A Phenomenological Study of Black Fathers in Child Welfare

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A Phenomenological Study of Black Fathers in Child Welfare

by

Tamaru N. Phillips

A Dissertation Presented to the
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

Each year thousands of children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care where they lose connections with their family, community, and friends. Coakley (2007) points out that children of color are overly represented within the child welfare system, and there is a lack of research on Black fathers and their involvement when their children become a part of the system. Studies have suggested that most families that encounter the child welfare system have adult males who are actively involved with their families, however, child welfare workers do not engage these men (Coady, Hoy, & Cameron, 2013). The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Black fathers previously involved in the child welfare system using the qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis. I completed semi-structured interviews with four Black fathers who were previously involved with the child welfare system. Five major themes emerged that illuminated the fathers’ experiences and gave meaning to their stories, including case worker attitude, services overload, intergenerational child welfare involvement, feelings of helplessness and willingness to comply. There were also several sub-themes for three of the larger themes. The findings are discussed in light of current literature about father involvement in child welfare, and Black fathers in particular. Implications of the findings are discussed for the field of family therapy, and future research and practice. It is my hope that the information obtained from this study will help inform current practices within child welfare and the field to more effectively engage Black fathers in the child welfare system.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is reported that daily there are over half a million children in foster care in the United States (Bruskas, 2008). The child welfare system has historically been inclined to focus on mothers, providing fewer interventions to fathers (D’Andrade, 2017). D’Andrade (2017) reported that case workers do not spend as much time with fathers as they do with mothers, and there are inconsistencies in identifying and contacting fathers. Bellamy (2009) stated increased attention has been given to the role of men over the last few years, however, the focus has remained on the maternal caregivers in families. The author further remarked that research indicated men, especially those who are father figures in families, affect children both positively and negatively. Bellamy (2009) concluded that by focusing only on female caregivers the roles of males in children’s lives were being disregarded.

Fathers are often ignored from child welfare research and practice even though men are becoming the leading head of single parent households (Ayer, Kohl, Malsberer & Burgette, 2016). It is important to include fathers because their role in ascribed maitrements is not clearly defined, and service providers do not actively seek fathers out for engagement. Storhaug and Oien (2012) reported that demands of fathers are not explicit; mothers are generally viewed as being responsible for their children, and because of this narrow view fathers are not held accountable. Children are less prone to depression if fathers are active in their lives, perform better in school, and experience less psychosocial problems (Marsiglio, 1995). Black feminist family therapy was used as the theoretical framework in this study, and the power structure of assigned gender roles within the child welfare systems were defined and examined. Walsh (1998) reported that societies are undergoing social change at a fast rate, however, the roles for
men and women remained gender based in families due to society’s limitations and established views.

**Background of the Problem**

Social workers have customarily viewed fathers’ involvement as less crucial when it comes to child rearing than mothers (O’Donnell, 2001). Coakley (2013) reported that information on fathers whose children are in foster home placements are rare, and the attempts of child welfare agencies to include fathers are not well recorded. Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003) reviewed the literature on child welfare and noted three things: (a) not much focus has been placed on the value of fatherhood in child welfare, (b) clinical documentation, and practitioners tend to focus on mothers as the responsible parent, and (c) not much emphasis has been placed on the issue of gender imbalances. Regarding gender in the child welfare service, mothers are often scrutinized, and fathers are viewed as not being able to care for their children, problematic, unavailable, or forceful (Storhaug & Oien, 2011).

Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003) pointed out that it is the responsibility of mothers to ensure that all family interactions are positive, and not only the relationship shared between mother and child. For example, when fathers are not involved in their children’s lives, the mothers are often held accountable for their lack of involvement. Strega, Fleet, Brown, Dominelli, Callahan and Walmsley (2007) further pointed out that names of case files are linked to the mothers, which casts undesirable attention to mothers while fathers are overlooked. Offending fathers regularly change families and are absent in stored maltreatment files (Strega et al., 2007).

Most of the problems in families are blamed on women while men are particularly ignored within the child welfare system (Curtiss and Heffernan, 2003). Brewsbaugh and Strozier
(2016) stated that research indicated that mothers are the focal point of child welfare, and it is not very often that child welfare workers seek out fathers for service involvement. Curtiss and Heffernan (2003) contended that fathers, whether perpetrators of abuse or not, are often invisible in the records of child protective service. The authors continued that traditionally the child’s mother is held responsible for their injury, even if they were not the actual perpetrator.

**Race and Socioeconomic Status**

Dettlaff, Rivaux, Baumann, Fluke, Rycraft, and James (2011) remarked that Black children are unfairly characterized in the child welfare system. People of color have also been habitually underserved by mental health and human services when it comes to contacting service providers, as well as accessing services that are culturally obtainable to them (Pumarienga, Winters, & Huffine, 2003). Based on information obtained from the Children’s Defense Fund, children of color have mental health needs that are not being met. Furthermore, the level of economic status makes the situation harder, considering that a large amount of minority children’s families are low income where psychological wellness is ignored, or confused as other issues (Coakley et al., 2015). Hines, Lemon, Wyatt and Merdinger (2004) commented that the original opinion of child abuse fixated on medical and psychiatric factors and minimized societal and financial influences. There was significant proof, however, that cases of child abuse have been excessively noted in Black and Hispanic or Latinx families (Hines et al., 2004).

**Statement of the Problem**

This dissertation study addressed an important gap in knowledge in the family therapy field. Burns et al. (2004) studied previous research and concluded that as many as 80% of youths that come across child welfare agencies have psychological issues, developmental delays, or other signs of a mental health intervention need. Adolescents who have been removed from their
homes because of abuse and neglect are more likely to suffer from psychological issues, end of familial relationships, not enough life skills preparation, placement instability, and a myriad of other family issues (Shin, 2004).

Including fathers in parenting programs is new (Scourfield, Allely, Coffey & Yates, 2016). It is my hope that the outcomes of this research will empower those in the field to seek out fathers for service engagement. Of 116 case files reviewed in a study by Strega et al. (2008), it was discovered that notwithstanding the current conversations about the significance of the “involved father,” fathers are continually ignored in child welfare literature. The main theme throughout the study was that mothers are the ones held accountable for the nurturing and the security of children, regardless if the fathers existed and participated in the children’s lives (Strega et al., 2008).

Black Feminist Family Therapy Approach to the Child Welfare System

In this study, the framework of Black feminist family therapy was used to explore power and oppression within the child welfare system, and how oppression and power played a role in the engagement of Black fathers. According to Campbell and Wasco (2000) when feminism is mentioned, more than likely it is in the description of one type of feminism, when there are in fact multiple types of feminism. Campbell and Wasco described four main types of feminism. Liberal feminism is all about women coming together and advocating for equality, and for everyone having access to resources in society. Liberal feminists focus on obtaining equality in all spheres, including equal pay for the same work, and equality in employment opportunities. Socialist feminism believes that the social problems stem from unfair economic and class structure within our society, and this leads to various forms of oppression. Radical feminism
focuses its attention on oppression by class, race, and sex. Women are believed to be powerless and this forms the basis of their oppression (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

The last type of feminism is *womanism*, which was formed out of the ideals that the feminism of white women did not hold the same value for black women (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). There are also three notable waves of feminism. The wave that was most relevant to this dissertation study was the third wave. Snyder (2008) described the third wave of feminism as consisting of the private stories of women that embodies intersectionality and multiple perspectives of feminism. Respect and inclusion are words used to describe the third wave of feminism when it comes to the multiple choices women encounter when balancing desire and equality (Snyder, 2010). Feminist therapy is one of the few methods that not only practices but identifies the politics of the truths that touch clients and therapists, researchers and participants, and students and teachers (Brown, 2006).

As a Black feminist scholar and a professional within the field of child welfare, I am interested in race, gender and class oppression within the institution of child welfare system. Simien and Clawson (2004) points out that “black feminist scholars focus on the concept of intersectionality, which suggests that interlocking oppressions circumscribe the lives of black women through day-to-day encounters with race and gender discrimination” (p. 794). Since the emergence of the feminist movement, the issues and concerns of Black women have been ignored. Black women continue to challenge the racism that is within feminism ruled by White women (Hill-Collins, 2001). By using the term Black feminism, the issue of race plays an integral part of the “for Whites only ideology and political movement” (Hill-Collins, 2001, p.13). Throughout this study the roles of Black fathers and their lived experiences was the focus. Feminism is not only for women but is inclusive of both women and men. Black Feminist family
therapy in the context of this dissertation looked therapeutically at the issue of Black fathers in child welfare from the lens of a Black feminist. The issues of racial trauma, institutionalized racism, gender, poverty, and intergenerational child abuse were relevant to the stories told by the Black fathers in this study.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of Black fathers previously involved in the child welfare system from a Black feminist family therapy point of view. It is reported that 8% of primary caregivers in the child welfare population are fathers, yet their involvement remains understudied in the field (Ayer et al., 2016). It is my hope that barriers to successful engagement with child welfare workers will be identified in my study, from which strategies can be generated to utilize fathers more when placement is being considered for abused children, or aid in the development of appropriate services to keep children in the home. This research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black fathers currently involved in the child welfare system?

2. What are their ideas on how the child welfare system can best engage them?

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) described qualitative research designs as allowing researchers to call attention to the socially constructed nature of reality, and the close relationship between the researcher and what they are studying. Qualitative researchers seek to answer questions that highlight how social experience is created, and how the meaning is given. Phenomenology is used to “describe the common meaning for several individuals and their lived experiences of a concept or
phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). In the current study, the experiences of four Black fathers previously involved in the child welfare system were examined.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect the data, which enabled participants to share their stories openly about the studied phenomenon. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine transcripts of the participant interviews, identifying similar and dissimilar themes across participants. The process of IPA entails an exhaustive analysis of a qualitative nature, which allows for the thorough review of the accounts of participants' stories (Smith, 2011). By using IPA, "there is a chain of connection between embodied experience, talk about that experience and a participant’s making sense of, and emotional reaction to that experience" (Smith, 2011, p. 10). The participants' names and identifying information were changed to protect confidentiality and honor their stories.

Significance of Study

This study was significant as it provides information to child welfare workers and marriage and family therapists (MFTs) on how to best engage fathers of children who are in the child welfare system. Furthermore, in my current professional role, I provide direct oversight of placement of children in licensed care after they have been removed from their caregiver because of abuse, abandonment, or neglect. In this role, I have noticed that when considering initial placement of children, it is quite infrequent that fathers are explored as a viable option. Fathers are overlooked by case managers and child protective investigators, especially when the fathers do not reside in the home and are not reported on the child’s birth certificate. This study was important to the topic of placement stability, as instability is one of the major reasons why child welfare outcomes for children in out-of-home care are often so disappointing. Continuous change can have a serious effect on how children and young adults form psychological and
emotional ties, how they view themselves, their overall health, and their access to education and health care (Ward, 2009).

Saleh (2012) believed that studying fathers within the child welfare framework is difficult because of diverse circumstances within the family, and the different type of services offered by child welfare interventions. The author further stated that despite the difficulties that are faced, there is a need for studies that will seek improved services and generate programs that focus on bringing fathers on board to better serve children. There is not much accessible research on fathers in child welfare, and the information obtained about fathers is received from mothers, child welfare workers, or databases that store information on a group (Storhaug & Oien, 2011). This study addressed the gap in knowledge by gathering information directly from fathers. When fathering is done well children thrive (Scourfield, 2014).

Previous studies have revealed that fathers play a significant part in the growth of children; this growth is noted even when fathers do not live with their children (Brewsbaugh & Strozier, 2016). It is my aspiration that this study will shed light on the importance of the father’s role in child welfare, and the significance of promoting positive, successful strategies to engage fathers that will in turn develop into quality fathering. By focusing on Black fathers’ experiences, it is my hope that future MFTs will be better able to engage fathers within the foster care system, thus leading to better outcomes regarding placement stability and family resilience.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms were obtained from relevant literature on child welfare, foster care, Black, fathers, and feminism as applicable to this dissertation.

1. Black: for the purpose of this study, Black used in description of race referred to any individual of African descent.
2. Black feminist: for the purpose of this study, Black feminist refers to any individual of the Black race with feminist ideologies.

3. Case management: the term case management, or case manager (person) for the purpose of this study refers to the ongoing review of a child who has been removed from their care giver so as to ensure safety.

4. Case plan: for the purpose of this study, a case plan is a legal document that is provided to parents/caregivers of any child that has been removed from their custody and are considered dependent children. This document has outlined goals which the parents/caregiver must follow for the child to be safely returned to their care.

