

Foster Care Placement: Applying Street Level Bureaucracy and Social Control Theories to Explain the Relationship between Academic Attainment and Juvenile Delinquency

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has reported that over 500,000 foster care children were admitted to the foster care system for the fiscal year of 2015. The overall annual cost of foster care placement in the U.S. exceeds \$9 billion dollars, a value shared by both the state and federal entities. The lack of effective placement and services often lead to low academic attainment and higher probability for children to become adjudicated delinquents. Placement in foster care affects children's emotional development, which can lead to adverse outcomes on behavior and mental health due to inconsistent nurturing and lack of parental contact. The costs for negative foster care outcomes include, emotional, physical, and psychological impairment, coupled with the separation of biological families, in many cases surpasses the monetary costs of foster care placement. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between foster care placement, academic attainment and juvenile delinquency through a theoretical framework including Street Level Bureaucracy Theory (SLBT) and Social Control Theory.

Keywords: *Foster care, children, theories, research and outcomes.*

1.0. Introduction

There is a significant increase in the number of children entering the foster care system (Green, 2004; Leos-Urbel, Bess, & Green, 2002; Schwartz, 2002; Smith & Devore, 2004). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has reported that over 500,000 foster care children were admitted to the foster care system for the fiscal year of 2015. The overall annual cost of foster care placement in the U.S. exceeds \$9 billion dollars, a value shared by both the state and federal entities. The lack of effective placement and services often lead to low academic attainment and higher probability for children to become adjudicated delinquents. Placement in foster care affects children's emotional development, which can lead to adverse outcomes on behavior and mental health due to inconsistent nurturing and lack of parental contact. The costs for negative foster care outcomes include, emotional, physical, and psychological impairment, coupled with the separation of biological families, in many cases surpasses the monetary costs of foster care placement.

According to de Carvalho and Chima (2017), most of the youth placed in foster care are victimized by early childhood experiences filled with chaos, traumatic events, inconsistent caregiving, abuse, and neglect. Subsequently, these children often process the world around them as unpredictable, confusing, and unsafe. Youth in foster care often display many symptoms of trauma because of the abuse and neglect, which initiate the investigation by the child welfare Agencies (Igelman, Conradi, & Ryan, 2007; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008a, 2008b). Children from a traumatized background often display symptoms that can include emotional, psychological, behavioral, and cognitive issues (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2005). Removal from home by itself is a severe disruption to children as they have adjusted to a new home and school environment and make new friends (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2005; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

The overall annual cost of providing foster care for children in the United States exceeds 9 billion dollars a year, a cost shared by both the state and federal Agencies. Monetary costs associated with foster care placement consist of welfare subsidy payments, medical expenses, childcare assistance, and monthly payments to foster parents for daily essentials. In addition to the significant overhead expense for the government, foster care has an everlasting impact on the overall well-being of children. The intangible costs for youth may consist of emotional, physical, and psychological impairment, coupled with the separation of biological families, and in many cases, surpasses the monetary costs of foster care placement. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between foster care placement, academic attainment and juvenile delinquency through a theoretical framework including Street Level Bureaucracy Theory (SLBT) and Social Control Theory.

2.0. Literature Review

An extensive review of the relevant literature showed that research studies on foster care began to be published in the late 1980s when formal kinship and non-kinship care arrangements were on the rise (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013). The literature review first explores the major theories used to describe, explain, and make predictions about the outcomes of foster care children under kinship and non-kinship care. The role of Street-Level Bureaucracy theory and Social Control theory may play in kinship caregiving, and outcomes for children are described. In addition, the value of application of an instinctive theoretical premise in child welfare research, policy, and practice is presented.

It is noteworthy that youth in foster care is considered a disadvantaged and fragile segment of the population due to traumas they experience in their homes before they enter the foster care system, which is often exacerbated by additional traumas experienced as they are moved around from one home to the next (Bruskas, 2008). Besides, factors such as genetics, prenatal conditions, and neurological development also make foster care youth a disadvantaged and fragile population often striving to overcome their own deficits while been trampled by the difficulties of life (Bruskas, 2008; Tarren-Sweeney, 2008a). Youth in foster care have been found to be at a higher risk for developing emotional and behavioral problems than children who are abused but are not placed in foster care (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006).

Children who experience maltreatment coupled with out-of-home placement tend to stay longer in the foster care system. Additionally, studies have shown that the prevalence rates of emotional and behavioral problems in children in foster care or out-of-home placements are much higher than those of children who are not in out of home placements. The internalizing problems often include anxiety and depression, and the externalizing problems are usually associated with aggression and behavioral issues (Burns & Grove, 2005; Pecora, 2012; Roberts, Roberts, & Xing, 2007).

