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An Ethnography of African American Parents' Perceptions About Exiting the Child Welfare System

Clevester Moten
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Clevester Moten

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

An Ethnography of African American Parents' Perceptions

About Exiting the Child Welfare System

by

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2007

BS, Eastern Michigan University, 2005

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Families of color in the State of Michigan, as in many other states, have been overrepresented in the child welfare system, particularly in the foster care system. The Child and Family Services and Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288) was intended, in part, to provide community-based interventions that could rectify the inequality some African American families experienced during their journey through the U.S. child welfare system. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's human ecology theory and Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of African American parents and families about the barriers they experienced in exiting the child welfare system, thereby expanding the current literature and increasing awareness of institutional racism that many African American families experience. The central research question was how human ecology and social disorganization theories might explain the challenges African American families experienced in exiting the child welfare system. Semi structured interviews of 8 African American parents were conducted and data analyzed using a continuous iterative process. Findings indicated that African Americans experienced institutional racism and cultural bias from caseworkers that appear to slow their successful exit from the system. Implications for social change include informing policy makers of the need for cultural sensitivity training among those responsible for implementing child welfare policies so as to lessen biased pathways African American families experience while navigating through these complicated systems.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research project to the many African American biological parents and families that participated in the child welfare system, and while participating faced issues related to institutional racism, and for participating in this research project. I do realize many African American families that participated in the child welfare system lack voice, and without that voice heard they are likely to be a dependent of the child welfare system, and face more severe social conditions than before entry. Working with African Americans and vulnerable families has been my passion and will continue being my passion to assist them in navigating through issues related to bias and institutional racism. Continued research and assisting these families with navigating through the complex system can offer recommendations to our legislative and governmental bodies to reduce overrepresentation and improve service delivery related to African American culture.

Unfortunately, and through no fault of their own, the African American families and children lack awareness of the policies and their rights for navigating through systems of such complexity. Through further research and examination of this African American's opinions. African American recommendations can be produced and delivered to policymakers and the child welfare system community in ways to close the large gaps between this ethnic group and those designing the policies. Without their views and perceptions conveyed toward equity and equal services, and programs with their cultural specifics included the gaps could close for African American families.

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First, I would like to thank God, without his inspiration and guidance this daunting and irritable task could not have been possible. I would like to acknowledge my mother, the rock of my life and inspiration, I am so proud of her, and you have influenced me and provided with a vision to help those in our communities who are vulnerable. I could not go without thanking my wife and two beautiful daughters, and watching our relationships grow stronger through this process was amazing, and without their faith in me, this accomplishment would not have been possible. Again, I thank everyone.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Interpretation and implementation of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (CFSIA, P.L. 109-288) by child welfare providers looks as if it has failed in reducing African American families' overrepresentation in the U. S. child welfare system. This overrepresentation may be the result of biased entry and exit pathways. Pathways for African Americans are a sequence of interconnecting routes within the child welfare system that this ethnic group participates in before exiting the system. The narrative for why it is difficult for African Americans to exit the system is because of the conceptualized socioeconomic barriers they face daily. Decisions made by child welfare policymakers and providers have failed to reduce the likelihood that African American families participating in the system would encounter biased pathways (Cooper, 2013; Miller & Esenstad, 2015; Wert, Mishna, & Malti, 2016).

These pathways consist of the various stages that occur when a person engages with an institutional system and participates in that institution's operational cycle. In the case of the child welfare system, there are multiple pathways for families to enter. They consist of referral, investigation, and assessment as a result of suspected abuse or neglect of a child; from a delinquency referral to law enforcement; or from a community-based referral source. For example, there may be adjudication and referral to a community-based program, the placement of the child or children into foster care or some other out-of-home placement, and the involvement of multiple court systems. Parents encounter many of these pathways during their experience with the child welfare system.

One form of bias is to feel or show inclination or prejudice for or against someone who is navigating through a system such as the child welfare system. Biased pathways, such as those resulting from entering and exiting the child welfare system, are pathways that African American families have experienced while participating in the child welfare system and are still a national concern (Anyon, 2011; Cooper, 2013; Curtis & Denby, 2011; Klein & Merritt, 2014; Rufa & Fowler, 2016). Scholars, public advocates, and child welfare decision makers have offered many opinions about how to eliminate the overrepresentation of African American families and their biased pathway experiences.

In Michigan, participating families usually make contact with the child welfare system through a referral from child protective service stakeholders, such as law enforcement agents, teachers, physicians, and individuals. After being referred, for alleged abuse and or neglect incident an assessment takes place to determine whether the allegation is substantiated. After that, the client-provider will determine if any, the need for certain community-based services, such as family preservation programs. This service consists of a home-based program that provides a family with services and the resources to avoid the possibility that the children would enter the foster system. African American youth require great mental need because of the exhibit behaviors and subsequent effects from ultimately entering into the foster-care system (Hambrick, Oppenheim-Weller, N'zi, & Taussig, 2016; Rufa & Fowler, 2016; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). For instance, African American children are the least likely to receive mental health treatment and services because of socioeconomic barriers such as the lack of income, lack of adequate Medicaid coverage to participate in effective treatment and therapy. Even though the rate

of diagnosis and presence of a mental health disorder were comparable to that of Caucasian youth, the number of positive outcomes for African Americans in the child welfare system were unfavorable (Font, Berger, & Slack, 2012; Hong, Ryan, Herndandez, & Brown, 2014). Decision makers in the child welfare system continue their efforts to fix the racial inequality and reduce the system's complexity (Anyon, 2012; Miller & Berrick, 2015; Chan & Orellana, 2012).

Reforming child welfare policies that likely include legislation to improve services for better outcomes for families, specifically African American families, is needed since this group has high numbers of representation among child welfare providers. Policymakers who design child welfare policies for client-providers that interpret and make decisions have yet to provide caseworkers who engage with families a resolution for eliminating the institutional disparity among African American families. There has been a decrease in the child welfare representation among African American parents, yet the disproportionate representation statistics are still a significant concern; when comparing African Americans to the national population, the numbers are astonishing (Cooper, 2013). For example, African Americans make up approximately 20% of the United States population but represent over 40% of the child protective services system. Given that more research was conducted on the comparison between how families of color being more likely to mistreat their children than Caucasian families, the racial disparities in the child welfare system constitute a distortion of reality and suggest that the decision makers influence maltreatment (Cooper, 2013; Drake et al.,

2011; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013).

For example, many African American families involved with the child welfare system pathway are immediately stereotyped and pressured by caseworkers to comply with the caseworker's beliefs and ideologies on how to raise children and discipline the children appropriately or risk losing their children. These experiences put these individuals at risk of suffering from further symptoms of mental illness and intensify their socioeconomic barriers. Research contends that when either a family enters the child welfare system, or the child enters foster care, individuals are likely to suffer from some mental illness (Miller & Esented, 2015).

Child welfare system policies have gone through reform with the goal of fixing the system's complexity— a complexity that could result in racial inequalities. The CFSIA was enacted to provide U.S. child welfare agencies with the necessary funding and resources to provide community-based services to keep families together, target at-risk and fragile families and communities, and to provide family permanency skills. The intention of the CFSIA, along with opinions and beliefs of decision makers and public advocates, involved efforts to eliminate racial inequality among African American families participating in the child welfare system.

Counties throughout the State of Michigan have been granted funds from the CFSIA, which give them the financial flexibility to inject community-based interventions into at-risk neighborhoods. Thus, providing financial flexibility provided by CFSIA is designed to preserve families and to keep children from the risk of harm. In 2008,

Michigan entered a federal lawsuit initiated by Children's Rights, Inc. (CRI), a national advocacy watchdog group (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Since the federal and court mandates were established by the CRI, many of those required standards were met by Michigan. However, more reform to Michigan's child protective service system is needed, especially regarding out-of-placement and the community-based interventions that are expected to reduce overrepresentation. Out-of-placement is explained as the child and family being separated with a child placed in foster care.

Yet, many standardized measurements that Michigan was expected to implement under the federal lawsuit agreement for purposes of reducing overrepresentation are not in compliance, and the one that stands out is community-based interventions. Michigan was expected to meet a proximity standard of 90%, but reported to the federal watchdog Children Rights, Inc., of implementing less than 90% of the standard for their community-based intervention efforts. These efforts would likely reduce the many socioeconomic barriers that are associated with African American families' frequent encounters with Michigan's child welfare system (MDHHS, 2014). Some of the socioeconomic barriers are their inability to sustain gainful employment, signal parent household, lack of community networks, and excessive criminal and drug use in the community.

Like many states, gaps between the child welfare system and African American families do exist and need to be bridged. Advocacy usually is one of the mechanisms that help prevent the increase in adverse outcomes for marginalized families. Organizations

like Children's Rights, Inc., advocate on behalf of families that experience traumatic pathways through the child welfare system. Children's Rights is a national advocacy organization with more than two decades of experience in class action reform litigation on behalf of children in the child welfare system. On July 18, 2011, Michigan and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) and Children's Rights, counsel for the plaintiffs, filed with the court a Modified Settlement Agreement (MSA) that established a path for the improvement of Michigan's child welfare system. Elements of the MSA were that Michigan would commit to specific improvements in their care of vulnerable children: safety, permanency, and well-being (MDHHS, 2014). Also, the MSA required Michigan to develop Assessment and Service plans to be completed within 30 days of a child's entry into Michigan's child welfare system. MSA required caseworkers to give quarterly updates of treatment plans to ensure that goals were being met. Michigan has not demonstrated compliance with efforts to ensure clients obtain services including medical, dental, mental health, and education. In 2014, Michigan failed to prove that it is assisting parents, children, and foster parents to connect, engage with, and make use of its family perseverance services. For the children and families, determining and monitoring services for appropriate quality and intended effects of the service was appropriate.

The reason for the lawsuit was the unlawful policies and practices by the Michigan DHS and child care providers, which included the lack of investigation of suspected maltreatment or neglect of children while in state foster care, lack of basic medical and mental health services for children in foster care, excessive lengths of stay in

state custody, and frequent moves among multiple placements. The lawsuit influenced Michigan's child welfare system to change how they work with families, which they implemented various standards and thus made it necessary to improve critical areas to better guarantee child safety and well-being (MDHHS, 2014). Another factor that influenced Michigan to improve its system was the ongoing implementation of both reform and monitoring the way that care was implemented.

Data from 2008–2014 demonstrated many areas of inadequate performance in Michigan's child protective service (MDHHS, 2014). The result was a settlement agreement that forced the state to enter into a federal monitoring protocol. Also, the settlement required the state to meet many federal child and family service standards. As of 2014, the settlement has yet to influence improvement in critical areas of the child foster care system. Children, particularly African Americans are spending timeframes beyond what the laws indicated for long-term placement and because of the lack of foster-care settings or kinship placement ability they are placed in shelters for (Cooper, 2013). Providers in the child welfare system consistently failed to have face-to-face contacts with parents and their children in any month during their pathway; such disparities have left life-long burdens on African American parents and their families.

Studies using national data found African American children to be 3.4 times as likely and Hispanic children 1.2 times as likely than Caucasian children to enter foster care and to spend longer periods of time in the child welfare system services (Cheng & Lo, 2012; Miller, Farrow, Meltzer, & Notkin, 2014). Michigan's foster care entry for African American children mirrors similar concerns with the national foster care system.

African American children in Michigan were likely to “age out” of the foster care system, meaning that they were unable to return to their families or be permanently placed with another relative, or an adoptive family (Michigan Coalition for Race Equity in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice, 2014). In addition, the child welfare system decision-makers and advocates have argued that African American families’ adverse socioeconomic barriers are associated with overrepresentation rates (Boyd, 2014; Dworsky et al., 2010; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Putman-Hornstein et al., 2013). For example, many African American families are living in neighborhoods of high-crime, substance use, drug distribution, high unemployment rate, which these indicators are potential contributors to maltreatment referrals. Expanding on the research and exploration of African American families’ engagement experiences in the child welfare system could give decision makers a platform for eliminating racial inequality.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief historical background, a description of the topic of study, why the research should be conducted, and the implications for social change. I then move on to the problem statement I then describe the reasoning behind, and goals of, this research study. A qualitative methodology was used to collect the data to understand African American families’ experiences in the child welfare system.

Background

Historically, initiatives by child welfare advocates and scholars have sought a reduction in African American families’ racial disparity experiences in the child welfare system. Since 1962, the year that marked the beginning of the child welfare system’s third and modern era of government-sponsored child welfare services, many African

American families have been part of the system. During the movement of child welfare system, African American families were part of major discussions by many scholars (Cheng & Lo, 2012; Myers, 2008; Mirick, 2014; Sribrick, 2011). The purpose of the U.S. child welfare system has been to protect families and children from abuse and neglect and to provide permanency services to those children who might be at risk of being removed from their family of origin. For decades, child welfare researchers and the child welfare system stakeholders have focused on the racial disparities and the disproportionate representation of African Americans participating in the various child welfare services and experiencing poor outcomes.

Minorities, especially African American families, have long experienced biased treatment when involved in supported services provided by the child welfare systems. In fact, the child welfare system research statistics show that systemic inequality remains a problem in the child welfare system across the United States (Anyon, 2011; Moore, Damman, & Rudlang-Perman; Bywaters, Brady, & Sparks, 2016; Lawson, 2014). With this bias and recent policy shifts, African American families are likely to depend more on federal entitlement programs compared to their racial counterparts. African American parents have become more dependent on child welfare services and programs because initiatives in the community-based programs are not sensitive to cultural issues such as poverty, race, or the African American cultural background. U.S. child welfare policy reforms have made some improvements, but many African American families are still experiencing disproportionate representation throughout the child welfare system.

CFSIA was intended to invest in the child welfare system, and particularly to better the outcomes for children, especially African American children, and improving the foster care system. Significant changes occurred with the enactment of the Child and Family Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288). This statute reauthorized funding in 2011 for the Promoting Safe and Stable Families law. Also, because of the reauthorization of CFSIA, states were given the flexibility to make improvements to their child welfare system service programs. The purpose of the child welfare system services program was to protect and promote the welfare of all children, to prevent neglect, abuse or exploitation of children, and to support at-risk families through services that allow children to remain with their families or to return to their families in a timely manner. In addition, the program's goal was to promote the safety, permanence, and well-being of children in foster care. Another goal was the flexibility to improve or make amendments to the programs, such as community-based family support, family preservation, time limits for reunification, and awarded adoption—which the parent and child would benefit from the child welfare system service program. Since the CFSIA was enacted, African American families have further weakened their relationships due to providers lack of cultural knowledge (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). For example, providers are unaware of parenting style expectations, which they may be different from that of African American parenting styles, which then is likely to force biased decisions by the child welfare system provider.

Compared to their counterparts, African American families have experienced more systemic bias along their U.S. child welfare system pathway (Cheng & Lo, 2012;

Miller, Cahn, & Orellana, 2012; Shanks & Danziger, 2010). Societal context, such as poverty, lack of employment, and lack of social networks in African American neighborhoods, has furthered the risk of African Americans being referred to the U.S. child welfare system's programs and services (Pelton, 2015; Shdaimah, 2010). Services offered to African American families are meant to keep their families intact, keep children out of the foster care system, and reunify children with their biological parents (Curtis & Denby, 2010; Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2013; Miller & Esenstad, 2015). Disadvantaged social conditions, such as poor socioeconomic status, are linked to the reasons African American families represent a significant portion of the U.S. child welfare system population (Boyd, 2014; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Lorthridge, McCroskey, Pecora, Chambers, & Fatemi, 2012; USDHHS, 2010b; USDHHS, 2017). Although one intention of the Child and Family Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006 was to reduce institutional discrimination among African American families in the child welfare system, the policy has worked for some states; many others have fallen short of the goal (Anyon, 2011; Cooper, 2013). Michigan and the suit entered by Children Rights in 2008, showed that this state and its local agencies have failed to implement into at-risk community's' community-based interventions that could prevent socioeconomic barriers and child welfare system dependency (MDHSS, 2014).

Child welfare research has indicated that institutional inequality is a problem in state child welfare systems across the United States. Policies such as the CFSIA do not give child welfare systems the ability to deliver culturally competent, community-based programs that would keep African American families out of the child welfare system

(Avery, 2009; Mangum, 2011; Oronde et al., 2014). Policy reform and increased awareness of African American families' overrepresentation in the child welfare system engagement is needed.

Problem Statement

In disproportionately high numbers, African American children find themselves in the foster care system (Cooper, 2013; Kelvin & Merritt, 2014). Implementation of the CFSIA failed to significantly reduce the disproportionate representation and biased journeys of African American families that participate in child welfare services (Anyon, 2011; Boyd, 2014; Cooper 2013). African American families participating in the U.S. child welfare system experience adverse barriers such as the lack of community-based programs; poor socioeconomic status, which are essential characteristics of better child welfare systemic outcomes for this ethnic group (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). For example, during 2012 African American males were 2.5 times more likely to be in foster care than their non-African American male peer's due to the construction of their social environment and community cohesion (Oronde et al., 2014). Similar to national trends, in Los Angeles County, California, African American families account for 9% of the population and 19% of the child maltreatment referrals (Klein & Merritt, 2014). Surprisingly, African American males were almost 30% more likely than other children in foster care to be placed in congregate care. Because of their adverse experiences of navigating through multiple foster care homes and running away which leads to juvenile delinquency. New York City's child welfare system identified that the child welfare system referral stage for African American families and children leaving the system was

still alarming after improving nationally when comparing statistics to their racial counterparts (USDHHS, 2013). Michigan improvements behind the reform of child welfare policy have been recognized, but the implementation of public law from the federal to local levels could use more equitable measures for ensuring equal delivery of services (MDHHS, 2014).

The purpose of the CFSIA was to extend federal funding authorization for the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) programs for five years that would ultimately support monthly caseworker visits to the homes at-risk families and improve outcomes for children affected by abuse and neglect. States were expected to use the income on four services: community-based family supports, family preservation, time-limited reunification, and adoption promotion and support (Stoltzfus, 2015).

The CFSIA of 2006 and many other child welfare policies have not given state child welfare agencies the ability to inject community-based programs into urban areas to support at-risk families and children (Curtis & Denby, 2011; Mirick, 2013). Also, the way state child welfare workers interpreted and implemented these policies have failed at-risk families and children. States like Michigan, which mirror federal concerns were given federal funding to establish community-based service interventions for at-risk families, children and their neighborhoods (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014).

The Title IV-E fund is a federal government funding stream that gives states flexibility to develop child welfare service programs for families whose funding increased from FY 2014 to FY 2015 (Stoltzfus, 2015). This funding stream pays for substitute care and adoption services. Although progress has been made toward the

reduction of disproportionate representation, still there are many advocates a concerned that African American families are socially disadvantaged when it comes to the delivery of public programs funded by Title IV-B of the Social Security Act. The Title IV-B funding stream pays for case management services throughout a state. Many reauthorizations of the child welfare public laws and the financial appropriations are improving family and child welfare experiences, but the implementation of the child welfare policies has not met the needs of those families and children who use the institution. Funding legislation has given states flexibility to implement programs, and those programs are implemented in counties; however, implementation of these community resources are missing in the urban area where the target populations are predominantly African American families and children. The U.S. child welfare agencies lack adequate programming oriented toward the African American culture and have failed to deliver programs in predominantly African American communities where there are rates of high crime and child maltreatment (Boyd, 2014; Foster, 2014). Many policymakers and scholarly advocates are in favor of African American children and families' requests for improving U.S. child welfare policy and the child welfare systems (Dettlaff et al., 2011; Mirick, 2014; Shdaimah, 2010). Unfortunately, African American families are not given an opportunity to voice their perceptions during the implementation process of policy and child welfare services (Miller et al., 2014). African American biological parents' perceptions are ignored largely as to the adequacy for representing a family and the socioeconomic barriers to relative to this ethnic group successfully exiting such a complex system (Avery, 2009; Lorthridge et al., 2012;

Mangum, 2011). Historically, the perceptions and voices of African American biological parents have not been used for reform and implementation of U.S. child welfare policy to improving outcomes for this ethnic group.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative ethnographic study was not just to examine the experiences and perceptions of African American parents and families about the barriers they experienced in exiting the child welfare system, but also their poor outcomes. The purpose of this study was to expand on current literature and increase the awareness of institutional racism that many African American families experience at the expense of the CFSIA of 2006. This qualitative study describes the experiences and perceptions of African American families in one county in Michigan. Understanding families' thoughts related not only to their experiences but also to what they believe might be the modifications to the child welfare system, reduces African American overrepresentation in the child welfare system. The study sought to provide policymakers and child welfare system decision-makers with recommendations for improving outcomes, for not only African American families, but for all families. Also, the results of this research could influence policymakers to reform policy in the direction of providing client-providers with a framework to develop programs based on African American families' culture and living experiences.

Research Questions

The central research question in exploring the barriers to African American participation in the U.S. child welfare system and generating suggestions to improve that

system is as follows: How might human ecology theory and social disorganization theories explain the challenges African American families experience in exiting the child welfare system? The sub-questions were as follows:

1. What perceptions do African American participants in the child welfare system have related to system barriers to exiting the system?
2. What do African American participants propose as solutions to the problems of the child welfare system?
3. How might the voices of participants educate policymakers on child welfare policy so that African American families are better able to exit the system?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework was the lens that guided this research project. The conceptual framework also revealed barriers to African American families exiting the child welfare system and elements for improving policy.

Scholarly research has revealed the social economic, barriers to releasing African American families from depending on U.S. child welfare system services and enduring systemic biases in the system. Unfortunately, the child welfare policies that was implemented have not provided the services necessary for improving their social make-up, for keeping many African Americans out of the child welfare system, or for putting programs in predominantly African American neighborhoods, where rates of crime and maltreatment are high. Social disorganization theorists, Shaw and McKay (1942), provided a platform for this research project; it helped in exploring the social barriers of

African American families who cannot exit the child welfare system. In addition, human ecology theory provided the opportunity to examine the systemic barriers related to the disproportionate representation and the biased decision-making by the U.S. child welfare agencies.

Human Ecology Theory

The child welfare system has been criticized for failing to protect at-risk families and abused children (Connelly, 2014; Curtis & Denby, 2012). Scholars have expressed concern about the vulnerable families and children in our society, especially the fragility of those children who need protection from troublesome family dysfunctions. This protection is necessary for them to reach optimal development and to function in their respective environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the Human ecology theory, which gives this research project a platform for acknowledging the qualitative circumstances that African American families and children that participated in the child welfare system experienced systematic inequality. Since its publication in 1979, Bronfenbrenner's major statement of this theory, *The Ecology of Human Development*, has had widespread influence on the way psychologists and others approach the study of human beings and their environments. As a result of his groundbreaking work in "human ecology," these settings — from the family to economic and political structures — have come to be viewed as part of the life course from childhood through adulthood. The Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Human Ecology Theory, or what has been called the ecological theory, identifies ways extrafamilial conditions and environments influence interfamilial processes. For example, many African American families' living conditions currently are

adversely constructed due to the lack of employment and state of poverty from the merely limited community cohesion. The Human Ecology Theory explains human engagement in complicated environments; the theoretical lens will help this project examine African American families in their complex social settings and focus on the interactions and interdependence of humans across their environments.

Introduced during the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Theory asserted that children and families interact with five systems that influence their development and dependency. The five systems are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem methods outlined how contextual policies could affect the child's development which all are considered influential in shaping the contributions in children's lives.