5. Dependent children: For the purpose of this study, dependent children are children who are under court ordered supervision.

6. Fathers: for the purpose of this study, the term father describes a male who is the biological parent of a child.

7. Offending parent: An offending parent for the purpose of this study, is the perpetrator of either abuse, abandonment, or neglect of a child in their care.

8. Out-of-home-care: for the purpose of this study, this refers to children who have been removed from their home and placed in a licensed placement or living with a relative or non-relative.

9. Maltreatment: the term child maltreatment, or maltreatment for the purpose of this study, is used as replacement for the term “child abuse” or “child neglect,” however both terms can be used interchangeably.

10. Mass incarceration: the term mass incarceration refers to the disproportional imprisonment of Blacks.
11. Non-offending parent: for the purpose of this study is being used when referring to a parent that has not abused, neglected or abandoned their child.

12. Services: for the purpose of this study, services referred to tasked as ascribed by case management and outlined on the case plan for parents to complete before it is considered safe for the child to return to the home.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I described my goal of examining the role of Black fathers within the child welfare system, the significance of their involvement, and the racial implications that are evident in the practices and procedures of the child welfare system. I briefly reviewed types of feminism, with a focus on third wave feminism as its pedagogy aligns with my study and emphasizes “uniqueness and intersections of oppressions” (Sinacore & Enns, 2005, p. 42). I discussed literature that pertains to the analysis of power and oppression within child welfare, effects of out-of-home placements, socioeconomic status of parents involved in the child welfare system, race, and the dismissal of fathers’ engagement by child welfare workers. I also presented a brief description about the research design of my study. Chapter II provides a thorough review of the existing literature related to father involvement in the child welfare system to provide history, deeper understanding, and support for my current examination. It should also be noted that as a Black woman, my views on feminism are from a Black feminist family therapy point of view, more of which is presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The United States Supreme Court has consistently emphasized the importance of parents being able to participate in the function of family (Killackey, 1992). Killackey commented that despite the well-established respect that is held for family and its privacy and parental control, the state reserves the right to protect the child if the physical or mental health of a child is at risk. According to Simms, Dubowitz, and Szilagyi (2000) it was nearly 150 years ago that families who were incapable of caring for their children, sought help from other family members, the church, orphanage or charity. Many children who were older, learned trades from tradesmen in preparation for becoming adults. The researchers further reported that it was not until the 19th century that state supported foster care became popular, and children who were engaged in social welfare programs in Eastern cities were transported to the Midwest to live with families as a means of getting away from city life and its temptations.

Black Children in Child Welfare

Hogan and Siu (1988) reported that in the 18th and 19th century, Black children who were no longer enslaved were brought to “almshouses” and “indentured,” but were still treated harshly and separated from White children who received different services. Dettlaff, Rivaux, Bauman, Fluke, Ryeraft and James (2011) believed that “disproportionality in the child welfare system occurs when the proportion of one group in the child welfare population is proportionately larger than the same group in the general population” (p. 1630). The authors further explained that Black children are mostly impacted by this, evidenced by research that Black children make up 30% of children in the child welfare system even though Black children representation within the general population is 15%. Black single mothers and their off springs are part of a rapid growing group, with 70% of Black children born to single mothers in 2006 (Choi & Jackson, 2011).
Rosner and Markowitz (1997) stated that there was a marked difference in how children were treated during the years 1930-1970. Child welfare professionals began the tracking of children and reported that White children needed mental health services, and Black children were better fit for long term placement within the foster care system, correctional institutions, or reform schools (Rosner & Markowitz, 1997). There is a dispute between the type of services that are recommend and delivered for Black youth and White youth (Hogan & Siu, 1988). Once a familial issue within the Black family is considered a problem, the tolerance level is lowered, and service recommendations become harsher. These views, according to Hogan and Siu (1988), mirror the partialities of the system that is controlled by Whites. Anyon (2010) commented that once a report of abuse is verified, Black children are more likely to be removed from their parents and less likely to go back. In addition, parents of Black children are more likely than Whites or other racial makeup to have their rights as parents severed, and their children wait longer in the child welfare system for permanent homes, and even longer to be adopted (Anyon, 2010). Dettlaff et al. (2011) stated that in instances where maltreatment of abuse has been substantiated, 96% of those children are placed in foster care, which guarantees placement inequalities in future decision making.

Disproportionality is not new to the child welfare system and has been documented for over 30 years without redress (Dettlaff et al., 2011). Hines, Lemon, Wyatt and Merdinger (2004) believed that there is a connection between race and child maltreatment and the likelihood of later being involved in the child welfare system. Dettlaff et al. (2011) explained that there have been studies throughout the years that substantiate this connection and concluded that when reports of child abuse or neglect are made, the cases involving Black children are verified more than those from other racial groups. Information from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse
and Neglect (NCANDS) obtained in the year 2000 from five states, reported that Black children were most likely verified in abuse cases compared to White children (Dettlaff et al., 2011). The evidence from NCANDS also showed that before a Black child reaches the age of 10, the probability of being in a verified report is three times more than that of a White child.

A study conducted by Sabol, Coulton and Polousky (2004) used computerized child maltreatment records from Cuyahoga County in Ohio from 1990-2001 to: (a) demonstrate the use of life table methodology in child abuse and neglect data reporting, and (b) show the use of indicators that were derived from the life tables for tracking the risk of child maltreatment within the Cuyahoga community. Life table methodology is a tool that is used to collect data for the examination of life patterns. In their study, Sabol et al. (2004) assessed 11 years of child abuse and neglect reports of children aged 0-10 years old. The researchers concluded that between 1999-2001, there were 18,574 maltreatment reports for these children that were first time reports in Cuyahoga County. Approximately 55.1% of the maltreatment reports were made on Black children, 38.3% on White children, and 6.6% on other races, with neglect the main maltreatment report for the youngest children. It was also reported that it was 2.4 times more likely for reports to be called on Black children than White children by age 10, and approximately half of the Black children living in the county were likely to be a victim of an abuse investigation by age 10.

Another study by Harris and Hackett (2008) analyzed secondary data collected from focus groups to examine racial disproportionality within the child welfare system of King County, Washington. The study used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology to compare Black, White and Native American children’s route at five points throughout their child welfare journey: (a) initial intake of reports for abuse and neglect, (b) when an investigation referral is made (c) services initiation during the process of reunification, (d) foster care
placement and ending of parents' rights, and (e) the path to leaving the child welfare system. The researchers conducted 11 focus groups with 66 participants consisting of professionals who were mandated reporters such as, Child Protective Staff, Attorneys, Mental Health providers, Judges, etc. According to Harris and Hackett, both the interviewers and the analysts used for data collection were chosen because of their own experiences with racism from a person of color point of view, as well as knowledge of the concepts of racism. The researchers found that Black and Native American children were more likely to be subjects of child abuse investigations, and most likely to have a substantiated finding.

**Effects of Out-of-Home Placements**

Raviv, Taussig, Culhane & Garrido (2010) reported in 2006 that approximately 303,000 children in the United States entered foster care. Of the 303,000 children, this included non-relative placements ordered by the court, kinship care placements, and residential group home. It is believed that the trauma of separation and loss are innate in foster care (Redding, Fried & Bitner, 2000). According to Redding et al. (2000), tantrums, crying, verbal aggression and difficulties in school, are some of the behavioral problems of the depression and anxiety that children suffer when separation from families are not adequately addressed. Foster care is described as placement of children with individuals who have undergone specialized training to care for the nation’s most vulnerable children (foster parents), and they are charged with caring for children in their own homes (Lo, Roben, Maier, Fabian, Shauffer & Dozier, 2015). It is expected that foster parents have an approved number of children to care for, in a setting much like home without shift care workers, but parents living in the home at all times. Out-of-home care, or foster care as it is mostly recognized, is organized from least to most restrictive
placements: (a) kinship care, (b) traditional foster care, (c) treatment foster care, (d) group home care, and (e) residential treatment care (Koob & Love, 2010).

Keil and Price (2005) conveyed that studies have shown that children who are involved in the child welfare system have higher rates of mental and medical issues as opposed to children who are not involved in child welfare. Additionally, there is the likelihood of children in foster care having a higher rate of developmental, physical and behavioral issues when compared to other groups of children. Kortenkamp and Ehrle (2002) presented data from the National Survey of America’s Families from 1997 to 1999, and reported that foster children often suffer from, delays in education, medical, and mental health in contrast to children who have never been involved. The children, aged 0-17 years (47% Black, 35% White, 14% Hispanic, 4% other), were involved in the child welfare system and living with either a relative, non-relative or foster parent.

Children in child welfare were compared with children who resided with parents, some in high risk situations and assessed in four areas: (a) behavioral and emotional problems, (b) school and activity experience, (c) health and health care, and (d) caregiver well-being and interactions (Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002). For children involved in child welfare, the data indicated that 27% of the children between ages 6-17 had high levels of emotional and behavioral problems, 32% of children between ages 12-17 had either been suspended or kicked out of school settings within the past year, 39% of children lacked school engagement, and 28% had a physical, learning, or mental health condition. Kortenkamp and Ehrle (2002) further noted that on all measures, children who lived with their parents did much better than children who did not, with those residing with single or low-income families also doing better than children in the child welfare system.
Foster care was designed to ensure children were placed in safe environments away from abuse and neglect, however, children in out-of-home placements face disruption and developmental delays (Shin, 2004). In a study conducted by Shin (2004) 200 foster children aged 16.5 and 17.5 years old from the Midwest were selected to participate in a study on developmental outcomes of children placed in foster care. Children completed a 90-minute in-depth interview, with exhaustive efforts made to match the ethnicity of the interviewer with the interviewee. Of the 100 children that consented to participate in the study, 76 were interviewed, and 74 of the responses were analyzed by the researcher due to two of the children being discharged. Forty-nine percent of the participants were males and 51% females, of which 64% identified as Black, 30% as White, and 5% as Hispanic. Shin found that children in foster care were more depressed, suffered from anxiety, and had less control over their behaviors and emotions compared to children who were not in foster care.

Children placed in licensed care are less likely to be returned to their parents within 18 months after entering foster care when they exhibit behavioral issues in comparison to children without behavioral issues (Keil & Price, 2005). When Black children are placed in out-of-home care, contact with child welfare workers are infrequent, visits with families are few, lack of support services and mental health services, and they are less likely to be adopted or reintegrated with their biological families (Clarke, 2012). Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey and McMaugh (2014) commented that fathers in general are overlooked as placements for children who suffer abuse or neglect at the hands of their mothers, with fathers who resided outside of the home especially overlooked as viable placement. If a father were to express interest in wanting to be a custodial parent, there were misgivings by the child welfare worker, even if the father was not a participant to the abuse or abandonment allegations. Fathers believed that if they had a history of criminal
activity, they were subjected to unfair treatment, and given more barriers to overcome than mothers. Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamoto and Rayford (2012) added that fathers with criminal histories are often scrutinized and viewed as being a risk to child safety at a higher rate than other individuals for placement of their children.

**Socioeconomic Status**

Much can be said regarding child welfare contact and poverty (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010). Saleh (2012) stated that the absences of fathers affect the structure of the family in the United States and has been linked with childhood poverty. Furthermore, families without fathers have been noted to have a poverty rate that is five times more than two parent households (Saleh, 2013). Bass, Shields and Behrman (2004) determined that children entering the child welfare system have encountered circumstances that hinder their development, in addition to being raised in poverty and suffering abuse. Being poor does not guarantee child welfare involvement, however it is believed that abuse and neglect happens more in poorer families (Dettlaff et al., 2011). Reports have indicated that one of the top determinants of whether a child will be removed from their home depends on if the family is considered low income (Rosenfeld et al., 1997). Hines et al. (2004) remarked, “child maltreatment rates and entrance into the child welfare system are difficult to isolate, as family and neighborhood conditions are believed to occur simultaneously with poverty” (p. 514).

**Intersectionality of Race and Socioeconomic Status**

Child maltreatment such as substance abuse, domestic violence, parental stress and mental illness, parental incarceration and death, along with poverty and living in poverty, are linked to a child’s race and ethnicity (Hines et al., 2004). According to Roberts (1999) complaints about the foster care system is common, and it is well known that the child welfare
system in America is nearly filled with poor Black children. A Texas study conducted by Rivaux et al. (2008) used sample cases from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services database system from September 2003 to February 2005, to test the following hypotheses: (a) White families would be more likely to have their cases closed while Black families would be more likely to have a child abuse investigation initiated; and (b) race is a factor in regards to child protective cases and how they are investigated; when income and risk levels are controlled for, White families are more likely to receive Family Based Safety Services (FBSS), and Black children are more likely to be removed from their families. The findings of the study indicated that when decisions were made based on a family’s socio-economic standing and danger threats, race was a factor when deciding to remove a child from their home, and FBSS were more likely to be referred to White children than Black children (Rivaux et al., 2008).

