 4.2 Barriers to Engagement**

**Intergenerational Child-Welfare Involvement.** Focus groups and interviews uncovered that 100% of the participants in this study had been involved in the foster care system themselves as children. Fathers shared that having experienced the trauma of child welfare placement themselves, they were keenly aware of the barriers it presents in parent-child relationships.
Despite pledging never to put their children in that position, they described with great emotion the guilt and shame of exposing their children “to the system” and how it has affected their current engagement.

If you grew up in the system, your number one goal is that when you have a baby, you never let it happen to them. You have this fantasy of how things are going to be different. Then when you see your own children’s lives unravel the way yours did, you feel so helpless and guilty. (Respondent 20)

I know better, I have to do better, break this chain, and be present. Being in the system makes you cold and distant. Yeah, I think the real barrier of system involvement is the feeling of being alone and feeling like no one wants or cares about you. Even though I said my kids would never be in the system, it happened and I see how it has affected them. It is my job to see that they never go back and that they know their father loves them. Me being present will change their lives. (Respondent 14)

No one can tell me that being in foster care does not screw you up. I know that most of the things that happened to me in my life were because of my foster care experiences. I’m so shameful that I let my kids get in the systems. Originally, I used my experience in foster care and that of my children as an excuse to be absent but now I’ve turned that shame to determination to make their lives better. Having their daddy present is essential. (Respondent 18)

**Lack of knowledge/parenting skills.** In discussion with study participants, they identified a lack of knowledge in parenting skills as a large obstacle to father engagement. The majority of fathers ($n=22$) in my study acknowledged that they were not “raised to raise children” and lacked core parenting knowledge, attitudes, and practices that are associated with
positive parent-child interactions and the healthy development of children. During one of the focus groups, one father noted,

I’m glad my child was temporarily removed from my custody. Because of his detention, I was forced to learn parenting tools to help benefit his well-being. Every parenting method I used before his detention was out of fear and ignorance. (Respondent 25)

Said another, “I never saw loving parenting in my childhood, so I made it up with my son and it proved to be harmful. That barrier has been removed and I now have a set of tools in my tool belt that has improved my engagement with him” (Respondent 6). Another father added:

We don’t know what we don’t know. My parents weren’t around, so I had no idea what I was doing when I became a parent. This lack of knowledge proved to be detrimental to my children. Having gained some knowledge of what parenting is supposed to look like, I have a better relationship with them and they are safer and happier. (Respondent 25)

**Racism/Culture.** All of the participants noted that being a man of color and specifically a Black man was a huge barrier in the engagement of their children and their race significantly impacted how others perceived them as fathers. Respondent 7 stated that “caseworkers, judges, and doctors are more suspicious of African American fathers and how workers within systems automatically think African American men are lying.” Another father explained, “I sit in courtrooms every month and watch how race influences child welfare decision-making through powerful, deeply embedded stereotypes about Black family dysfunction” (Respondent 4).

As it pertained to race and parenting, more than half (n=15) of the fathers who were interviewed believed that race affected their approach to parenting. Participants noted that being “a big Black man” with children who have been exposed to the system, they had to be extra careful with discipline.
Being afraid to discipline my children has had a strong impact on their behavior. I’m very careful not to yell at them, spank them or do anything that might result in someone reporting us to child welfare (teachers, neighbors, etc.). My children take advantage of this and misbehave, knowing that I’m afraid of a report being made. (Respondent 8)

Participants shared how cultural upbringing played an integral role in their engagement with their children. Multiple fathers communicated that their children would not learn what they need to survive without physical discipline.

“Time-outs” don’t work for my kids, I was raised hearing and believing the bible verse “spare the rod and spoil the child,” which means, if children are not punished when they do wrong their personal development will suffer. Because of my child welfare involvement, I’ve had to adjust my punishment methods that haven’t been very effective with my children. (Respondent 13)

In spite of the challenges that the participants illustrated about race being a barrier to their engagement of their children while in the child welfare system, they acknowledged that it was not an issue that they saw changing and therefore they had to “work the system”:

To “buck the system” would only jeopardize my custody with my child, so I put my head down and do what I’m told. I have to balance fighting race issues or being there for my children. And, my children win! (Respondent 17)