According to Fairneau (2016) youth who "Age out" of foster care have a higher propensity to engage in deviant and criminal behaviors as opposed to children who grew up with biological parents, which further contributes to costs to the criminal justice system and state-funded indigent programs (Hill, 2012; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Most of the youth who are referred to the child welfare system have experienced some form of maltreatment, which has a potential to exacerbate deviant behaviors. During the fiscal year 2015, approximately 4 million children in the United States were referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) for alleged maltreatment. Of this population, 2.2 million were deemed appropriate for out-of-home placement (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

Additionally, the literature did not include a comparative discussion regarding adverse outcomes associated with the type of placements when youth exit the foster care system (Agnew, 2001; Fairneau, 2016; Koh, 2010; Snyder, 2000; Widom, 1989; Zinn, 2012). This study seeks to explore foster care placement, and educational attainment relate to a child being adjudicated as delinquent. Moreover, there is limited research comparing the prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems of foster care youth with high and low academic attainment. Most studies conducted relied primarily on caregiver report of emotional and behavioral issues (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Heflinger, Simpkins, & Combs-Orme, 2000; Rubin & Babbie, 2016). In fact, results from these studies indicated that youth in kinship care experience fewer emotional and behavioral problems, higher levels of academic attainment and lower levels of juvenile delinquency than youth in non-kinship care. However, when researchers use teacher's report and youth self-report, the results do not indicate that youth in kinship care experience fewer emotional and behavioral problems and better outcomes than youth in non-kinship care (McMillen, Zima, Scott, Auslander, Munson, & Ollie, 2005; Shore, Sim, Prohn, & Keller, 2002). Thus, the correlation between the type of placements and the emotional or behavioral outcome is still inconclusive.

Current literature, However, places emphasis on the importance of placement stability for children in the foster care system (Belsky, 1980; Britner & Mossler, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which has been the overarching goal of the Children and Family Research Center and the Department of Health and Human Services because of the socioeconomic impact that placement stability has on the foster care system. Researching the removal reasons (i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect) and placement stability are vital to ensuring the welfare of children in foster care (Herring, 2012; Zinn, 2012). Providing proper care for the well-being of children in foster care is essential, as they become adults in society who can either contribute positively or affect society negatively through crimes, behavioral issues, or physical and mental health problems (Ferguson, & Wolkow, 2012; Hill, 2012).

The problem of foster care placement is significant as it contributes to an increase in costs for both state and federal government. Most kinship foster caregivers come from lower socio-economic status and single-family households (Wu, White, & Coleman, 2015). Thus, it is critical to examine the relationship between the type of placement of foster children with outcomes such as placement stability, academic performance and likelihood for becoming adjudicated delinquent. It is essential to explore the relationship of removal reason (i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, etc.) with the likelihood for becoming adjudicated delinquent while controlling for the type of placement (Evans, 2014; Fanti, & Centifanti, 2014). Thus, information can be used to determine how best to protect the welfare of foster children and ensure that their conduct during the "Age out" period will not be impacted by their experiences in foster care. It is paramount to ensure that child welfare practitioners are best equipped with current research and knowledge, which will assist in reducing the risks associated with foster care placements (Fairneau, 2016; Hegar, & Rosenthal, 2009).

3.0. Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical framework focuses on how street-level bureaucracy theory, social control theory and attachment theory describe, explain and predicts how kinship and non-kinship care giving impact outcomes for children in foster care. In addition, the value of application of an instinctive theoretical premise in child welfare research, policy, and practice will be presented.

Subsequently, this theoretical framework describes the type of placements (e.g., kinship or non-kinship) by providing a summary definition of the characteristics of children in kinship and non-kinship care and their caregivers. Third, it critically examines the research studies regarding permanency outcomes as measured using criminal records and academic performance for children in kinship care vs. children placed in non-kinship care. Lastly, it identifies gaps in the literature regarding removal reasons as they relate to positive or negative outcomes of children in foster care.

3.1. Street Level Bureaucracy Theory (SLBT).

The structure of bureaucracy was first coined by Merton (1940) regarding the hierarchy structure within organizations and the dysfunctions of bureaucracy. Lipsky (1969) continued the development of the theory by contradicting the conventional notion that policies are formulated and implemented by those at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Lipsky examined street-level bureaucracy in an attempt to explain that corporate behaviors are often created by the faulty arrangements between ambitious policy goals and implementation outcomes.