According to Schneider (2017), there are more Black children in the child welfare system than there are White children, with many living in poverty, which some might argue could be the reason behind child welfare’s race disparity. However, the author maintained that the large number of Black children in the child welfare system could also be blamed on institutional bias as parents of Black children are more likely to be involved in child welfare investigations than parents of White children. Clarke (2012) believed that systemic racism is part of the problem and a contributing factor as to why so many Black children are involved in child welfare. Systemic racism can be found in the United States and Canada by evidence of the biased child abuse reports, child protection investigation, and child abuse cases being verified during the decision phase of the child protection procedure. Another example of racism that is built within the system of child welfare is allowing Black women to be drug tested by physicians who are mandated reporters (Clarke, 2012). Roberts (2012) stated that based upon the concentration of
race and geographic area, White middle class and wealthy parents do not have the same sense of fear of being involved in child protection, and they tend to believe the false narrative that place the blame on poor Black women for their children’s lack of basic needs.

According to Roberts (1999) racism and being poor in America are connected, and half of Black children born in the United States are born into poverty. Black fathers encountered a higher rate of unemployment, low wages, and low educational levels in every decade since the days of slavery when compared to White fathers (White, 2006). It should be noted that areas that reported a high number of absentee fathers also had a high crime rate, more young men in prison, and a higher rate of poverty (Campbell, Howard, Rayford & Gordon, 2015). Furthermore, the largest reported numbers of absent fathers are found in Black and Hispanic families (Campbell et al, 2015).

Schneider (2017) reported that mothers who are single, working, and considered low income are more inclined to abuse their children and have their abuse reported more than married women. Poverty was also reported to be linked to maltreatment and single mothers (Schneider, 2017). According to Roberts (2012) the act of removing children from their home and placing the family under court ordered supervision to ensure the family’s compliance with their case plan occurs mostly in neighborhoods described as “inner-city.” The author referred to these areas as “racial geography” and stated that many child abuse cases that are investigated by the state happens in neighborhoods of low-income Black Americans. Blacks reside in neighborhoods that have the most involvement in child protection, with Black mothers facing a higher risk of having their children removed from their care than White mothers (Roberts, 2012). There is no direct evidence that racism plays role in child welfare, however, it is safe to say that the disproportionality of Black children within the system is because of racism (Roberts, 2002).
Fathers in Child Welfare

In the world of child welfare fathers are often viewed exclusively as dangerous, absent or unimportant, and are rarely contacted or engaged by case workers (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016). Bellamy (2009) conducted the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) to examine the extent of male involvement in the lives of family involved in child welfare using a two-stage combined stratification and cluster design with four main questions driving the study. The questions were: (a) To what extent are adult males absent from child welfare-involved families? (b) Is male involvement related to case workers' perception of children's risk? (c) Is male involvement related to maltreatment rereport? (d) Is male involvement related to entry into foster care? (p. 256).

There were 5,501 children aged 0 to 14 identified in the NSCAW who had been reported to child protective service from October 1999 through December 2000 (Bellamy, 2009). However, only 3,978 families were included in the study, as only families with primary caregivers that were legally ascribed or biological relatives were chosen. The findings of the study concluded that there is a need for proper assessment, engagement, and inclusion of adult male figures within families. Brewsaugh and Strozier (2016) used the NSCAW data in a later study and found that approximately one-third of children involved in the child welfare system were living with their biological fathers. The researchers maintained that child welfare services were focused on mothers, and not much effort was done regarding father engagement.

O’Donnell, Johnson, D’Aunno and Thornton (2005) noted that paternal involvement in child welfare cases are not widely examined in studies, and because of this, there is a belief that child welfare agencies have not included the studies of fathers into best practices. New York City foster care programs conducted an analysis of programs which concluded the involvement of
fathers in the child welfare system was much lower than that of mothers, and child welfare workers willingly initiated contact towards mothers as opposed to fathers. Regarding the above-mentioned study, Franck (2001) hypothesized that “case workers would demonstrate a preference for birthmothers over birth fathers as targets for outreach and planning efforts” (p. 384). The case study consisted of 143 children with 286 biological parents of children who had been involved in the child welfare system for at least 18 months, from three non-profit foster care agencies within New York City (O’Donnell et al., 2005).

The caseworkers that participated in the study were 83% females who identified as either Black, White or Hispanic, held a bachelor’s degree with some having completed or in the beginning stages of graduate school, and had an average caseload of 22 cases (Franck, 2001). The researcher reported that more services were provided to fathers than to mothers by case workers, with mothers being more accepting of services than fathers. According to O’Donnell et al. (2005) caseworkers did not intentionally disregard fathers’ involvement, but instead approached child welfare cases with the expectation that father engagement would be difficult. Franck (2001) also pointed out that it was difficult for case workers to scheduled meetings with fathers than with mothers, and mothers experienced less difficulty in visiting with their children than fathers.

The data on Black fathers about their involvement in services is lacking, and besides literature on services provided to unmarried young fathers, there is no data on the insight gained by Black fathers when enrolled in social services on behalf of their children (O’Donnell, 1999). By ignoring the role of fathers in child welfare, it would appear as if males are being differentiated against by workers (Saleh, 2013). Men in child welfare are not only overlooked by students in the field, but by those experienced in the field as men are believed to be problematic
whether they are resident or non-resident fathers (Daniel & Taylor, 1999). According to Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, and McMaugh (2014) fathers are often perceived to be reckless, not willing to commit, uninvolved, uncaring, non-nurturing, unable to cope, unwilling and unable to change. The authors further stated that men’s involvement in at-risk families have been characterized as fleeting and inconsistent, as they are often believed to be irresponsible fathers with numerous children with different women. It is also presumed that men lack commitment and are not as emotionally attached as mothers (Zanoni et al, 2014).

Black fathers are ignored more than White fathers, and it is assumed that Black males are harder to work with than females (Price-Bonham & Skeen, 1979). Black fathers are described as uninterested in their families and “ineffective figures.” There are no expectations when White fathers are absent from their families because of work, but Black fathers are viewed as unavailable when absent with negativity tied to their absence (Hopkins, 1972). Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland and Tolman (2012) reported that professionals are unwavering when opinions have been formed about fathers. The authors continued by stating that when fathers are considered “good” or “all bad,” case workers tend to judge the fathers based on the initial perception. Furthermore, caseworkers suggested working with mothers would be more beneficial to their case outcome rather than working with fathers (Maxwell et al., 2012).

Fathers involved in the child welfare system are believed to be incompetent and lack the need to take care of their children daily, thus, care is often transferred to the mother (Zanoni et al., 2014). Bellamy (2009) believed that because of the emphasis of women as caregivers, the role of males in children’s lives is often ignored. It is the expectations of workers that fathers are insignificant and immaterial in the work conducted by child protection agencies (Zanoni et al., 2014). However, when men are overlooked in child welfare cases they are not given the chance
to be a part of their family situations that may be of significance to them, and conversely not held accountable for their familial problems (Coady, Hoy, & Cameron, 2013). Bellamy (2009) believed that there are more males involved with families that are involved in child welfare services than reported, despite mothers being listed as head of household in child welfare involved cases. There are many reasons given as to why men are left out of child welfare services, one reason being that welfare workers are more comfortable engaging mothers and perceive challenges working with fathers (Storhaug & Oien, 2012). Storhaug and Oien (2012) concluded that workers are uncertain about what strategies would work best, and because of this uncertainty fathers are not sought for engagement.

**Institutionalized Racism and the Separation of Black Families**

Roberts (2002) stated that Black children end up in foster care due to the large number of young Black fathers and mothers being incarcerated at an alarming rate. It is believed that the system of child welfare and the justice system share unfair policies that are geared towards Blacks (Honore-Collins, 2005). The child welfare system can be compared to the criminal justice system based on the overwhelming amount of Blacks in both systems, and the established policies in place ensuring that they remain in the confines of those systems. "The criminal justice system and the child welfare systems are not coincidental and serve similar social function to blame and punish to address the problems of the population under their control" (Roberts, 2002, p. 206). An observer of both systems could easily conclude that they perpetuate the concept of institutionalized racism.

Institutionalized racism as defined by Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, and Kelly (2006), is "the process whereby individual racist beliefs, nurtured by convictions of power an authority, are converted into discriminatory policies and procedures of the institution" (p. 11). The institutions
of child welfare and criminal justice are related in their acts of tearing families apart to teach lessons to those that have become problematic to society (Roberts, 2002). One in three young Black males are under the scrutiny of the penal system, and politicians choose to fund the penal system instead of creating programs to assist the poor, most of which are Blacks (Roberts, 2002). The systemic enslavement of Blacks is a form of institutional racism that is responsible for the lack of Black fathers in the home.

Effects of Incarcerated Black Fathers on Child Welfare Outcomes

"More African American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850" (Alexander, 2010, p. 180). During the years of 1988-1996 there was a rapid increase of Blacks in American prisons with the "war on drugs" being highlighted as the reason (Honore-Collins, 2005). It is very clear when the bigger picture is viewed along with certain policies, that the process of mass incarceration proves to be effective in removing Black people from the streets, and then released as inferior citizens losing access to certain rights and privileges (Alexander, 2010). Economic and social support are taken away from thousands of children due to mass incarceration and decreases the chance of employability for Black men when released (Roberts, 2002).

As per Geller, Garfinkel and Western (2011), in 2002 there were more than 1.1 million incarcerated parents in the U.S., most of which were fathers. The authors elaborated that of the 1.1 million parents, there were 2.4 million children that belonged to those parents. Black children today are more likely to be raised in a single parent household than Black children born during slavery (Alexander, 2010). The author further explains that absence of Black fathers from their families is not related to neglect of parental responsibilities, but as a result of the thousands of Black men imprisoned for drugs. The same drug crimes Black fathers are being incarcerated for,
leniency is given to Whites (Alexander, 2010). When it comes to U.S. demographics, it is nine
times more likely for a Black child to have a parent in prison and three times more likely for a
Latinx child to have a parent in prison compared to White children (Mazza, 2003). A Human
Rights Watch reported that in the year 2000, in 15 states Blacks were sent to prison on drug
related charges 20-57 more times than White men (Alexander, 2010). Of the prison population,
93% are fathers (Hairston, 1998).

Maintaining parental bond while imprisoned is hard, and fathers rely on information
about their children from other family members due to restricted contact while in prison. The
father-child bond is also largely dependent on the father’s relationship with the mother. As
reported by Mazza (2003), many fathers who are incarcerated express anxiety about their
children, and this is evident in research and clinical observations. Fathers tend to be anxious
about their child’s wellbeing and the possibility of being disowned by their children or replaced
emotionally by another father figure. There is also shame associated with being imprisoned, and
because of this shame families may not disclose to service providers that they are working with
minors with an incarcerated father, therefore not allowing for service engagement.

Hairston (1998) stated that child welfare services along with academic research, rarely
pay attention to the responsibilities of fathers who are imprisoned. Furthermore, the prison
population consists of young, uneducated, poor, males at the time of their incarceration. Even in
cases where fathers have played a significant part in their children’s lives, services are scarce.
Few prisons have programs that include children and when available, the programs are only
offered to incarcerated mothers (Mazza, 2003). Hairston commented that there are not many
services geared towards imprisoned fathers, and the connection between fathers and children are
viewed as unimportant. Consistent with Geller, Garfinkel and Western (2011), if a male has a
history of imprisonment, he is often viewed as being dishonest, a threat to his family’s well-being, involved with drugs, and disruptive to his family’s stability, potentially placing his family at risk due to illegal activities that may occur in the home.

Black Feminist Family Therapy and the Child Welfare System

As previously mentioned in Chapter I, my dissertation study is informed by the third wave of feminism, as research has shown that poor Black families are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. The third wave of feminism can be described in four parts: (a) the theory of intersectionality started by women of color, (b) postmodern feminist approach, (c) global feminism, and (d) the newer generation of young feminists (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Lotz (2003) explained that the first wave focused on women’s right to vote and occurred from the middle of the 19th century until the 1920s. The second wave of feminism became prominent after World War II until the start of 1980s, and the third wave of feminism emerged in 1992. Harnois (2008) stated that the second wave and third wave of feminism can be distinguished by the focal points of each wave. The focal point of third wave feminism was the inclusion of women who were previously excluded from the second wave of feminism because of their race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation (Killackey, 1992).