The microsystem layer represents those factors that are closest to the child and contains the structures in which the child has direct contact. It is in these settings that the child actively interacts with others and develops. This layer encompasses the relationships and interactions a child has with his or her immediate surroundings. The child's surroundings include relationships with his and her family, school, neighborhood, or childcare environments. Immediate surroundings are essential because this is how a child develops cognitively to interact with his or her social environment. Interestingly, microsystems should be assessed over time, because, as individuals, they change over time. A child's failure from acting detrimentally to his or her community will likely result in an adjudication of delinquency under the care of the local child welfare agency. At this

point, parents are likely to be labeled as unfit are because adjudication is then considered a delinquent one. The mesosystem provides the connection between the structures of the child's microsystem. For example, the mesosystem is represented by the relationship between the child's teacher and his or her parents, or between the church and neighborhood, or with public entities. A child's connection with this framework can be with the child welfare system, an ecological process that keeps him or her from the risk of harm or injury. Another example of the mesosystem includes agencies designed to prevent child abuse by the delivery of community-based resources and programs that was linked to the child welfare system.

Mesosystems may include organizations designed to treat and prevent child abuse, including school systems, social work agencies, and hospitals. Without these cohesive mesosystem community connections, children are less likely to develop and adapt to their environment; this is known to be a contributor to their admission into the child welfare system. The failure in the family and neighborhood connections increases socioeconomic disparities toward the family and its ability to sustain consistent employment and support. Without consistent financial assistance for the family, data has identified the single-family household characteristic as being a determinant to African American inability to live according to society standards, which results in their referral and admission into the child welfare system (Font et al., 2012).

Family cohesiveness has been another critical characteristic not only to the development of the child but to determine if the family can live according to societal conformity. Single-parent households may have difficulty adjusting to their social

environment. Difficulty adjusting to these settings, leads to many stressors which subsequently may lead to the abuse of the child. Single-parent households often have one income which likely heightens the potential risk of that family not meeting society's expectations. In turn, this can also raise the likelihood of referrals to the child welfare system for a family that lacks cohesiveness. Decision-making by the child protective service workers incorporate the living conditions of families in their determination as to whether the child has a safe living arrangement and parental relationships that are healthy.

The exosystem is an external environment that indirectly influences a person's development. This system includes the parents' workplace, funding agencies, the court system, state legislatures, and policymaking entities which do not directly involve the child. If the workplace is stressful for the parent, and the parent is laid off, or if the parent works long hours, this might impact the development of the child. Many children face the challenge of not only raising themselves because of their parents' working schedule, but face the risk of becoming improvised, another characteristic related to child welfare system admission. In addition, the lack of supervision for children without at-home adult supervision can increase the risk of those children becoming involved in drug use and or distribution, as well as other inappropriate behaviors while the mother is at work. Ironically, changes in the state funding because of legislative action having modified existing legislation which would likely cause the loss of community prevention. Legislation modification, is yet another example of the exosystemic placing children at risk of child welfare system admission.

The macrosystem is the larger cultural and social context that influences the micro-, meso-, and exosystems and includes government and agency policies and the racial, political, and economic climate. Public laws that are designed for governing society have a significant adverse effect on family's socioeconomic status because of how those rules were implemented by state and local government agencies. Interestingly, the macrosystem includes the family's values, beliefs, expectations, and traditions of the child's culture. An example of how this system impacts the child and family is the underutilization of formal institutional services that have the potential to act as additional supports or resources for an at-risk family.

The exosystem involves links between the social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual's immediate context. The interaction between the child's parent and existing workplace effects families' ability to conform and meet societal expectations of raising a child. A mother in a single-family home lacks the ability to provide for the child as an adequate caretaker or according to society expectations of a caretaker, the child would likely be referred to the child welfare system. For example, the child may be impacted not just by his or her social condition, but the parents' workplace also affects the development of the child. Workplace layoffs may cause stress for the parent which could potentially add uncontrollable stress for the parent which can lead to the child being abused or neglected. Additionally, workplace layoffs for parents have been associated with the increase in statistics of children being at risk of harm and potential abuse and neglect in the home.

Another characteristic associated with child maltreatment and identified in research is the high impact of neighborhoods being dysfunctional and lacking in cohesiveness. Lack of conformity in the region has shown in research that these demographic areas are infected by drug abuse and drug dealing as well as a high crime rate. In this type of environment, the child has the likelihood to engage in that community negatively where he or she is consistently in trouble and later becomes adjudicated to the legal system. The mother then is considered unfit based on institution regulations of the child welfare system. Unfortunately, popular literature demonstrates that because of the lack of conformity in their neighborhood, African American families and children are in authorized community-based resources by the child welfare system.

Community construction is a danger to the child as the neighborhood has been polluted with drugs and lacks economic resources. Complexity and dangers of the area in which the family and child are living increases the risk of a child welfare system referral and family separation because the household lives in conditions that are not accepted by the local child welfare system. Although direct contact has not been concluded, the child's socialization ability has now been affected tremendously.

Social Disorganization Theory

According to the social disorganization theory, structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods characterized by high levels of poverty, single-parent households, racial-ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility, have higher rates of child welfare system contact and juvenile delinquency for African American families (Kingston, Huizinga, & Elliott, 2009; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016). Social disorganization theory explains

the social processes and mechanisms through which particular neighborhood structures can cause families and individuals to become dependent on public assistance. There are two complementary types of community processes that fit into the framework of social disorganization theory: social processes by formal and informal networks of association and informal social control or collective efficacy (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Communities with weak or no social networks and low levels of collective efficacy typically lack the services, social support systems, and informal social controls that are essential for healthy family and child development.

Bursik (1988) defined the social disorganization theory as the inability of community members to achieve shared values or to solve jointly experienced problems. Bursik (1998) based his Social Disorganization Theory views on strong networks of social relationships that prevent child maltreatment and delinquency. Greater capacity in social networks and more efficient neighborhood cohesiveness can have a positive impact on families' values and interests. Social disorganization characteristics such as poverty and ethnic diversity lead to higher delinquency rates because they interfere with community members' abilities to work together (Shaw & McKay, 1942).

Nature of Study

The nature of this study is to provide a concise ethnographic rationale and tradition toward the improvement of African American families' experiences with the child welfare system. Semi-structured interviews helped guide the interviewing process and to capture the African American biological parents' experiences in their local child

welfare agencies. African American families' perceptions for improving child welfare systems and the policies that guided the complex system were examined.

A qualitative approach was chosen because much quantitative research involving African American families' overrepresentation in the child welfare system has already been conducted, and further qualitative research was needed on this group's perceptions for improving the child welfare system. The child welfare system has problems representing African American families equally. This system needs more descriptive viewpoints from African American families that have participated in it to improve outcomes for this ethnic group.

Semi-structured interviews provided a rich context to address African American biological parents' (a) perceptions about the barriers related to them exiting and (b) suggestions for improving the child welfare system. Information collected from the semi-structured interviews helped to amplify the awareness of educating policymakers on cultural competency about African American families and influencing policy reform to the needs for improving the system.

The recruitment process for this research study was of a small Midwest city, that has a population of approximately 5,000 families in Jackson County, Michigan, who are African American and who are participating in the local child welfare system agency services. Sample size for this research project was to interview between 10-15 African American parents or until saturation. The criteria for participation were as follows: African American parents, at least 18 years of age, engaged in child welfare service

programs such as wrap around, community-based, and foster care for at least three months and up until 18 months, who have now exited the system.

Recruitment from this African American population was difficult due to their lack of trust in the U.S child welfare system, as well as the lack of transportation to and from the semi-structured interview location. To engage participants in the semi-structured interview, support was found in the form of individuals in a geographically small, rural, predominately African American neighborhood that consists of about 5000 residents. Included in the recruitment were groups such as clergy, teachers, and others with their fingers on the pulse of that particular community. Care was taken in the selection of sites for interviews to facilitate privacy. A preliminary coding framework based on the conceptual framework for the study was developed before data collection. After completing the interview process, data analysis was conducted, using qualitative software for help with coding the themes. Interview transcripts were reviewed thoroughly to identify emerging codes and themes.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions explain the key concepts of the study. Included in the definition Included in the definition were comprehensive words that identify support in the professional literature. Concepts used in this proposal may require definitions to provide clarity for readers and participants. Therefore, providing working definitions of the concepts that inform the foundation of the research is imperative to the success of this study and to inform scholars and those involved in policy development. Further

explanation related to the definitions can be found in Chapter 2 as well as in Chapter 3 in relation to the interview protocol.

Chronosystem: made up of the environmental events and transitions that occur throughout a child's life, including any sociohistorical events (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Cultural competence: Cultural competence may be defined as having awareness of one's cultural identity and views about differences, as well as the ability to learn and build on varying cultural needs (Burthlet & Parris, 2010; Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015).

Exosystem: elements of the environment that have a profound influence on a person's development even though that individual is not directly involved with that environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Macrosystem: the cultural environment in which the child resides (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Policy process: The policy process is the system that involves problem definition, debate and decision by a governing body, policy formulation, program selection, agenda setting, implementation, evaluations, and termination (Birkland, 2014; Wiber et al., 2012).

Racial disproportionality: This phrase refers to the uneven ratio of a particular ethnic group relative to the group's presence in the overall institutional population (Boyd, 2014; Klein & Merritt, 2014; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Tilbury & Thoburn, 2009).

Street-level bureaucrats: Street-level bureaucrats are individuals of a particular agency or government institution who carry out and enforce actions required by laws and public policies (Lipsky, 2010).

Assumptions

In research, some mechanisms are somewhat out of the control of the researcher, but if they were to disappear the study would become irrelevant or unnecessary (Simon, 2011). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) noted that assumptions are so fundamental that without them the research problem itself could not exist. Besides, assumptions, factors can be potentially influential to the study for which the researcher has no hard data, and for which the researcher cannot or does not intend to control. For example, when conducting a study on the overrepresentation of the African American family in a child welfare system, there is an underlying assumption that this phenomenon will continue to be an important national, state and local topic. However, the underlying premise of working in the social services field was from the researcher's professional experience which leads to the assumption that African American families are overrepresented in the child welfare system.

As the researcher, based on my experience and background as a child and family counselor and a provider of reunification services for families involved in the child welfare system in Agency X, three primary assumptions were held going into this investigation.

First, African American biological parents received unequal treatment and social services when it came to the efforts of reunifying the children with their biological

parents (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). This assumption was based on the premise that poverty-stricken neighborhoods with the lack of conformity offer little by way of support to help serve as a protective factor for children and families at risk for maltreatment. African American families are linked to neighborhoods that lack cohesiveness and the necessary resources to avoid Child Protective Services referrals (Klein & Merritt, 2014). Furthermore, once involved in the child welfare system, African American families and children have not been offered the same amount, or quality of, reunification support services compared to other racial and ethnic counterparts (Johnson-Reid, Drake, & Zhou, 2013; USDHHS, 2012).

Second, services delivered by child welfare systems to Black families did not address the cultural needs to remedy the issue for African American biological parents coming into contact with the child welfare system. This assumption was based on the premise that child welfare providers had yet identify for African American parents and children the social service programs that penetrate their real issues and correlate to the culture of this ethnic group.

The third assumption is that African American families and children are experiencing different outcomes than their racial counterparts during child welfare service delivery. The premise for this assumption comes from the mandates of the child welfare system where African American families and children usually are awarded foster care and community-based resources in an effort to reunite the family. However, the family and children are less likely to reunite, and the child graduates from the foster care system as an adult. Besides, African American families experience poorer outcomes

because there is a disconnection between the Child Welfare Service Provider and parents in the development of proper permanency planning.

The fourth assumption is that African American families have not been given the opportunity to voice their perception as to ways of not depending on the system as well as improving their experiences in the child welfare system. This final assumption was raised that many African American males separated from their primary caregiver because their ideologies were not recognized during the permanency planning stage. Trust and confidence in the public child welfare system no longer exist among African American families and children because they have feared to participate in public social service programs due to their perceptions of being treated poorly.

Furthermore, many African American families then lose their confidence and trust in the child welfare system. This assumption leads to the premise that African American families and children's voices and perceptions are ignored during their participation in the child welfare system.

Scope and Delimitations

The extent of this research project is to explore African American family's perceived perceptions of their socioeconomic barriers to exiting and to improve policy in the child welfare system. The scope of a study refers to the ethnographic parameters under which the study was operating (Simon & Goes, 2013). Making sure participants met inclusion criteria and criteria related to the human ecology and social disorganization theories. Human ecology system developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to understand how systematic mechanisms impact not just an individual's development but their upward

social capabilities. Social disorganization theory developed by Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that an individual's societal conceptualization impacts their ability to live according to social norms of what constitutes a healthy life. There is a research need to gather information from African American biological parents' perspective about the obstacles related to exiting the system and to collect their suggestions for improving the system. African Americans who participated in this research project had the opportunity to voice their opinions freely, and their ideas may help engage policymakers in reforming the Child and Family Improvement Act of 2006.

While foster care representation has dropped significantly from 2002-2011 across the country, a significant divide remains with African American children being more than twice as likely as White children to enter foster care. During the fiscal year 2012, on average, 9.6 of every 1,000 Black children were in foster care, compared with 4.2 for Caucasians (UDHHS, 2014; UDHHS, 2015). The research identified that Caucasian/White families and children were more susceptible to treatment measures than African American families (Eamon & Wu, 2010; Oronde, 2014). This raises the question of whether racial disparities exist on treatment modalities and experiences.

Delimitations of a study are those characteristics that arise from limitations in the scope of the research and by the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions made during the development of the research plan (Simon & Goes, 2013). The findings of this research project may not be applicable to policymakers, but they will get a sense that much more research is needed to solve the national concern of overrepresentation among African American families. Those politicians who lack the knowledge in the child

welfare system were provided with an explanation of the recommendations some parents feel are needed to modify a struggling system.

Limitations

Limitations are matters and occurrences that arise in a study which is out of the researcher's control (Simon & Goes, 2013). Locating interview sites and assuring that participants are comfortable in the interviewing process may be problematic. African American biological parents experience adverse social mobility and could potentially lack transportation to the particular locations. African American biological parents of children in the child welfare system may be hesitant in answering semi-structured interview questions during the interview process (Huang & Coker, 2008; Scharff et al., 2010). African American biological parents could potentially refuse to go in-depth about their experiences when in the child welfare system, as result of not trusting the interviewer, and whether their personal information would be kept private and protected.

As a result, this research project and information collected from data collection process validity could be questioned and securitized. Parents lack of willingness to participate in interviews could be a hindrance to developing a thick description of their experiences, socioeconomic barriers related to their social exclusion, and suggestions for improving the child welfare system. Researcher's personal beliefs and ideologies could influence study outcomes but must remain impartial and open-minded during the interviewing process, and throughout the research project. Finally, these behaviors could hamper the collection of the data necessary to answer the research questions in this study. Strategies for overcoming these challenges was discussed in Chapter 3.

Significance of Study

The results of this research project may increase awareness about African American families' overrepresentation in the child welfare system in one Michigan County. It may also improve this ethnic group's pathways through the child welfare system based on the participants' recommendations to policy and decision makers for improving the child welfare system and its engagement process with this ethnic group. Recommendations given by African American families may also assist the child welfare system in developing programs that are culturally supportive of this ethnic group. It is anticipated that this study will start discussions among policymakers about appropriations allotted for community-based programs in African American communities. Maybe discussions of this significant issue will give states the flexibility to work more closely with providers to implement programs in African American communities. Finally, the study gave providers feedback from African American parents' that helped establish inner-city programs.

Implications for social change from the result of the study are for continued research in cities throughout the State of Michigan that are similar in size. The study certainly sparks questions for a quantitative research method that can be utilized that would expand on current child welfare system research. Future research can be conducted on the narrative for why this ethnic group lacks trust in research and reasons for the lack of knowledge toward research.

Summary

The evidence from the background section of chapter demonstrates that too often, African American families experience institutional racism or bias pathways when navigating through their local child welfare system. Again, as described in chapter one awareness related to African American overrepresentation in the child welfare system needs to be heightened at the local, state, and national levels of child welfare system. History continues to repeat itself without the ability to bridge the gaps between the child welfare system and African American relationships with this provider. This research study was sparked because the lack of research related to African American perceptions and beliefs about improving the child welfare system and their pathways. Often, African American biological parent's perceptions and ideologies when navigating through a system are not valued and heard as to how they feel system mechanisms could improve to meet their needs better.

Historically, overrepresentation among African American families in the child welfare system continues to be under national scrutiny and debate, and a foreseeable phenomenon. As the child welfare system expanded, African American families' representation in this system was likely the focus and discussion toward how improvement should be implemented to influence change. Unfortunately, during these studies African American families were not included, which research convey representation of this ethnic group continued to experience bias decisions and racism in the child welfare system. Opinions and perceptions on how to improve the relationship between this ethnic group and the child welfare system needed further exploration. The

purpose of this study was not to just examine but understand the reasoning for why African American families continue to experience pathways of inequality and injustices during navigation periods in the child welfare system. Different ideologies and cultural beliefs have impacted the ability for African American families to experience outcomes and improvement in their development of their children and themselves after exiting the child welfare system.

Guided by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Shaw and McKay (1942) theories of human ecology and social disorganization concluded organizational and community mechanisms impact individuals and families' development. Using these two prolific theories helped guide and development research questions for this research project. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theory of human ecology focused on how organisms such as the child welfare system impact a family and individual human development and can influence that development that later increases adverse socioeconomic barriers for that individual and family. Shaw and McKay (1942) theory have similar indicators and organisms like Bronfenbrenner's theory that surrounding organisms can impact someone's development and influence socioeconomic disadvantages. Community cohesiveness being a major factor that determines whether family or individuals are successful or referred to the child welfare system. The lack of community cohesiveness extends from drug-infested neighborhoods, high crime rates, high unemployment rates, and juvenile delinquency. These are all organisms of a community that are prevalent contributors toward African American family's outcomes in society and when navigating through systems such as the child welfare system.

Chapter 1 demonstrates that further examination and literature review shall be done and could be challenging. During this research exploration, multiple challenges and limitations was a problem for the researcher. Issues and constraints the researcher experienced during the exploration was explained in-depth during chapter 4 of this research project. Furthermore, the explanation was given throughout chapter 4 how the researcher adjusted to the barriers and limitations that were relevant during the research project.

The significance of this research project may increase awareness towards African American families' overrepresentation in the child welfare system in one Michigan County. Besides, it may improve this ethnic group's pathway through the child welfare system. The study will provide recommendations from African American families' perspective that could offer policy and decision makers ways of improving the child welfare system engagement process with this ethnic group. Recommendations given by African American families may also assist the child welfare system in developing programs that are culturally supportive towards this ethnic group.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Scholars have offered many potential reasons why African American families are overrepresented during their participation in state and local child welfare systems. The National Institute of Health used a national sample of 1,461 child welfare system investigations in 2010 drawn from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being. The study concluded that a combination of public policies, funding mechanisms, and public and private agencies and services need to focus further on cultural competence training for caseworkers (Font et al., 2012; United States Government Accountability, 2013). Surprisingly, there is still a host of public indicators that continue to keep this ethnic group a dependent on the child protective service program mechanism.

The purpose of this study was to expand on current literature and increase the awareness of institutional racism that many African American families experience at the expense of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006. In Chapter 2 I reviewed and synthesize the literature on the problem of overrepresentation of African American families and children in the child welfare system and addressed in Chapter 1. This research project was guided by both the human ecology and social disorganization theories. The policy process described in this research explained how the construction and implementation of policy impact the child welfare agencies, and those it serves. Finally, child welfare reform is discussed.

Keywords were used to identify literature on the research topic as follows: *child welfare system, reform, policymaking process and design, social disorganization, human ecology theories, child protective service, racial disproportionality, and African American families*. They were entered into the following databases: ProQuest Central, SAGE Premier, Science Direct, Google Scholar, Google Books, and SOCindex databases. Three websites were particularly useful: United States Health and Human Services website, the United States Child Welfare Gateway website, and the National Institutes of Health.

The themes scholar-researchers identified to try to improve African American families' experiences through the child welfare system are promoting policy, programs, and services. Miller et al. (2014) argued that the policies guiding the child welfare system's mission towards protecting families and children have failed to provide these themes and implement them in African American families and communities which are highly subjective to child maltreatment association. Further research through the lens of social disorganization and human ecology theories would increase awareness in Black overrepresentation in the child welfare system. The theories will provide initiatives to policymakers in their efforts to eliminate inequality among African American families and to improve the child welfare system structure.

Historical Evolution of Child Welfare System

The shape of the child welfare, protection, foster care, and adoption systems did not take on its modern form until 1974 with the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L. 94-234). The Social Security Act of 1935 substantially extended

the power of the Children's Bureau authorizing it to cooperate with state welfare agencies in establishing, extending, and strengthening predominately rural areas for the protection and care of homeless children in danger of becoming delinquent (Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). According to Billingsley & Giovanni's (1972) research, many Black families were excluded from receiving services awarded by the child welfare system because little was known about the ethnic group. Three key events in the history of child protection preceded the mid-1970s. The first was the creation of The New York Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1875, the first society of its kind.

Second, the Social Security Act of 1935 greatly extended the power of the Children's Bureau, authorizing it to incorporate with state public-welfare agencies in establishing, extending, and strengthening, especially in predominately rural areas for the protection and care of homeless, dependent children in danger of becoming delinquent.

The Social Security Act of 1935 was significant legislation toward not only establishing governmental components of the U. S. child welfare system but also adopting measures to give the government the ability to protect children and strengthen families with the growing visibility of children being harmed.

The growing visibility of abused and neglected children led to the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (P.L. 94-234) which established the National Center on Child and Neglect and sought to improve the monitoring and response to maltreatment. The establishment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (P.L. 94-234) provided federal funding to States in support of prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution, and treatment activities and also provides grants

to public agencies and nonprofit organizations, including Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations for demonstration programs and projects. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 developed child abuse and neglect identification and prevention programs and grants which were modest in size played a pivotal role in stimulating the development of systems to address child abuse and neglect. After the construction of this public act, other significant events occurred to improve the efforts of child maltreatment.

In the U.S. many child protection systems appear to reflect the unresolved tensions and debates of the child welfare system's past. Still, we see much on-going literature and statistics that are comparable to the research of the past concerning African American families and children that are represented at higher rates than their Caucasian counterparts (Font et al., 2012; Klein & Merritt, 2014; Meyers, 2008; McGowan, 2012). Reform of child welfare policies and public social service programs in hopes of addressing the many maltreatment and abuse cases and keeping families together has been the focus of the U.S. child welfare system to prevent increased numbers of abuse and neglect. The practitioners and scholars in this professional arena of the child welfare system continue to examine the systemic process in efforts to understand the challenges that are faced by participants and those practitioners who provide services. Policy reform and the system framework of the U.S. child welfare system have failed to reduce many African American families dependency on the system.

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 significantly changed the child welfare policy in the United States. Importantly, this act implemented expectations for the juvenile court judges and made them an integral part of the operation

of the law. According to Edwards (1989), the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 focused upon judicial oversight of abused and neglected children who are removed from parental custody. This public policy offers technical assistance to judges, court administrators, social service agencies, attorneys and other interested persons on the Act's implementation. This legislation provides judicial oversight of abused and neglected children when they are removed from parental custody.

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 governs juvenile dependency law in the United States. In efforts to eliminate widespread criticisms of the country's child welfare system, this federal legislation balances the need to protect children with the policy of preserving families (Edwards, 1989). Before the adoption of this public act, Congress identified that children were unnecessarily removed from their family home too often, and insufficient resources were authorized to preserve the family. Policy practitioners involved in the implementation of this policy acknowledged that the system lacked the efforts in keeping families intact. They sought efforts in preventing unnecessary foster care placements, providing safe and timely reunification of children with their biological parents. Finally, they wanted quick adoption of children unable to return to the home of their primary caretaker. This act sought to achieve these goals by providing state social service systems with incentives to encourage a more active and systematic monitoring of children in the foster care system. After that, the child welfare system took further measure in policymaking development to improve efforts in service delivery.