Gatekeeping. In general, a mother can be the single most determining factor in promoting a father’s relationship with their children, or conversely, a significant hindrance. In this study African American fathers report “gatekeeping by mothers” to be one of the biggest obstacles of their engagement during child welfare involvement that had a huge impact on their access to their child(ren). If the mother of his child engages in gatekeeping, she does so because
she believes that giving father access to and involvement in the life of their child should be limited or prevented altogether. In this study, it was noted that five fathers reported that the mother of their children actively supported father involvement with children by complimenting their parenting or encouraging the father to spend one-on-one time with the children. On the other hand, of the 20 fathers that reported gatekeeping as an obstacle, all 15 of the single fathers, in addition to five of the fathers in current relationships with the mother of their children, reported mothers using gatekeeping as a “weapon.” According to participants in the study, the gatekeeping was used to exclude fathers, from their children’s life or “pay him back” for being a lousy parent or partner/husband in the past. Despite their wanting to be engaged and involved with the child during the child welfare process, fathers were often excluded at the mothers’ requests according to participants in my study. For example, one father noted that:

As much as I wanted to be involved in getting my children out of the system, because I ended a relationship with their mother, she did everything she could to keep me from being involved. Although I knew it was legal, she was successful and blocking me at every turn. The worst part is that the gatekeeping was supported by everyone in the system (social worker, judge, teachers and attorneys). Despite my best efforts, until I joined Project Fatherhood, I had little to no contact with my children (Respondent 9) The mother of my child was allowed to decide when, how long and where I saw my children the whole time we had an open case. When she was mad at me, I didn’t get to engage with him. She would make up things to the social workers to make me seems like a bad person. Of course, they would believe her and remove me from the equation. I saw my son go through a rollercoaster of emotions when she would keep them from me.
I rarely fought back because I didn’t want the him to be further affected by our mess. (Respondent 16)

I have friends who don’t have system involvement and they go through hell with the mother of their children gatekeeping their engagement with their kids. It’s worse for those of us who are involved in the system. We not only have to deal with the gatekeeping of our children’s mothers, we also have social workers who support and encourage the gatekeeping. (Respondent 9)

Study participants’ views were aligned with the research from the past 20 years, which has documented a connection between how controlling a mom is of her partner's parenting and how much parenting he does. The more gatekeeping from mom, the less parental involvement from dad.

I’m in a situation where my child mother plays an important role both in encouraging and curtailing my involvement. Unfortunately, that role is not very consistent and it depends on her mood that day what my involvement can be. (Respondent 11)

I don’t think my children’s mother has a clue of how her gatekeeping and criticisms of me end up negatively influencing how I parent. Her negativity toward me being involved is exhausting and sometimes I just want to “give up.” (Respondent 20)

There is a lot of talk about the absent father. What most people don’t know is that mothers have a lot to do with why a lot of us are not as involved as we want to be. We know that mothers have the power, especially in child welfare situations. Although we know it’s not the best for the children but sometimes it’s easier on everyone if we just stay away. This keeps us out of trouble. (Respondent 4)
**Lack of Finances.** Finances was another topic that was common when discussing obstacles with the participants of this study. Fathers described themselves to be “at rope’s end” in fear of not being able to support their children. They blamed themselves for their inability to provide for their children and relayed experiencing varying degrees of depression and hopelessness as a result of their financial circumstances. While not as popular as some of the other obstacles, the roles of both provider and nurturer were perceived as very important to these men. Respondent 18 related, “A ‘good’ father is now perceived to be nurturing and responsive to the emotional needs of his children as well as able to provide for their material needs.”

The majority of fathers (n=18) saw providing for their children as an essential, even fundamental, component of their paternal role. They conceptualized this partly in terms of meeting the basic needs of their children: providing a roof over their heads, food to eat, and clothing and shoes. One father stated, “Although not the most important part of fathering, a father couldn’t get to the social emotion parts of parenting without making sure there was a roof over the children’s head” (Respondent 4).

**Substance Abuse.** Substance abuse came up as an obstacle in this study, but as a correlate of the other obstacles. Of the 12 fathers in the study that reported substance abuse as an issue/obstacle, 10 of them noted that their substance abuse and subsequent lack of engagement was due to lack of finances, intergeneration substance abuse or depression due to poor parenting. Some of the fathers identified alcohol as the drug of choice and noted that alcohol exacerbated other issues related to their parenting and seriously interfered with their engagement. One father noted, “I began drinking to forget about being broke. Little did I know that my drinking would cause further chaos in my family and lead to neglect of my children” (Respondent 3).
Having a few beers after work has always been part of my family culture. I never seen it as a problem wasn’t until I noticed that the more I drank, the less I engaged with my children. The ritual of “having a few to unwind” led to my children not being properly taken care of. (Respondent 16)

Repeatedly, participants reported that the search for drugs and alcohol and the time spent recovering from hangovers left them with little time or energy to care properly for their children.