The second wave of feminism should not be discredited, but it did not sufficiently confront the issues that women of color faced daily (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Also, the views of younger feminists were not taken into consideration within the second wave of feminism, and the third wave provided a foundation that welcomed a more diverse type of feminism where multiple voices were welcomed (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Black feminist family therapy differs from feminism, in that Black feminists felt the need to intersect race, gender and classism because women from different socio-economic and racial and ethnic backgrounds have different
experiences of oppression. Black feminist family therapy also focuses on the experience of Black women and the burden they bear when Black fathers are absent from their homes. Boisnier (2003) examined research that indicated Black women did not identify as feminists, and the women’s movement did not focus on the issues that were important to Black women. Kelly (2001) pointed out that, “young, low-income, African-American women face daily multiple forms of oppression related to their race/ethnicity, their social class and their gender” (p. 152).

As a Black feminist family therapist examining the lived experiences of Black fathers within the child welfare system, I would be remiss to disregard the mental health implication that separating Black families have had on the Black family unit. Black men do not have the same power as their White counterparts in society and gender roles may look differently in Black families than other families of a different race (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). During slavery, slave owners used the children of Black mothers as leverage, making it more common for runaway slaves to be single young males who fled, severing all contact with their families (Roberts, 2017). Racism and discrimination have had a tremendous effect on how Black men are socialized, and it is common for young Black males to be taught by their mothers, as a survival mechanism, to be strong and not show vulnerability (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). According to Boyd-Franklin (2003), because of slavery and the impact it has had on Black people of African descent, the impact of racial trauma and discrimination is evident in all aspect of life, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Historical trauma is personal and is suffered over generations. Michaels (2010) described historical trauma as an event that impacts the lives of children even if they were not exposed to the trauma. Disproportionately separating Black children and Black fathers from their families through mass imprisonment and the child welfare systems are examples of historical trauma that
will affect generations to come. As a Black feminist family therapist, it is important to address racial and historical trauma if we are to change the narratives of Black families. Most Black fathers are not present in the home because they are incarcerated. Black children are more likely to end up in foster care because their existence is not valued, as evidenced by what historical data has taught us. Historical trauma is usually unrecognized, unresolved, and in most cases untreated and as a result the Black family is suffering.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed existing literature based on my research questions about Black fathers’ experiences within the child welfare system. The literature addressed Black children within child welfare, father involvement in the child welfare system, the child welfare system through a Black feminist family therapist lens, incarcerated fathers and their experiences with the child welfare system, and the effects of out-of-home placement on the well-being of children placed. This literature has paved the way for the interview questions which will add to the richness of this study. In Chapter III, I outline the qualitative methodology used in this study and discuss the data collection methods and the preferred method of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Black fathers involved in the child welfare system, honor their stories, authenticate their experiences, and ultimately find solutions that best meet the needs of fathers and children involved in the child welfare system.

Self of the Researcher

I have extensive experience with the research topic in question due to being employed in the field of child welfare for over 15 years. During my 15 years, I have been employed in various positions with Florida Department of Children and Families and community-based care agencies, and have witnessed firsthand the lack of engagement with fathers. My interest in this topic stems from my experience in, and a passion for working with children and families who have encountered the child welfare system. Throughout my years of working in the field of child welfare, I have noticed that there has not been much emphasis on engaging fathers. Also, mothers are often held responsible for the family’s involvement in child welfare, even if they were not the perpetrator of the abuse.

As a Black feminist researcher who is also a mother, I am aware that this study could reflect possible biases. When biases arose during this research, I consulted with my dissertation chair to keep my biases in check, minimizing any impact on the findings of the study. I allowed the approach of phenomenology to take precedence by encouraging the participants to share their lived experiences, with little to no influence on my part. The participants were purposefully selected as a result of my being a Black woman working in the child welfare system and witnessing the high rate at which Black children are removed from their parents. As such, I felt compelled to conduct this research on the Black family. I focused on Black fathers because they
are often ignored when seeking placement for children, as well as my desire to detract from the narrative that Black men are uncaring and uninvolved in their children’s lives.

Qualitative Research

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of Black fathers in the child welfare system, therefore, a qualitative research design is most appropriate for exploring the meanings of participants experiences and to deepen the meaning making process. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) point out that meaning and the quality of experience is more important than chance relationships to researchers using the qualitative method. According to Sloan and Bowe (2014) methodology is the process, principles and procedures by which problems are researched and answers are sought. The authors further describe qualitative methodologies as an aim to portray the socially constructed complex world which is always changing, in addition to recognizing the lived world of human beings and how they thoroughly describe their experiences.

In keeping with Creswell (2013), qualitative research is conducted when researchers “want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and participants in the study” (p. 48). Pietkiewitz and Smith (2012) point out that when it comes to qualitative research, the collection of data is done in the natural setting of the participants, with their understanding of the phenomenon along with that of the researcher’s analyzed as part of the process. For this study, I used an open-ended interview question to guide my interview and formulate additional questions: “How would you describe your experiences as a Black father navigating the child welfare system, and what challenges if any did you have to overcome?”
**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, as described by Sloan and Bowe (2014), is a philosophy that is used to approach a study or research. Van der Wal (2015) states that phenomenological researchers offer "accounts of time, body, space and relations, as they are lived by the people whose lives are altered by the phenomenon" (p. 23). Additionally, Creswell (2013) defines phenomenologists as seeking to describe the shared experiences of participants in a phenomenon. According to Flood (2010), the process of phenomenology starts with describing life experiences that occurs daily from a stance of "pre-reflexive" thoughts. The author further states that the description of the life experience is obtained by the researcher, from the participant by those conducting the research. In addition, the researcher must be unbiased and non-judgmental to be open to the described event.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenology, also known as hermeneutic phenomenology, requires the researcher to understand the meanings that originate from the participants' relation to the phenomena (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). By utilizing phenomenological qualitative research, my intent is to achieve an understanding of the role Black fathers play in the child welfare system and make sense of their realities, ultimately formulating desired resolutions for Black fathers and child welfare workers. Like qualitative researchers before me who sought to bring about change through research (Warren & Karner, 2010), my goal is to bring about change within the child welfare system through its organizational practices, laws and structures.

In keeping with Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) attempts to examine and explore the meanings participants give to their experiences. The authors further state that participants are experts on their own experience, and
because of this experience they provide researchers an insight of what they are thinking, relay their feelings by telling their own stories as they recall it, and being as transparent as they feel comfortable. IPA researchers seek to analyze in detail how participants distinguish what is happening to them, and how the participants make sense of what is happening (Smith & Osborn, 2007). According to Drummond, McLafferty, and Hendry (2011) the researcher’s aim in conducting IPA research, is to draw, inform, and become experts by ensuring that the information solicited from the participants are directly quoted. The authors continue by stating that IPA also allows room for creativity, and focuses on the participant’s thinking, language, emotional and physical being.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

This study included a homogenous sample of four Black fathers with previous involvement in the child welfare system. This sample size was selected because it was manageable, and it would provide data that is intimate and rich in depth. Sample size for an IPA study is usually small, and by utilizing the technique of purposive sampling with a homogeneous group, useful information was obtained based on the interview questions (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Purposive sampling is a non-random way of choosing participants for a study due to their unique knowledge (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). In order to recruit Black fathers, I posted flyers on the public bulletin boards of two governmental agencies that worked directly with parents involved in child welfare. I posted my flyers once permission was obtained from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The flyers included a brief description of my study, inclusion criteria to participate in the study, location where the interviews would be held, research procedures, and my contact information (see Appendix A). In order to be eligible for the study, participants were required to: (a) be an adult Black male (b) be
previously involved in the child welfare system either as an offending or non-offending biological parent with no active child welfare cases, (c) not have been incarcerated at the time of the child’s removal from the home, and (d) speak fluent English. Individuals who had a current/open child welfare case were excluded from the study.

Data Collection

In this study, five Black fathers were interviewed, however, due to data saturation only four interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and used for this research. Saturation is utilized in qualitative research as a means of stopping data collection or analysis (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs and Jinks, 2017). Fusch and Ness (2015) further explained data saturation as obtaining enough information for a study whereas additional information is not needed.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was required from all participants prior to being involved in the study. Informed consent, as described by Schofield (2014), is permission given freely, with autonomy and trust playing important roles. The informed consent form explicitly detailed any risk to the participant (see Appendix B). The involvement and participation in this study was voluntary, and the participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview process at any time. During the initial phone contact, and before scheduling a date and time for the interview, I conducted a brief screening over the phone to determine eligibility to participate in the study, at which time I reviewed the consent form. During the initial phone call, participants were advised of the intricacies of the study and the risks involved. I provided a telephone number as a direct means of contact in the event the participant had any follow up questions after the initial phone
call. Potential participants were given 48 hours to process the information provided during the initial interview.

**Interview Procedures**

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants as this technique allows the researcher to identify and make sense of participants’ experiences (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). This type of interview is easily managed, participants are free to express themselves, conversations flow easily, and participants are being listened to by the researcher as they voice their opinions, which allows for in-depth personal discussions. A benefit of using the semi-structured interviewing technique is its ability to allow empathetic rapport and flexibility in allowing the interview to go into “novel” areas, which in turn produces an abundance of information (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Smith and Shinebourne (2012) point out another advantage of allowing for the opportunity to have real time conversations between the researcher and the participant. The authors further elaborate that with real time conversations, there is the ability to request additional information on issues of interest that are brought up during the interview, based on the participant’s experience.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded of the choice to withdraw at any time during the interview process. I was explicit in advising the participants that their participation or withdrawal would not have an impact on past or future cases involving child welfare. Interviews were conducted at a small dance studio, outside of the business’ normal hours of operation. This was a private space which was secured to perform the interviews, and at the time of interview I had access to a private locked area in which to conduct the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. A $25 visa gift card was provided to all
participants to assist with transportation expense, and whether the participant decided to continue or withdraw from the interview, the $25 was not asked to be returned.

Open-ended questions were used to guide the interview, and follow-up questions were asked for clarification and to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ responses. In line with the semi-structured interviewing process, I started the interview by asking general questions about participants’ experiences (see Appendix C). At the end of the interview, my phone number and email address were provided to the participants in the event they had any questions, concerns, or complaints at a later time. The contact information for my dissertation chair was also provided, if at any time I could not be reached. Only participants with closed cases were interviewed, and the risk was minimal as the lived experience had already occurred and the participants had completed required task to ensure successful case closure. However, I was prepared to provide clinical referrals for participants if they become agitated or highly emotional as a result of the interview invoking unpleasant memories in the retelling of their stories. The interviews were audio recorded, and the audio taped sessions were transcribed verbatim for use in the data analysis process of this study.

Data Analysis Approach

The data analysis design used in this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). According to Smith and Osborn (2007) the intent of IPA is to examine in-depth, how participants of a study make sense of their personal and social world. This approach was used to explore the stories that were shared by the participants to reveal themes that would become useful to therapists working with Black fathers. As an IPA researcher, I approached the data with two aims in mind: (a) an attempt to understand the participants’ world and then provide a description, and (b) address and acknowledge the participants view of how they make sense of
their experience (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The intent of the study was to gain knowledge of what it feels like to be in the participant’s place as a father, and then translate that understanding without minimizing the experience of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The methodology acknowledges that it is not possible to remove a participant’s experience directly from their head, but through the researcher’s role of engagement and interpretation. I used bracketing to reduce bias and objectively detect emergent themes, setting aside any assumptions I had about Black fathers based on my employment in the child welfare system. Bracketing “keeps the unstructured research interview personalized and allows for subjectivity without prejudice” (Kiikkala & Kurki, 2015). I also kept a journal of any thoughts, reflections, insights, etc. I was having throughout the data analysis process, and consulted with my dissertation chair as needed.

Data Analysis Steps

I followed Smith and Osborn’s (2007) idiographic approach of IPA, which defined the data analysis process in a clear and concise manner. By carefully listening to the audiotaped interviews and transcribing into a Word document, I coded emerging themes while searching for connections across each case. Being very detailed, I transcribed the audio taped interviews, ensuring that only pertinent information was used for the analysis, noting pauses, laughter, and hesitations (Smith et al., 2009). After transcribing the interviews, I used the following five steps to analyze the cases (see Figure 1).

First, I read and re-read the transcripts to become familiar with the participants’ stories. Multiple readings of the transcripts allowed me to obtain different perspectives with each reading, gaining new insights (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In doing this, I was able to familiarize myself with the most significant parts of the interviews and identified patterns within and across
the interviews. Second, I took notes during reading and re-reading the transcripts. According to Smith et al., (2009) initial noting enables the researcher to explore the participants’ stories, documenting information that mattered to the participants and their stories. In this step, I searched for meaning to the participants’ stories, noting information that was important to the participants and the relationships they formed while experiencing the phenomenon.