Policymakers have reauthorized legislation to improve the child welfare system and community-based programs in hopes of reducing the high numbers of maltreatment and abuse cases and to keep families intact (McGowan, 2014). Major federal legislation that kept families intact are the Child and Family Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288), the Fostering Connections to Success and Increase Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351), CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-320), and Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-34). Currently, child welfare legislation does not give the appearance to have improved the child protection systemic process, families participation timeframes, nor the improvement of families' social conditions after exiting the system. Research conducted by McGowan (2014) and Connelly (2014) identified that when African American families exited the child welfare system, their community experiences were no different from when they entered the system; in fact, socioeconomic barriers convey the impression to have increased. They encouraged further research to be done for the increasing of social awareness toward the social phenomenon of the overrepresentation of African American families in the child welfare system and placement of culturally competent programs injected into predominately African American communities.

In the review of the Michigan Annual Plan for FY 15, efforts were described to emphasize utilizing families and their natural supports to help keep families together. Four key components of incorporating community-based services were strong families, safe children, Michigan's title IV-B (2) program, child protection community partners, and child safety and permanency plan. Michigan Department of Health and Human

Services offers statewide appropriations to fund two evidenced-based intensive family service models. Those evidenced-based models are Families First of Michigan and Family Reunification programs. Families First of Michigan and Family Reunification Program are core components of the MDHHS child welfare continuum. Michigan reported that these programs have reduced the abuse and neglect incidents across the state, prevented children removal from their primary caregiver, and helped reunify children with their primary caretaker from foster care placement.

Title IV-B (2) Promoting Safe and Stable Families is state fiduciary for these funds to implement a statewide effort in allocating funds annually to 83 counties for community-based efforts. The planning and delivery of services were for family preservation, family support services, time-limited reunification services, and adoption promotion and support services. Michigan is required to allocate funds and programs according to federal legislation. The purpose of these programs was to keep children safe in their homes, to prevent the separation of families, prevent child maltreatment, promote family strength and stability, and return children in foster care to their families in a safe and timely manner. Finally, an additional purpose was to promote and support adoption from the foster care system and help families maintain permanency.

Many African American families are socioeconomically stratified, and this is typical because many families belonging to this ethnic group who are participants in the child welfare system are those without the neighborhood community resources. Klein and Merritt (2014) contributed to the literature on community-level contributors to racial and ethnic disproportionality in the child welfare system's involvement examining the

relationship between racial-ethnic diversity in neighborhoods, several other indicators of social disorganization, and maltreatment reporting rates separately for Black, Hispanic and White children under the age of eighteen. These researchers identified that it was approximately three times more likely for African Americans living in non-diversified neighborhoods to be referred to the child welfare system. U.S. child protective systems continuously demonstrate African American families' need for extensive community-based programming and resources as a result of the high system of recidivism for these families (Connelly, 2014; McGowan, 2014). Until Billingsley and Giovanni (1972), little research was known about the services needed for African American families. Before Billingsley and Giovanni's (1972) publication, African American families were systematically excluded from the child welfare system services. Billingsley and Giovanni (1972) argued that the existing child welfare system known at the time was established just for White families and children of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Billingsley and Giovanni (1972) traced the history of the U.S. government's discriminatory treatment of African American families. Decades later the racial disparities throughout the U.S. child welfare system have only become worse, and it has come to light that policymakers have rejected the concern they professed in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Roberts, 2009; Roberts, 2012; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). Federal and state policies give the feeling that they have shifted away from preserving families and eliminating out-of-home placement. Recent politics of child welfare threatens to intensify state supervision of African American families. One example is the lawsuit against Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services where their system would

be monitored until they reach measured goals of meeting federalized standard requirements. Until Michigan meets a required percentage of the measurements established, they would continue to be monitored. Standards outlined in the lawsuit are complex because the State has yet to meet a standardized percentage in specific mandates (MDHHS, 2014). Child protection authorities are taking custody of African American children at alarming rates, and in doing so, they are dismantling social networks that are critical to African American families' community welfare. Unfortunately, the child providers are not injecting the social networks into neighborhoods that could give Michigan and its local child protective service agencies the ability to preserve families and reduce out-of-home placement programs.

If child welfare policy would target more on socioeconomic barriers that are contributing to African American family's risk factors toward misrepresentation while participating in services, it could reduce this social phenomenon. Historically, the Adoption and Assistance Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) required states to make programs and procedural reforms to serve children in their homes, prevent out-of-home placement, and facilitate family reunification following placement (McGowan, 2010). Michigan's child protective service system and the three largest cities in the state that experience alarming numbers of overrepresentation of African Americans (Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Saginaw) are working diligently and through state reform to solve this crisis among African American families (Race Equity, 2008). Ways to resolve the overrepresentation issues with African American families is consistently discussed to better identify implementation practices.

Child Welfare System

The child welfare system is not a single entity. The child welfare system consists of a group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to care for their children successfully. While implementation of the child welfare services rests solely with the States, the federal government plays a role in supporting States in the delivery of services through funding of programs and legislative initiatives.

Primary responsibility for implementing Federal child and family legislation rests with the Children's Bureau, in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, and the U.S. Department Health and Human Services (HHS) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The Children's Bureau works with the State and local agencies to develop programs for focusing on preventing child abuse and neglect by strengthening families, protecting children from further maltreatment, reuniting children safely with their families, or finding permanent families for children who cannot safely return home. These concepts are explored when the family, child, or both come in contact with their local child welfare agency.

Family and children encounter the child welfare system because of many contributing characteristics. Those decision-making factors include child safety, child characteristics, parent characteristics, family characteristics, and child welfare system characteristics. Analyzed by Font et al. 2014, the child protective service reporting had identified that reports to the system were high among those characteristics discussed during the previous sentence. Neighborhood racial and ethnic diversity research has

found a strong association between poverty and child maltreatment, and poor children are overrepresented (Klein & Merritt, 2014). Surprisingly, research has not associated poverty with the cause of maltreatment; however, effects of poverty interact with other risk factors and the likelihood of depression, isolation, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Child Protective Service Reporting Process

The Michigan child protective system is a unique system that receives abuse and neglect complaints from wide-range of community professionals. Interestingly, abuse and neglect reports referred to child protective system originating with law enforcement, public school officials, and social service personnel who work closely with at-risk families and are lower-income families rather than upper income families; upper-income families were less likely to be referred to child protective service compared to lower income families. Abuse and neglect are reported by professionals who disproportionality serve low-income groups. Sources such as educational staff, law enforcement, and social service personnel reported complaints to the Child Protective Service hotlines in 2003 (USDHHS, 2005). Michigan child abuse law defines abuse as harm or threat to a child's health or welfare that occurs through non-accidental physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or maltreatment by a parent, a legal guardian, or any other person responsible for the child's health or welfare such as a teacher, a teachers' aide, or a member of the clergy. Michigan's definition of abuse can be found in the Michigan Child Protection Law Manual, under section 722.61 of the Michigan Compiled Laws. Abuse and neglect characteristics have shown to be a contributor among children

reported for child maltreatment. For example, White children with no history of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) use lived in tracts with child poverty rates between 9% and 10.6% while African American children with no history of AFDC use lived in tracts with twice the childhood poverty rate. Johnson-Reid, Drake, and Zhou (2013) revealed that among African American children, 90.9% of those reported for neglect to child protective service system lived in homes having AFDC histories, while only 54.6% of White children reported for neglect lived in similarly poor households.

Investigating Process

After a caseworker receives a report of alleged abuse or neglect, an agency worker then screens it to decide which ones should be referred for investigation. Child protective service caseworkers are expected to respond to what is considered just an allegation within 24 hours. Child protective service workers then take the suspected child maltreatment case and investigate the possible abuse or neglect. The report of abuse and neglect goes through a screening center. After the screening process that caseworker must follow up on the story in a standard time frame under state law. Caseworkers are expected then to interview individuals in direct contact with the child and interview the child either in the parent's presence or alone based upon the level of risk involved. Based on the level of risk for the child, child protective service workers then determine whether or not the family stays intact or if the parent and child could be considered for community-based resources. Community-based resources are usually chosen based on the needs of the family and child, and the adverse challenges in the family context.

Substantiation of Complaints

In the event of a substantiated complaint, the local child welfare agency is required according to their state legislation, in collaboration with their local government as a non-profit organization and public social service agencies are required to provide community-based programs to support and keep the family intact. These community-based initiatives are authorized by the child welfare agency in efforts to help accomplish family preservation and to strengthen the family. However, reports are deemed necessary for the child's current home to be at risk; if that is the case then a safe home is sought for the child, most likely, that placement would not be with a relative. Some of the community-based resources authorized by the local child welfare agency are time-based therapy for both the parent and child, in-home training, parenting education, and public housing initiatives. These particular efforts have a time limit and are expected to give the families the necessary skills to reunite the family and place the child back into the home with his or her primary caregiver.

Placement in Foster Care System

Once the allegation of maltreatment has been established, the local child welfare agency must decide whether to provide services in the home or if the child needs foster care placement. National statistics have shown a significantly disproportionate number of substantiated children were placed in the foster care system while the remaining number of children received in-home services. For instance, research conducted on California foster care placement showed by the age of five, approximately 6% of African American children are placed in foster care which is twice as often as White children (Wilderman &

Waldfoegel, 2014). For example, the number of children placed in out-of-home care was substantially higher than those children who received in-home services (Font et al., 2012; Hills, 2006). Interestingly, the child welfare system's operational mechanism for determining appropriate resources for the family is difficult for the practitioner authorizing the services but could be detrimental to the family if services fail to meet the ethnic group needs.

The systematic process already is traumatizing toward the family, but involvement in another public relationship in a program such as children and family services further increases their stress levels. It was difficult for the family to trust and have confidence in the social service program authorized. Example, community-based resources were measured nationally, it was identified during the research that these relationships fail because the relationship conformity, trust, and African American family and children confidence in the practitioner (Hill, 2006; Miller et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the client-provider relationship then becomes ineffective in the child welfare system efforts of meeting their goals. Similar efforts have been explored systematically and procedurally to eliminate overrepresentation of the African American ethnic group in Michigan.

Michigan Child Welfare System

Recognized by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau is the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Under Title IV-B, IV-E, and XX of the Social Security Act is the department with the responsibility of administering federal programs such as Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program.

This state's child welfare program is state-supervised and administered. Michigan Department of Health and Human Services is committed to ensuring that youth and children served by their public systems are safe and have permanent and stable family lives and that children and families can sustain a quality of life.

Historically, Michigan's child welfare system has fought the battle of identifying a resolution to end disproportionate representation of African American families (Miller & Esenstad, 2014)The Center for the Study Social Policy, 2009). Since 2006, Michigan has developed many committees to identify themes toward better outcomes for all of Michigan's children. During the committee gatherings, it has been demonstrated that rates of racial disproportionality and disparity are significant in Michigan's child protective system. Like many other states, Michigan and local child welfare agencies still are looking for a resolution to resolve the overrepresentation among African American families involved in the system. African American children represented a slight portion of all children residing in the system; research demonstrates that they represent more than half of all the children in the child protective system (The Center for the Study and Social Policy, 2009; Kids Count, 2013). From a county level, Jackson County kids, like federal and state level kids, are raised in families struggling to make ends meet.

The Kids Count in Michigan Report conducted by Michigan League for Public Policy identified an increase of 41% statewide in the number of children living in families that were investigated for abuse and neglect between 2005 and 2012 (Kids Count in Michigan Report, 2013). Jackson County ranked 68th with 142.9 children per 1,000 living in homes investigated for abuse or neglect compared with the statewide average of

90 children per 1,000. Research conducted throughout the Michigan demonstrates there is further research needed to address racial inequality and to improve the system's process in local child welfare agencies.

Findings from the Michigan Race Equity Coalition, Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Committee (2014) highlighted that African American families throughout Michigan who participated in child welfare services were likely to spend longer durations in the system, less likely to be adopted, and non-favorable permanency outcomes compared to their racial counterparts. In addition, the coalition cited that foster care placement over the years had increased from high rates of homelessness, unemployment, parental incarceration, substance abuse, and other adverse outcomes. Members of the committee addressed the concerns in the juvenile justice and child welfare system that African American families experience worse outcomes than non-minority households. Finally, the recommendation by the committee was that Michigan should direct resources to early-childhood community-based services in communities which show high disproportionality rates.

In Michigan, a snapshot of the fiscal year 2013, the state received 148,392 Children's Protective Services (CPS) complaints. The department assigned 87,551 for investigation, which averaged to be 59%. Confirmed abuse and neglect cases in Michigan numbered 22,763 which estimated to be around 26% of cases investigated. In March of that fiscal year, the department had become responsible for the care and monitoring of 13,063 foster children, including those monitored by private agencies under contract with MDHHS.

In 2013, the Department of Human Services Child Protective Services Comprehensive Report provided child protective service statistical information pursuant to Section 514 of the Public Act (PA) 62 of 2011. During the 2013 reporting year, there had been a total of 83,627 reports of abuse and neglect investigated under the child protection law (MDHHS, 2013). The cases were classified under Category I, Category II, Category III, Category IV, and Category V. The total for African Americans was 28% of the total population that was reported. From child protective service case reporting period 2011 to 2013, cases investigated grew significantly. One example was Category I consisting of a court petition that has been required because a child is unsafe. A petition is mandated by the law or a court is needed to get the family to cooperate with the investigation or comply with a service plan.

Michigan Child Protection System

The child welfare system in Michigan is a state-supervised and state-administered system. Like other state child welfare systems, African American families and children were engaged in Michigan's child welfare system because of adverse socioeconomic challenges that are comparable to their national counterparts. Characteristics include dysfunctional neighborhoods, single-parent households, lack of mental health services, and high unemployment rates. Interestingly, Michigan's child protective service system mirrors other state child protective systems and have similar rates of overrepresentation among African American families and children, if not, higher rates of child foster care placement among African Americans. Like most states, Michigan is expected to respond

to child abuse and neglect complaints which are then streamlined through a screening process.

Based on the seriousness of the charge, if the child is at risk of harm, or if abuse and neglect are confirmed, the report is then passed on to a child protective service worker for investigation. For example, the child welfare protection system's procedures are established at their state level and administered through local offices. The system operates according to the Michigan child protection law which was established and implemented to have government systematic processes that focus toward the protection of a child, keeping that child from abuse and neglect, and preserving the families.

In Michigan, this child protection law is significant because it is considered a safeguard toward keeping a child from potential physical harm inflicted upon the child by a caregiver or provider. The Michigan, child welfare system, is governed by interpretation and ideologies from federal mandates which work to formally and justifiably protect and preserve family life. From federal mandates, the Michigan child welfare system has been given guidelines to connect with community providers in efforts for protecting the child.

Child protective service has 30 days to complete an investigation unless extenuating circumstances require an extension. Immediately, child protective service workers should interview the alleged victims, child caretaker, and alleged perpetrators. Interviews would take place with the child protective service worker viewing the family's home. Standard practice for child protective service workers is to obtain and review necessary documents, such as police reports, criminal history, medical reports, and school

reports. The workers also check whether the alleged perpetrator has a previous child protective case file. Child protective service assess the child safety and future child risk of abuse and or neglect, and the family's needs and strengths are also evaluated.

An investigator from child protective services then considers the alternative explanations to the allegations. He or she will analyze the family dynamics and family circumstances during the time of the alleged abuse, and he or she will check for injuries, if injuries were suffered as a result of abuse or neglect or if medical attention may be needed. The investigator is looking at the condition of the home and the state of the child. During investigations, these professionals analyze the situation to determine if the child's basic needs are being met. Finally, he or she will ascertain whether the child receives adequate supervision and if the caretaker is emotionally and mentally abusing the child.

Racial Disparities

The concept of racial disparities looks at a particular ethnic group's difference in treatment and outcomes in comparison to other ethnic groups participating in the child welfare system. Many African American families that participate in the child welfare system were less likely to receive the necessary mental health services and public resources for favorable child welfare system outcomes. Examination of racial disproportionality research has shown that high African American disproportionality statistical rates are typical in the U.S. child welfare system (Cheng & Lo, 2012; Font et al., 2012). Among the minority groups participating in the U.S. child welfare agencies, African American families are at the forefront of being overrepresented by this public institution (Miller et al., 2014). Services awarded to African American families by the

U.S. child welfare system are not being provided by the partnering agency adequately for this ethnic group to exit the system (Boyd, 2014). Unavailable mental health and public resources are indicators that affect favorable decision-making processes and provide favorable outcomes for those families participating in the child welfare system.

Decision-making is a critical element not only toward outcomes of participating families but their results from involvement in the child welfare system. Decisions from the U.S. child welfare system and collaborating agencies are often postulated as a contributor to the overrepresentation of youth and families of color in child welfare systems (Miller et al., 2014). According to Detlaff (2011), many years of overrepresentation and biased decisions have been observed, but racial disparity continues to social concern. This form of bias was identified in many types. Researchers noticed the types of bias during policy implementation, decision-making, awarded programs and services, and outcomes (Cheng & Lo, 2012; Font et al., 2012). U.S. child welfare systems have been the national focus and discussion when it involves the racial disproportionality and structural bias associated with participant involvement. For decades now, scholarly researchers have tried to articulate a resolution to this complex social problem and to eliminate racial disparity among minority groups. African American families are the primary ethnic group that still endure structural bias during their pathways through the U.S. child welfare system.

Boyd (2014) recognized during collection of data that African American families are still overrepresented in child welfare reports, investigations, and foster care entries. African American families facing social disparities during the U.S. child welfare system

reunification process, placement duration, and foster care exits are likely to have less favorable rates than non-African American families. Research studies illustrate many participants' experiences and perceptions that individual and or systemic bias contributes to the racial disproportionality and disparity that African American families experience during pathways in the child welfare system.

The U.S. child welfare system has been a contributor to the racial disproportionality and disparity in African American families' outcomes. Miller et al. (2014) argued that these biases should be addressed at the policymaking level to create equitable pathways for African American families. Further research must be done on the disproportionality which African American families experience when participating in the child welfare system, and results and recommendations need to be addressed to policymakers. Also, further influence is needed to increase the inclusion in qualitative research among African American biological parents. Nevertheless, research has not identified a particular theme to address and increase awareness of racial disproportionality. National research many times has proposed that structural biases be addressed at the policymaking level to not only eliminate biases but to establish favorable outcomes for African American families.

The U.S. child welfare system child protective service process has demonstrated the racial bias towards African American families from the point of contact until exiting the system. Oronde (2014) identified that the percentage of African American males exiting the foster care system without being reunited with their permanent family has almost doubled in recent years, from 7% in 2001 to approximately 13% in 2010.

During an exit of the U.S. child welfare system, African American families experienced more of the same social barriers before their contact with the agency. Cross (2011) identified that satisfactory outcomes in the U.S. child welfare system for African American families are unfavorable. Research results seemed unfavorable in the foster care outcomes for African American families who have a child welfare history because of the higher prevalence of poor socioeconomic status, family, and barriers they endure.

Numerous social conditions are factors toward high disproportionality rates for African American families participating in the child welfare system. Negative social conditions that are contributors toward African American families ability to exit the child welfare system successfully are poverty, neighborhood risk factors, lack of community resources such as mental health services, broken homes, and stereotypical decisions made by case managers. The social conditions identified are proven to have high prevalence toward the disproportionate representation among African American families.

Barriers for the Families

Every ethnic group participating in U.S. child welfare system experiences adverse barriers, but minority groups barriers are more negative and persistent than any other ethnic group. Minority groups especially African American families are living in impoverished neighborhoods that lack conformity and mental health services, are poverty-stricken and filled with broken homes, and have high unemployment rates (Pecora, Sanders, Wilson, English, Puckett, & Rudlang-Perman, 2014). Child poverty has risen since the 2000s and family support such as income is well below the poverty threshold. Most importantly, many families referred to U.S. child welfare lack of social

and community support. African Americans' current socioeconomic status results in a greater dependency upon the U.S. child welfare systems services and resources.

Systemic Barriers

The structural makeup of an organization such as the child welfare system is pivotal in the process for accomplishing goals and successful outcomes with those they serve. The U.S. child welfare system's structure is a very complicated structure in nature and has a tendency to be more favorable toward a particular ethnic group than that groups' peers; this is referred to as systemic bias (Klein & Merrit, 2014). Many families that come into the U.S. child welfare system are in need of public resources but are usually affected by systemic bias because of the perceived beliefs of decision-makers (Miller et al., 2014).

Systemic bias refers to the tendency of an institution to prefer or predict one outcome more favorably over another. For example, even when families and children of color have the very same characteristics as non-Hispanic Whites, research reveals differential treatment in the child welfare system (Race Matters, 2012). Belief systems and policies that are created from personal beliefs seem to be creating the complexity and unequal distribution of resources to African Americans. For instance, child protective service workers' parenting skills and beliefs concerning how a child should be parented are likely different than African American parents. Unfortunately, African American families are disproportionately treated when engaged in U.S. child welfare services because of decision-making bureaucrats unintentional and intentional bias that ultimately generate adverse effects toward this ethnic group.

Decision-making is another critical component for ensuring the institution meets expectations and the demand of the community it serves. Client providers are expected by the Federal government to uphold their position based upon policy and operating procedure that is implemented without understanding one's cultural and environmental conditions. Most importantly, client-provider relationships are to be effective for the U.S. child welfare system operational process to meet the demand of people it serves. Decision-makers face multiple barriers when choosing whether to keep a family intact or to separate the family because of socioeconomic conditions and procedural makeup. Surprisingly, the procedure creates unintentional and intentional biases during the decision-making process in the U.S. child welfare system. Stereotypical beliefs of the case manager may contribute to the systemic bias that is prevalent to high overrepresentation rates among African American families involved in CPS (Miller et al., 2014). Caseworkers decisions are likely based upon a combination of indicators such as the caseworker's belief of how a child should be raised versus their biological parent's beliefs in raising a child. In addition, the caseworker may have beliefs that a child's household make up should mirror the caseworker's household.

Community cohesion characteristics are those norms of institutions and people working together in the neighborhood. Research has proven that U.S. child welfare system decision-makers consider participants neighborhood conditions and the context of their area impacts the caseworker decisions to determine either out-of-home placement or community-based services (Rolock, Jantz, & Abner, 2015). Client-provider decisions are pivotal to the ensuring safety and well-being of families and children that become a part

of the U.S. child welfare system. The decision-making process plays a central role in procedural and operational methods and is a contributor to family separation and extensive family involvement in the system. Research has given much attention to the structural dimensions of the community in which an individual resides which include networks, relationships, and social institutions that help or hinder interdependence in a community and the perceptions of community problems and cohesion (Rolock, Jantz, & Abner, 2015). African American families live in community neighborhoods where services are not available to support or prevent the harmful social norms these families encounter.

Impact of Neighborhood

The racial and ethnic structure of neighborhoods has been missing from the child welfare system debate as to how they can contribute to disproportionate child welfare system involvement. According to Klein and Merritt (2014), neighborhood structural factors are linked to child maltreatment rates, suggesting that place-based interventions may be a promising avenue for reducing child abuse and neglect. Characteristics of neighborhood poverty and unemployment rates are indicators frequently acknowledged in poor communities to be contributors to the family's involvement with child welfare system services. Not just diverse communities but evidence has suggested that residents of African American or low-income neighborhoods are a risk of child maltreatment (Harrikari, 2014; Lery, 2009). Unfortunately, the conceptualization of African American and low-income communities has been a predictor of whether or not families living in these demographical areas will have successful child welfare system outcomes. Klein and

Merritt (2014) argued that neighborhood structural factors are linked to child maltreatment rates. Not surprisingly the debate no longer exists, but the question remains when legislators will discuss the importance of putting family preservation programs back in predominately African American communities.