![Substance Abuse Chart]

**Figure 4.3 Fathers with Substance Abuse Issues**

**Social Worker Bias.** The fathers of this study stated that they believed social worker bias and stereotype is indeed held by a significant number of social workers and has profound effects on the engagement with their children. Participants of the study indicated that they were not convinced that social workers were invested in meeting the needs of the Black father to help children. They communicated a strong bias such that the bias did not provide a space for fathers to participate in meaningful engagement. Several of the fathers spoke of social workers that may be biased, and how they offered services that have been tailored to fit the assumptions of what
will engage the Black father, rather than services based on feedback from those being served: the Black father. One father offered this insight:

The hardest part of the entire child welfare process was working with social workers who couldn’t or wouldn’t relate to me as a Black father. I felt like I spent the entire time that my children were in the system, apologizing for being a Black man. Apologizing for my size, my tone of voice, my past, my upbringing, etc. (Respondent 2)

Probably the most interesting finding was that of perceived bias by Black social workers. The majority of literature discusses biases of African American fathers coming from White female social workers. Every father in this study communicated that he experienced the most and strongest bias from social workers of his own race (African Americans). A father stated, “Every problem I had with engagement in the system came from a Black female social worker. She treated me like crap, and it was apparent that she had problems with Black men” (Respondent 17). Other fathers made similar statements, such as this one from another participant: “Black social workers went out of their way to show me that they had the power. It seemed as if it as their job to show me who was in charge, even at the expense of my children.” (Respondent 6)

I don’t want to categorize all social workers but I would never want a Black social worker. My experience has been that they have internal racism that is projected on the Black fathers on their case load. No matter how hard I tried to be compliant and be there for my children, the Black social workers would “nail me to the wall” and make engagement almost impossible. It wasn’t until a got a social worker of another race that my passion for my children was recognized and applauded. (Respondent 10)
Research Question 3: According to African American fathers, what role, if any, does the child welfare system play in allowing African American fathers to demonstrate stronger parental involvement to improve outcomes for their children?

To address research question 3, study participants were asked their opinions about how the child welfare system can help facilitate father involvement and strengthen the influence fathers have with the outcomes of their children. Participants were eager to provide feedback to this question and collectively agreed on three main engagement methods. First was a suggestion to address Black male bias by the department was at the top of the list. Next was recommended approaches to engaging fathers differently than those used for engaging mothers, taking into account sensitivity to gender and cultural assumptions about gender roles and the benefits of fathers working with fathers. Lastly, participants stressed a desire for workers in the child welfare system to place a strong and intentional focus on the benefits of father engagement to the children. Among some of the statements made were:

The system has to find a way to address how Black men are viewed by the department. Only those in the system can make the change. Maybe they need to have workshops or trainings that involve some of us to help them identify and recognize their biases.

(Respondent 5)

In order to engage African American fathers in a meaningful way, the department must learn and appreciate the them as men of color. This means acknowledging their biases and working to change the culture in which African American men are treated as villains.

(Respondent 11)

African American families are more likely to be reported to the child abuse hotline and investigated for child abuse and neglect.
Fathers should be treated as equals but acknowledged as different by the department.
Men show emotions differently, we hurt differently and we sometime love differently.
Not better, not worse, just different. (Respondent 17)

There is a huge need for workers who are culturally competent and can converse in the preferred language of the client. (Respondent 10)

Referrers should make sure providers have full understanding of the client’s cultural background, beliefs about health, parenting, and behavior. (Respondent 19)

Providers must be able to incorporate the client’s cultural beliefs into services or use strategies found to be effective with the client’s culture. (Respondent 4)

Participants of this study recounted stories of how the removal of a child from his or her home was one of the most violent acts a government can undertake against its people.

If the system isn’t intentional in its engagements, they’re missing the chance to support fathers and families during a crucial time in a child’s development. Speaking from experience, there is nothing worse than being removed from your home as child. We have to do everything we can to minimize that trauma and including fathers in the process can and should be an option. (Respondent 6)

If the work and the mission is about the children, efforts should be made to engage fathers with the hope of improving outcomes for the children that include another loving parent (the father). I know their job is to protect children but fathers can help in protecting them; not all of us hurt our children. (Respondent 2)

Most people agree that having an involved father has obvious benefits to children.