Third, the notes were then transformed into themes. Through examination of the notes I had taken during my reading and reading of transcripts, I was able to formulate themes from the data that was collected and generated through note taking. During this stage, I organized and analyzed the data, focusing on participant comments that stood out. For example, one participant used the word “juggling” to describe his experience. I then searched for comments from other participants related to juggling and the theme emerged. Fourth, I looked for connections across themes. By searching for connections, I compiled a list of themes taken from the transcript organized in chronological order, then clustered all relating themes together, forming my connections. Fifth, I then moved to the other participant’s transcribed interview and repeated the steps noted above (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

![Figure 1. Data Analysis Steps (Smith & Osborn, 2007)](image-url)
Ethical Considerations

I ensured that all ethical standards were upheld throughout the entire research process. For example, I did not proceed in recruiting participants until I received permission from the IRB. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was given a thorough explanation of the study, what it entailed, and the option of opting out of the study at any time without penalty. Throughout the interview I remained empathetic and attended to any level of emotional distress in participants’ facial expression or body language. I ensured the participants that their identity would be protected; pseudonyms were used, and all data was kept in a locked file cabinet to which I only had access. Additionally, I used my personal computer to complete the transcriptions, which was password protected. The participants were informed that all electronic and paper files were to be kept for 36 months after the study, after which both electronic and paper documents would be shredded.

I treated participants with the utmost respect, and they were aware of my role as both a researcher completing my Ph.D. and an employee within the field of child welfare. I assured them that the primary purpose of conducting the study was in fulfillment of my degree, not to investigate them. As a Black feminist family therapist, I was aware of the power constructs between myself and the male participants, and the perceived power that I held as an employee of the child welfare system. I was transparent with the participants and advised them that all information received was to be used for the study, and would not influence their cases past or future.

Summary

Smith and Shinebourne (2012) reported that the focus of IPA research is to conduct an in-depth exploration of lived experience, and how the experience is understood by those involved.
This data analysis approach allowed me to gain insight into Black fathers’ experiences in the child welfare system. I used a semi-structured interview format, giving participants the ability to tell their stories without guidelines or restrictions. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym. After listening to the audio recordings of each interview twice, the third time I began to transcribe the data. Themes from the interviews emerged from the description obtained through the analysis of the participants’ experiences. In Chapter IV, a brief introduction of the participants and their case is given, and detailed analysis of the emerging themes is provided using excerpts from the participants’ interviews.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Black fathers who have encountered the child welfare system. The narratives of the participants supported the themes that emerged during the analysis phase of the study, and served to highlight the experiences as told by the fathers. The results of the study were based on the analysis of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the fathers and included superordinate and subordinate themes. I outlined a brief introduction of the participants’ background information to include name (pseudonym), age, number of children and reason for child welfare encounter. All fathers interviewed self-reported they were the non-offending parent. Two of the four fathers were non-resident fathers.

Participant Profiles

The participants were four Black fathers aged 22-42 years old. All participants were previously involved in the child welfare system and were biological fathers of the children involved. The fathers interviewed successfully completed a case plan to close their opened child welfare case and regain custody or unrestricted access to their child. One father at the time of the scheduled interview did not have physical custody of his children due to not having suitable housing; he was, however, allowed unsupervised visits as he successfully completed his case plan and his case was closed.

Father Clifford

Mr. Clifford is a 41-year-old father of two children who were brought into the child welfare system due to what he calls “a misunderstanding” with his wife. Mr. Clifford and his wife were going through a divorce at the time of the interview. According to Mr. Clifford, he went to the home of his wife to get the children for a scheduled visit and ended up in an
argument with the wife for having her current boyfriend at the joint marital property. Mr. Clifford was not pleased with the boyfriend in the home and an argument ensued. The police were called, and according to Mr. Clifford’s account, the mother of his children alleged that he assaulted her. He was subsequently arrested and charged with battery. The children were present during the incident and witnessed what happened. Mr. Clifford’s visitation order previously issued by family court was deemed null and void by the dependency court. The child welfare system imposed their own set of rules and guidelines regarding visitation.

**Father Williams**

Mr. Williams is a 36-year-old father of three children. Mr. Williams was married at the time of the interview and expressed that at the time of the incident, he was living with his wife. Mr. Williams stated that he suspected his wife was abusing prescription medication, tried to get her help, but also believed her use was under control. On the day of the incident, Mr. Williams stated he was scheduled to work, but could not find a babysitter. His wife was at home, but due to her suspected state, he usually had one of his family members stay with the children while he worked. Mr. Williams stated that his wife was in a “good mood” and “looked o.k.,” so he left the children in her care. While Mr. Williams was at work, the mother fell asleep in the home and the children ages 3 and 5 wandered out into the street. A neighbor saw the children, tried reaching out to the parents, but were not able to, and eventually called the police. The police showed up and contacted the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and the children were taken away from the home and placed in the care of their paternal aunt. When Mr. Williams was made aware of DCF’s involvement and requested the children be returned to him, he was told that he lacked protective capacity, and knowingly placed the children at risk.
Father Robinson

Mr. Robinson is 26 years old, and the father of three children, ages 9, 7, and 5. At the time of the interview, he was temporarily living with his mother and five other family members in a three-bedroom house. At the time of the involvement with DCF, Mr. Robinson was living and working in Georgia. Mr. Robinson reported that he had his own apartment, was making "decent" money, and would provide financially for his children through court ordered child support. He stated that over time it became increasingly difficult to get in contact with his children, however, his sister, who lived in state, would periodically stop by the house to check up on the children. His children were taken into licensed care due to neglect and substance abuse on the part of the mother. The children were reported to be outside frequently looking unkempt and unsupervised. A report was called in to the abuse hotline, and upon DCF's arrival, they found a home with no light, electricity, running water, or adequate food in the home. The house was dirty, with laundry piled on the floor in all the bedrooms, and rotten food in the fridge and on the kitchen counters. The bathrooms were filthy with overflowing waste matter, and cockroaches were visibly crawling about the home. There was also an eviction notice on the front door with a past due date. The mother was found in the home passed out with drug paraphernalia in reach of the children. The children were removed and placed in licensed care. The father was not notified by DCF, and it was not until two months later, when his sister found out about the situation, and called to inform him. Mr. Robinson then reached out to DCF to inquire about getting his children placed with him.

Father Carter

Mr. Carter is a 22-year-old father of a 2-year-old child. His child was born substance exposed, and this prompted a DCF investigation. The mother of the child was 19 years old at the
time, and had previous involvement with child welfare system when her oldest child was removed from her care due to inadequate supervision and substance misuse, and placed with the paternal grandmother. Mr. Carter admitted that he and the mother of his child both smoked marijuana, but reported that he believed she stopped smoking during her pregnancy. According to Mr. Carter, this was his first child and he was prepared to be a good father. Upon release from the hospital, the child remained in the parents’ custody, however both parents were given case plans to complete to safely maintain the child in the home. Mr. Carter reported that two months after the birth of his child, he was pulled over for speeding. Upon searching the car, the police found a small amount of marijuana. Mr. Carter reported that he was sent to jail for 262 days.

Development of Themes

Five major themes emerged from the data analysis, along with accompanying sub-themes for three of the larger themes. The interviews with the fathers were personal, filled with varying emotions, and shed light on their vulnerabilities as they recounted their experiences, which at times were filled with regrets, disappointment, confusion, and a willingness to succeed. Each interview was similar to the next, and with each similarity there were emerging themes. Table 1 shows the themes and sub-themes that emerged throughout the data analysis process, and while the stories of the participants were similar, their experiences were also unique.
Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Case Worker Attitude and Characteristics</td>
<td>Not Feeling Heard</td>
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<td>Feeling Ignored</td>
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<td>Feeling Judged</td>
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<td>Uncaring</td>
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<td>Inexperienced/Not Knowledgeable</td>
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<td>Case Worker Race</td>
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<td>2. Services Overload</td>
<td>Juggling</td>
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<td>3. Intergenerational Child Welfare Involvement</td>
<td>Wanting to Break the Cycle</td>
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<td>DCF Involvement is Bad/Negative</td>
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<td>4. Feelings of Helplessness</td>
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<td>5. Willingness to Comply</td>
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Case Worker Attitude

Several important sub-themes emerged from the theme of case worker attitude and characteristics. All but one of the case workers assigned were women; and as reported by the fathers, one was Black, two were White, and one was Latinx. The fathers reported that during their encounter with their case worker, they often felt as if they were not feeling heard/listened to, they felt ignored, judged, and the case workers seemed uncaring and inexperienced. The excerpts, below, provide insight into the fathers’ perceptions of their case workers with the use of the distinctive themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Not Feeling Heard

The fathers expressed that they felt as if they were not being listened to by their case workers. The fathers stated that when they expressed how they felt, the case workers seemed to overlook their questions and their statements as invalid. This is evident in Mr. Carter’s comment
about his case worker: “She was hard to deal with... I tried to complain... but no one wanted to listen to me... I wasn’t.... I guess... I’m... (pauses).” Mr. Clifford expressed his frustration about not feeling heard by his caseworker, which led to him “giving up.”

If I questioned anything about my children’s well-being when I visited them, she would tell me that it was not concerning me. How could a question about my child not concern me? I just stopped asking questions... because it got me nowhere with her.

In Mr. Robinson’s case, he was trying to be responsible and follow-up with his case worker to let her know what he had been doing and to get an update on his case, but was immediately cut off:

When I was in Georgia and I called to ask about my case and to let the case worker know I had no idea... of what was going on and that I was providing financially... before I was done talking she cut me off and began to schedule a date to meet with me.

She didn’t want to hear me out...

Feeling Ignored

The theme of participants feeling ignored was very prominent throughout the interviews with the fathers. Three of the fathers mentioned that case workers were often too busy to meet with them, and if they had a question they did not feel as if they had anyone who would readily be available to answer. Mr. Clifford commented that he made connections with other service providers, and that was how most of their questions were answered. In making connections with other providers Mr. Clifford stated, “The girl at one of my programs was real friendly, she helped me a lot. When I had questions about some of the programs... she helped me out. Her help took a load off...”
Mr. Carter explained how he felt whenever he tried to contact his case worker and received no response: “At one point I felt like she was ignoring me, cause when I called or went by her office she was never there, and barely answered my phone calls.” Mr. Robinson expressed his frustrations with not being able to have effective communication with his caseworker, by mentioning that he felt as if she was always busy. Regarding his efforts to have a discussion with his case worker Mr. Robinson explained,

When I came back from Georgia I was a wreck mentally, you know...now I was back...you know... I had questions to get my mind right. I went by the office saw her for a few minutes, then she left for a meeting. I ...went by...no... I called her the next day and she answered just to say she was busy...

**Feeling Judged**

A prominent theme was participants feeling judged by their case workers. Three of participants believed that because of their current circumstances, they were seen in a negative light by their case workers. Mr. Carter explained that his second case worker was a female, who he believed only saw a Black man out of jail.

Whenever I needed to get a hold of the first case worker, he would answer my questions. I got arrested and when I got out of jail I was given a new lady to contact. That lady was not nice...I mean...she saw nothing but a black man out of jail.

Mr. Robinson indicated that his lack of trust in case workers stemmed from their attitude, and that his case worker had an attitude with him, but constantly informed him that his attitude was impeding her from assisting him. Mr. Robinson stated,
I don’t trust case workers anyways cause their attitude. But yet she steady telling me I have a bad attitude and she can’t work with my attitude. I mighta had a bad attitude but I had a right to have one under the circumstances...what was her excuse?

In Mr. Williams’ case, he had a better relationship with his case worker than the other fathers in the study, however, he still felt as if he was being judged. Mr. Williams stated, “My case worker was O.K. for the most part, but I felt as if even though she was kinda helpful, she looked at me like I was...a bad father.”

Uncaring

During the analysis of the transcripts it was evident that the participants expected the caseworkers/DCF to be more caring, and helpful. Three participants relayed that this was not the case and often were left feeling shunned. They felt like their case workers did not care about their welfare and that their situation was not a priority. The fathers explained that they understood the caseworker had other cases, but felt as if they lacked empathy. This is evident in Mr. Robinson’s response regarding his case worker.

My caseworker honestly, I feel didn’t even...it was a next case to her it wasn’t like she felt even obligated to even help me... you know. It was like... oh I will get back to you... or oh you can call this number, or... oh be here, but then when you’re there they tell you basically you know you still got to wait. It was just... it was just that I felt like she wasn’t even there to help me.