Certainly, many African American families are either at high risk of entering the child welfare system, they lack favorable outcomes and are categorized in the child welfare system recidivism rates because their neighborhood is stereotyped. According to Rolock, Jantz, and Abner (2015), the community with signs of a physical and social disorder is identified during their research as being an influence towards the perception about the community which could, in turn, impact the decision-making process involved in child maltreatment investigations. Neighborhood conceptualization has been a decision-making component that is strongly unfavorable in outcomes for African American families participating in the child welfare system process.

Social disorganization theory was further tested in relation to community condition and how the context of the community affect a family's mobility in a particular public institution setting. According to Rolock et al. (2015), the child welfare system professionals need to be aware of neighborhood content when conducting investigations because families' neighborhood make up is a risk factor for maltreatment outcomes for families. A research implication is made around the fact that community context was taken into strong consideration when determining if children can remain in their home; racial disparity in the child welfare system among African American families could be reduced. Moreover, if programming were injected back into predominately African

American neighborhoods, outcomes would be more favorable for these families. Interestingly, their research identified another critical issue that raises disproportionality rates significantly is that high child welfare system cases had large numbers of neighborhood context being a critical aspect of the removal of children or the onset referral for services. Demographics in predominately African American communities are similar in makeup to today as when neighborhoods were tested by McKay and Shaw (1942). Their findings during their exploration of neighborhood demographics identified that community contextual makeup was a common risk factor toward crime rates and drugs distribution.

McKay and Shaw (1942) from the school of social disorganization theory tested the impact of neighborhood disadvantages on families and how their societal conditions contribute to child welfare system engagement. Rolock, Jantz, and Abner (2015) noted in their study, professionals of the current child welfare system need to be aware of the impact of participant's neighborhood conditions when making decisions. Research has proven that families and children living in neighborhoods which lack social conformity and have a high prevalence of drugs and crime are more likely to be referred to the child welfare system than families and children that are not living in these types of neighborhoods (Klein and Merritt, 2014; Rolock, Jantz, and Abner, 2015). The body of research by Klein and Merritt (2014) adds to today's scholarly suggestions of neighborhood environments' influence on child maltreatment risk, and, therefore, place-based interventions may be a promising avenue for reducing child abuse and neglect. Without child welfare programming that contributes to poor social conditions in

predominately African American communities, their outcomes were no different than when the families enter the U.S. child welfare system.

Scholarly research has demonstrated that families are referred to the U.S. child welfare system as a direct result of their neighborhood content and lack of resources in the region. Merritt and Klein's (2014) research from U.S. Census and child maltreatment report data for 2052 Census tracts in Los Angeles County, California, was used to explore the relationship between neighborhood social disorganization and abuse referrals rates for African Americans. The study concluded that neighborhood characteristics are a direct result of African American references to the U.S. child welfare system. Areas that contribute to the U.S. child welfare system association had high poverty, unemployment, lack of mental health services, and infestation of high drug and crime rates. In addition, research demonstrates that the neighborhood content is pivotal in the decision-making process for family reunification and for families who are involved in the U.S. child welfare system

African American neighborhoods are considered a predictor of maltreatment and the U.S. child welfare system involvement for this ethnic group. Many African American families live in demographic areas that are in despair. Their neighborhood content lacks the social norms that allow them upward social mobility in comparison to their national counterparts. Many of these predominantly African American neighborhoods have social networks and employment opportunities affected by single-parent homes, are poverty-stricken, are located in highly concentrated drug areas, and have no environmental cohesion. Neighborhood environments and place-based services for participants are

another complex issues for U.S. child welfare systems. Injection of the public services into urban communities where many African American families and children reside lack favorable outcomes. Moreover, this ethnic group has experienced more extended foster care placement because of the lack of participation and trust in the programs as well as their social conditions are worsened when compared to admission.

Social conditions are considered variables such as an individual's demographic and physical status compared to others in that shared environment. African American families compared to other ethnic groups' demographic conditions had not only been a national concern but found to be a contributor to child welfare system involvement. Scholarly research has shown that high maltreatment rates among African American families are consistent with the lack of social networks and improvised communities (Cross, 2011; Drake, Lee, & Johnson-Reid, 2009; Knott and Donovan, 2010; Roberts, 2011). The research of Klein and Merritt (2014) suggested that neighborhood environments influence child maltreatment risk, and thus, place-based interventions may be a promising avenue for reducing child abuse and neglect. Without place-based programs in African American communities, adverse social norms or poor outcomes for this ethnic group during their U.S. child welfare system pathways could not be overcome.

Child poverty is another social condition contributing to higher representation throughout the U.S. child welfare system in America for African Americans. Unfortunately, child poverty has been stagnant since its high rates in the 2000's (Pecora et al., 2012). Some research has shown that poverty contributes to the African American child welfare system admissions for African American families. The African American

ethnic group is living paycheck to paycheck and are beyond the poverty threshold. A staggering statistic is that 18% of children are living in poverty (Pecora et al., 2012). The nature of this statistic demonstrates the likelihood that African American children's socioeconomic characteristics are associated with the social phenomenon of higher representation rates in child welfare system admissions.

Neighborhood context of predominately African American families have low socioeconomic status, and their neighborhood mobility is significantly affected. African American families with low socioeconomic status are less likely to experience favorable mobility outcomes and conform to the contextual makeup of that area. Conformity of African American neighborhoods does not have a favorable employment rate, consist of high drug areas, and no social resources which make for poor socioeconomic status and the result of African American high referral rates to child welfare systems. Low socioeconomic status among African American families was considered to be a high prevalence factor toward the overrepresentation rates among African American families.

Policy Process

Often conceptualized as a complex system of inputs and outputs is the policy process. Policies are developed in response to an existing problem or an opportunity for specific groups (Boyd, 2014; Weilble, 2008; Nowlin, 2011; Sabatier, 2007). Many individuals with different ideologies, interests, and beliefs are involved in the policy-making process.

Public policy process not only identifies problems to be solved and goals to be achieved, but it also serves as the major way government impacts the social construction

of the different target populations that the specific policy targets (Fisher, Miller, & Sidney, 2007; Smith & Larimer, 2009). Public institutions and individuals representing those systems have a different interpretation of the legislation. They also interpret social values differently in the implementation of a public law that could likely be favorable toward a specific target. For example, interest groups in Michigan may think that mothers depend solely on governmental stipends, and their ideology is that it makes them lazy. The interest group may pressure politicians or the individual's interpretation of the law to make changes to the social policy that would likely eliminate the monetary stipend for the parent. The policies identify the groups whose behaviors are relevant to the issue and seek to elicit change through incentives or punishments (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Also, the additional amendments to the existing policy have the likelihood to cause further adverse challenges to a specific target population by the elimination of existing services that the legislation had already authorized. Unfortunately, the processes are so complex and more favorable toward a particular target population than another because the policy implementation process is based on ideologies and perceptions down to the local stages of the governmental institutions (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Soss et al., 2011). For example, participants involved in the policy process are faced with multiple complex social challenges and decisions because of their beliefs and perceptions toward a problem.

The policy process is enormously complex and affects many actors who are participating in the process. The policy process is known as the study of the interactions over time between public policy and its surrounding players, events, and contexts, as well

as the policy or policies' outcomes (Birkland, 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2005). Today, the differentiation between agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, and evaluation has become the conventional way to describe the chronology of a policy process.

Unfortunately, there are a large number of ideas in the policy arena. However, only a small percentage are considered and favor those involved due to technical feasibility and value acceptability of such individuals. For example, the African American families involved in the child welfare system and their perceptions about improving the child welfare system are not considered nor forwarded on to those that implement policy (Anyon, 2011; Birkland, 2014). The process could take decades and involves dozens of different programs in any particular policy domain over multiple levels of government. Finally, the policy process also includes deep-rooted cultures and their interests.

Interestingly, policies frequently reinforce existing powers and relationships and social constructions through the introduction of change that likely alters existing patterns. The policy process does create dysfunctional conditions throughout society and for individuals that are a part of the policy implementation process (Thurber, 2010; Weible et al., 2012). One example of the dysfunction created from the policy implementation process is that many families living in predominantly African American neighborhoods are referred to the child welfare system for maltreatment because authorized services from the policy were not injected into that specific community (USDHHS, 2011; Klein & Merritt, 2014). Child welfare policy implementation seems to have furthered the cause of

social dysfunction among the African American families and with their social context after release from the child protective service system.

It has become difficult for the African American families to live according to the social conditions that are established as the result of public policies because the policies can create traumatic experiences and look to fail at providing community-based interventions to assist the families with complex conditions. Without the ability to live according to their social construction, the family would further experience adverse social situations and traumatic events that could lead to child welfare system admission (USDHHS, 2011; Klein & Merritt, 2014; Miller et al., 2014). Policy processes are likely sending messages to those individuals implementing the policy which forces community and socioeconomic shifts for those interest groups or persons involved in the policy implementation process.

Whether a person is a government official, agency staff, interested stakeholder from an advocacy group, the media, or scientist, he or she has some involvement in the shape of the public policy from within policy subsystems. Subsystems bring together policy participants who focus on a particular policy issue within a particular territorial area (Weible et al., 2012). For example, Michigan is a subsystem of the CFSIA of 2006 that monitors the local agency in efforts to help guide in delivering the programs that were authorized from the amendments of the policy. The service authorizations awarded from the designed public law have the qualities to be implemented through each subgroup with the necessary resources given a specific target population. Unfortunately, there is an absence of trust of the governmental systems by African American families

because the ethnic group feels powerless when it comes to the legislative process of implementing policy and the procedural initiatives that are taken to implement the policy. For example, Avery (2009) found that African American families did not trust the political system and were not in support of the governmental system process. African American families would benefit and experience better social outcomes if they had a voice towards the influence in the policy implementation.

To understand the policy process, it is important that people know the basic constitutional rules, physical conditions, and the culture of a society (Weible et al., 2012). Governmental institutions and the separation of powers across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches look as if they cause friction between public agencies and social conditions at the national, state, and local levels of government. Unfortunately, these dimensions of government create different venues of decision-making strategies and the procedures that are to guide the governmental institution. The different aspects of decisions impact the policy process and families and children that are nested in the political process. Theories and instruments are utilized by officials designing and implementing the policy process hopefully to administer better outcomes, and strengthen involved individuals socially.

Policy Theory

Policy implementation theory can help develop instruments that could provide legislators with insight to establish frameworks to design fair policy. Surprisingly, policymaking actors use the scientific context of policy theories to either change, expand on current policy, or execute new social policy. Unfortunately, the social construction

created from either the language change, expansion of policy, and newly created policy will either adversely affect a target population or benefit those in that specific target population. Research gathered convey the impression that the conceptual framework used from policy streams help policymakers make favorable choices toward particular target population (Cariney, 2013; Weible, 2008). Utilization of the policy theories causes individuals streamlining that policy through the institutional framework to develop behaviors that likely produce inequality.

Gaps were identified from social science research between designers of policies and individuals that are in the target populations the policies serve. Instruments adopted from policy theory process help guide policy implementation and create a gap between many African American families and the child welfare system (Rycraft & Dentlaff, 2009). This ethnic group lacks trust in the relationships that are associated with the local agency and caseworkers who interpreted and implemented the public law.

Another gap noticed in social science research is how policy implementation look to force a particular target population into adverse social construction context that likely causes poor judgment by African American families, for example (Cariney, 2013). Unfortunately, legislators design and implement welfare policies that give them the abilities to grant program legislation within the particular social construction group that is ineffective for the many individuals participating in the child welfare system. Importantly, policy theory can be a basis for providing policymaking practitioners with instruments for efficiently designing policy and communicating it to the specific target population group. Research implies that policymaking practitioners not only lack

effectively communicating the legislation but also making effective decisions toward the reduction of the African American overrepresentation in the child welfare system pathways (Rycraft & Dettlaff, 2009). Policy streams are subject to good theories that could likely help develop programs that assist federal and state agencies to in developing the ability to reduce inequality.

Multiple Stream Policy

The multiple streams theory provides expert-based information in two different streams. The first stream is an expert-based information system that gives the actors use of science to indicate the seriousness and causes of social problems. The second stream is to help actors evaluate policy and the program effectiveness toward a social phenomenon (Fisher, Miller, & Sidney, 2007; Weible, 2008). Through the scientific lens, the science from the multiple streams policy offers ideas in an effort to help legitimize ideas and provides a conceptual framework for the policy streamline. The scientific framework is used through the policy stream; science offers ideas, helps legitimize ideas and provides a theoretical and experimental framework of policy theories to support actors in the policy-making process identify and implement program effectiveness.

Interestingly, social programs awarded from public policies that give social practitioners flexibilities to inject community resources into a community often affect one target population adversely more than the other target population. Interesting information was drawn from policy theories; scientific data gathered from the conceptual framework drastically change behaviors and those actors involved in the policymaking process. Information gathered from the policy theories often change agents' beliefs and practices

that also affect individuals more often than current policy theories. Government agencies utilize policy approach to help evaluate the current program's effectiveness toward the specific target populations it may serve. The conceptual framework of policy theory, when used by members of government organizations, is provided with ideas and agenda setting and also provides individuals with technical feasibility of an approach. Expert-based research has identified four policy theories that have helped guide policy process and implementation. Policy theories known today are multiple streams, punctuated-equilibrium, advocacy coalition framework, and social construction theory. These methods are imperative to the policy-making process, design, and the implementation processes. Because of policy theory and the process mechanisms, many governmental institution programs have changed drastically. Policy theory that would help in guiding this particular research project is the advocacy framework method.

Policy Design

The many social actors involved are essential to the policy process and design of the policies that guide the U.S. child welfare system. Public policies contain designs recognizable in the text and in the practices through which policies are conveyed and have consequences. Policy design involves conscious attempts to define policy goals and connect them to instruments or tools expected to realize objectives. Legislation design, in this sense, is a form of policy formulation based on the gathering and application of knowledge of the effects of legislation used on specific target populations. It is developed and implemented through the policies aimed at the attainment of desired policy ambitions.

Policy design is found in administrative guidelines, court decrees, programs, and even the practices and procedures of street-level caseworkers as they interact with those who are recipients of the specific policy (Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Legislation provisions are described to instruct who does what, when, with whom, with what resources, for what reasons, and with what kinds of motivating characteristics. Policy design consists of nine elements which begin with a problem definition: goals, benefits, and burdens to be distributed, target population, rules, tools, implementation structures, social constructions, rationales, and underlying assumptions (Nowlin, 2011; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). Empirically, policy designs contain specific social elements such as target populations, goals and problems to be resolved, rules, rationales, and assumptions.

Implementation of the policy often involves many different people at different points in time, often with different or conflicting aims. For example, the enactment of the Child and Family Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288) provides funding for the Promoting Safe and Stable Families programs and the Child Welfare Service program; policy implementation patterns have not worked toward federally and or locally for improving family's outcomes, especially for African American families (Lorthridge et al., 2012). On this research study, the implementation patterns that involve the designing of community-based programs phase provides the focal point that public policies have underlying trends and logic during implementation will cause real consequences and adverse outcomes for people involved. Effects of the policies depend mainly on the meanings and interpretations that constitute the social construction of the policy in value

dimensions. Concerning the CFSIA, the interpretation conveys that applied inequitably and was likely to result in problems for the African American families.

Public policies are continuously evolving and often changing because of new statutes, reauthorizations to old statutes, agency guidelines, and programs, as well as through the changing multitudinous interpretations give to the policy. The public is served differently by the design of policy, and one context may well be served, as the other context was served poorly. Like the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006 (P.L. 109-288), programs developed from the legislation has evolved largely with continued appropriations that are given to states and local child welfare agencies as resources in efforts to ensure child well-being and permanency programs for families participating in child welfare system (Stoltzfus, 2015). In addition, expenditures from the community-based program's policies are conceptualized and analyzed differently by social scientists and stakeholders of the particular target population. For example, policy analysts can study a specific design of policy, even as small as one local program or one statute, and the two will likely have different interpretations of the intended policy which affects those involved differently. As a result, the various interpretations which lead to those nested in the legislative design are likely to be affected negatively.

Policy design has different effects toward the various parties nested in the policy process, and will likely value one individual or groups more than the other. Congress approves a policy which is then signed into law by the president; at that point, a state is authorized to develop and carry-out the legislation according to the purposes and statutes

drafted into the policy. Within the statutes of the designed policies, states are granted flexibility to establish programs as they see necessary, as long as they are in the monetary appropriations awarded from the development of new policy (Stoltzfus, 2009).

Implementation of the new statute and amendments to existing legislation develops uncertainty in those nested into the policy process. New statute implementation affects those nested into the policy design process and social construction changes significantly. Child welfare policy, for example, is implemented into society for protecting vulnerable children and families, and from abuse and neglect based on how the street-level bureaucrats interpret that law or statute may determine a family's social construction make up.

Shifts in a family or children's social development could be the result of how the designed policy has been interpreted by those who administered the authorized services to the individuals in need. For example, social policy has the likelihood of forcing a family into a socio-demographic construction that will cause the family to behave and engage in their social environment negatively which ultimately could lead to the risk of the household being referred to the child welfare agency. Another example is the street-level bureaucrats who are the professionals that implement the designed policy and monitor the designed policy throughout the targeted populations and areas it is expected to cover. Unfortunately, policy design does not affect everyone nested in the policy process equally; for example, programs could be implemented in communities that African Americans cannot attend because they lack a vehicle or funds for transportation.

The social construction and policy design theories are focused on attitudes toward a specific target population or on how the people nested in the target population can influence the type of policy that is created. One example is that a politician notices certain adverse social phenomenon that are adversely affecting a specific target population and he or she wants to see immediate change. Interestingly, the social construction of target populations is essential not only to political science and its contributions to studies of agenda setting but most importantly to legislative behavior and how policy is formulated, designed, and associated to citizen orientation, the conception of citizenship, and style participation.

The social construction of child welfare population has evolved over 100 years now in such fashion that child protective service involves children, involved parents, foster and adoptive parents, and the state agency itself. Each institutional function of a public welfare system is considering the agency that would likely distribute to the target population for various authorizations of services from the specific child welfare policy and their benefits accordingly (Donnelly, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Pierce et al. (2014) explained in his publication that the design of policies is applied to various target populations in which results in one group have more advantage than the other group. The implementation and interpretation of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006 (P.L. 109-288) shows research associated with this policy that African American families and children are likely to experience inequality when it comes to the community-based programs that are federally authorized giving states the ability to deliver the service (Stoltzfus, 2015; Wildeman & Waldfogel, 2014). While many families

and children rely heavily on other advocacy groups in the policy arena for their needs, they are likely to receive a fair amount of negative attention from policymakers and they will likely not receive many tangible benefits from the designed child welfare system policies (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). For instance, if noticed by policymakers that economic funds are being excessively utilized, a politician may have a specific ideology that could ultimately modify the policy which would eliminate the benefits causing the federal government to spend an excessive amount of money.

Policy literature has described the allocations and burdens policy places on the target populations which depends on the target population's extent of political power and its positive or negative social construction on the deserving and undeserving axis (Pierce et al., 2014). Usually, adverse characteristics behind the policy implementation are the individual's or the target group's inability to live under the social conditions that were created by the policy. Because the specific target population developed the cause of adverse conditions to a family's social context, it may likely affect one's behavior, cultural characteristics, and socioeconomic status to the point that the policy may keep one disenfranchised for a long period.

Social Disorganization Theory

Research of the social disorganization theory has spread to many different fields. Social Disorganization Theory originated from Shaw and McKay (1942) when they used ideas of human ecology to study the association between urban ecological characteristics and juvenile delinquency. Shaw and McKay's (1942), the study of Social Disorganization Theory, centered around three sets of variables: physical status, economic status, and

population status. Variables used to measure the physical status of an area were population change, vacant and condemned housing, and proximity to industry. Shaw and McKay (1942) identified areas with high delinquency rates as physically deteriorated, geographically close to areas of heavy industry, and populated with highly transient residents. These two scholars proposed that population shifts influenced delinquency because of the process of invasion, dominance, and succession, a term they used for disruption of the social disorganization of an area because members of one collective ethnic group moved into another group's neighborhood.

Shaw and McKay (1942) further analyzed the association between the economic status of an area and its delinquency rate. Variables measured were the number of families receiving social assistance, the median rental price in the area, and the number of homes owned rather than rented. Data showed throughout their study that when the number of families receiving social assistance increased, there was a corresponding rise in delinquency. They concluded that was that high delinquency rates were in areas with low economic status rather than in areas with high economic status. Finally, Shaw and McKay (1942) suggested that economic conditions indirectly influenced high delinquency rates. Their research asserted that affluent regions offered an atmosphere of social controls, whereas areas of low affluence produced an environment conducive to delinquency because of the diversity of the residents.

In the 1990s Social Disorganization Theory went through a resurgence. Theorists Bursik and Grasmick (1993) presented a formulation of social disorganization theory by placing it "within a broader systemic theory of community, which emphasized how

neighborhood life was shaped by the structure of formal and informal networks of association” (Walker, 2009). Bursik and Grasmick (1993) measured a three-level system of relationships influencing informal social control. Level one consisted of the strength of individual relationships within a neighborhood. Through this measurement, Bursik and Grasmick (1993) argued that strong relationships among residents would result in substantial neighborhood networks which were the second tier. The second level generated the argument of Bursik and Grasmick (1993) that when neighbors know each other, they are more likely to pay attention to events that are influencing the common good of the community. The final level of relationships was between residents and organizations external to the neighborhood, such as local government officials or the police (Walker, 2009). Community networks externally in the neighborhood develop positive social construction and help keep out unwanted social problems.

Social disorganization and child welfare have connections because of environmental programs, and research has concentrated on micro-level causes and practices, such as parent-child interaction, parenting styles and attitudes, family structure, and the consequences of child maltreatment. Research studies recently expanded to understand the ecological scope in an attempt to explain child maltreatment and welfare incidences (Harrikari, 2014). Bronfenbrenner’s terms meso-and especially exo-systemic factors has findings complementary to those of the social disorganization theory studies, and in many ways, these approaches must be kept integral. The ecological perspective’s primary focus lies not at the micro- or mesosystemic levels but the exosystemic level of interaction. Harrikari (2014) argued that research studies have identified interconnections

between child maltreatment or welfare incidence and the classical elements of Social Disorganization Theory such as weak economic situation and poverty. Based on Harrikari's argument, the more fragile community structures are the more child maltreatment, abuse, and welfare incidences there are. Factors between communal politics, child maltreatment, and child welfare activities have received less attention.

The dynamic interaction of power and social construction leads to a distinctive pattern in the allocation of benefits and burdens to the different types of target groups. Interestingly, theories such as social construction contend that target populations have a powerful influence on public officials and shapes both the policy agenda and the actual design of policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Schneider and Ingram (1993) identified in their research associated with social construction of target populations and culture groups that policy places benefits and burdens on the specific target populations. A good example is that public policies place lifelong burdens on a family in which it changes the families' cultural and social characteristics.