I know that that my involvement in my child’s life has increased his chances of being an emotionally stable young man. By supporting me in my child welfare case, the
department is helping me improve the outcomes for my child. The benefits of my involvement with my son are unmeasurable. (Respondent 24)

I honestly believe the reports of my social worker when she says that father involvement is associated with positive child characteristics such as increased: empathy, self-esteem, self-control, feelings of ability to achieve, psychological well-being, social competence, life skills, and less sex-stereotyped beliefs. (Respondent 4)

Summary

This study allowed fathers to describe their individual experiences and attach their own meanings to these experiences in both individual and group settings. The emergent themes from the study affirm findings and theories offered within existing literature about African American fathers outside of the child welfare system. Not only were the responses resounding in agreement about barriers to engagement within the child welfare systems, participants were also in agreement about views of fatherhood and the responsibilities associated with raising their children who had child welfare involvement.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gather perspectives and perceptions of engagement from African American fathers who have had children involved in the child welfare system and the impact of their involvement on their children’s outcomes. African American families have experienced important social, cultural and economic transformations in the last decades; these changes have significantly influenced family dynamics and gender roles, especially when it comes to child welfare involvement. To obtain first hand perspectives, I gathered qualitative data through focus groups and individual interviews with African American fathers from three different regions in Los Angeles County who had previous child welfare involvement (currently closed cases with the Department of Children and Family Services). The themes I uncovered point to recommendations for father engagement practices for both organizations and programs working with fathers as well as child welfare agencies themselves.

Key factors influencing the perspectives of engagement by African American fathers with child welfare involvement in this study were: understanding the meaning of what it means to be a father, the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood, race and culture, barriers to engagement and the role of the child welfare system. The findings yielded insight from fathers in the form of concrete feedback that will inform current and future engagement of fathers in order to benefit children.

In this final chapter, I draw conclusions from the study findings, explore connections to existing literature, and make recommendations based on participant reports. Lastly, I will discuss possibilities for future research and conclude with a personal reflection.
Discussion

This study was anchored in the appalling outcomes for African American children in the child welfare system and the possibility of improvements through father engagement. The study conveyed the perceptions of African American fathers with children involved in the child welfare system and the fathers’ perspectives on their engagement. These men have often been ignored in social science literature, presented in stereotypical manner, and their personal perspectives are largely absent (National Research Council, 2011). The information collected from my study participants confirmed much of the literature on African American father engagement, with or without child welfare involvement, and describes African American fathers as caring parents, even when they do not live with, or spend relatively little time with, their children. The results support other studies that suggest there is a shift in how men perceive their roles and specifically addresses the issue of child welfare involvement to explore the perceptions of fathers on their father involvement and subsequent outcomes of their children.

Psychological research suggests that African American fathers' affection and increased family involvement help promote children's social and emotional development (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007). Today’s father is no longer always the traditional, married breadwinner and disciplinarian in the family. He can be single or married; externally employed or stay-at home; gay or heterosexual; an adoptive or stepparent; and a more than capable caregiver to children facing physical or psychological challenges, even with child welfare involvement.

Role of the Father

The African American fathers in this study collectively agreed that they were ultimately responsible for the well-being of their children and did not direct that responsibility to the mothers of their children or to the Department of Children and Family Services, despite previous
life challenges or their economic circumstances. As a group, the fathers of this study ranked the ideal of being a nurturing parent and role model at the top. This substantiates the current research of Edin and Nelson (2013) that fathers, especially those who have a child welfare-involved child, want to emphasize the softer side of fatherhood. The fathers in my study consistently stated that what they really wanted to offer their children is love, communication, and quality time. They want to be fathers who serve as role models by sharing cautionary tales in the form of catalogs of their own past mistakes. Yet too often, the men in my study repeatedly talked about how these good intentions are never realized. These findings stand in striking contrast to the popular image of the lazy father, the incompetent father, or the “deadbeat dad” (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004) who ignores both the meaning of fatherhood as well as the needs of his children.

A father’s influence as a role model for his children is largely affected by the amount of time they spend together. Whether they live in the same home on a full-time basis or not, fathers should make a concerted effort to model behaviors and attitudes that they want to see their children display when they grow up (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Current literature supports the perspective of study participants regarding the development of social and educational capital with their children. Coles and Green (2010) argue that African American fathers perceive themselves to be role models, teachers, and mentors to their children, and have a strong desire to help their children establish life plans based on high expectations and positive school experiences. A key predictor of fathers’ involvement in children’s learning is been involved in their care very early on (Goldman, 2005). Research consistently shows that such shared activities promote a sense of responsibility and significance in children that is, in turn, linked to
greater self-esteem, academic and occupational achievement, psychological well-being, and civic engagement later in life.

**Barriers to Engagement**

Fathers experience a number of barriers to their child welfare involvement, which adversely affects their children's permanency outcomes (Coakley, 2008). One of the goals of this research was to identify barriers to father involvement from the fathers’ perspective. All barriers reported by the 25 fathers were collapsed into the following categories: race and culture, gatekeeping by mothers, economic challenges and child welfare bias. All of these barriers were anticipated by the existing fathering literature (Coakley, Shears & Randolph, 2014).