The theory is based on the significant role that street-level bureaucrats play in the field of practice in framing the policy decision-making process (Lipsky, 1969; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). Lipsky (1969) focuses on providing a framework to describe, explain, and make predictions regarding the organizational context that impacts the provision of services by care workers. The theory explains the effect of the decisions making the process of foster care workers and their clients' accessibility to services. Caseworkers in the child welfare system are often perceived as 'street-level bureaucrats,' striving to reconcile professional goals or the goals of those in the higher chain of command with the realities of agency resources.

Lipsky (1980) identified that street-level bureaucrats are those in public service (e.g., teachers, social workers, police officers, lawyers, etc.) who work directly with citizens, have considerable discretion, and provide access to government programs and services. Lipsky has found that because street-level bureaucrats are, in essence, an extension of state control and influence and also are required to serve their clients, they are dually responsible for client accountability. Street-level bureaucrats work within an institutionalized setting and "help reproduce prevailing relations between individuals and government organizations" (Lipsky, 1980, p. 12). Having multiple sources of accountability can be a balancing act for caseworkers, and it depends on the situation or setting when one may take precedence over the other. For example, instead of removing a child from his/her home due to a lack of food or clothes, the caseworker facilitates with differing entities or organization to assist the family. Without the intervening of a supervisor to ensure all possible steps are taken to assist the child and family, the decision of removal is the sole responsibility of the caseworker.

SLBT was used in the present study to explore how child welfare agencies work to assist kinship and non-kinship placement clients on a day-to-day basis. It also examined the perceptions and experiences of child welfare staff members regarding accountability and discretion toward both the organization and their foster care clients. Others have used SLBT to explain a certain phenomenon, for example, caseworkers deviating from a set of agency guidelines, but such deviations are undetected due to the hierarchical nature of the child welfare system (Ayon, 2009; Brodtkin, 2000; Fineman, 1998; Segal & Brzuzy, 1998). Smith and Donovan (2003) based their study on SLBT to explore and understand the "everyday practices of frontline child welfare caseworkers" (p. 541). Their study is one of the first to provide an in-depth look into the institutional context of the child welfare caseworkers' work environment. Ayon (2009) also included the organizational theory section of street-level bureaucracy and goes into more depth than Smith and Donovan (2003) study to explain the dilemmas faced by caseworkers. A qualitative study by Kriz and Skivenes (2017) took an exploratory view into child welfare workers in England, Norway, and California with the use of SLBT to find out how these workers perceive child welfare policies.

SLBT assumes that street-level bureaucrats often forge policies as they are being constantly forced to make decisions to meet the demands of complex, unpredictable, and multifaceted problems. The research by Ayon (2009) supported this notion by inferring that street-level bureaucrats' function in a complex and unpredictable environment trying to maximize resources to meet multiple needs. Additionally, practitioners have personal values and idiosyncrasies that may conflict with clients, agencies, communities, and policies. Therefore, clients may be treated according to the workers' personal values despite organizational policies and procedures.

Street-level bureaucrats often struggle to align the goals of the agency with the ambiguous and conflicting needs of their clients. According to Brodtkin (2000), the child welfare workers' definition of success was not always consistent with federal policy regarding permanency placement causing an inconsistent outcome for children in the child welfare system (i.e. some caseworkers find it difficult to place children with relatives, though the statistics show placement with relatives has a higher permanency rate). Decisions made by street-level practitioners determining which child receives what type of placement and under what circumstances demonstrate their control over people's lives and their ability to alter the design of purposeful social welfare policy. Smith and Donovan (2003) stated, "the SLBT framework clarifies discrepancies between policy as written and policy as implemented, and it may also be useful for exploring discrepancies between best practice guidelines and practice as implemented" (p. 544).

The theory of SLBT takes a bottom-up approach when analyzing organizations; it seeks to study "lower-level discretion as a constructive element of policy delivery" instead of taking the traditional method of looking at the hierarchy within the organization regarding policy and practice implementation (Brodtkin, 2000, p. 5). This approach is more useful when studying the implementation of policies that are vague and lack specific guidelines. Due to the complex nature of child welfare policies, discretion is central in the work of a street-level bureaucrat (Brodtkin, 2000).

As Matland (1995) states, taking the bottom-up approach is best used in studying the implementation process when there is a high level of ambiguity in policy implementation because “this process is more open to environmental influences than are other forms of implementation” (p. 166).