Anderson (2010) analyzed data from Danish administrative registers and found that local differences in the levels of formal support, social support, and social disorganization affected out-of-home placement rates. The present analysis of this data suggests that low levels of cultural capital, secularization, and community ties may increase the likelihood of child welfare incidences and precise control and thus child protection statistics (Harrikari, 2014). Poor educational levels, church membership, and voting turnover were correlating variables associated with child welfare system involvement for families, specifically African American families. Children and families

that are associated or classified in one of these variables are subject to be referred to the child welfare system.

Human Ecology Theory

The basic premise of Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Theory (1979) is that families interact with their environment and the institutions associated with that environment. Bronfenbrenner's theory described three complex layers of the environment. Microsystem has the most impact on the child and family because it deals with how a particular ethnic group's behavior reacts to its surrounding social contexts. For example, many of the African American families participating in the child welfare system live in surroundings which lack networks and cohesion. Schools in those areas are poverty-stricken and are failing at government standards. The lack of supportive networks such as schools is considered to lead families and children toward poor behavioral choices that ultimately lead to child welfare system admission. Unfortunately, the connection between the social context and child and family do not exist in society.

Rolock, Jantz, and Abner (2015) found that the lack of cohesion that African American youth endure when engaged in their adverse constructed environment is likely to be referred for maltreatment to the child welfare system. Social contexts for many African American families and children are filled with multiple variables that make a living and decisions difficult for this group. Perhaps this is the reason many African American families and children fail to live according to a particular institution's expectations. The organizations give the impression to have difficulties interpreting and implementing the policies according to individual's social context; ultimately families'

social context was created because of some other policy or procedure. For example, a social condition is a critical element in the decision-making process by street-level bureaucrats to decide whether a child is safe or at risk of harm in his or her current setting. Research has demonstrated that single-parent households or immediate surroundings are likely to experience what the child welfare system deems an unfit environment for the children.

Social environment and conditions that makeup African American living conditions and how those environmental conditions affect parental behavior is stereotyped as a characteristic that does not meet public policy expectations. Children become conditioned to their environment and are subject to a home that lacks stability that was created from a single-parent household. Single-parent families that lack cohesion which is needed to raise a child to societal expectations that usually drives policy development. Instability and unpredictability of their socioeconomic status cause the family to experience dysfunction which ultimately causes a referral to child welfare system. A child is conditioned to this environment that is enriched in drug trafficking; because of his or her economic instability, the child chooses to sell drugs and is caught by law enforcement. The child then becomes involved with the child welfare system. Parents at that point are now considered unfit because of their inability to discipline the child efficiently, and the parent's social conditions also lead to adverse behaviors that contribute to the parent's ability to parent. Mesosystems impact child welfare incidences among African American families because their social networks are broken, and they lack adequate connection with the church, schools, child welfare system agencies, and

their neighborhoods. Research has introduced a very important antecedent which has been known to have children and families at risk of unsuccessful child welfare system outcomes. Many African American families living in socially disorganized conditions lack the effective ability to connect with social agencies and resources because the family lacks economic resources to participate in the program that is usually not in a convenient location. Unfortunately, with these broken links of social conformity, social networks, and failing schools, children and families referred to U.S. child welfare are socially disenfranchised and lack equity of social norms to live independent of the U.S. child welfare system. This variable does not impact the child directly but is on a larger scale. For survival, parents are working multiple jobs to raise their kids. Without child-parent relationships and lack of community cohesion, children are at risk of delinquency.

Families are at risk of child maltreatment because of single-parent homes, and the mother is working to make ends meet while leaving the children to raise themselves. Unfortunately, these characteristics lead to child maltreatment. Many families that are currently participating in the child welfare system or referred meet criteria for governmental monetary assistance. Social conditions then become adverse where the family now is poverty-stricken, and parents cannot afford to pay household bills and community resources are not available. Recommendations from research are that when child welfare systems assess single-parent families, workers should explore the family's relationship with the social systems, such as welfare organizations, legal systems, schools, and churches to precisely determine if any of the systems act as a support mechanism or protective factor for the family. Leon et al. (2008) gave a contribution to

the Latino families; extended family members may take children into their households for periods of time, providing an unofficial respite period for overloaded and overstressed parents whereas African American families are overlooked in this context and are likely to be placed in foster care. Another detriment to the likelihood that families graduate from the child welfare system and have poor outcomes is the lack of trust in community support and mental health programs.

Macrosystem scope is the larger layer where cultural values, customs, and laws have an effect on all the other scopes. Our cultural beliefs, values, customs of institutions that direct society, and policies that tend to dictate how society operates from an organization and societal standpoint affect behaviors in many ways. African American families are affected by the macro system due to their lack of trust in government and policies failing their communities (Osypuk & Acevdo-Garcia, 2010; UDHHS, 2011). Policymakers views are what generate policy discussion and ultimately establish policy legislation. African American families are not directly involved in the policy structure and subsystems created from policy constructs. Individuals indirectly and directly involved in a social problem that feel change is needed will propose legislation through congressional channels to sustain change. A policy is what directs our society and creates a variety of behaviors. The policy thus far has connected with their respected communities, but the programs and preventions are not existing in the urban communities, predominately African American communities, are at risk of child maltreatment and child welfare system admissions. Policy reform efforts like the CFSIA have made many improvements toward the overrepresentation of this ethnic group.

The Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-288)

The CFSIA was enacted to extend the funding authorization of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program for two purposes. Those two goals were to support monthly caseworker visits and to improve outcomes for children affected by their parent/caretakers' abuse of methamphetamine or another substance. The Promoting Stable and Safe Families (PSSF) Program funding was reauthorized to continue supporting four broad categories of services: child and family services, community-based family support, family preservation, time-limited reunification, and adoption promotion. The CFSIA expanded on the child welfare services program that will promote state flexibility in the development and expansion of a coordinated child and family services program that utilizes community-based agencies and ensures all children are raised in safe, loving families by protecting and promoting the welfare of all children. These programs are established for preventing neglect, abuse, and or exploitation of children. Supporting at-risk families through the services will allow for children to remain safely with their families or return to their relatives in a timely manner, promoting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care. The CFSIA of 2006 impacts relationships between providers and families of the child welfare system, especially African American participant families. However, the Promoting Safe and Stable Families law does not help support the child welfare system provider nor the African American participant family because African Americans live in social demographic areas where family preservation and reunification services no longer run. The CFSIA of 2006 and

other scholarly researcher views have not eliminated overrepresentation among African American families during their pathways through U.S. child welfare systems (Fluke et al., 2011). Breakthroughs and improvement for the foster care system are costly appropriations that are awarded annually for funding child welfare programs.

Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) Program

The Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) Program, which is funded by Title IV-B, Subpart 2 of the Social Security Act, is a significant source of federal funds to help states keep children safe from maltreatment, allow children to remain safely with their families, and ensure safe and timely permanency for children in foster care. United States policymakers, child welfare providers, and scholars find that there is a continuing need to protect children from abuse and neglect, and to strengthen families. Additionally, federal appropriations that supply states with money to develop these programs have not improved the outcomes for many African American participating services awarded from the PSSF program. Promoting Safe and Stable Families program supplies states with grants for four categories of services to children and families, community-based family support, family preservation, time-limited reunification, and adoption promotion.

Miller et al. (2014) in their scholarly research perspective identified that programs funded from the PSSF program like counseling and therapy is of little interest and benefit too much African American youth, reflecting what some researchers describe as “cultural mistrust” between African American young people and many mental health professionals. Interestingly, opinions given by African American youth that participated in PSSF funded programs was that their perceptions as to improving their family context

and what educational programs was not valued during permanency planning (GAO, 2013; Stoltzfus, 2014). In addition to their research studies, disparities and gaps in the public mental health resources such as counseling and therapy were well documented, and continuous high service delivery expenditures. Counseling and therapy delivered to local families by the authorizations of Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) Program has been of little interest and benefit to many African American youths. Program has also been described by some researchers as “cultural mistrust” between Black families and the mental health professionals supplying the service (Miller et al., 2014). Reunification for the many African American families that are required to participate in the counseling and therapy sessions are likely to age out of the foster care system.

According to African American youth who took part in the study of “Improving Outcomes for African American Males Involved with Child Welfare Systems,” male’s perception was that they lacked knowledge of their foster care placement which led them to hesitation in their acceptance of new placement. African American family and children, voices fail to reach the landscape of where policymaking decisions are made because research provides more analysis’ of how that African American voices lack contribution to the program development for improving this ethnic group’s outcomes after exiting child welfare system.

Child Welfare Services (CWS) Program

Child Welfare Services program is another extension of the CFSIA authorizing monthly caseworker visits with foster care children, with the percentage of those visits

needing to reach 90% of the children in foster care. The emphasis of this child welfare service program was placed on the existing African American youth involved in foster family home visits. Wildeman and Waldfogel (2014) noted that not just child welfare services expenditures increased, but African American childrens' length of time in the foster family had been longer than the legislative mandates. Policy reform is necessary for extending States flexibility with program development that would include views from African American families and youth as to the direction of program implementation.

States under this particular program were expected to develop procedures and plans as to how they are going to respond to and maintain services to children in foster care. Additionally, it was anticipated that state incorporates operational mechanisms to ensure and monitor monthly caseworker visits. For example, since the legislation of this public was enacted and implemented throughout the states, many states had not been meeting expected federal percentages states were not meeting the requirements. Many states utilizing authorized funding under the Child and Family Improvement Act of 2006, the constraints and expenditures had increased annually since the implementation of the public act by States. Moreover, the act was to provide child welfare service programs with flexibility, and flexibility neither seemed to be an option to meet the child welfare service program requirements according to the CFSIA. Requirements for states are they must ensure that all children in foster care receive case review and permanency planning. The complexity is that states are limited to using funds for child care, foster care maintenance payments and adoption assistance payments. Administrative decision-

making in the child welfare system has been affected because only 10% of the funding can be used on for administration functions.

Title IV-B Funds

Funding for Title IV-B programs that provide a financial appropriation to many states across the United States, states expenditures have similar payment rates from year to year, or expenditure rates increased. The premise of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act is to secure funding to provide states with necessary resources for keeping children with a permanent and safe home, help state and local child welfare agencies ensure child protection services, such as parenting classes and substance abuse classes. Title IV-B of the Social Security Act is the primary source of federal funding designated to state child welfare agencies. During the fiscal year 2012, Congress appropriated \$730 million to states under the Title IV-B programs to provide child welfare services and programming and increased during the fiscal year 2015 (Stoltzfus, 2015). Unfortunately, many of the families and children went without the array of services that states are given the flexibility to provide services to the Child and Family Improvement Act of 2006 for meeting mandated child welfare service requirements for family permanency. African American families and children weren't getting the services funded under the Title IV-B services, mandated families of this group had not had necessary mental health services because of financial constraints. Without these services awarded to families and children under mandated child welfare service requirements, it is likely going to make it difficult to preserve or reunite families (Donnelly, 2014; USGAO, 2013). Under Title IV-B

Subpart I and Subpart II are Child Welfare Services and Promoting Safe and Stable Families.

Title IV-B funding provided to the many states across the U.S. during the fiscal year 2012, the \$328 million in Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) funding from Subpart II conveys to not effectively fund the many child welfare agencies, in which spending have grown significantly. Interestingly, these state financial constraints widen the gaps in provider's ability such as local organizations that provide therapy to mandate family and children and transportation for the household and child attend the reunification service. The governmental financial stream under Title IV-B contributed \$328 million in PSSF funding Subpart II.

In the Government Accountability Report, from 2011, many states reported that over 675,000 children had been victims of maltreatment. This report eluded to the fact providing services to mandate families and children of the child welfare system was difficult, and many families and children were not getting adequate services. Report utilized survey of states funded by the Annie E. Cassey Family Programs to identify sources of federal funding to commonly used by child welfare agencies. Expenditure reports and reviewed data from SSBG expenditure report and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Some of the child welfare service programs funded under Title IV-B were home visiting programs, in-home services, educating the parent, parent support, counseling and mental health services, and material supports including housing (USGAO, 2013). Securing these programs, the child welfare system relies on partner agencies, such as behavioral health agencies and public housing authorities are just a few.

Policy Reform

Changing laws that govern America's child welfare system has been a debatable topic by federal, state, and local stakeholders to the system. Curtis and Denby (2011) identified the laws governing America's child welfare system that does not rectify or prevent poor outcomes experienced by African American children. These researchers body of work included the study of 20 major federal laws passed in response to problems faced by children and their families when it is necessary to temporarily or permanently remove the child from their homes to ensure safety and well-being. Reforms were recommended because the 20 laws that were supposed to ensure child protection and safety have not had a positive impact on the majority of African American children that remain in the child welfare system (pg. 126, 2011). Financial reforms that grant states more flexibility in the use of federal foster care funds can be a viable vehicle for modification. Curtis and Denby (2011) argued that stakeholders in the U.S child welfare system should be more educated on the policy implementation and elements in the process. Seemingly policy change could help increase awareness and produce recommendations to policymakers.

Significant improvements in the child welfare system across the country were made by these new laws governing the systematic operation. However, many of the laws are still struggling to address the country's child abuse and neglect needs for many. These authors propose revising all major federal laws to requiring tracking and reporting of outcomes experienced in this group. Changing these laws and practices would bring attention back to the public. Since the publication of the Curtis and Denby's (2011)

article, reform in U.S. child welfare policies has been conducted, but it has not brought change to the social problem of African American overrepresentation in the system. Further research is needed to contribute to the existing literature on African American families' overrepresentation in the U.S. child welfare system.

Similarly, Edwards, Bryant, and Bent-Goodley (2011), had identified that the U.S. child welfare system made a significant improvement, but more system modifications were needed. They concluded that the current child welfare system throughout the country did not sufficiently address the problems that they targeted. Many child welfare policies cause problems which in turn cause negative unanticipated consequences.

Summary

Collected scholarly literature and synthesis of that academic literature convey the story again, policy design and implementation of child welfare system policies such as CFSIA indirectly impact families and individuals that experience pathways through the child welfare system. In chapter two of this dissertation project, the methodology of this project was started by importing keywords into highly recognized research websites and Walden University library. Many journal articles, publications, and child welfare agency publications shined a light on the social phenomenon of continuous disproportionate representation among African American families and their socioeconomic barriers influencing their poor outcomes after exiting child welfare system. The scholarly literature demonstrates that the child welfare system has not made an impact on reducing African American families' overrepresentation in the child welfare system. Research shows many social variables African American neighborhood conceptualization,

ideologies of decision-makers, design, and implementation of policy streams are influenced toward and impact African American representation and referrals to the child welfare system. Because of African American parents and children social conditions, they are a higher risk of being referred to the child welfare system than other racial groups. Scholarly literature throughout chapter 2 explicitly discuss African American families, and children's adverse challenges within the neighborhood that reside in a high risk of child welfare system referral.

Furthermore, African American families and children participate in the child welfare system longer than their ethnic counterparts. Unfortunately, the policy process has impacted African-American social conditions and their behaviors that cause shifts in their social mobility and conditions. Current research on policy changes that exist in today's child welfare system shows that design and implementation of policy fail the African-American ethnic group when navigating through the system.

Further research examination is needed to increase social awareness on racial inequality in the child welfare system and to improve the process. Scholarly literature has exposed to this nation, state, and local communities that further research from African American perspective could provide recommendations for filling the gaps between this ethnic group and child welfare system. Opinions from an African American cultural perspective offers suggestions that could help establish cultural specific programs.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to expand on current literature and increase the awareness of institutional racism that many African American families experience at the expense of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006. However, there is a lack of research on the personal experiences that African American biological parents experience in the child welfare system and their beliefs about their socioeconomic barriers to exiting the system. Utilization of ethnography methodology gives the researcher opportunity to randomly select African American biological parents who had experience with the child welfare system. Goals for this study are insightful information from African American biological parents who have participated in the child welfare system and to hopefully promote awareness in the Michigan child welfare system that would lead to policy reform. This section of the proposal will explain the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, recruitment and participation, data plan analysis, and issues of trustworthiness. The chapter culminates with ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach for understanding African American families' perceived beliefs to their socioeconomic barriers to exiting the child welfare system. Qualitative research is an inquiry process for understanding qualitative examination that has a unique platform that arranges for interactive processes between the researcher and participant which allows for the order to make sense out of emerging

themes and findings (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2008). Scott and Garner (2013) suggested that the ethnography tradition allowed for the researcher to gain an understanding and answer to a particular culture's group living experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data and analyze the information collected from interviews of African American biological parents experiences in the child welfare system. A purposeful sample method was used to help in the selection of African American biological parents.

The rationale for this qualitative research project is to explore African American experiences in the child welfare system and perceived barriers to improving the system. The goal of qualitative research is to determine the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a specific problem (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2009). The qualitative research is inquiry process of understanding. Qualitative examination has a unique platform that arranges for interactive methods between the researcher and participant which allows for the order to make sense out of emerging themes and findings (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009). African American biological parents are reluctant to contribute to the political process that would improve policy process. Obtaining the viewpoints of African American biological parents who experienced child welfare system engagement would not only give this ethnic group voice but can increase awareness on racial disparity in the system.

In-depth interviews of African American families that experienced overrepresentation in the child welfare system could add to the existing literature. Secondly, obtaining the viewpoints of African American biological parents who were

exposed to the child welfare system would not only give this ethnic group voice but can improve the child system pathways for this ethnic group. This study may hold the potential to allow for the preliminary identification of efficiency measures and variables to improve the child welfare system's systematic process in the handling of African American families' disparity experiences.

Rationale for Ethnography Methodology

Ethnography is a scientific and artistic approach to studying human societies, and it resembles that ordinary person's self-reflexive and systematic approaches to learning about the world around them, particularly when confronted with a new cultural experience (Scott and Garner, 2013). Ethnography research systematically studies current differences in the treatment of individuals and looks for ways to reestablish systems, which maintain such inappropriateness (Denzin, 2001, Lapan, 2008;). Obtaining African American families' perceived beliefs to their socioeconomic barriers to exiting the child welfare system would add this culture groups' values to the current literature and awareness. Ethnographers use multiple data sources and methods for data collection that bring complex, personal, and thoughtful insights and meaning to the inner workings of social settings that are in need of liberation (Lapan, 2008; Madison, 2005). Two ethnographic methods was used in hopes to provide insight on African American families having a more pleasant child welfare system experience. Fine (1994, p. 17) has identified three key positions that ethnographers believe when involved in ethnography research. The first position is the ventriloquist stance that neutrally transmits data in a manner, and the researcher is consciously omitted from the text. Next, positionality of voice stance

communicates the voices of the participants and the meaning they attach to their experiences. Finally, the activism stance boldly takes and maintains a position against discriminatory practices in addition to offering alternatives and practices that seek to eliminate oppression and marginalization of groups and individuals. It is critically important that the researcher understand positionality to have the ability to recognize the power, privilege, and bias of both self and others.

Particular to African American families, issues surrounding race, class, and gender are primary factors influencing not only the disproportionate numbers of African American families in the child welfare system, but also the poorer placement outcomes for children (USDDHHS, 2010; USGAO, 2008; ACF, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, & Children's Bureau, 2010). By recognizing the inequality and oppression in the child welfare system, this research study will offer professionals a description of experiences that African American biological parents encounter and an opportunity to improve upon services that specifically address cultural needs of the population.

Role of the Researcher

The explanatory nature of qualitative research compels transparency between the researcher and audience (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2007). The means of transparency is to provide a description of the researcher's background that lends itself to the interest in and knowledge about the subject. Since the beginning of my human service career, I have primarily focused on systemic services awarded to vulnerable families which are involved in the child welfare system.

In addition to the cultural insight related to being a member of a socially disadvantaged and marginalized group, I bring to this inquiry process graduate-level research and clinical experience. These skills provide me with not only critical knowledge pertaining to the interworking of the child welfare system, but also the relevance of recognizing and incorporating the role of culture in the program services.

I acknowledge that the same experiences that prepared me to conduct this study also have the capacity to serve as a potential bias. This bias would be in over-estimating the role that culture and policies may have in African American families being disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and receiving services. I am not only invested in undergoing this exploration at the level of quality expected for graduate studies but as a researcher, I wanted to equally invest in ensuring that the findings of this research and from participants are investigated.

I constructed a semi-structured interviewing protocol and prompt template located in Appendix C. This assisted me in questioning African American biological parents who were involved in the child welfare system and worked with providers. The focus of the semi-structured interview questions gave me not only flexibility to implement themes and concepts but an opportunity to understand first-hand African American biological parents' experiences and knowledge of how policies impacted their experiences with providers.

Methodology

Participants and Eligibility Criteria

Participants are those African American biological parents who have exited foster care system but worked with a caseworker and engaged in services for a minimum of three months. Participants' child has not returned to the care of the child welfare system for at least one year. Participants for this research study must be at least 18 years of age and the parents of a child who has been involved in the child welfare system. Parents are eligible to participate in the research project system if they received permanency or reunification services, and their child was placed in out-of-home placement including parents with children in community-based programs, foster care, or other substitute care including kinship care. Eligible participants for this study can be interviewed whether or not their children were removed from the home.

Recruitment Procedure

Recruitment can be a daunting task because many cultural backgrounds are reluctant to trust large organizations. Previous research stresses that recruitment of African American biological parents who were involved in the system at one point lack trust and can be hesitant in interviewing and distance themselves from these institutions more than any other ethnic group (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005; Sutton, 2009). Two methods were used in the process of recruitment of African American parents for this research project. First, collaboration with community gatekeepers, including church pastors and community advocates, to allow fliers posted publicly and in highly visible areas of the community. In addition, a snowball sample was used using word of mouth

from participants to other potential participants. These methods were highly recognizable throughout graduate research projects with the researchers utilize a qualitative approach (Martinez et al., 2014; Toth, 2015). Methods used during the recruitment process gives the researcher abilities to complete the process in a timely fashion.

Through email gatekeepers were asked to participate in the recruitment of African American parents, to be educated on the research project, and to advertise fliers in churches and community functions in which they are involved. Gatekeepers selected for this research project are individuals that advocate for the church and participate in community-based projects. Use of professional gatekeepers with this experience is great for word of mouth advertisement. Furthermore, it allows for the gatekeeper to educate other professionals with whom they may collaborate to carry out particular community projects. Most likely these participants are to be trustworthy individuals in the community which builds trust and credibility with participants chosen to participate in the interview process (Martinez, 2014). Gatekeeper's participation will hopefully be utilized in other methods.

Location was an critical component of this research project. I identified St. John's Baptist Church which is located in Jackson, Michigan, and on a bus route, allowing for ease of access for participants. The pastor of this church has agreed and signed a document agreeing to allow me the use of the facility in a private area to conduct semi-structured interviews. Participants also was given the option of choosing a location for participating in the semi-structured interviews. Participant's choice of location was of a place they are comfortable with sharing their child welfare system experiences.

Selected church pastors were asked if flier advertisements could be posted in visual areas of their churches. Participants for this study were recruited for the use of advertisement in the form of fliers (Appendix C), which they help place in and around local agency buildings where child welfare services have been provided for African American parents. He/she provided the potential participant with my information for a contact. Finally, word of mouth method was used to help the community become aware of the research project. Community-based advocates and gatekeepers were asked to advertise at community functions that they are actively participating in to use word of mouth advertisement method to build project awareness.

Once participants made contact, they made aware of the specifics of this research project and the importance of their contributions. It was explained to participants verbally and in writing that they can opt out of the semi-structured interview process at any given time. During the interview process, if any question asked of the participant is uncomfortable, he or she can ask to go onto the next question. Participants were reminded before the start of the interview that a consent document must be signed. If a verbal agreement was given on participating in the research, the participant was asked to offer his or her choice of venue to conduct the interview process. The researcher and participant was given the opportunity to schedule a date, time, and venue that is appropriate for each individual to conduct the interviews.