Mr. Carter explained that because he felt as if the case worker did not want to help him, he stopped asking: “She was no help. I stopped asking questions because I didn’t feel as if she wanted to...to help.” Mr. Williams mentioned during the interview that he believed his case worker expected him to fail by the way he was being treated. Mr. Williams stated,
Ah yeah, I think they... you know... because if seeing so much of this you know I think they expect us all to... to... to fail as fathers. So, you know the way they treat us uhmm... it's like ah... they never really look at the good we've done or anything they... they just expect us to fail in our roles as parents you know. And we're not all like that you know.

Some of us love our kids.

**Inexperienced/Not Knowledgeable**

Three of the four participants expressed they felt as if the case managers were either giving them the run around or were unsure of what services were needed to complete the case plans. The fathers expressed frustration, and even mentioned throughout the interviews that lack of experience of the case workers may have contributed to their confusion. Regarding this sub-theme, Mr. Clifford mentioned, “My case worker was young and seemed as if she knew less about what she was doing than I did. Whenever I asked a question she would tell me to take it up with the judge.” In expressing that he felt as if he was getting the run around by his case worker, Mr. Carter explained that her age may have played a factor, and laughed as he found irony in his explanation considering how young he was.

I kept on getting the run around for the most part... I would go one place and told they couldn't help. The case manager would not explain certain things that needed explaining... sigh. I don’t want to say... she was young (laughs) because I am... but she wasn’t ready.

Mr. Robinson stopped asking questions because over time, he became frustrated with the answers he received from his case worker. This is apparent in his response:

So... it’s like every time I asked a question you are... I felt as though even when I needed to ask her for something honestly... I personally didn’t want to ask her. I felt
like the answers she was giving me wasn’t even helpful or she wasn’t sure of what I should be doing.

Case Worker Race and Gender

The issues of race and gender are being highlighted as a sub-theme because three of the four fathers mentioned race in talking about their experience when asked, “How would you describe your relationship with your case worker?” It should be noted that initially three of the four case workers were female, and subsequently all four were females when the Black male case worker for Mr. Carter was changed to a White female. Mr. Robinson described his case worker as White, Mr. Williams’ case worker was Black, and Mr. Clifford’s case worker was Latinx. Two of the four fathers had Black case workers and they expressed during their interviews that having a Black case worker was beneficial to their process as they were understanding and empathetic.

Mr. Carter was assigned two case workers while his case was opened with child welfare. His first case worker, a Black male, was assigned after the incident that led to his involvement with child welfare. He said that having a positive Black male as a caseworker was meaningful to him, especially since his father has been incarcerated for most of his life. The Black male case worker was a father figure to him, and was encouraging. Mr. Carter stated, “He kept on telling me to hang in there and to do better for my child. He was there to work with me to make sure I did everything right.” Mr. Carter was subsequently arrested, and after serving time in jail he contacted his “old” case worker and was told that he no longer worked for the agency. A White female case worker was assigned. When discussing his relationship with his first case worker Mr. Carter stated,
The first person that I met at the hospital was a man. He was there because the hospital called him. Black dude that seemed to.... seemed to understand. He was from the same neighborhood as me, so I know he was real.

In discussing his relationship with the case worker that was assigned after his release, Mr. Carter indicated that he preferred the Black male caseworker more than the White female case worker.

I like the man caseworker better. I felt like he was a positive figure for me... I never had that...and especially because he was Black. The White lady was picky.

In keeping with the sub-theme of case worker's race, Mr. Williams indicated that he had a “pretty decent” relationship with his caseworker, and this may have been because of her race.

He stated,

She was a Black older lady. She was ok. I guess it was because she was Black. Because you don't know... she was more in tune with you know... what we... what we go through as parents, as a people. Ah you know... it's hard for if... if you... if you don't know the lifestyle.

Much like Mr. Carter, Mr. Williams mentioned that having a Black case worker made a difference in his case. He commented,

It's hard for you to understand you know what parents must go through to put food on their table for their kids, and you know... so having a black caseworker she was sympathetic and um you know... she knew she could identify with some of the stuff I talked about.

It was apparent in the interviews that there was not much connection between the fathers and their White case workers, and Mr. Robinson and Mr. Carter were vocal in expressing this lack of connection. When asked about his relationship with his case worker, Mr. Robinson
replied, "She was White and privileged and to her I was just another Black man in trouble." He went on to say,

There was never a connection, so it was just like oh you weren't a good dad... you got up and left them you know... and you don't even know the situation. And you just reading what's there in front of you, without understanding what I went through. And what I been trying to go through to get them in my life.

Mr. Carter described his reasons for continuing to follow through with his required services by stating, "The only thing that had me going back to the meetings was because I wanted to see my son with no issues. If it wasn't because of that I wouldn't even call my case worker..." Mr. Clifford did not have much to say when asked about his relationship with his case worker, and he did not elaborate whether her race or gender had any impact on their relationship. In describing his relationship with his case worker, Mr. Clifford stated, "She was a young Hispanic girl."

**Services Overload**

The fathers in this study talked about being overloaded with tasks that they had to complete in order to fulfill the requirements to get their children back. They voiced that it was impossible to complete all services weekly while employed full-time. It was the fathers' belief that the system was designed for them to fail, and no thorough assessment was done for services before referrals were made, but was more of a "one size fits all" referral system. All fathers expressed that they were embarrassed with having to be a part of the child welfare system, and that the system judged the way they lived and how they were parenting. Mr. Carter was the only father that did not verbalize being embarrassed by having to attend parenting class before their cases could be satisfactorily closed. Instead, Mr. Carter, the youngest of the fathers and a first-time father, welcomed the idea of attending a parenting class.
Juggling

Involvement with child welfare usually means intrusiveness on the part of the courts, case workers, and service providers. The fathers believed that too many services were being recommended for them to complete as part of their case plan. The sub-theme of juggling was provided by Mr. Williams as he compared his situation of having to complete several services recommendations as being a clown in a circus. Mr. Williams expressed his frustration by stating,

So, it's like they're telling me to quit my job you know... to get all this done. I don't know... they wanted me to do that, but they wanted me to do a drug treatment class um... (long pause) and they also wanted me to take a parenting class right... and I... um I have been parenting my kids. They wanted me to juggle, and I'm not a clown, but I felt as if I was in their circus.

Similarly, Mr. Robinson described his experience of having multiple service recommendations. His explanation and frustration are expressed in his comment regarding multiple services and the expectation of finding full-time employment.

Since I moved back from Georgia to Florida I had nothing...nowhere to go. I couldn't have my children with me because of that...and I had no job. The case manager told me I had to do family therapy with my children before I got them back because they never lived with me. Then I had to do parenting class. They want me to go to therapy...do parenting...find job...find housing (counting tasks on his fingers) all before I could get my children back. How? Therapy once a week, parenting once a week. Where would work fit in?

While Mr. Clifford was angry about having to successfully complete multiple services before having unsupervised contact with his children, he also expressed that he believed the
services given to him were not relevant to his child welfare case. Mr. Clifford stated that he had a
driving under the influence (DUI) charge 10 years ago and believed that because of that incident
on his record, he was recommended for substance abuse classes as part of his case plan. He had
not been arrested since then on any charges of DUI; neither was there any alcohol involved when
the altercation between him and his ex-wife occurred. He was displeased with having to
complete irrelevant tasks, which is evident in the following comment.

I had to meet a lady and she made me sign a paper that says I have to go to anger
management and um... substance abuse... but I don’t understand that part. But I guess
they gave that to me because they went in my records and saw that I... um (pauses)
been arrested for DUI. But this was like 10 years ago I haven’t had no incident after that
and I don’t have anger issues. I’m not a angry or violent person so that didn’t make any
sense...

Much like Mr. Clifford, Mr. Carter was displeased with the services referred. Mr. Carter
felt as if he was given a lot of tasks, and as if he was being forced to complete the tasks. He
stated that of all the services recommended, he was most willing to do parenting.

So much to do, and it’s not easy stuff. They don’t make it easy for you, not that I want
easy, but talk to me first. Before I went to jail I had signed up for a class for parents and
a drug program. They also wanted me to do therapy, but I could refuse it...I did. I don’t
need therapy. I’m not crazy. I was willing to do the parents class though.

**Parenting Skills in Question**

All of the fathers were open to the idea of attending parenting classes, however, only Mr.
Carter believed it would be beneficial; the other fathers felt as if they were being judged. Mr.
Carter being the youngest of the four fathers and a first-time parent, agreed that he needed
parenting classes. The other fathers believed that the incident they were involved in should not have led to their role as a father being questioned. Regarding parenting classes Mr. Williams stated,

My kids are pretty good and I'm pretty good at what I do. But they still wanted me to take a parenting class to... to... to... tell me the same thing, you know... that I already know. But um... and I had to do all of this and maintain my job full-time. So, um... and if I had lost my job then I wouldn't be able to afford getting the kids back... and you know I just don't think it's fair.

Mr. Clifford attended parenting classes as recommended, however, he felt as if it was not something he needed. He explained, “They told me to do parenting classes... parenting? How do you teach somebody how to be a parent? I went, learned some things... but... but... I could have done without it.” Mr. Robinson felt uneasy about attending the parenting classes. He understood that the children did not live with him at the time of the incident, however, he believed that parenting is something that is innate. Mr. Robinson stated, “Going to the class did not sit right with me you know... yea the children didn’t live with me. But being a father is something you have or don’t. And... I feel... I knew I could do it.”

**Intergenerational Child Welfare Involvement**

The theme of intergenerational child welfare involvement was evident for all of the participants. Throughout the interviews, the fathers expressed not wanting their children to end up in a system they were familiar with. Mr. Carter, Mr. Williams, and Mr. Robinson experienced the child welfare system as children, and Mr. Clifford’s encounter as a child was limited to his cousins’ experiences. As a child, Mr. Clifford’s cousins were brought to live with his family after they were removed from his maternal aunt for substance misuse. Mr. Clifford mentioned that
besides his cousins' involvement, this was his first time as an adult being involved in child welfare. He stated,

I was brought to the system... I didn't know how to go about things because my family was never involved like that. I was raised around it because my cousins came to live with us for a while when I was a little boy because my aunt had problems with drugs.

Mr. Robinson explained his involvement with the child welfare system by stating that his parents could not deal with his behaviors as a teenager, so they gave him up to DCF. Regarding his encounter as a child, he explained,

My parents felt that I needed to be in the system because I wouldn't listen. My mother was a single mother, and my father had a new family and problems of his own. The last time I got arrested my mother refused to get me from the jack (juvenile detention center), so DCF took me.

Mr. Carter mentioned that because of his own involvement he was familiar with the child welfare system. He explained that his parents had drug issues and because of this, he has been in multiple foster homes. At the time of the interview, Mr. Carter was a 22-year-old unmarried Black male with a 2-year-old child, who at 18 years old aged out of the foster care system. He expressed that he and his brothers and sisters grew up in the system.

My brothers and sisters and I were first living with my grandmother. The second time...we were place in group homes. I can't count how many times...I turned 18 in foster care. My mom and father was...on that...on drugs. In and out of jail...I know the system well.

Mr. Williams mentioned the similarity with his case as a child and his child welfare case as an adult.
My mother tried her best to raise me. She was always working, and I work hard because I saw my mother working hard. But even with that the state took me away. I was in foster care for about a year when I was 9 because my mother left me and my little sister at the house, so she could work...and here I was. Caught up...the same way...sort of...

**Wanting to Break the Cycle**

The need to break out of the cycle of child welfare and foster care was prominent throughout the interviews for the fathers who were involved as children. Mr. Clifford expressed that when he was a child he witnessed what his cousin went through when he was taken from his mother and did not want his children to suffer the same fate.

My children didn’t deserve to be in DCF because their mother and me have problems. Dealing with my cousins when they were taken away was hard for them...and we weren’t nice all the times...just being kids and all. I don’t want my kids being treated bad...not because of me.

Mr. Carter acknowledged that the system “raised him,” but did not believe they did a good job.

I had been in so many group homes, been in so many fights, so many schools. I didn’t want that for my child. My life was a constant fight...so when that case worker was being nasty...I knew what it was hitting for...

Mr. Robinson explained that he was constantly running away from group homes as a teenager. He mentioned that times were different back then regarding technology and that made it harder to find him. The last time he ran away from a group home he was 14 years old, and he was a run-away until age 18. Mr. Robinson stated that he ran because he did not want to be a part
of the system when he was a child because of negative things he experienced, and he does not want his children to be involved in it now that he is a parent: “I ran from the system all the time when I was young...and I was going to get my kids out of it.”