**Gatekeeping by Mothers**

Although scholars acknowledge mothers often employ “gatekeeping” to control or limit a nonresidential father’s access to his children and therefore affecting father engagement, there has been disagreement about how the gatekeeping ultimately affects the outcomes of the children. Participants of this study identified conflict with the mother of their children as one of most difficult barriers to overcome. Research has shown that mothers do play an important role both in encouraging and curtailing fathers' involvement and this maternal gatekeeping is a powerful force: Even fathers who wanted to be involved with their kids often drifted away in the face of persistent maternal criticism (Raeburn, 2014). Study participants align with scholars Lawson and Thompson (1999), that maternal gatekeeping increases paternal distress when African American fathers perceive maternal gatekeeping as hostile and fathers often considered relinquishing their fathering role to avoid conflict with their children’s mothers. Fathers in this study communicated that regardless of gatekeeping and negative relationship with their children’s mothers, the child welfare involvement has strengthened their desire to do whatever is
necessary to maintain a relationship with their children and enhance their lives. Though existing research about the present relationship with the child’s mother reports it is typically negative, the fathers in my study clearly desired a positive relationship with the mother in the future for the benefit of the child. The fathers I interviewed echo the research indicating that conflict, low levels of cooperation, and less father involvement contribute to the child’s academic, behavioral, and social difficulties in the short and long term. Maternal gatekeeping therefore poses an important and powerful threat to the vitality of the father-child relationship and the overall well-being and adjustment of the child.

**Economic Challenges**

The fathering literature suggests that one of the principal barriers for fathers is unstable employment and lack of income. Economic challenges resulted from the perception that ability to pay often sets the terms and frequency of a father's involvement with his children, both financially, emotionally, and otherwise. McAdoo (1988) found that fathers who are economically able to provide financial support to their families are more nurturing in their interactions with their children than fathers who cannot provide financial support. Among African American fathers he studied, those who could fulfill their provider role were more likely to be involved in other aspects of child rearing and more likely to have stable families (McAdoo, 1993). Although fathers in this study acknowledged that financial challenges presented a barrier to their involvement, it was clear that it did not prevent them for being more emotionally available and nurturing toward their children. Noting that the primary focus of their fathering role was not always one of being a provider, fathers in this study realized that by being involved in the child welfare system, if they did not have the ability to financially support their children, their right to spend time with their children could be jeopardized.
**Child Welfare Bias**

Although fathers’ roles and rights have gained more attention recently, many child welfare agencies still struggle to involve fathers fully (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Worker bias against father involvement appears to be the most widely researched barrier to fathers’ participation in child welfare case planning and the bias is intensified with African American fathers (Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland & Tolman, 2012).

Child welfare agencies historically have focused on the relationship between mothers and their children and the father is often excluded—so much so that in Los Angeles County, there isn’t even an option for a father to have his name listed on a child’s case file. A mother could be deceased, and the case would still be in the mother’s name. This institutional bias is supported by the fact that mothers are recognized as the primary caregivers and nurturers and is compounded by the fact that child welfare staff are predominantly women. With the strong female orientation of the child welfare system, many fathers feel the entire system lacks a male perspective on how to approach and resolve problems and parent involvement is limited only to the mother and emphasis is placed on reestablishing the mother’s relationship with the child (Coakley, 2013). In the current welfare system, many fathers are left to question where they fit in the equation and note child welfare system bias as an obstacle in maintaining engagement/involvement in the lives of their children. Fathers of the study repeatedly referenced child welfare bias as a major factor in how and how much they were able to engage with their children. The bias against men, as well as against African American men specifically, had an impact that left them feeling disrespected and disengaged.
Race and Culture

The experiences of African American fathers in the child welfare system are similar to those of African American males within the broader society as it pertains to race and culture. Numerous studies have shown that racial disparities occur at various decision points in the child welfare continuum (Detlaff et al., 2011; Font, 2013; Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013) and have an impact on father involvement and the outcomes of the children. Much of the literature describing the experiences of African American fathers has been deficit-focused, arguing that individual and cultural factors account for the inequities. While acknowledging personal responsibility, participants of the study highlighted racism as strong barrier to navigating the child welfare system and subsequent engagement. Based on discussions with fathers, the barriers reported can be categorized as institutional racism and gendered racism. **Institutional racism** is where the racism influenced the operation of the child welfare system to result in unequal adverse interactions with the African American fathers, and interactions are described as failures to provide appropriate and professional service to because of a father’s race, culture, or ethnic origin. Failed interactions that are detected in processes, attitudes and behaviors of staff amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage African American fathers. **Gendered racism** is a form of oppression that occurs due to race and gender. Fathers in the study communicated how they experienced both racism and sexism from African American female social workers and were viewed, stereotyped, and treated unfairly in practices and policies of the child welfare system.