Prior to conducting the interview process, it was explained how the participant's personal information was protected. Protection of participant's information was secured on a protected flash drive. The flash drive was protected with a password that is only

accessible by the owner of the flash drive who is the researcher. Stored information will only stay on the flash drive up to five years.

Upon contact with potential candidates for participating in this research project, I described to the potential participant what to expect during his or her participation. Participants were then introduced to participant consent forms, read the consent form, told of possible locations where interviews are going to take place, given a description of possible outcomes from their participation. I moved forward with the interview process after the participant signed the consent form.

Informed Consent

Eligible participants were asked to sign consent forms that state that they agree to participate in this research project interviewing process. Before the participants' consent, they were given a signed copy of the consent form which was read to them aloud. Reading aloud to participants helped the participants with understanding the contents of the consent form. Another benefit of reading the consent form to the participants is that those participating may have trouble reading and be low-functioning educationally. The interviewer will then explain the research study including possible risks and benefits, inclusion criteria, considerations around confidentiality and anonymity, and information about research participants' rights.

Sample Procedure

A purposeful sample consisted of eight self-identified African American parents were recruited from a small urban neighborhood in Jackson, Michigan. Interviews of the eight self-identified African American parents reflected on their engagement in the child

welfare system. The process for determining the sample size is explained in the next section of this proposal. The purposive sample method provided flexibility in the number of participants studied and locations of where interviews were going to take place (Creswell, 2007; Rudestam, 2007). The target population consisted of African American biological parents and adoptive parents who participated in services for at least three months and who were at least 18 years of age. Furthermore, this particular sample design allows me flexibility in directing and asking further questions that could arise during the interview process, which added emphasis to the qualitative analysis.

Process for obtaining a sample size I contacted churches administration to speak with the pastor of the church to identify whether there are members who were involved in the child welfare system at some point. Research advertisement fliers were posted at local mental health clinics whom supply evidence-based programming and services to families that were referred by the child welfare system to participate. Fliers advertising this research project included my contact number and provide an explanation of the project. If the potential participant had questions, I referred the biological parent to myself or pastor of the church where the advertisement exists.

Sample Size

Brikci and Green (2007) suggested that a sample size for qualitative research are generally small and depending on the purpose of the study. For this study between 10-15 individuals was asked to participate in this study. Eight individuals participated in this research project as evidence for saturation. Recommendations for an adequate sample size in ethnographic studies that focuses on single culture-sharing groups have been

ambiguous and, therefore, should remain flexible. Creswell (2007) stated that researchers are recommended to sample until the emergence of a thick cultural description that includes clear patterns and themes associated with the workings of the cultural-group are evident. Thick cultural description of the sample was conducted as compliance with Creswell (2007) for determining clear patterns and themes of association. It is at the point of redundancy that saturation is achieved with the given sample size.

Data Collection

Data collection is viewed as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering sound information to answer emerging research questions (Creswell, 2007; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Data collection methods used for this research project are semi-structured interviews and secondary data. Data collection method will start with the recruitment of African American biological parents who engaged in the child welfare system services for at least a three month period. Eight participants did participate in the child welfare system over three months. All of the eight participants had participated in the child welfare system for over one year. My decision to use semi-structured interviews was made to generate complementary views on the experiences under study, to improve the ability to compare and contrast participants' perceptions, and to increase data confirmation (Halcomb & Andrew, 2005; Lambert & Loiseau, 2008; Lapan, 2008). Semi-structured interviews give me the ability to prompt and probe deeper into the given situation. In addition, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewers the opportunity to ask more detailed questions about the respondents' situations and to not adhere only to the interview guide (Kajornboon, 2009). Use of semi-structured interviews allowed for

me to ask extended questions, along with follow up questions during the interview process. Another benefit with using semi-structured interviews is that I can explain or rephrase the questions if respondents are unclear about the questions. To help answer the research questions, a sample population of at least 10 African American biological parents who have experience in the child welfare system and working with providers are going to be recruited. Understanding the recruitment of African Americans can be difficult due to their lack of trust in research and the child welfare system, I plan on working with local pastors and African American parents to recruit the necessary number of African American parents to carry out a qualified ethnography research study. This may serve to validate my involvement in the study. Interviews of African American parents are going to take place in a neutral setting, somewhere other than the parent's home, and where that individual feels comfortable talking openly. Alternative locations were included for participants to choose from such as churches, libraries, and community resource centers.

To enrich the context of this study, I performed a document analysis of public child protective services policies to compare with the interview perspectives. Knowing that obtaining public records from a sensitive venue and institution was difficult and take time, I focused on a firm networking procedure by contacting agencies that have worked with and study phenomenon's parallel to this study. According to the Children Foster Care Manual, the Substitute Care Policy, on foster care initiatives, case managers and foster families and children are required to meet monthly to establish an adequate safeguard for the child and families. In addition, families and children awarded child

welfare service programs have to be given a limited time for reunification, according to the Children Foster Care Manual. Case managers are expected to make sure the community-based resources are targeting the individuals and family's needs for effort toward reunification. Using these different methods and strategies builds an in-depth description of the social problem and the ability to answer the research questions proposed.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow for new ideas during the interview process that can be explored. With a topic guide and well thought-out questions, the semi-structured interviews provided a wealth of knowledge mainly from participants who were not hesitant to openly share experiences, impressions, and ideas on improving experiences (Creswell, 2007; Rudestam, 2007). Semi-structured interviews allow for the incorporation of flexibility to follow up with questions for clarity and issues that may later surface.

For meeting the ethnographic inquiry study requirements, I interviewed eight African American biological parents who have participated the child welfare system. Semi-structured interviews provide a wealth of knowledge particularly from participants who are not hesitant to openly share experiences, impressions, and ideas on improving experiences (Creswell, 2007; Rudestam, 2007). The interview strategy allows for a thorough exploration of the participants' experiences using their words to describe such involvement. Flexibility incorporated in the semi-structured interview method gives the

researcher ability to follow-up with clarifying questions and any additional questions that may surface as a result of the discussion.

Table 1 in this proposal describes an interconnection between the study's conceptual framework, research questions, and the interview questionnaire. I created the interview questionnaire guide to generate discussion that helps participants answer the study's central and sub-group research questions (See Appendix D). The research questions serve as an informal grouping of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants (Lapan, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Establishing a sound baseline of experience across all participants, each participant is going to be asked five primary child welfare system provider questions. The primary CWSP that participants was asked is: "What were your experiences with foster care worker(s)?" Additionally, CWSP questions that was discussed are the participants' perceptions and specifics about services experienced during child welfare system involvement. The scope of this interview prompts questions that are wide in variety to allow the flexibility to access in-depth perceptions and experiences of African American parents in the child welfare system and to work with child welfare system providers.

Table 1

Individual Interview Prompt Questions: Connection between Conceptual Framework and the Prompts for the Individual Interviews

Theory	Central Research Question/Sub-questions	Interview Prompt Questions
Human Ecology	What do you think may account for the pathways African American biological parents and	Please describe your experiences in child welfare programs and engagement with child welfare

children of color experience that are different from their White counterparts at the various decision points?	providers.
What steps do you think are needed to change the pathways for families and children of color?	Please describe your experiences with child welfare service providers. Child welfare service providers include caseworkers, psychologists, individual or family therapists, parent mentor, etc.
How does child welfare policy impact African Americans ability to exit the system and eligibility of federal entitlement programs?	Were there differences when working with specific providers? If so, please describe the differences? After interacting with providers or receiving services, how did you feel walking away?
How does child welfare policy impact African Americans from exiting the system?	Have you ever had any experiences where you felt that child welfare service providers you were working with went against child welfare policy, and or procedures? Please explain.
How do providers determine African American families' service needs?	In your experience(s), do you feel child welfare providers incorporate various aspects of African American culture into policies, and or services? If you answer no, please explain.

		<p>Do you feel there are cultural factors specific to African American biological parents that providers need to consider? What are those factors? Please explain.</p> <p>What was your outcome(s) in client-provider relationships? Were you given the opportunity to explain the results to the institution caseworkers?</p> <p>What are the components of a service(s) that would have been beneficial in helping you avoid child welfare involvement, maintaining parental rights of your child (ran), and avoiding family separation? Please explain.</p>
<p>Social Disorganization Theory</p>	<p>What social barriers do you think keep African Americans from adequately exiting the child welfare system?</p> <p>What social barriers do you think may account for African American systemic bias pathways during child welfare system engagement?</p>	<p>Do you feel that demographics (e.g. neighborhood, social mobility, socio-economic status, and cultural status) have an effect on your outcome?</p> <p>Do you feel that neighborhoods, community programs play a major role in your child welfare system outcome?</p> <p>Did you have problems accessing, and/or attending services that were awarded?</p> <p>What do you see that could have been done differently</p>

in your allegations by the child welfare service provider to meet your needs?

Did you have problems accessing community programs, and if those particular programs were in your neighborhood how the child welfare system outcome would have been different?

What practices were not done in your case but could have been done in order to meet your needs better?

Do you feel that the practices you described could benefit in response to the specific needs of African American parents who are currently in the child welfare system or do you consider them general practices for all parents in the child welfare system? Why?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences that have not been shared thus far?

Data Analysis and Interpretation Methods

Because ethnographic studies' focal points are deep rather than broad, this study evolved into an intense discussion. A thick description of all the events and descriptions

of parents' perceived barriers to exiting U.S. child welfare system was explained. This ethnography provided a narrative but also situate insider's beliefs and practices in the large theoretical context (Geertz, 1973, p. 14). Semi-structured interviews were transcribed from an audio tape and entered into NVivo professional software data software to assist in data analysis.

Coding

Ethnography is a scientific and artistic method to study human societies, and it resembles the ordinary person's self-reflexive and systematic approaches to learning about the world around them, particularly when confronted with a new cultural experience. A code is a qualitative inquiry word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a salient symbolically summative, striking, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based on visual data (Saladana, 2015; Strauss, 1987). Coding strategies during this inquiry helped to examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize appropriate terms of properties and dimensions. Grouping the themes in a cluster analysis helped classify themes that emerged during the coding process. NVivo 13 assisted in doing an axial coding process to relate the individual codes to each other to help me understand relationships and this studies phenomenon. Themes were arranged in a systematic order, grouped, and relinked to consolidate meaning and explanation. Files was kept secured on a password protected flash drive and stored. Data were accessible to the participant and me. The actual number of codes, categories, themes, and concepts will vary and depend on contextual factors.

Preliminary Coding Framework

The preliminary coding framework gave me the opportunity for conducting the process a number of ways but involved assigning a word, phrase, number, or symbol to each coding category. Coding framework for this research inquiry started with a pre-list of codes that emerged from the research inquiry conceptual framework. Codes that are different from the pre-list did emerge. Code categories and sub-categories originated from the interview transcripts, direct notes taken from the observation, and fieldwork was organized in a systematic way. When reviewing the statements from the interviews I made notes in the margin to signify the particular category. Concepts and themes were identified during the conceptualization process of emerging statements. Emerging concepts and themes was then be paired in different codes.

Research suggests that the researcher start with a list referred to as list of pre-set codes. Emergent codes are those variables that come up during the coding process that were not listed in the pre-list of codes. A modifier was assigned to the particular code. For example, “shared values” is going to be given a particular number. These particular codes derive from the conceptual framework and the list of research questions propose ways of coding the data. Grouping alike variables, known as clustering analysis will take place when there are variables identified that are similar in phenomenon that emerged from coding.

Table 2 was a guide for understanding the coding process and codes relationship to the different theories. Showing the codes relationship to the theories, a table was developed which had two categories. The two categories are theory and primary codes.

The two theories are Social Disorganization Theory and Human Ecology Theory.

Grouped with theories were indicators conducive to Social Disorganization Theory process in relationship to community environment. There were indicators identified that were conducive to governmental process in which that process plays a pivotal role in the environmental make up.

Table 2

Description of Preliminary Code Framework

Theory/Theme	Primary Code
HET	Mesosystems
	Exosystems
	Chronosystems
	Marcosystems
SDT	Shared Values
	Common Practices
	Network: Formals
	Network: Informal
	Social Control
	Collective Efficacy
	Lack of Services
	Lack of Social Support

Qualitative Data Analysis

The latest version of NVivo-software from QSR International was utilized to help analyze, manage, control, and analyze qualitative data. This program provides security by storing the database and files together in a single file that enables a researcher to use multiple languages and allows researchers to manipulate the data easily and conduct searches (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). The program can display the codes and categories of data gathered during a research study graphically. NVivo provides a

frequency table that measures the collected data to recognize gaps in the child welfare system. A collection of data was stored in electronic folders that are only reviewable to the researcher. Outside parties will not have access to the data gathered and information given by participants.

Ethical Procedures

The ethical procedure describes the modules utilized for safeguarding individuals relevant to qualitative research. It is recommended that qualitative research inquiries that the qualitative researcher undergoes formal research ethics training. Also, ethical procedure context is critical because researchers must agree upon standards for research ethics. This helps to ensure that as researchers we explicitly consider the needs and concerns of the people we study. It also gives appropriate oversight for the conduct of research and provides a basis for trust to be established between researchers and study participants in the child welfare system context.

Using the fundamental research ethics principles is appropriate for protecting research study participants. Respect for persons requires I committed to ensuring the autonomy of research participants, and, where autonomy may diminish, to protect people from exploitation of their vulnerability. Specific methods were explained to the participants as to how the researcher is committed to minimizing the risks associated with research, including psychological and social risks, and maximizing the benefits that accrue to research participants. Participants who take part in the research study are going to take advantage of participating by being provided the information gathered from the research project.

I completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) training that explains the importance of protecting human subjects and storing data during research projects. A copy demonstrating that I completed the training is attached to this research proposal (Appendix F). I will not interview nor ask an individual whom I know to participate in this research study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Creswell (2003) recommended eight different strategies that could be used to increase the trustworthiness and creditability of the study. Creswell also pointed out that all eight strategies are not needed, and some are more effective than others (p. 196).

Anney (2014) encouraged a similar method in the demonstration of the trustworthiness.

This guide helped me during the interviews to keep me on task. Creswell (2007) recommended a thick description to convey the findings (p. 196). A thick description was utilized to convey to the readers exactly how the data collection was conducted. Creswell also suggested another strategy for trustworthiness was to spend an extended time in the field. Extended time in the field allows the researcher to gather an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study which increases the credibility of the phenomenon. As I mentioned earlier in this dissertation, I spent three years working in the field watching children being removed from their families and also observed the children spend lengthy timeframes in residential facilities rather than transition into foster care or back with their biological parents. Creswell encourages that the researcher clarify any bias that could be brought to the study and that self-reflective disclosure creates an open and honest air that will resonate with the readers (p. 196). There is no denying that I was interested in this

research topic due to my beliefs, values, and life experiences. However, to mitigate bias, I conducted interviews using a topic guide with specific interview questions to avoid leading questions and push and pull questions (Brown, 2015; Scott & Garner, 2013). Additionally, I was transparent about the findings, using direct quotes from participants to illustrate the themes and categories that emerged during the data analysis of the data.

Guba and Lincoln (1998) prefer that the researcher uses terms for credibility and dependability. This research project is a process under exploration. Reliable and dependable research means that if and when the same phenomenon is studied again, parallel observations and findings will emerge (Anney, 2014; Babbie, 2007). It is critical that I actively control for potential biases that may hinder credibility and dependability for this study.

To deliver trustworthiness of this study, I used several sources of triangulated data collection methods. Using multiple data sources including interviews and document analysis enhanced the richness of the data. It will furthermore increase the likelihood that a thicker description of experiences, themes, and perspectives will emerge (Anney, 2014; Creswell, 2007). Benefits of having a thicker description include providing readers with sufficient information, which helps determine the transferability of findings to other settings (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Provisions and assumptions laid the foundation to provide transparency between me and those involved in this research study. Without appropriate consideration for researcher's biases, this would sacrifice the overall creditability of the study, and thereby ultimately silence the experiences of the participants (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton,

2001; Merriam, 1988). To maintain transparency throughout the study, I used an audit system in the study. Carle (2010) offered member checking to incorporate this study's data analysis process and which gives participants the voice, power, and awareness to help with gathering and analyzing data. This research recommends that participants are given the opportunity to request hard copies of the transcripts and other documents collected during data analysis. The practice of member checking has been cited as being "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Member checking is theoretically succinct with ethnography approach to providing voice to marginalized populations.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time (Anney, 2014; Bitsch, 2005). This process involves participants evaluating the findings and their interpretation and recommendations of the study to make sure that they are all supported by the data received from the informants of the study. After data is analyzed, participants are going to be allowed to review the data analysis process and findings for the opportunity to provide feedback and ensure they agree on the findings. There was an analysis after the data was collected to make sure it covered all elements of the research inquiry.

Confirmability

For strengthening the credibility of the research project, I used an effective triangulation process to demonstrate confirmability. This mechanism was administered with this research inquiry for solidifying confirmability. Confirmability refers to the

degree in which a researcher's inquiry could be confirmed and collaborated with other scholars and to verify that the research inquiry is not just the imagination of the researcher (Anney, 2014). Another alternative for demonstrating confirmability is when the researcher stored the documents in a binder and on a secure flash drive to refer to if confirmability needs establishment. For strengthening confirmability of the inquiry, the researcher plans to perform an audit trail for demonstrating his personal experience throughout and whether or not his background of this phenomenon had an effective outcome to this inquiry. Included in the audit trail is my journal that entails the ledgers of information documented on my experiences throughout the inquiry process.

Summary

Sustainability of the African American families who participated gave the study thick and rich information that could lead this study in influencing policymakers to reform the current child welfare system's policies. The triangulation of data collection provided enough information to know about this country's child welfare system and how their decisions impact engagement and relationships with African American families and children. The data granted the researcher with the ability to provide precise conclusions and recommendations to serve better the people at risk of entering the child welfare system, specifically African American families and children and improve their outcomes in the child welfare system.

The approach for this research project was a qualitative methodology with ethnographic scope to examine African American beliefs and perceptions to their socioeconomic barriers of exiting the child welfare system, and how to the child welfare

system. Gave the research project the ability to examine African American family's experiences throughout the child welfare system. In chapter 3, the researcher developed a strategy to obtain sound interrelated activities aimed to gather sound information to answer emerging research questions. Guided by semi-structured interview protocol has the potential to bring to light the many socioeconomic barriers that cripple African Americans abilities to experience successful outcomes and eliminate the institutional racism.

Sample procedure for this research project was unique in using a purposeful sampling method gives the research project opportunity for in-depth, thick, and rich information to deliver sound recommendations to the child welfare system community for improvement. Sampling size method of 10-15 potentially gives the opportunity for rich and thick information to provide to the child welfare system, community recommendations to improve the system and bridge the many gaps between this culture and community. Furthermore, the purposeful sampling method gives the researcher the ability to design and other research questions as they come up during the interviewing process of participants.

Ethnographic studies' focal points are described as points with deep rather than broad to deliver a thick description of the discussions that evolve. Explained experiences by African American parents' perceived barriers to successfully exiting the child welfare system provided a wealth of knowledge about their experiences which demonstrates research should move forward. Potential participants for this research project are going to be educated on this research project before signature to give consent is accepted.

Acceptance for participation in this research project the participants will be allowed to exit the interviewing process at any time.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to expand on the current literature and increase the awareness of institutional racism that many African American families experience at the expense of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006. This study described the experiences and perceptions of African American families who participated in the child welfare system in one county in Jackson, Michigan. It was important to understand families' thoughts— not only about their experiences but also about how the child welfare system should be modified to reduce their overrepresentation in it. The study sought to provide policymakers and child welfare system decision-makers with recommendations for improving outcomes not only for African American families but for all families. In addition, the results of this research could influence policymakers to reform policy: one idea is to give client–providers a framework in which to develop programs based on African American families' culture and life experiences.

In this chapter, I cover the following topics: setting and demographics, data collection procedures (including methods used to collect and analyze the data), and data analysis stage, precoded categories, emerging themes, and direct quotes from interviewees as examples. Next comes evidence of trustworthiness, which includes an explanation of what steps were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Finally, I offer an overview of the results and frequencies. I explain how each research question was answered and present the findings that support the answers to those questions. I could do so by listening to (a) the number of times each precoded category or emerging theme was repeated in the interviews, (b) the number of participants who raised those topics, and (c) quotes that exemplify the theme being discussed.

Research Questions

The research questions are pivotal in exploring the barriers to African American participation in the U.S. child welfare system and generating suggestions to improve that system. The central research question for this study was: How might Human Ecology theory and Social Disorganization theories explain the challenges African American families experience in exiting the child welfare system?

The sub-questions related to the central research question are as follows:

1. What perceptions do African American participants in the child welfare system have related to system barriers to exiting the system?
2. What do African American participants propose as solutions to the problems of the child welfare system?
3. How might the voices of participants educate policymakers on child welfare policy so that African American families are better able to exit the system?

Setting

After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study (Approval No. 01-06-17-0067756), research fliers were distributed to local barbershops, grocery stores, ,

libraries, and churches. The participants contacted me on the study, and I invited them to participate in a semi-structured interview if they met research inclusion criteria. During the first phone contact with the potential participants, the conversation took place between the participant and me to determine if the individual met research inclusion criteria. Appointments were individually made with the setting for the interview chosen by the participant. All interviews were conducted inside the target neighborhood. Locations included a local library and Substance Abuse Recovery Center with very private rooms. Each participant spoke freely as much as he or she wished, and the interview was ended when participants felt they said everything there was to be said. Therefore, the location was not considered a factor that could influence the interpretation of the research study results.

Demographics

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who represented the Jackson neighborhood demographics. Of the eight participants, 100% were females living in the targeted neighborhood, 75% (six) were under the age of 30, 100% lived beneath the poverty threshold and were being financially supported by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. All were currently experiencing economic stratification, a known contributor to maltreatment and a referral to the child protective service system (Cooper, 2015). Of the eight participants, four (50%) of the African-American parents were currently navigating through the child welfare system and had a prior child protective service case. Also, seven participants (88%) mentioned as a result

of their child welfare system involvement that they have since been diagnosed with a type of mental illness.

Table 3

Demographic Composition of Female Participants

Participant	Age	Family	Employment	Temporary Assistance
P1	26	Single-parent	Unemployed	TANF Assistance
P2	43	Single-parent	Unemployed	TANF Assistance
P3	21	Single-parent	Employed	N/A
P4	28	Single-parent	Employed	N/A.
P5	41	Two-Parent	Employed	N/A
P6	25	Single-parent	Unemployed	TANF Assistance
P7	23	Single-Parent	Unemployed	TANF Assistance
P8	18	Single-Parent	Unemployed	TANF Assistance

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection consisted of individual interviews with eight African American biological parents. Interviews were scheduled according to participants' schedules. Interviews produced a thick description of experiences and perceptions on African-American biological pathways through the child welfare system. Each of the semi-structured interviews with the participants lasted approximately one hour. The

interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. Data collected from the semi-structured interview protocol was kept under safe conditions exactly as planned and approved by the IRB. No unusual circumstances took place during the data collection stage.

A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D) was used to aid me with developing probing and follow up questions of the participants to provide more details or to answer more in-depth questions to ensure that the research questions were addressed in each of the interviews. Other than audio-recording the semi-structured interviews, I took notes and signaled elements that I thought could be of use later in the analysis. I wrote a journal after each interview which was a summary of what I noticed during the interview and what I believed to be relevant for further analysis. As a recommendation by Janesick (2004), I also wrote personal notes after each one of the interviews to become aware of any personal biases, so that the data analysis stage would be conducted with as much objectivity as possible. My notes and memos were all consulted when analyzing the data so that no details would be forgotten.