Lipsky (1980) considers street-level bureaucrats to have a high level of discretion in the allocation of benefits and sanctions provided by their organizations. Although he does not ignore the fact that street-level bureaucrats are constrained by rules and regulations (e.g., eligibility rules, benefits, services, etc.) from those above and the norms held within their field, Lipsky (1980) states that they do have a considerable amount of discretion within those rules and regulations. Also, due to the nature of the work with clients, it is difficult to reduce these issues by responding in a prescribed manner. In these situations, street-level workers must have a level of discretion to respond accordingly to each client's issues and needs (Lipsky, 1980). Additionally, Brodtkin (2000) states that street-level bureaucrats have a high level of discretion because their interactions with clients are done “outside of direct observation” (p. 2), and this discretion can be beneficial in providing good service to clients.

According to Berrick, Barth, and Needell (1994) and Beeman and Boisen (1999), kinship placements are viewed by child welfare workers as likely to produce positive outcomes, although it was more difficult to manage because often there are multiple family members involved. These findings indicated that even though child welfare workers prefer kinship placement, they may be reluctant regarding its utilization because of the magnitude of its complexities. Nevertheless, SLBT provides a framework for assessing how the human element impacts the effectiveness of services delivery for children in foster care. Caseworkers are on the front lines of the child welfare system and have the responsibility of implementing multiple layers of policies and regulations while connecting the client system with the child welfare system.

3.2. Social control theory.

The study used social control theoretical framework to understand youth in foster care in terms of sociocultural, emotional, and psychological context. These constructs emphasize the influence of the social environment and the interpersonal relationships that develop within the social environment on outcomes for children. Thus, the elements of Hirschi's (1969) social control theory assists in explaining delinquency and a lack of educational attainment among youth in foster care. Youth's positive developmental process is contingent on healthy parents, and caregiver's socialization processes in ensuring a bond is developed (Ryan, Hinterlong, Hagar, & Johnson, 2008b).

Socialization processes that are flawed or inadequate in meeting a child's needs could limit the child's sense of attachment and commitment, which is vital in solidifying relationships with family members and traditional role models (Ryan et al., 2008b). Social control posits that social bonding is critical in ensuring that youth abstain from delinquent behaviors. A lack of investment in social bonding creates a weakness and difficulties in conforming to social norms (Hirschi, 1969). According to Hirschi (1969), “[D]elinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Social bonds to conventional society are composed of four elements ‘attachment, commitment, involvement and belief’” (p. 16). Attachment refers to the affectional bond one holds with another, this component of social control is critical in ensuring a moral conscious is connected to specific action (Hirschi, 1969). Commitment is based on conventional goals and aspirations normally associated with educational or occupational. Involvement is related to the amount of time invested in some type of conventional activities (Hirschi, 1969). Lastly, the belief element is centered in moral social norms, this element ensures that deviance is less likely due to holding a truth between what is socially right and wrong. When youth are confronted with the choice to engage in delinquent or deviant behaviors, those with strong bonds are more likely to conform and refrain from such acts to avoid jeopardizing relationships that are important, compared to those youth who lack such bonds. (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Hirschi, 1969). The two main components in social control are attachment and commitment, which represents the critical ingredients of the social control theory (Ryan et al., 2008b).

3.2.1. Attachment theory.

To explain in depth on the component of attachment, Bowlby (1958; 1982a; 1982b; 1988; 2004) developed attachment theory as a perspective on the secure base functions of close relationships that operate to promote child development, personality development, and affected regulation. Attachment is defined as an emotional and psychological attachment to significant others, which is vital in developing social bonds (Marcus, 1991). It is an emotional bond or ties that reflects the enjoyment and attraction that one individual has for another specific individual (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1958; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983).

Attachment is created in an ongoing reciprocal relationship between children and their caregivers. Bowlby believed that attachment behaviors must exist and be reciprocated for the child to survive “biopsychosocial”, which presupposes evolutionary biological necessity. Attachment to a protective and loving caregiver who provides guidance, support, and a secure base is a basic human need. There is an instinct to attach, (i.e. biological necessity), referred to as “evolutionary adaptedness” (Bowlby, 1982).

Those youth who lack a sufficient level of attachment are prone to reject moral restraints (Hirschi, 1969). The inability or non-compliance in adhering to moral and social norms and insensitivity to others equates to youth who have an increased propensity to engage in delinquent behaviors (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnsworth & Joon, 1991). To predict a healthy psychological development, child welfare professionals support the notion that attachment is a critical attribute and foundation in the provision of care (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care, 2000; Vuchinich, Ozretich, Pratt, & Kneedler, 2002).

When there is a positive relationship between foster children and their foster care provider, there is a decrease in emotional and psychological distress, which is common among youth in foster care due to separation from their biological parents or guardians. Additionally, attachment creates the ideal conditions for a child in foster care to develop relational skills that will continue into adulthood (Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003). There is a consensus in the literature (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby 2004; Cassidy & Shaver 1999; Hesse, 1999) regarding the significant impact the role of attachment has on the developmental process of youth.