The African American fathers' own social experiences in relation to their parenting practices can be a barrier to their involvement and have an influence on the caring of their children. Scholars have advocated for a more socially embedded perspective to fathering to
support an approach relevant for understanding African American fathers' involvement with their children and how their intergenerational experiences influence their identities and paternal engagement (Roy, 2006). As revealed during interviews and focus groups in this study, the intergenerational impacts of trauma on African American fathers are a very real concern. Research has established the intergenerational continuity of parenting practices may have important implications for the development of their own parenting ideologies and future involvement (Franklin, Chen, N'cho, Capawana and Hoogasian, 2014).

**Limitations of the Study**

The findings from my study are limited by the use of a convenient sample. The fathers were participating in a fathers’ support and mentoring group at the time of the study and had successfully closed their cases with the local child welfare system, Los Angeles County of Department of Children and Family Services (LA DCFS). Therefore, it is likely that they were more knowledgeable of parenting strategies than fathers currently navigating the child welfare system.

The sample size also adds some limitations. Although it is typical to have a small sample in qualitative studies, it is important to note that all the characteristics of fathers, such as age, education and income level and were not representative of fathers across the system. Therefore, I cannot state definitively that the findings apply to those fathers whose characteristics were not represented. These findings are by no means generalizable, and only can speak to the experiences of the 25 men that I studied. Collecting detailed data in the future will provide an opportunity to make stronger inferences concerning the experiences of fathers and the demographic characteristics that impact experiences with the child welfare system. Despite
these limitations, the study provides useful insights into a small group of fathers’ views of their parenting.

**Implications**

This study has implications for African American fathers with child welfare involved children, child welfare practices, social work education, and future research studies. Findings from my study revealed that African American fathers were committed to maintaining a relationship with their children, and perceived that by being present, they protected their children, helped them emotionally and financially, helped in their overall development, acted as a role model, and shared parenting responsibilities with their children’s mothers, despite child welfare involvement. Because there is minimal research surrounding the impact of African American fathers in the child welfare system, this study can be used to assist in child welfare practices working with African American fathers and help social workers understand the perspectives of fathers to improve outcomes of their children. Understanding how fathers are perceived and that they desire a role in their children’s lives can inform initiatives that actively engage these men and nurture their level of involvement to promote healthy engagement with their children; this is necessary to realize their potential to actively improve outcomes of their children.

Future studies should focus on involving fathers from ethnic minority backgrounds as these men tend to be excluded in research, yet are often active in the lives of their children whether the system has knowledge of their involvement or not. Focusing research on strategies that specifically highlight the value of fatherhood engagement could prove beneficial in the way public child welfare cases are managed.
Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was designed to answer four research questions. These questions focused on the role and responsibilities of fatherhood, race and culture, barriers to engagement and the role of the child welfare system as it pertained to fathers who had children with child welfare involvement and their perspective of their influence on the children’s outcomes. The results of this study substantiate previous research that African American fathers who have positive perceptions of their father involvement, can help to improve some of the dismal outcomes associated with their children, despite child welfare involvement. Regardless of the barriers associated with child welfare, African American father desire to have close, enduring relationships with their children and have a perspective that with their engagement, there are more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high-risk behaviors including drug use, truancy, and criminal activity.

The perspective of an African American fathers' involvement is much more complex than having him establishing a case plan and system compliance. African American father involvement can be strengthened only by revising child welfare agency policies and practices to promote working with fathers in a culturally competent, strength-based manner and addressing both personal and systematic barriers. After a relationship built on respect and trust is established between the agency and fathers, further efforts can be made to learn about African American fathers' perceptions, motivation, and ability to provide safe, adequate care for their children.

Recommendation 1: Look beyond traditional parenting roles.

Society as a whole and specifically the African American community must look and educate itself beyond the traditional parenting roles if men are truly to embrace their role as
caregiving fathers. There is a clear need to educate the public, social service agencies, and fathers’ families about the multifaceted African American fatherhood role. This is particularly important because society holds preconceived notions about fathers as being primarily breadwinner and protector of a family. Educating the public can help establish modern and comprehensive views of the fatherhood role, along with the types of services needed for fathers to support their children and improve their outcomes.

Contrary to the false negative descriptions characterizing African American males, Yeung et al.’s research indicates that “African American fathers are neither absent nor uninvolved in family life but play essential roles within families” (as cited in “Fatherhood,” 2003, p. 618). They emphasize “family unity, stability, and adaptability. Middle-class African American fathers are involved in the rearing of their children; maintain warm, interpersonal relations with them; and their children are well-adjusted and motivated” (“Fatherhood,” 2003, p. 618).