**DCF Involvement is Negative/Bad**

Parents often fear what might happen to them if they allow the state to intrude in their lives, so parents often resist or hide their children to thwart child abuse investigations. Some parents become frustrated and give up, while others navigate as best as they can. All four fathers expressed their fears as it related to involvement with DCF. Mr. William’s fear stemmed from his experience as a child.

When I was in the system I was away from my sister, and that was my biggest fear when I found out DCF had the kids. They were going to...uhm...to...split my kids up.

That’s not good for them...it wasn’t for me.

Mr. Clifford’s opinion of DCF being negative was derived from his cousins’ experience when they lived with his family as a child.

I just knew my aunty was a drug addict who couldn’t take care of her kids. My mom took them in, and it was hard on us...and hard on them. My little cousin would cry all the time for his moms. So... I always think of DCF as being a bad thing, a bad thing that I became a part of.

Mr. Carter described having DCF in his life as much like an invasion, and not of the good kind. I feel like they just came in and took over my whole life. I know the system. Real well (eyes widened). I was a part of it. I grew up in it. My whole family been a part of the system.
As mentioned earlier, Mr. Robinson spoke about his constant running away from the system, believing it was better to be on his own at a young age than in DCF’s custody where he was treated badly by his caregivers. He also remarked that there was a lot of bullying by peers, and fights.

Well they tried to get me in the foster care system you know... but back then the times were different then, but me personally I ran away. Every time they caught me and brought me back I would runaway till eventually they never caught me again... until you know... by the time it was too late I was 18. So, I couldn’t be in the system anymore. So, I was on the run for four years. I was on my own at 14.

Feelings of Helplessness

All of fathers interviewed spoke about their ignorance of child welfare laws, and feelings of helplessness when restrictions were placed on their interactions with their children. Parents who become entangled in the child welfare system most times do not know the laws as it applies to their situation. This example is evident in Mr. Clifford’s comment.

I was brought to the system and I didn’t know how to go about things, because this was my first time getting involved as a parent. It was hard for me (sighs). It was tough... (long pause). Trying to get in contact with the caseworkers and all that, getting the right information going about things the right way just so things will flow easier, but it seems as if sometimes... sometimes they don’t make it easy for you and you have to go through a lot and jump through a whole lot of hoops.

In Mr. Williams’ case, he was clearly frustrated with the system and stated that he was never able to readily get in contact with anyone. He remarked that he did not ask for further
clarifications when needed because he was embarrassed and did not want to seem as if he was “stupid.”

In the beginning I felt like a fish out of water. If I asked for guidance it seemed like you’re stupid. Like you don’t know what you’re doing. And you don’t. You know...(pauses). This is not something I get involved with every day, this was new to me, but those people (shakes head), they expect you to know the rules, know where to turn, know what to do next...just...just...

Mr. Carter commented that while trying to navigate the system, he stopped asking for help out of frustration. He mentioned that having been raised in the system as a child, and being involved as a parent are separate, and equally confusing experiences.

No help asked for and none they gave. They come in, do what they want and leave you to do you...and you better do it the way they want it. Or you’re screwed. I was raised in the system. I knew the system as a child. But as a man...a father...an adult. I didn’t know nothing.

Mr. Robinson stated that when contact was made with the case worker assigned to his case, he was given information that he did not understand, and the worker did not explain the information to him.

Help? (laughs). Nothing. They actually didn’t offer me no help. They gave me grief. It was just...you know.....their phone numbers to call this person to speak to and wasn’t like it was no real help to me. It was just here...follow this direction go call this person. You know....then you call that person and then that person. It was always a constant run around. I felt like on one knew what the other person was doing. I’ve been on my
own since I was 14 years old and didn’t need as much help on the streets like I did with these people at DCF...they make you feel small.

**Willingness to Comply**

All participants reported they were willing to comply with whatever restrictions were imposed by the child welfare courts, if it meant having their children in their home. Mr. Williams declared that he was willing to do whatever was asked of him to ensure his children were returned home.

I was willing to do whatever they wanted me to do. My children needed to be with me and their mother. All of this could have been handled in a different way, but instead they want to push people around and show them who was in charge. The moment they took the kids I knew they were in charge...so I...I... had no other option but to do it.

Mr. Robinson expressed that it was hard knowing that his children ended up in foster care, but he was willing to fight to get them out of the system.

Well it was really hard you know... to know that you work so hard and you sacrificed to not give your kids that life, but it is ended up happening anyway. You begin to feel as though you had no rights or privileges as being their biological father. You know I came and I fought for them. I did everything the system asked me to do. As far as like establishing myself as a good parent.

Mr. Clifford wanted to ensure that he came across as a good parent. He stated that he was a good parent and because of his involvement with DCF, he was willing to ensure he did what was necessary to have unsupervised visits with his children.

I have always done everything I can to make sure my children had what they wanted. Even when me and my wife were going through our issues I did what I needed to. I
went to the court and asked for visitation with the children. Nothing was different when DCF came into the picture. I worked hard. I did everything. I was not in the wrong with this situation, and I was going to make everything right. So, I did what they asked. Even when they wouldn’t help, I didn’t stop going.

Mr. Carter was willing to comply with whatever services DCF recommended, as he was intent of breaking the cycle of incarceration and DCF involvement. He stated that the memory of disappointment from his biological father kept him going. Mr. Carter’s willingness to comply is obvious in his comments.

This was my first born. My father was in prison all my life growing up. He still doing his bid right now. I wanted to do something different than he did. I grew up in the system, I didn’t want that for my child. I know what it’s like to be disappointed, I didn’t want that for my child. So, I sat down with the lady and listen when she told me what I needed to do.

**Summary**

In this chapter the themes most relevant to the lived experiences of Black fathers in child welfare emerged, including case worker attitude and characteristics, services overload, intergenerational child welfare involvement, feelings of helplessness, and willingness to comply as the overarching themes. The interviews flowed in different directions for each participant, however, the themes and sub-themes were constant throughout the interviews and connected across the cases. Chapter V contains a more detailed discussion of the themes that emerged in light of past literature, along with implications and discussions as it pertains to the field of family therapy, research, and practice.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Discussion of Themes and Connection to Study

The intent of this research was to examine the lived experiences of Black fathers in child welfare, using the theoretical framework of Black feminist family therapy. The guiding research questions were, (a) What are the lived experiences of Black fathers currently involved in the child welfare system? (b) What are their ideas on how the child welfare system can best engage them? As outlined in the methodology section, I read and re-read the transcripts, took notes of themes that captured the essence of the participants’ experiences, and searched for connections across the themes taking notes of the similarities and differences between the fathers’ experiences. The fathers gave rich, detailed accounts of their experiences, much of which aligned with the limited information about this topic. The fathers’ lived experiences enabled me to add to the current literature, while paving the way for future research. I decided to narrow my scope and focus on Black fathers because Black children are overly represented and underserved within the child welfare system.

As derived from the analysis, fathers’ interaction with case workers was a dominant theme, with several sub-themes. The fathers believed it was difficult to communicate with their case workers, did not feel as if they were being heard, felt ignored, believed case workers were inexperienced, uncaring, judgmental, and there was a lack of connection between themselves and the case workers. According to Hojer (2011), when it comes to describing the system of care, parents give differing accounts. However, the author continued by stating that what was relevant were the attitudes of their case workers, their ability to show empathy, respect, sincerity, and willingness to listen to the parents as they describe their experiences. Most of the literature reviewed described fathers as unwilling, uncooperative, and hard to engage. However, all four
Black fathers interviewed for this study expressed their willingness to comply with the child welfare system, even though they all admitted to feelings of helplessness while navigating the system. The fathers were cooperative and willingly described their experiences for this study, highlighting areas they believed could be improved upon within the system of care. The fathers believed that for more successful engagement with case managers, case managers needed to be empathetic, helpful, non-judgmental, knowledgeable and encouraging.

To properly engage parents, it is important for them to feel as if they are in control when it comes to family support (Platt, 2008). The fathers in this study all expressed that they felt helpless navigating the system, and in Mr. Carter’s case, he requested to have a meeting regarding his case and was told that a meeting was held while he was incarcerated. He felt powerless and voiced that he believed the system had already made up its mind as to how his case would be handled. Parents are powerless as child welfare workers are the ones in charge (Fazioli, Lawson, & Hardiman, 2009). The power construct that exists between parent and case worker is ominous, and parents are at times afraid to voice their opinions in fear of being labeled difficult or uncooperative.

Notwithstanding the underlying power hierarchy that exists between case workers and parents, there needs to be space made for empathy. The fathers in this study reported that they did not feel as if they were being heard, felt ignored, and as if their case workers were uncaring. In most instances, the fathers stopped communicating with the case workers. Mullins (2011) aptly points out that it is important for case workers to be empathetic, conversely, displaying empathy does not mean child abuse is being tolerated, but instead used as a gateway to effect change. The fathers throughout the interviews expressed that they felt helpless and believed the system should be designed to readily assist in completing required tasks, especially when the
parents are being cooperative and compliant. Mr. Williams believed that his feelings of helplessness stemmed from the lack of assistance from his case worker, who expected him to navigate a system that he did not fully understand, and who at times also seemed to lack knowledge. Mr. Williams' idea on how the child welfare system could best rectify this issue, is to ensure that case workers themselves are properly trained, so that they in turn, can confidently advise parents on what steps need to be taken for successful case closures.

The fathers felt that the case workers' race, and in one case gender, played an important role in how they approached their caseworkers for assistance and viewed their willingness to help. Representation matters, and if the fathers are able to identify with the case workers, engagement becomes easier. According to Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, Needell and Park (1996), by increasing the number of case workers of color, this may assist in ensuring that communities of color are properly served and in turn balance the outcome of child welfare needs. The fathers believed that the case workers were unwilling to help as the system was designed for them to fail. The fathers felt more trusting and comfortable with having a case worker of the same race because they believed a case worker of the same race would be understanding of their cultural upbringing and background. Slavery may be viewed by members of the society as history, however, Blacks deal with the effects of slavery on a daily basis, and it is believed to be manifested in societal systems such as child welfare. As previously mentioned in the literature, child welfare and criminal justice are related in that they are both involved in separating families when members have become problematic; as a result the Black family suffers (Roberts, 2002). Therefore, Blacks are distrusting of both the child welfare system and the penal system, as was expressed by fathers in this study. Black feminist therapists can assist families in dealing with historical trauma, thus allowing trust to be somewhat established.
The theme of services overload emerged when fathers began to express during their interviews that their case plans were filled with many tasks. Fathers are expected to complete multiple services while maintaining a full-time job. All fathers interviewed expressed frustration at this expectation. The fathers also reported that they were not consulted regarding recommendations for services, but instead were given an outline of services they were expected to successfully complete within a given timeframe, without fully understanding why some of the services were required. According to Schreiber, Fuller and Paceley (2013), it is important to parents that their case workers are honest when communicating the process of their cases and that information regarding next steps are unambiguous. While voicing their frustrations, the fathers stated that they would have preferred if they were involved in the case planning process and able to discuss the type of services they believed would be beneficial.

The child welfare system needs to be proactive in the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and proper assessment of service referral needs to be completed. Furthermore, it is the practice of child welfare workers to recommend services to parents for successful reunification after the child has been removed from the home instead of assessing for service needs prior to removal, especially for Black families. As mentioned in Chapter I, the child welfare system is more likely to remove a child from their home than a White child. White children are more likely to be recommended for services intervention in the home instead of being placed in licensed care. In this study, Mr. Williams may not have made the best decision by leaving his children in the home with a drug abusing mother, however, instead of removing the children from the home and placing them with relatives, appropriate services could have been put in place to ensure the safety of the children. The mother of Mr. Williams' children could have been asked to move out
of the home instead of disrupting the children. Mr. Williams could have also benefitted from child caring services such as day care referrals to assist with his babysitting issues.

Children ranging from 0-3 years old involved in the child welfare system are mandated by the federal government to enroll in early intervention services (Lipscomb, Lewis, Masyn, & Meloy, 2012). Lipscomb et al. (2012) point out that there is a high rate of enrollment of children in the child welfare system in child care programs, and this is in place to support employability of parents. The traumatic experience for Mr. Williams’ children were compounded by the removal, and as reported by Keil and Price (2005), placement in out-of-home care is detrimental to the mental and medical health of children. It is the responsibility of the child welfare system and their providers to ensure clients of the system are referred to a reasonable amount of services that are appropriate.