According to a 2001 study in Wisconsin consisting of 141 foster care youth aging out of the child welfare system, 75% of youth felt close to their foster caregivers, 40% remain in contact with their foster care parent, and 20% continue to receive emotional support (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). Of the above-reported cases, 37% ran away from their foster homes, 32% felt lonely, 28% felt foster parent's biological children were treated more favorably, and 34% reported mistreatment. Also, a study conducted by Wallace and Belcher (1997) indicated 18% of children in foster care lived in at-risk homes. The parent-child relationship within the foster care home is vital to understanding the propensities for problematic behavior among this vulnerable population.

Attachment theory considers the natural tendency of kin to care for their own despite any challenging circumstances while acknowledging the power of social attachments that unite foster children and caregivers. The studies of Testa and Slack (2002) and Testa (2013) support the notion that kin caregivers are more likely to advocate for children's interests and that children benefit from this type of altruism. Kin caregivers commonly make financial sacrifices to the care of their relatives' children that exceeds government benefits (Testa, 2013). The benefits of kinship care are frequently forged in kinship care literature within two of the four theoretical constructs of social control/social bonding theory, attachment and commitment. One overarching construct includes the human development attachment view that describes the psychosocial benefit to foster children who experience a greater sense of stability when cared for by a relative (Testa, 2013).

The other construct used in understanding kinship care is based on the sociocultural level of commitment that an individual must abide by legal behavior (Testa, 2013). The effect of the social environment and the interconnectedness that is developed within the social environment impact the outcomes for children (Watson & Kabler, 2012; Testa, 2013). Bowlby (1999) proposed that attachment between humans promotes care and safety, thereby improving the chance of positive outcomes. Testa (2013) suggests that children's cultural identities, the management of bonding and continuity in relationships are essential building blocks on life trajectories for children in kinship foster care. Consequently, the type of foster care placement does not alter the child outcome as long as it supports the child's sense of self and provides connectedness over time.

3.2.2. Commitment.

Commitment is conceptualized as an individual's investment in traditional institutions in society. Investments may be relationships, educational attainment, and employment, which may be at risk if an individual engages in delinquent behaviors (Polakowski, 1994). School and church are the most popular and observable institutions related to commitment (Thompson, 2005). Literature examining the relationship between a lack of education or lack of commitment to education and delinquency has demonstrated consistent reliability (Villegas, 2014; Warburton, Warburton, Sweetman & Hertzman, 2014; Waston & Kabler, 2012). Research has indicated a higher likelihood of delinquency among juveniles who maintain a low academic commitment, have problems with teachers and peers, disregard or disrespect of authority and a have high dropout rate (Agnew, 1985; Gottfredson, 2001).

4.0. Implications for Practice

Applying street-level bureaucracy to examine the process of how school administrators respond to policy obligations that are shaped by contextual factors allows a greater understanding of how to increase educational outcomes for students within the foster care system. There have been several studies that use street-level bureaucracy theory to analyze policy implementation. Brodtkin (1997) discussed the 1996 welfare reform and how it provided states with greater control over the administration of government programs. Brodtkin used street-level bureaucracy theory to research how the increases in state discretion and less federal regulation had impacted the accountability of state service providers. The findings revealed that more discretion is not always positive. Having knowledge of the work process can bring to light how “organizational contexts influence practice” (Smith, 2010, p. 256). Also, knowing who or what frontline workers are accountable to and how it can impact their practice to change existing policies that focus on effectiveness in serving their clients.

The positive outcomes of kinship placement are substantiated by attachment theory, which relies on a balance of nature to explain the forging of the affectional bonds of kinship utilized as survival and protective functions to affect self-regulation and social development. Further, the findings of the present research study support the notion that placement stability allows for necessary building blocks of character development as foster care children grow into autonomous and productive adults. Developmental psychologists stress that children who are experiencing stability and having the opportunity to develop secure attachments promote confidence and trust in others (Fairneau, 2016). Short lengths of stay away from the parents and minimal placement disruptions allow for children to feel a sense of security.

The main elements is social control, commitment and attachment are crucial factors is measuring how the child will be socialized. Closeness with guardians or parental supervision is a key component in developing good relationships and communication. According to Hirschi (1969), affectional relationship has positive outcomes in academic attainment and a decrease in adjudicated delinquency. Those premature adult activities such as drinking and smoking are decrease, while activities that enhance educational goals and aspirations are the focal point of the child. When socialized properly the child has a “stake in conformity” and will not risk be violating social norms (Toby, 1957).

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