Educating men on how to be committed, responsible and involved fathers and teaching them that their role and contributions are significant in the healthy development of their children are worthy steps toward breaking the cycle of fatherlessness.

**Recommendation 2: Expand programs and services that work with fathers in child welfare.**

Participants in this study stated that successfully navigating the child welfare system helped them in becoming better fathers, and the fatherhood support group (Project Fatherhood) was a major factor to their success. The fathers of this study shared numerous benefits from their participation in Project Fatherhood. They treasured the positive influence of the facilitators and the space to share experiences and emotions with other fathers. From the feedback of study
participants, it is clear that there is a strong need for institutional and organizational support for fathers and their specific needs, as well as additional spaces and opportunities to engage with their children. Programs like Project Fatherhood provide a much-needed resource to fathers who are typically not well-served by social programs, and fathers claim that the bond they form with the program facilitators and the connections they provide to other community resources is as valuable to them as the program itself. The resources provided help dads become more involved in their children’s lives and assist them in removing barriers that may prevent them from doing so. Through group therapy, peer mentoring and cultural and gender specific parenting education, these services help fathers learn to be more loving, responsible parents and active participants in their children’s lives. Lacking father figures themselves, fathers conveyed how they needed help to figure out how to put their children first, see their children’s mother through their children’s eyes, and recognize that they must communicate effectively and coordinate parenting activities for the sake of their children. These types of programs are scarce and primarily offered through federal government programming. It is recommended that fatherhood support programs be offered through local child welfare agencies with the goal of addresses the poor outcomes of African American children.

**Recommendation 3: Provide training to individuals working with African American Fathers to address race and culture as a barrier to involvement.**

Child welfare agencies need to provide cultural competence training to workers to work effectively with African American fathers with a special focus on racial and gender specific barriers. Fathers report being treated unfairly by workers based solely on their race and/or gender. Research indicates the presence of “unintentional bias” on behalf of social workers due to issues of countertransference, racial stereotypes, or educational background (Brodie et al.,
The need for new intervention strategies is necessary if social work is going to provide relevant services to African American fathers.

**Recommendation 4: Expand research and data collection on father engagement/father involvement policies and practices within child welfare.**

The findings from this study shed light on the following child welfare practices and policies of father engagement /father involvement, which have not been thoroughly discussed in other studies to date and not received any empirical attention.

**Father perceptions.** Additional areas of future research include examining African American father’s perceptions and historical experiences within child welfare and its services in an effort to reduce barriers to services. To engage African American fathers, professionals need to understand the contextual factors affecting men and the multiple levels of barriers impacting their engagement in service. The final, and potentially most significant, concern for future research is how father perceptions and fatherhood activities can impact the children and their outcomes.

**Race matching.** Fathers in this study noted challenges of gendered racism with African American female social workers that warrant further research that could include race matching between caseworkers and fathers. Although it is common, primarily unintentionally, as a function of community homogeneity, research could determine if intentional race matching would be beneficial for fathers who have gender racism concerns.

**Policy revision.** The child welfare system would benefit from a model plan for implementing father-friendly policies and practices with the system. The development of this model should include the assessment of barriers to the inclusion of fathers, training of child welfare staff in father-friendly practices, and evaluation of the success of implementation of
father-friendly practices at a policy and practice level. Most fathers’ programs and resources are aimed specifically at service delivery to fathers, not to those who work with fathers. There has been little focus on changing how the child welfare system deals with fathers.

**Reflection**

Having worked with African American fathers involved in child welfare for the past 13 years, I did not expect to learn anything new. My expectation was that I was going report experiences of fathers that I have heard in the past and help tell their story. In conducting this study, I was impressed by the resilience of participants as they attempted to parent through child welfare involvement. African American children involved in the child welfare system and foster care are among the most vulnerable children in the nation. To hear firsthand how fathers perceive their role and importance in the lives of their children confirms my thoughts that given a fair shot at father engagement and involvement, fathers can be a major factor in changing the depressing outcomes reported about African American children in child welfare. While there is a growing body of research that offers a critical assessment of the central and unique role of fathers, the positive benefits of father involvement, and explains African American father absence as a far more complex issue than frequently acknowledged, the research is normally told from every perspective except the fathers’. It was both a personal and professional win to be able to help provide the fathers’ perspective to the stories being told. My goal is to continue working with child welfare-involved African American fathers and conduct additional research projects to highlight and combat the poor outcomes of their children.
APPENDIX A: UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND UNITS OF OBSERVATION CHART