After interviews, I met with the participants to review their questionnaires and to ensure answers given were accurate. I met with the participants after the interviews to review the information from the interviewee for accuracy and triangulation.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis was performed on the completed semi-structured interviews and responses of the study participants. All eight interviews were transcribed verbatim. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to help store files, code texts, identify

parent code and emergent themes. I reviewed each transcription where I was able to determine emerging patterns, themes, and expressions from each participant. As data were encoded, preliminary codebook and emerging themes were detected. Words, sentences, or entire paragraphs of the transcribed interview were selected and codified with the purpose of finding patterns and repetitions in the participants' experiences about participating in the child welfare system. If the sentences or words of the interviewee narrative were adequate to match to the preliminary coding book, then those words or sentences were coded. If a new theme emerged, a new category was created to encode those sentences or words, or that piece of the participant's narrative was encoded into it. NVivo software allows the inclusion of a piece of the participant's discourse into two or more categories if required, which was common during the data analysis. This feature has its strengths because it allows a researcher to include pieces of the participant's discourse in several categories being analyzed at the same time. So, for example, for the purposes of investigation, certain experiences can refer to an event of racism that the participant personally observed. Because of interviewees constant repetition, some of the themes reached fast saturation, whereas other themes received only few mentions. In the results section, this is fully covered.

By using Nvivo software, I was able to produce frequency inquiries. This included listing every experience, expression, word, and phrase shared by each participant. The result was a culmination of words that were verbatim from the participants' experiences in the child welfare system. I read, reread, and coded the transcripts to gain a holistic insight from participants.

Clustering and Thematizing

With the assistance of Nvivo, I was able to conduct the clustering and thematizing process to help organize words that yielded core themes surrounding my research phenomenon. NVivo has a highlighting feature for highlighting phrases, color-code themes that were expressed by participants. List of words that were highlighted include the following: provider, caseworker, cultural, communication, poor decisions, differences, cultural differences, policy, separation, stress, programs, Blacks, support, court, judges, family, money. I inductively coded units using Nvivo to create a larger presentation including categories and themes using specific codes. Codes were used to obtain the conceptualization of the ethnographic research process.

Preexisting coding categories

Appendix D presents the preliminary codebook that contains categories and themes that might emerge during analysis of data. Human ecology theory was already a part of the preliminary codebook along with the subcategories mesosystem, microsystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Also included in the preliminary codebook was the Social Disorganization theory which consisted of the social efficacy, lack of social services, lack of social support, and lack of cultural competency.

The set of codes already established are directly related to the research questions that are connected to the process of human ecology and social disorganization theories, which discuss how systems, socialization, community, and people's ideologies can affect

an individual or family development. Interestingly, by coding participants' responses to the interview questions, it was easy to understand how systems had an effect on African American family's development. I could understand how systems and community develop had an effect African American parents. These codes helped draw a conclusion as to how the child welfare system and society can impact families and also provided recommendations to policymakers to improve the child welfare system.

Emerging Themes Explained

During the transcription of interviews, more themes had emerged and were added to the existing preliminary codebook. By the sixth interview, most of the emerging themes had shed light on the bias and institutional racism experienced by African American families and children. Themes emerged from participants answers from the interviewing process produced both preliminary code and new categories, which are explained below:

P1: *My caseworker talks to me disrespectful; the experience with my caseworker was awful.*

P2: *My caseworker and I only talk during court proceedings, and she/he don't provide any guidance for family improvement; caseworker documentation does not be accurate, and they make bias assumptions based on their parenting beliefs.*

P3: *Foster-care parents didn't know how to prepare my daughter's hair, so during supervised visits, I had to do my daughters hair and make sure it was done properly for the school week. Individual that transported me to the supervised visits told me I was never going to be a good parent.*

P4. *Caseworker didn't know where to place my child, so the different placements caused more stress for my children and me as a mother; I just wanted to give up. Caseworker kept telling me if I don't seek counseling that I will never see my children again. Counseling services didn't help because of lack of services; and services were not culturally competent. Counseling services didn't focus on Black parenting styles services to be focused on White parenting styles.*

P5. *Caseworker was very abusive and mean toward me when I participated in child protective services. Counseling services were very helpful, but services with the caseworker was awful. Communication didn't happen but twice out of the year and two months I participated in the child welfare system*

P6. *I was in the child welfare system at least four times from leaving my children alone from working multiple jobs and to make ends meet. My son was 15 years old at the time but from him being alone, he became delinquent and always acting out-in-school, so he became award of the state.*

P7. *My children were taken for electricity being cutoff in the home, which there were not any community resources to help support my family that lead to substance abuse and major stress that ultimately lead to someone calling child protective services.*

P8. *My caseworker did not discuss any policy with me that just make up their own rules and do whatever they want we it come to taking parents' children. Caseworker didn't show me how to find services and kept telling if I do not complete counseling and parenting skill classes, I will never see my children*

again. *Caseworker experience was awful* because she kept telling me my *parenting styles* were horrible.

Discussion of Findings

A general overview of frequencies is offered before assessing specific sections of the sample and their responses. Thereafter, a discussion will follow in which each research question is addressed explaining how that question was answered, including evidence to support such answers to the questions. Direct quotes from the interviewee are provided to stress the results. Mostly referenced themes were in relationship with mesosystem ($f=80$) which is a relationship between families and case manager that ultimately effects not just the family but child development. Also, the emerging theme associated with mesosystem was that Black mothers mentioned how negative the client-provider relationship was. During a child welfare system pathway, this type of negative experience can keep children separated from their families. Paraphrased examples from the semi-structured interviews were discussed in the results section.

Discussion by Research Questions

In this section, some potential answers to the research questions are answered. I begin with the main research question. Then I address each of the research sub-questions. Besides the frequencies of repetitions, direct quotes from the interviews are presented to support the findings. The central research question in this study is: How might Human Ecology theory and Social Disorganization theories explain the challenges African American families experience in exiting the child welfare system?

The sub-questions related to the central research question are as follows:

1. What perceptions do African American participants in the child welfare system have related to system barriers to exiting the system?
2. What do African American participants propose as solutions to the problems of the child welfare system?
3. How might the voices of participants educate policymakers on child welfare policy so that African American families are better able to exit the system?

Presentation of Findings

Frequencies and repetitions of the preliminary codebook and the themes that emerged during the semi-structured interview protocol were addressed here in the findings section. Upon saturation, a codebook was developed that consisted of coded response and the reference frequency, which listed the number of times a node was referenced by the African-American biological parents during the semi-structured interview process. Incorporated into this codebook was emergent themes, which had been identified from the transcribed interviews. Coded themes chosen was based on the number of times the word, group of words, and paragraphs with the highest number of times referenced. This codebook (Table 4) provided the amount of times a theme, group of words, and paragraphs were referenced.

Table 4

Overall Frequency of Parent Codes and Emerging Themes

Parent Code(s)	Emergent Themes	Frequency (f)
Mesosystem	Negative relationships; no support; no communication; have not seen the caseworker but one time since be referred to the system; Had two different APS case workers Relationship with APS worker was “awful” and “fucked up”; negative relationships; experiences with caseworkers	80
Exosystem	Background checks of family members, court proceedings delayed, poor documentation, Multiple court proceedings; over 1 year in parenting classes; Participants did not understand policies; Not adherence policy; staying programs for over a year; decisions based on assumptions	71
Stress	Anxiety, wanting to kill myself, give up, receiving mental health services	64
Stereotype	poor parenting skills; never been good parent;	58
Lack of services	parenting classes; counseling services; lack of culturally competent programs	53
Macrosystem	Cultural beliefs; cultural competency; beliefs; appearance;	50
Improve System	Change the laws on vetting out referrals; interpretation of laws appropriately; do not ignore the laws; improve programs or services; programs need to be culturally related; involve families in treatment	58

Emerging Themes

Emerging themes were based on each research question and are now explained. Direct quotes from the interviews are used to exemplify them. These are the emerging themes, defined and explained in order of importance as to the frequency of mentions during the semi structured interviews:

African American parents' experiences and personal observations refer to moments or incidents which the participant personally experienced or observed. The first theme that emerged from research question one addressed the main objective of the ethnography study which was the perceptions African American parents related to their experiences during their pathway through the child welfare system. Research question one addressed how African American parents' perceptions were related to systemic barriers to exiting the child welfare system. The perception that transpired from the participants' response centered on their negative relationship with case-workers and how the negative relationship impacted their development, including their ability to experience a positive outcome.

Themes Related to Research Explained

Theme 1: Mesosystem

Mesosystems ($f = 80$). Mesosystem is a relationship between families and case manager that ultimately affects not just the family but child development. All participants stressed the negative perceptions during the relationship with their case-workers and how

it could improve. Words that are associated with and/or have similar meaning as mesosystems was expressed frequently by participants. Example:

My caseworker was rude and did not communicate with me at all. Every time I phoned the caseworker during my child welfare system experience it became more difficult, and stress levels increased. Every time I tried to call her I reached her voice, or when I did get in contact with her she would tell to wait until court for updates on how my children were doing.

Lack of Trust. Distrust in the child welfare system and feeling of doubt not have trust or confidence in this system.

P1: My experience with the child protective service worker experience was frightening, very frustrating, and she could not be trusted either. I feared the child protective service worker (P01, personal communication, March 13, 2017)

P2: Relationship my caseworker was never on good terms, she would never respond to my phone calls, she could never be trusted because she would not inform me about my children. During court hearings, the judge questioned how she was handling the case and was concerned because she was turning in court documentation late (P02, personal communication, March 31, 2017)

P3: I usually get along with everyone, but not with my child protective service she was nasty and rude toward me, also it kept me from trusting her. We never had the greatest conversations and when we did talk was very judgmental about my parenting skills and decisions. She told me if I don't start allowing my children to speak their opinions which were disrespectful then I would never get my kids

back. There was a transportation representative for child protective service who said to me I would never get my children back because I don't speak to my children like a mother should. That affects me still to this day and then I lost confidence. At that time, no one from the child protective agency would listen to me, nor would they communicate with only until court proceedings. The child protective service process was very stressful and could be better if the child protective service workers would just communicate. (P03, personal communication, May 29, 2017)

P4: My first experience with a child protective service worker was very uncomfortable and she made me feel like I was nothing and a poor parent. The child protective service worker came into my home without knocking and told me that I was under investigation, took my children and never explained the reason. As my experience grew with the child protective service system the more I could not trust her and the system (P04, personal communication, July 23, 2017).

Negative Relationship. All participants made negative comments on the construction of the relationship with the provider.

P6: My children were not able to stay with any members of my family, and child protective service gave me no reason for why children could not go with my family members. My children's father and I had to move in separate homes because they were checking his background to see if could retain custody of our children. This caused my son to act out in school and become delinquent. I'm always feeling like I want to give up and kill myself at times because I feel

helpless and no longer have relationships or support in the community. (P06, personal communication, July 27, 2017)

P3: My child protective service worker on many occasions lied about the progress I made as a parent and status of my children during their stay in foster care to the judge. On numerous occasions the child protective service worker was hesitant in telling me how my children were coping with staying in a foster-care home and coping with the stress of not having the ability to see their biological parent daily. Child protective service would make false perceptions of me and comments related to my parenting skills but never directed me in the necessary direction to gain the necessary skills in hopes of becoming a better parent (P03, personal communication, May 29, 2017)

P5: My experience was very frustrating and uncomfortable experience because the caseworkers lie to you and they cannot be trusted. They refuse to communicate with about your case until yours arrive to the court proceeding (P05, personal communication, July 27, 2017)

There were responses that were directed toward how the case provider lacked concern toward the African American parent. Beside P03 and P06 the other six participants mentioned having a negative experience during their child welfare system pathway along with having poor communication with their caseworker. Trying to bridge the fence between the caseworker and African-American parents consistently fails, because when this ethnic group comes into contact with government institutions the client-provider relationship between the institution between client they experience to

many barriers. Behaviors demonstrated by the caseworker when working with parents during their pathway are covertly and intentionally bias. For example:

Participant 1 stated the relationship with the caseworker was awful which caused my children to experience trauma and long-term mental illness. (P01, personal communication, March 17, 2017)

Participant 2 spoke on how the “caseworker failed to assist getting services to help preserve the family and to keep the children from mental health issues. (P02, personal communication, March 30, 2017)

Participant 3 discussed her frustration around the issues of being assigned three case- workers in a years’ time. (P03, personal communication, May 30, 2017)

Participant 4 talked also about her experience the first six months with having two different case managers. (P04, personal communication, June 01, 2017)

Participant 5 case worker relationship was horrible and very frustrating.” (P05, personal communication, June 6, 2017)

Participant 5 perception on the case manager relationship was that having to deal with three different providers in 9 months was awful as fuck. (P05, personal communication, June 6, 2017)

Participant 6 said that the experience with the child protective service worker was horrifying and horrible. (P06, personal communication, August 7, 2017)

Participant 7 said that she usually gets along with everyone, but not the child protective service worker. (P07, personal communication, August 17, 2017)

Participant 8 said during the experience with the child protective service worker

the relationship was poor and no communication between them. (P08, personal communication, August 31, 2017)

These responses focus on how caseworkers decisions and interpretation of policy do affect African Americans ability to navigate the system without experiencing any biases and experience successful outcomes. Many of the responses targeted how caseworkers decisions impact family development, and the need to improve the child welfare system. This research question further extended to how these decision-makers interpretation of the law has a significant impact on the family and their ability to be independent of the system. The literature in this research project, did explain how the decision-makers in fact increase the adverse social and family barriers for the many African American families that are referred to the child welfare system. Not only are these families spending lengthier time frames in the child welfare system than their ethnic counterparts, these adverse barriers cause the family to experience recidivism by reentering the system just a short time after exiting, and their children likely graduate from fostercare system. Interestingly, of the eight participants when answering this first question, all eight of the participants they reported the lacked trust in the child protective service worker because their workers refusing to communicate with them, which caused the participant to not trust the caseworker too the system as whole.

Theme 2: Exosystem

Exosystem ($f = 74$). The system represents the larger social system, and encompasses events, contingencies, decisions, and policies over which the developing

person has no direct influence (Johnson 2008). Participants had mention how caseworkers were not follow laws and policies, and the behavior of the caseworker impacted the development of their children and family long term. The second theme followed the first theme in that case worker behavior toward African American families could improve. Research question to concentrated on better interpretation of the child welfare laws and use better decision-making strategies. At any level of the child welfare system decision makers need acknowledge that their bias decisions impact the family significantly. Another extension from theme 1 was caseworkers bias decision-making methodologies from having poor documentation when presenting during court hearings. Rather than the case worker using methods according to the law, the case manager makes their own laws and refuse to educate families on the child welfare system laws. Example:

P1: I would never know because child protective service worker never explained the process nor the laws about removing my children from the home. They build their case but never explained to meet what options I had based on law, nor did they explain the timeframe the child protective service would take (P01, personal communication, March 13, 2017).

When the case worker arrived to see where I had an altercation and was arrested, the police officer was going to turn my children over to family members, however the child protective service refused to do so because the family needed to go through a background check. So, for three weeks my children were in foster care before myself and or family members could see my children. Me and my mother

was never able to see my children again only during supervised visits (P02, personal communication, March 31, 2017)

It was very frustrating understanding the process, just do what we say and you'll get your children back. The child protective service worker never explained the parents' rights during this process. By the child protective service worker not explain the process, myself and children lived in the unknown, which caused much more stress for my family. The process became more traumatizing because my daughter was raped while in foster-care system (P03, personal communication, May 29, 2017).

I did not really understand what was going on, however the caseworker never explained to me my rights. She just told me if I don't want to lose my child just cooperate with system (P04, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Don't believe they go by policy, they have their own policies and agenda rather than for the protection of the child and go about what they choose to do. I came home to find a note from my caseworker on my kitchen counter, telling me I need to contact her immediately because she received reports that I was abusing drugs, and the drugs were purchased by my food stamp card. 'Before even speaking to me she had already went to my sons' school, talked to him which terrified him to the point he did not want to return to school the following morning from being afraid of being taken by child protective service (P05, personal communication, July 27, 2017)

They just come take your children and don't follow the law. During the middle of the night, they knocked on my door, did not explain what was going on but I need to let them interview my children right away (P06, personal communication, July 30, 2017)

Besides P07 and P08 the other 6 participants described having experienced a situation during their pathway through the child welfare system where caseworkers refused to make decisions based on the system policies. These responses provided by the participant reflect on how exosystem is the broader perspective of ecological system theory but has no direct contact with the family but has influence on the developing person. Although the exosystem has no direct contact with the developing person, the policy and those interpreting policy impacts and influence more adverse barriers onto the family and the child social development, and the systems which these individuals are expected to navigate in. Participants' answers during interviews prove that policy interpretation does impact caseworkers' decisions, because policies that are being followed are broad and leave for the caseworker to interpret the law based on their personal beliefs.

Theme 3 Stress

Stress ($f = 64$). Participants often mentioned how interaction with the caseworker and child welfare system increased the amount of stress they experienced during their pathway. Responses were striking to hear that a parent wanted to give up and kill themselves because caseworkers' decisions of refusing to communicate to the parent how

their children were doing, and the foster-care parents that were caring for the child while the case was maneuvering through child protective service protocol. Example:

P1: Because of the child protective service and foster-care system, my children now live with stress and adverse mental health diagnosis. My son now experiences hypertension disorder which causes him to struggle in school (P01, personal communication, March 13, 2017).

P2: The first time I came in contact with the child welfare system I gave up on my first child because of the stress level. The child protective service took me through so many obstacles after speaking with my mom she just told me to let it go (P02, personal communication, March 31, 2017)

P6: When they took my children and placed them with someone else than my relatives the stress level increased, and my children started acting out at school and getting suspended. (P05, personal communication July 27, 2017)

I just want to kill myself at times and give up because the casework would not communicate with me, nor tell me where the fuck my kids were living or the type of parents caring for my damn kids. I feel like the services made shit for me worse because I didn't trust any caseworker or therapist which caused more stress because I was not able to explain or discuss my frustrations. (P06, personal communication, August 7, 2017)

P7: When they took all my children, and during a visitation, I notice my child's hair was cut and he was very shaken, questioned me as to what was going on multiple times. After that visit, I lost control of my well-being and ended up in the

mental health ward from so much stress (P07, personal communication, August 14, 2017).

P8: I felt lonely and hopeless throughout the entire process my anxiety levels were always high and I tried to visit my therapist more frequent than once a month (P08, personal communication, August 21, 2017).

Participants mentions of these stressors certainly demonstrate that the child protective system affects the development of families and children, then also, influence stressors on the family and children, which to last long term. Stressors that are forced onto the family and children have much to do with the caseworker's belief and decisions. During observation of the participant's interviews, it likely that many of the stressors the families faced were because of interpretations of the law, based on the law drives their interpretations, which then leads to stereotypes toward the family parenting skills and or their inability to deal emotionally with the child protective system.

Theme 4: Stereotyping

Stereotyping ($f = 58$). Specific references of how the child welfare system perception of Black parenting skills, which creates bias in decision-making. Example:

P1: The caseworker during court proceedings was judging how I handled my children, when she didn't understand how Black folks raised their children. They fail to understand we have different cultural beliefs and how their culture raises their children is totally different than how Black families raised their children (P01, personal communication, March 13, 2017).

P2: Caseworker and parenting class facilitator explained that I should never discipline and send my children to their room for back talking me, if so, I'm not going to get my children back from foster care. Casework feels this is poor parenting skills. I felt like the child protective service worker and parenting class facilitator was stereotyping Black mothers parenting skills (P02, personal communication, March 31, 2017)

P6: They used a previous situation against, rather than looking at how my situation is now, and they should not take your children for alleged domestic disputes between boyfriend and girlfriend (P06, personal communication, July 30, 2017)

P3: Child protective service representative that transported me to my supervised visits told me that I would never be a good mother and wouldn't ever get my children back. That statement still hurts today, and I continue to think about even though now my children are grown, it caused severe trauma which the services did not help me cope with the stress. (P03, personal communication, May 29, 2017)

The participants mentioning having experienced bias pathways and being stereotyped does cause inequality and poor outcomes for the family. Further, participants describe how the stereotypical perceptions of professional's influence on the family crisis and stress that impacts the family's development. The child protective service system award services to the family and children, however, participants also speak to the service as not being effective and programs fail to improve outcomes for African American

families. Research literature in chapter 2, explains how stereotypes from case managers and facilitators from parenting classes influence bias decisions. Unfortunately, not having the necessary resources produces more adverse barriers for African American families because the facilitators that are coaching the family on best practices for parenting are usually already equipped and disenfranchised from upward mobility may have had the adequate resources, in which many African American families participating in these systems lack the necessary resources to raise their children according to society expectations.

Theme 5: Macrosystem and culture and parenting beliefs

Macrosystem and culture and parenting beliefs ($f = 50$). Participants in this research study described how the systemic pathways are difficult because they have different cultural and parenting beliefs than the providers.

P7: I dislike the parenting classes I attended because the teacher told me I should allow for my children to back talk me, and I should do nothing. I was raised that our children are not to disrespect their parents, if our children are rude we are to spank them and send them to their room. The parenting teachers and case-workers feel whipping your children is corporal punishment on the children. This is the reason why Black children and other children are so bad in the community because they are thought how to contact child protective service for any reason at all (P07, personal communication, August 7, 2017)

Participants statements during semi-structured interviews prove that decision-maker beliefs and perceptions can affect family's development. When the two individuals have

different parenting beliefs and those parenting should be applied can influence differences that likely would influence bias decisions by the caseworker and parents experiencing negative outcomes. This theme certainly relates to the lack of services and the makeup of the services inability to improve family development and or keep the family from the risk of separation.

Theme 6 Lack of services and programs

Lack of services and programs ($f = 53$). Interestingly, all but one participant spoke at length how services did not improve their family structure. Example:

P1: Mental health services I was forced into did not help my family nor me. At Mental Health Facility X, waiting was exceptional long, services were not covered by Medicaid so I felt like the counselors and I only hit the surface my family's issues because we were only allowed to a minimum amount of services. When we attended the services as a family, they were more beneficial in helping us cope with the child welfare system rather than improving our family (P01, personal communication, March 13, 2017)

P6: I attended service at X mental health facility, but the counselor was very judgmental toward me at times. If you don't change and do what the case worker from child protective service tell you, your kids will remain in foster care. The services didn't work because the counseling gave me more anxiety, because the counselor wasn't providing with skills to deal with stress and caseworker (P06, personal communication, July 30, 2017)

P8: They need to put programs in the predominately Black neighborhoods and if not help with transportation to the programs that are across town (P08, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Participant a couple of times had to cancel and reschedule counseling because the lack of transportation, and lack social support that could provide transportation to the counseling sessions.

Theme 7 Experience and perception to improving child welfare system

Experience and perception to improving child welfare system ($f = 58$). Most of the participants suggested their experiences with providers and perceptions to improving the child welfare system. Participants mentioned variables that could improve not just the system but improve provider-client relationship along with the system.

Example:

P1: The child protective worker that I had was very rude toward me and made assumptions toward my parenting skills. The relationship with my child protective service worker was poor and traumatic because she caused stress in my family and process made my children act out in school. The parenting and family programs didn't help or improve my parenting skills because of different parenting styles than facilitator and or child protective service worker. This made my relationship with the case manager more difficult (P01, personal communication, March 13, 2017)

P2: The child protective service system could explain and communicate more effectively about their processes to the families, it may provide the family with comfort rather than fear. When families are fearing the system and the people

making the decisions to take our children can cause further adverse family issues.