Another prominent theme in this study was intergenerational child welfare involvement. Three of the four fathers of this study had direct involvement with the child welfare system as a child, while one was connected through family involvement. The fathers all expressed disappointment in being involved with a system that had a negative connotation, evidenced by the narrative of wanting to break the cycle, but believed family history made their involvement inevitable. For example, Mr. Carter lamented that he did not have his parents around to raise him. He was a victim of child abuse as a child, with parents who abused illegal substances and engaged in criminal activity. The lifestyle of his parents ultimately led to his father being incarcerated on drug related charges. Attachment theory purports that abused children are insecurely attached to their parents and if left untreated, it is likely that the abused child will become an abusive parent (Marshall, Huang & Ryan, 2011). In Mr. Carter’s case it is normal for him to yearn for a relationship that he did not have, but if left untreated the cycle of child
maltreatment will continue. He did express, however, the need to change the trajectory of his life.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

This study explored a topic that has not been widely researched and because of the sample size of this study, the reader must be careful of making assumptions or generalizations about the findings. The sample size was small and homogenous, and it would be beneficial if conversations were to be continued with a larger number of participants in various stages of child welfare. It should be noted, however, that there is strength in having a small sample, as this allowed for deep, meaningful conversations with the participants. I was able to form a connection with the participants during the interviews and gained their trust, thus, allowing the participants to shed their armor and engage in vulnerable conversations filled with emotions and sincerity. The focus on Black fathers was a strength because it allowed me to focus on a population that is ignored, thus, filling in a gap in existing literature. However, not considering the perspectives of the Black mothers within this study was a limitation. The perspectives of Black mothers would be beneficial as it relates to how they cope when fathers are not held accountable by the child welfare system, especially when they are the perpetrator of abuse.

Another limitation of the study is the focus on participants with a closed case. By only selecting participants with a closed case, the perspectives of the participants were retrospective in nature, and this may or may not have added to the validity of the data. Participants with open cases may have a different outlook, as interviews would be conducted during ongoing experiences, which may give fresh perspectives. The findings presented were from four Black fathers with closed cases within the child welfare system between the ages of 22-42, a population for which the literature reviewed did not provide adequate detailed information. The final
limitation to this study is based on the literature reviewed. The literature reviewed for this study was limited regarding Black fathers’ experiences within the child welfare system, as most of the literature is about the experiences of all fathers in general, not specifically Black fathers.

**Implications and Recommendations for the Field of Family Therapy**

There are not many studies in the literature pertaining to Black fathers and their experiences navigating the child welfare system. As a student in the field of marriage and family therapy and having a career in child welfare, it was disheartening to discover that there was not much updated literature geared towards Black fathers and child welfare. Because of this, there are misconceptions within the child welfare system as it relates to the engagement of fathers, and their willingness to complete services. It is my intent to change the narrative.

Within the Black community there is a stigma that is attached to therapy, and a Black man seeking therapy could be viewed as weak. In seeking help, Black families often turn to their church, close family friends, or family connections they have made by attending church (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Therapists who become involved in the treatment of Black fathers must be vigilant in treating not just the issue at hand, but the impact that historical trauma has on the Black man’s mental health and conditioning. Black men are discriminated against daily, and this discrimination causes them to have low self-esteem which influences how they relate to their family (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). As a Black feminist family therapist who believes in equality for everyone, it is important to focus on the experiences of all members of the family, not just mothers and daughters. There is a tendency to negate our Black boys, and shine light on our Black girls. I will attend to this narrative within the Black culture and serve to empower Black boys as much as Black girls.
Franklin et al. (2006) believe the trauma suffered by slaves due to slavery has been passed down to future generations and impacts current behavior, stating: "These emotional and psychological traumas transmitted intergenerationally have never healed and continue to have psychological consequences such as lack of self-esteem, or the anger and violence currently seen in some young Black males" (p. 16). According to McWey, Pazdera, Vennum and Wojciak, (2013), when intergenerational pattern of abuse is confirmed, the parents' childhood abuse must be understood so that treatment can be tailored to their needs instead of having one type of treatment for all. However, they point out that little research has been conducted related to "understanding beliefs regarding past abuse and current parenting practices of parents who were maltreated" (McWey et al., 2013, p. 135). With the information provided in this dissertation research pertaining to historical trauma, mass incarceration, and institutionalized racism, therapists have a duty to address these ills when Black clients are referred, especially by way of the child welfare system.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings of the current study contribute to the gap in the literature regarding child welfare and Black fathers. The research results are a small step towards assisting Black fathers when navigating the child welfare system and helping child welfare workers provide more effective services for this population. There are many possibilities that await in future research on this topic that may help keep families together and begin healing and building trust when it comes to racial trauma in Black families. It is my intention to continue to my research on this topic and the various themes that emerged from this study.

For example, I would like to expand my research to focus on fathers of all ethnicities in comparison to White fathers, to determine the differences and similarities when the child welfare
system is being navigated. It is also my intent to triangulate the information obtained in this research about Black fathers with the perspectives of Black mothers. Black mothers should be acknowledged for their role in ensuring that the family’s emotional and financial needs are adequately met when fathers are missing from the home. Research also needs to be conducted on the matching of race and/or ethnicity of child welfare workers and clients. In this study, some fathers reported that they were comfortable working with case workers who were the same race as they were, as they perceived that these case workers understood them and were more empathetic to their needs. Others reported that they felt judged and discriminated against by case workers who were racially different.

More work needs to be done in building a trusting relationship with child welfare workers and fathers, so that fathers feel comfortable in requesting assistance. For future practices, proper assessment needs to be completed in the assignment of case plan tasks, as most of the fathers reported that they were given tasks that were not beneficial or relevant to their cases. By involving fathers in their case plans, fathers are empowered in seeking help and completing tasks.

Fathers who are incarcerated or who have been incarcerated should be considered for services and placement when appropriate instead of being denied the right to care for their children based on their criminal history. Black families are missing Black fathers. Families are disrupted due to the high incarceration of Black fathers, and children left behind often end up in foster care (Roberts, 2002). A million Black men can be found within the confines of the penal system; however, society has turned a blind eye to the role the criminal justice system plays in the absence of these Black men (Alexander, 2010). The literature supports the view that Black men in prison would like to maintain a connection with their children while incarcerated,
however, there are few prisons that facilitates or have implemented services geared towards incarcerated fathers. Case workers must make all possible efforts to ensure that children of incarcerated parents are given the opportunity to build connection with their incarcerated fathers as appropriate. The engagement and involvement of incarcerated fathers must be encouraged. While most prisons are not equipped to provide relevant services, case plans can be tailored to involve incarcerated fathers so that upon release, they are given the opportunity to interact with their children. With proper monitoring and as permitted by laws, incarcerated fathers should be given the opportunity to be involved in their child’s life.

Conclusion

Being a Black feminist family therapist with a passion for child welfare and the field of marriage and family therapy, propelled me to provide Black fathers involved in child welfare an opportunity to talk about their experiences without fear of negative consequences. The technique of semi-structured interviewing was conducted to allow the fathers to speak freely about their experiences in the hopes that professionals in the child welfare system and marriage and family therapists will find the information in this study useful enough to instigate change in their organizations. Throughout the literature, fathers are viewed as uncooperative and unwilling to work with child welfare workers. While this study cannot be generalized to most fathers within child welfare, it was evident that participants in this study were cooperative and willing to comply with their case worker’s demands. In addition, the participants were insightful and fully aware of how their own family background impacted their life, and expressed the importance of breaking the cycle. The fathers interviewed stated that once they were given a case plan, steps were taken to complete all tasks as soon as possible. When barriers were presented by way of the
case worker’s attitudes, the fathers chose to focus on completing the tasks according to their case plans.

During the interviews, fathers expressed a feeling of helplessness in navigating the system and sought assistance from others regarding navigation. The sub-theme of helplessness was central to all participants’ narratives and should be addressed properly at the institutional level within agencies to minimize parents’ frustrations. Those involved in the case planning of services for parents should include and request the input of both parents to provide a sense of empowerment and confidence in the process. All themes and sub-themes identified in this study were consistent with most of the literature reviewed, however, there are gaps that need to be filled with future research. Black fathers with child welfare involvement are available and willing to be a part of their children’s lives, however, they are often ignored or stereotyped. It is time for case workers, therapists, and leaders in child welfare on the administrative level to begin the process of engagement.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Nova Southeastern University

Are you a black father that was previously involved with the child welfare system and would like to share your experience?
If yes, I would love to hear from you!

To Participate or If You Would like More Information on This Research, Contact:
Principal Investigator: Tamaru Phillips
Phone: (305) 767-5928
Email: tamaru@mynsu.nova.edu

Research Location: 7232-B Taft Street, Hollywood Fl 33024

Research Procedures:
This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of Black fathers previously involved in child welfare.
- Participants will discuss their experience in a 60-90-minute semi-structure interview.
- All information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used.
- A $25 visa gift card will be given to participants to assist with travel expenses.

Eligibility Criteria
- Black male, English speaking only.
- Previous involvement in the child welfare system either as an offending or non-offending biological parent with no active child welfare cases.
- Successfully completed a court ordered case plan within the last year.
- Not being incarcerated at the time of the child’s removal from the home.

To Participate or If You Would like More Information On This Research, Contact:
Principal Investigator: Tamaru Phillips
Phone: (305) 767-5928
Email: tamaru@mynsu.nova.edu
Appendix B

General Informed Consent Form

NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled
A Phenomenological Study of Black Fathers in Child Welfare

Who is doing this research study?
College: College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Department of Family Therapy
Principal Investigator: Tamaru Phillips, Master of Public Administration
Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Kera Erolin, PhD
Site Information: Happy Girls, LLC 7232-B Taft Street, Hollywood FI 33024
Funding: Unfunded

What is this study about?
The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of Black fathers who were previously involved in the child welfare system. This study is significant as it will provide information to child welfare workers and marriage and family therapists on how to best engage fathers of children who are in the child welfare system.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?
You are being asked to be in this research study as I would like to hear about your experience of being a black father navigating the child welfare system. I believe that your experience would be invaluable to those that work in the field, allowing them to improve upon areas of the system that may be deficient.

This study will include about 5 people.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview length will be approximately 60-90 minutes and audio recorded to be transcribed later for research analysis. The interview will be semi-structured giving you the participant the ability to speak
freely on your experiences. This interview is expected to be completed in one session. If clarification is needed while analyzing the data, you may receive a follow-up phone call requesting clarification. There will not be a need to visit the site after your initial visit, as any follow up will be done over the phone.

**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life. You may experience psychological discomfort when retelling your experience. You may find some questions we ask you to be upsetting or stressful. If so, I can refer you to someone who may be able to help you with these feelings.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study, but you may request that it not be used.

**What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help other fathers competently navigate the child welfare system,
but most importantly involve fathers as appropriate, in decision making and services referral regarding their child welfare involvement.

**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will be given a one-time $25 visa gift card for being in this research study. This gift card is to cover travel expenses that you may incur as a participant of this study. The $25 will be given at the beginning of the interview, and if you decide to withdraw from the interview before its completion, you will be not be asked to return the gift card.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to further protect the identity of the participants. Research records will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home private office, and I will be the only one with access to the records. Electronic files will be kept in a private folder on my personal computer with a locked password that only I will have access to. This data will only be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If I publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, I will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by shredding all electronic and paper files.

**Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

This research study involves audio recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what
is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the
recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will ensure that anyone not
working on the research will be prohibited from listening to the recording.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the
research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:

Tamaru Phillips, MPA can be reached at (305) 767-5928

If primary is not available, contact:

Kara Erolin, PhD can be reached at (954) 262-3055

**Research Participants Rights**

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790

IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-
participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

All space below was intentionally left blank.
Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:

- You have read the above information.

Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the

Adult Signature Section

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

Printed Name of Participant       Signature of Participant       Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent and Authorization  Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Authorization  Date
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experience as a Black father trying to navigate the child welfare system, and what challenges if any did you have to overcome?

2. What are your ideas on how the child welfare system can best engage you?

3. Do you think society has expectations for your role as a Black father? If yes, how do you believe these roles affect your ability to parent? If no, why not.

4. What would you say were the most positive aspects of your experience with child welfare if any and why?

5. What would you say were the most negative aspects of your experience with the child welfare system if any and why?

6. How comfortable were you in asking for guidance or assistance as needed? And who would you say was the most helpful?

7. How would you describe your relationship with your case worker?

8. Were therapeutic services/interventions offered to you as an individual or your family at any time throughout your involvement with child welfare?

9. Is there anything else would you like to add about your experience with the child welfare system?