My unit of analysis is the perspectives on their parental influence of African American fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Units of Observation</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| According to African American fathers whose children are involved in the child welfare system, how do they influence their children to develop positive academic and social-emotional outcomes (or, what effect do they have on academic and social-emotional outcomes for their children)? | • Feeling Valued despite my lack of employment  
• In lieu of my criminal past, I can be an example to my children to avoid the criminal justice system  
• Despite my lack of education, I can be influential to my child(ren)  
• I feel like my lack of education prevents me from positively influencing my child’s educations.  
• I refuse to let my past influence my involvement with my children.  
• Although I don’t live with my child, I have a large impact on his/her outcomes. | • Individual Interviews  
• Focus Group |
| What do child welfare-involved African American fathers report as obstacles in maintaining involvement in the lives of their children? | • Mothers gatekeeping of children  
• Non father-friendly policies  
• Systems bias (Social Workers)  
• Prior Criminal History of Fathers  
• Distance from fathers to children  
• Restraining orders  
• Lack of Custody of children  
• Lack of information (procedures)  
• Child Support requirements  
• Fear of rejection from children | • Individual Interviews  
• Focus Groups |
| According to African American fathers, what role, if any, does the child welfare system play in encouraging African American fathers to demonstrate stronger parental involvement to improve outcomes for their children? | • Mandated policies and procedures in working with father engagement  
• LA County Department of Family and Children’s services promotes father engagement through ongoing staff training  
• LA County Department of Family and Children’s services helps fathers be more involved with their children by inclusion of case planning. | • Individual Interviews  
• Focus Groups |
APPENDIX B: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Individual Interview Protocol

Interviews for this study are planned to be conducted in a conversation-like manner that is comfortable and customary to the participants. The interview and questions will be guided by the following topics: 1) A father role; 2) Perceived Influence; 3) Barriers/Benefits; and 4) Child welfare system Involvement.

Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed.

Approximate length of interview: 60 minutes

Purpose of research:

As previously indicated, the purpose of this study is to provide qualitative information from African American fathers who have children involved in the child welfare system and how fathers believe their influence impacts their children’s social & emotional development and their educational success. Additionally, I want to hear about obstacles you have encountered in maintain involvement and the role the child welfare system has played in your involvement.

To begin, I’d like to hear more about you and your family.

1. Background
   a. Tell me about your family.
   b. How many children do you have?
   c. Do you live with your children?
   d. How did you become involved with the child welfare system?
2. Your role as a father.
   a. What do you think your role as a father is?
   b. What do you think the secret is to being a good dad?
   c. What do you want for your child and how do you fit into the picture?
3. The Child Welfare System
   a. How would you describe your role or purpose in your child's life while involved in the child care system?
   b. What if any, are the obstacles/problems when working with child welfare toward improving your child's outcomes?
4. Influence - Think of your experience as a father
   a. How would you describe your current influence in your child’s life?
   b. What additional influence would you like to have?
5. Closure – Is there anything that you’d like to communicate that we haven’t discussed?
   a. Thank you to interviewee
   b. Reassure confidentiality
   c. Ask permission to follow-up
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Protocol

Similar to the Individual Interviews, focus groups for this study are planned to be conducted in a conversation-like manner that is comfortable and customary to the participants. The questions and conversation for the focus groups will be guided by the following topics: 1) A father role and his value; 2) Perceived Influence; 3) Barriers/Benefits; and 4) Child welfare system Involvement

Confidentiality of discussion is guaranteed, and the focus group should last between 60-90 minutes.

Focus Group Guidelines:

- No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
- We're tape recording, one person speaking at a time
- We're on a first name basis
- You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
- My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion and notate responses

Sample Questions

1. Do you think your role as a father is seen as valuable?
   a. What about in your own circle? (Family, friends, workplace, etc.)

2. How do you perceive your influence over your children’s lives? Specifically, their social/emotional development and academic success?

3. How does being a Black man affect your parenting and subsequent influence with a child involved in the child welfare system.

4. With an open case, what role do you think the child welfare has on your ability to parent and produce positive outcomes for your children?

Closing

- What stands out for you in our discussion? Is there anything new?
- Do you have questions or final comments?
  o Thank you
  o Distribute incentives
# APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT PROFILE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Interview Type</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Residency/Non-residency</th>
<th>Detained</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Case Closed</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Focus Group 1 (Pullman)</td>
<td>Individual Interview</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>5-year-old boy</td>
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<td>Individual Interview</td>
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<td>5-year-old girl</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>2018</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Reggie</td>
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<td>2017</td>
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<td>Focus Group 1 (Vancouver County)</td>
<td>Individual Interview</td>
<td>Sam</td>
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<td>2017</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Nonresident</td>
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<td>Individual Interview</td>
<td>Alf</td>
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<td>2-year-old girl</td>
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<td>Resident</td>
<td>2017</td>
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REFERENCES


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