I feel like the laws can be less stringent which would provide the caseworkers with more flexibility to make adequate judgments rather than bias decisions (P02, personal communication, March 31, 2017).

P4: My child protective service worker could have done a better vetting process of my case, and not always determining decisions on here say, a lot of times people make reports to child protective service for targeting purposes or just mad at you, what probably is called retaliation. So, as a mother to protect me and my family I feel like the referral process should be explained and parents should have rights too when it comes to protecting their children (P04, personal communication, July 23, 2017).

Discrepant Cases

Discrepancies in this investigation are few and only related to the least frequent categories. Findings most important present no discrepancies in this sample of eight participants. The entire participation of the interviewees showed basically the same pattern as did the research literature. The most frequent categories and themes associated to the category used in the research process are “Mesosystem and experience” (80 mentions), “Exosystem” (74 mentions), and “Stress” (mentioned 64) were confirmed throughout the sample protocol. There were more cases that varied in some aspect of the sample. For example, “Lack of Social Support” (28 mentions) during the sample, however majority of the participants discussed the lack of having support at least once.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is defined as the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings. Establishing credibility whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants original views. To determine that the findings were valid many rigor methods were used. Credibility strategies used during the study were member checking and triangulation. I conducted a member checking protocol on each person in order to confirm the patterns that were found during the data analysis. Member checking, as a methodological triangulation, helped confirm that the results are valid, but also expressed that there is a feeling among certain interviewees about the possibility that these results could be transferred to other parts of the city and the county.

Transferability

The results of this research cannot be immediately transferable. The findings speak about certain participants who live in specific neighborhoods in Jackson, Michigan. There is a heuristic value to these results. This methodology could be replicated in other areas of the state which would allow for contrasting with cases around the state. In order to verify that a quantitative instrument could be developed out of the answers of the participants from this research, and this could be applied either face to face, or via email to a larger sample of people located in different areas of the country.

Dependability

Dependability is the qualitative counterpart for reliability (Patton, 2002), and is usually assessed through audits or methodological triangulation. This research's dependability was ensured through member checking, which confirmed that results made sense to 100% of the participants. Additionally, journals and notes were kept during and immediately after the interviews. The notes helped during the data analysis stage, to ensure that no detail was missing and that what was observed during the interviews was considered during the analysis of the information. Through the journaling process and memo techniques, I kept noticing themes that were emerging or had constant repetition.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the qualitative counterpart for objectivity (Patton, 2002) and can be assessed through triangulation, reflexivity, and peer review. Full objectivity is unachievable by a social researcher, but some strategies to diminish the risks of subjectivity was used. A reflection about my potential biases due to the type of work I perform as a journalist and scholar for peace was conducted by myself and expressed to my committee. In addition, I selected a far away and very different neighborhood than the one in which I live. Third, I put attention to my notes as well as the records, which led to a different and new understanding than previous research conducted. Finally, I am sharing these results with my committee and Walden University which provides peer review.

Summary

One of the uses of the results from this research will provide the ability to feed future qualitative and or ethnographic research studies. Another use of this research project might be to investigate African American parents' inabilities and or intractability to participate in qualitative research. Also, the research study and descriptive perceptions delivered by participants could be helpful toward improving complex public systems such as the child welfare system.

Qualitative methodology, sampling procedures, and triangulation methods used during the analytical and coding process gave this dissertation thick and rich information to suggest to our policymakers as to ways in improving the child welfare system and African American families and children outcomes. Descriptive emerging themes that came out-of-the data collection process certainly shines a light on the need for improvement to such a complex system and the need for the gaps between client-providers and African American families to be closed. Also, performing confirmability methods conveys confidence and authenticity to the research project.

In Chapter 5, I will address the potential implications of these findings for the areas of policy design and to improve outcomes for African American families. It will also benefit future research and give insight on how perceptions of these consequences could improve the system for purposes of the social change in Michigan, including suggestions and recommendations as a product of the findings presented in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to expand on current literature and increase the awareness of institutional racism that many African American families experience at the expense of the Child and Family Services Improvement Act (CFSIA) of 2006. This study also explored African American families' outcomes and the government's role in effecting those outcomes, according to the Michigan process.

In this chapter, I cover the following topics: a summary and interpretation of the findings, two different areas in which the findings may have different implications. These areas are theoretic implications, as contrasted in the literature review, for policymaking that is in support of improving the system, and the recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with comments on the connection between this dissertation and social change and a conclusion that summarizes the study and what was learned.

Summary of Findings

The research study consisted of interviews with eight participants and was conducted in the city of Jackson, Michigan. Participants' backgrounds consisted of African American parent's, a dependent of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), single-parent households, parents living in improvised neighborhoods, neighborhoods poverty-stricken with high unemployment rates, lack of employment, drug infested, high-crime rates, and lack of community cohesiveness. Many of the African American parents lack the parenting skills set forth by society. The data were analyzed using precoded categories, and themes emerged during the interviews. In this

summary, numbers that follow categories refer to the number of times a participant mentioned a theme. The most frequently mentioned theme were words and paragraphs including “Mesosystem and personal experience” ($f = 80$). This means that participants were constantly repeating how negative their relationships were with the child protective service workers. African Americans own observations of what they perceived as facts as the main source of their values, as well as perceptions and conceptions about the mesosystem and relationships with case workers. The next most mentioned was “Exosystem and decision-making do not directly impact the child but affects development” ($f = 74$). The participant continually talked about how their children were placed in foster care without family members obtaining custody. Because in Michigan, families must go through background checks which takes days to complete, children remain in foster care for days, weeks, and sometime months, which was discussed in Chapter 2. This related to other topics that continually emerged in participants’ semi-structured interviews. Participants continually discussing being under stress, unable to cope; their children acted out in school. Participants reported that they had difficulty coping with the stress due to their pathways—frequently going to court, scheduling visits with their children, hearing their children’s’ experiences from being in the foster care environment, and systemic delays because of paperwork from child protective service being inaccurately documented. Furthermore, 6 of the 8 participants talked about their experiences with either the lack of services available to them or those services failing them as a family. Afterwards, their families are worse off than before they were referred to the child welfare system. Lack of services ($f = 53$) was another theme in which

interviewees continually discussed how people administering the activities in the parenting classes had ideologies on the ways of raising a child that were different than African American parents.

Discussion of Findings Results Related to the Literature Review

This study was able to emerge many themes essential to many of the African American families' bias experiences during their pathways through the child welfare system. For the first theme, in answering the first research question, the main barrier to African American parents' pathways and lack in their unsuccessful outcomes were contributed to caseworker's ideologies and decision-making strategies.

Results from this study show that caseworkers' ideologies do affect others' development and force difficult pathways for those that engage in the child welfare system. Ideologies of caseworkers' have indirect impact on African American parents' ability to experience successful outcomes during their pathway through the child welfare system because the failure in client-provider relationships. The child welfare system worker does not communicate with the parent as to how the children are navigating through foster care system, but wait and communicate during court, which then increase stressors for parents. Furthermore, decision-makers that work with African American parents during their child welfare system pathway research has shown, including this research project that participants endure increase stressors, to the point parents end up quitting, and the child would likely graduate from the foster care system. Yet, rather than correcting the bias decisions, policies has been known by the massive amount of

research, that they are both a direct and indirect impact on the public operation and family.

For the second theme, which were words and categories associated with exosystems and how caseworkers interpreted policies. Decisions resulting from child welfare system policies have a direct impact on a person's development. Included with the significant amount research, participants in this research study lack knowledge about the policy that indirectly impacted their development and the family separation. The same policies caused major shifts within their social and family context, which ultimately forced marginalization, and influence referral to the child welfare system. Evidence from the research literature, like the evidence collected in this study, these materials in fact demonstrated that policies are broad which influence both bias decisions and adverse social barriers for the family.

Other examples related to the research, was because caseworker interpreted the board policies incorrectly, referrals to the child welfare system increased due to the lack in social mobility that left no possibilities for the African American families. Possibilities for African American families to at least live within the social expectations in Jackson, Michigan, are scarce as policies lack the opportunity for African American families to experience social equity. Like research, African American parents explained during interviews that community cohesiveness lacks, predominately African American communities are marginalized, which ideologies of those in power have cut the government funding that were expected to channel money through the community for improvements. The complexity of the public policy structure and the child welfare

system makes it extremely difficult for African American families, and they are much more likely to depend on the child welfare system because of systemic complexity. From the systemic complexity, research literature, including data collection from this project proves this process influence community adversity for African Americans.

Community adversities are also caused by policy shifts, which makes it much further likely for African American families to shift to poor neighborhoods, which that make-up of the poorer neighborhood which many African-Americans live in, they are more susceptible to child maltreatment referrals, and to be in the system longer. These neighborhoods lack social cohesiveness, nor resources are implemented into African American communities, which lead to further stressors and referrals to mental health services. Then too, mental health services are not equipped to meet the needs of African American families' cultural background. Additionally, because this ethnic group lacks the necessary financial resources, therapy do not resolve their adverse barriers and coping inabilities from stress generated from the anxiety of family separation.

Research literature and data collected from this study implies that through every child welfare pathway, African American families in fact experience inequality. Additionally, the collected material also suggests institutional racism are experiences that many African American families that participate in the child welfare system encounter. From the time, African American families are referred to the child welfare system until outcomes, experiences have been less favorable than all other ethnic groups.

Through this research process, and including data collected from this project participants have formed a shared understanding about the institutional racism that is a

condition created and fostered within the structures of the child welfare system, and the policies. Most participants believe that systemic policies, poverty, unemployment, and inequality are aided by stereotypical ideologies of those that are in decision-making positions, which are influenced by policy.

Although the findings are limited to a very specific and small area in the city of Jackson, the high number of patterns and repetitious themes does indicate that there might be a tendency for African American biological parents and families to experience racism in some way during their pathway through the child welfare system. Each participant formed her perception through one single but meaningful event such as relationships with the case manager and how policies effect development but not directly related to the subject. Interestingly, the strength of participants' own experiences has enormous weight in how these participants validated their understanding about what is taking place in the child welfare system in Jackson, Michigan.

Once participant's experience is internalized, then it is socially communicated in her daily life with family, friends, during work, or in the streets. This communication method is how participants share what they have experienced in the child welfare system. The experiences of others could help educate each participant and future participants.

These findings may have several different implications in at least three to four different areas:

1. The philosophy discussion and reflection on my two conceptual frameworks of this dissertation: human ecology and social disorganization theories.
2. Public policy design to foster child welfare representation improvements.

3. Future research.
4. Research on the lack of inclusion of the African American population in qualitative studies.

Limitations to the Study

All participants that participated in this research study came from the city of Jackson. In Chapter 3 of this research, I proposed to interview 10-15 African American parents who were at least 18 years of age and had experienced a pathway through the child welfare system. As stated in Chapter 3, under the limitation section, it was stated that participation in the study might be difficult to obtain from this particular population. Reasons for this include the African American population's lack of trust in both the research and governmental agencies, their lack of knowledge toward the particular study, and they are intractable to research (Huang & Coker, 2008). Huang & Coker (2008) argued that there are many barriers keeping this ethnic group from participating in research. The major reason is the culture as a whole is still in shock from the Tuskegee experience and cultural distrust (George, Duran, & Norris, 2014). The Tuskegee experiment and data collection process from that study demonstrated unethical behaviors by release information without gather participants consent. Although the 10-15 interviews were not performed, the research project does demonstrate a rich and thick descriptive data analysis surrounding African American parents' experiences with case manager providers, policies affecting outcomes, and the creation of traumatic experiences for these participants.

Policymakers or scholarly researchers could argue against this small study, but the answers gathered from participants does capture the negative and biased experiences that African American parents have when participating in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the results of this dissertation do portray instances of African American parents describing their experiences which resulted in them experiencing the racism and biased decision making of case manager providers. Further, these research study findings speak to needs of further research as to the current legislation that guide child welfare systems from federal, state, and local levels to improve child welfare pathways for not just African American parents but other ethnic groups as well. Future studies need to take place to examine issues affecting African American participation in research studies. For example, research has discussed the culture's distrust toward the White research establishment and the distrust in research (Huang & Coker, 2008).

Sample Size

For the current study, the sample of eight is sufficient to confirm the major categories and sub-themes. Given that this study was an ethnography exploration in nature, the assumptions about this ethnic group are specifically based on the results of this sampled population. Policymakers or scholarly researchers could argue against this small study, but the answers gathered from participants does capture the negative and biased experiences among African American parents when participating in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the results of this dissertation do portray instances of African American parents describing their experiences which resulted in them experiencing the racism and biased decision making of case manager providers. Further,

these research study findings speak to the needs of further research as to the current legislation that guide child welfare systems from federal, state, and local levels to improve child welfare pathways for not just African American parents but other ethnic groups as well. Also, these findings and recommendations can offer policymakers some immediate suggestions which would not impact or inject a barrier into their agenda that is currently underway but could improve the child welfare system.

Future Research

As qualitative inquiries on this topic and the experiences of African Americans grow, a body of research will develop that both further legitimizes and empowers the perspective of this marginalized population. Benefits would be for further research related to African American parents' experiences in that child welfare system and biases that occur so often. Continued research needed on the variables as to why African Americans are reluctant to participate in qualitative research and lack of trust in public government. Research on these identified barriers would provide African Americans with the understanding on how government entities work and rights that have when navigating through such complex systems.

Recommendations

In Chapter 2, I explained that social disorganization and human ecology theories are processes that directly impact outcomes for African American families participating in the systemic process. There are two perspectives scholar-researchers identified to try to improve African American families' experiences through the child welfare system and are promoting policy, programs, and services related to African Americans contexts.

Miller et al. (2013) argued that the policies guiding the child welfare system's mission towards protecting families and children have failed to provide these themes and implement them in African American families and communities which are highly subjective to the maltreatment of children. Further research through the lens of social disorganization and human ecology theories would increase awareness in African American overrepresentation in the child welfare system. For example, improving child protective service workers' decision-making processes by making decisions based on beliefs rather than African Americans' socioeconomic circumstances would reduce the systemic overrepresentation.

Implications for Policy Reform and Policy Design

Like in Chapter 2 of this research project, there is an argument for better designed policies because they did not directly impact the individual but impacted development. The two things must be already considered that, if such results as the experiences and conversation as the most powerful constructed perceptions are true, then it might be assumed that racism exists, and policy design is a contributing factor to systemic bias. Also, the fact that further research is needed to verify these results can be confirmed in other areas than Jackson, Michigan.

A detailed reading of the interviews that were analyzed in Chapter 4, combined with the concepts and theories presented in Chapter 2, give suggestions and recommendations for a better structural approach to representing the African Americans' outcomes in the child welfare system. This approach must also include regional and national policies, but it must impact common citizens that may have immediate contact

and experience in the system. Actions taken and/or designed would be deeply valued and would greatly benefit African American families and children.

1. *Local policies and decision-making.* Results of this project indicate that interpretation of policies impact ideologies and beliefs because policies are vague and cause biased interpretations. An example is the Mesosystem (80 mentions) on decisions and relationships that deeply impact pathways for African Americans participating in the child welfare system.
2. *Community Programs.* Participants from the interview process mentioned the lack of community programs and the lack of their availability in despair-ridden neighborhoods that have the high rates of maltreatment.
3. *Stress.* Mental health programs were limited because of policy design and lack of funding for not just African American participants but other ethnic groups as well.

These measures offered above are all connected to the conceptual frameworks presented in Chapter 2 and to the findings of this study. They are directed towards addressing overrepresentation of African American families in the child welfare system. The purpose of these suggestions is attending specifically to what the participants of this investigation refer as their main social constructs, experiences, observations, and daily conversations.

Recommendations for Research

The results of this investigation suggest that similar patterns might be encountered throughout the city of Jackson, Michigan. Therefore, more ethnographic studies like this one could be conducted throughout the Michigan, in different neighborhoods, or in small

towns or places. In that way, research could show whether experience, observation, and conversation remain the main social constructors at these locations or whether the citizenship living in such areas may tend to suggest a less structural approach towards reducing racial bias.

Besides qualitative research, the results obtained in this dissertation may help researchers develop a quantitative method based on participants' responses that may be applicable in much larger sums of participants, which could be answered via survey or in-person interviews. This type of research might provide a larger picture, which could be more persuasive for policymakers as to the need of fostering measures such as the ones recommended above. Furthermore, replicating studies as this one in different parts of the state could shed more light on the kind of relationship being established between caseworkers and participants, as well as exploring the actual impact that the child welfare system has on humans' lives, perceptions, and conceptions in the present era. Although this investigation does not show substantial gender differences on the most important patterns and repetitions, there is evidence of variations as to some of the themes that were analyzed. Future research could dig deeper into those variations assessing the potential impact that age has upon those differences and determining whether that knowledge could prove to be useful for improving outcomes.

Implications for Positive and Social Change

The research project provides substantial information related to social change needed in the child welfare system, and their communities. First, it allows scholars to focus on certain subjects that require further research on bias and racism which African

American families experience. This study also provides a useful path to be replicated in other areas of the child welfare system locally and statewide which is qualitative or could be converted to quantitative methodology. That way, our knowledge about overrepresentation in Jackson's child protective service system has increased. Also, while this research is conducted or extended, this dissertation already points out specific actions that might be deeply valued by African Americans. Such as, understanding how to build and or improve community that surrounds them, police the community together to combat drugs distribution, educate on how to decrease the dependency on public government, and improve job market in the community.

Finally, addressing the structural causes to poor outcomes for African Americans is not only something which is perceived as necessary by a sample of eight participants, but it is also something that has been deeply discussed by a great number of authors presented in Chapter 2. Therefore, these recommendations directed towards combating racism in its roots, make sense, if Michigan wants to reduce institutional racism. An additional area in which the present study fosters social change is to impact peoples' experiences, and thus, their perceptions and conceptions about systemic biases.

Conclusion

Reducing institutional racism is the core of social change, and this dissertation is about a specific city in which for decades people did not realize structural biases. After years of policy change, there is still an increase in Black representation by the child welfare system which shows that there are still some realities to confront. Reality is that there is not enough research from African American families to shed light on this social

phenomenon. This study proved to be useful. It was based on a vast conceptual framework that was developed to understand systemic agencies' impact on the development of an ethnic group.

The use of the qualitative approach also provided participants with the ability to speak out about their feelings and ideas to improving such a complex system and their social mobility. The theories and peer-review journal articles in Chapter 2 coincide with the interviewees of this research. These articles in Chapter 2 conveyed throughout this research exploration that ideologies and policies, and those who use child welfare policies to make decision impact families' development directly and indirectly.

Secondary and data from this project demonstrate this research should and could be used in smaller communities throughout Michigan communities. Data evidence that emerged from the data collection process conveys to us American people, especially African American families that the crisis of overrepresentation is prevalent, and a quantitative approach can be used to further conduct research.

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- Male
 Female
 Age: _____
 Male
 Female
 Age: _____
 Male
 Female
 Age: _____
 Male
 Female
 Age: _____

6. Household Structure

- Single-parent household
 Two-parent household
 Single-parent but partner helps with children
 Other Describe: _____

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7. Caseworker **Relationship(s):**

Describe your relationship with assigned caseworker?

How often did you meet with your caseworker?

8. Allegation and **Involvement:**

Allegation(s):

What was the allegation(s) that brought you to the attention of the child welfare systems (e.g. neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, etc.)?

Was this your first allegation that brought you to the attention of the child welfare system? If this was not your first allegation, briefly explain.

How long was your most recent involvement in the child welfare system?

- 0-3 months
 3-9 months

- 9-12 months
- 12-18months

9. **Outcomes/Service**

What was the outcome of your case (family preservation services, reunification, parental termination, guardianship, adoption, and etc.)?

Were services awarded, and what was your involvement in deciding the services that were awarded?

What is your understanding of the law and/or DHS or court policy that specifically relates to your case?

Did anyone explain it to you so you understand it?

Appendix B: Flier for Participants



African American biological parents needed for study of their experiences in the child welfare system.

Your participation and benefits include:

Voluntarily participate in a one-on-one interview at a location of your choice.
Help other families with their involvement in the child welfare system.
Influence change in child welfare policies and institutional procedures.

Eligibility Requirements:

African American
At least 18 years old
Biological parent
Have been involved in the child welfare system for at least 3 months.

Contact Info:

Contact Clevester Moten, Jr., for information pertaining to this study at (517) 936-3531.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Research Study: African Americans Perceptions of Socioeconomic Barriers to Exiting the Child Welfare System

Interviews:

Interviews was audiotape and transcribed verbatim. Parameters of the study and areas of inquiry are participants' perceptions of barriers to exiting and fixing the child welfare system.

Parameters of the study and areas of inquiry are general experiences with child welfare service providers and will include: perspectives on services with disproportionate representation of African American families throughout the child welfare system; the barriers and contributors to meeting the needs of African American biological parents; and suggestions on ways to improve child welfare service delivery and outcomes.

Interviewer's Script:

The purpose of this interview is to gain knowledge of how policies impact relationships between providers and African American families in the child welfare system. I was asking an array of questions and remember that at any time you can take a break, request to skip a question, or even stop the interview all together.

Sample prompt questions:

1. Please describe your experiences with child welfare service providers. Child welfare service providers include caseworkers, psychologists, individual or family therapists, parent mentor, etc.
2. Were there differences when working with specific providers? If so, please describe the differences. What were some of the differences you noticed when working with different providers?

After interacting with providers and/or receiving services, how did you feel walking away? Good follow up question.

How might that feeling or experience compare with a different worker?

3. Can you explain any experiences where you felt that child welfare service providers you were working with went against child welfare policy, and or procedures?

4. In your experience(s), do you feel child welfare providers incorporate various aspects of African American culture into policies, and or services? If you answer no, please explain.
5. Do you feel there are cultural factors specific to African American biological parents that providers need to consider? What are those factors? Please explain.
6. What was your outcome(s) in client-provider relationships? Were you given the opportunity to explain the results to the institution caseworkers?
7. What are the components of a service(s) that would have been beneficial in helping you avoid child welfare involvement, maintaining parental rights of your child (ren), and avoiding family separation? Please explain.
8. Did you have any problems accessing and/or attending services that were awarded?
9. What do you see that could have been done differently in your situation by the child welfare service provider to meet your needs?
10. What practices were not done in your case but could have been done in order to meet your needs better?
11. Do you feel that the practices you described could benefit in response to the specific needs of African American parents who are currently in the child welfare system, or do you consider them general practices for all parents in the child welfare system? Why?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences that have not been shared thus far?

Appendix D: Letter of Authorization to Conduct Research Interviews

Subject: Letter of Authorization to Conduct Research Interviews at St. John's United Methodist Church of Christ.

This letter will serve as authorization for Clevester Moten, researcher, to conduct the research project entitled *An Ethnography African American Participant's Perceptions to Barriers to Exiting the Child Welfare Policy* at St. John's United Methodist Church of Christ at 801 S. Mechanic St., Jackson, MI 49203.

Management acknowledges that it has reviewed the protocol presented by the researcher, as well as the associated risks to the facility. The facility accepts the protocol and the associated risks to the researcher, and authorizes the research project to proceed. The research project may be implemented at the Facility upon approval from the Institutional Review Board.

If we have any concerns or require additional information, we will contact the researcher and/or the Walden University Office of Research Integrity-Human Subjects.

Sincerely,

Facility's Authorized Signatory

Date

Printed Name and Title of Authorized Signatory