A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN BIOLOGICAL
PARENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH CHILD WELFARE SERVICE PROVIDERS

By

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ABSTRACT

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African American children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare and foster care system. While there is no statistically significant difference between race and rates of maltreatment, African Americans are more likely to be reported, investigated, have their children removed from their care, and remain in foster care settings longer. As the system continues to work to meet the needs of African American families, the actual experiences of African American parents have moved to the peripheral. There is little data available that speaks specifically to the extent to which African American families experience child welfare services as culturally sensitive and/or beneficial.

The primary goal of this study was to describe the experiences that a sample of African American biological parents have when working with child welfare service providers (CWSP). The secondary research goal was to examine how the sample of African American biological parents made sense of their child welfare experiences. A third research goal was to determine how child welfare policies inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and CWSP. The forth research goal was to explore the extent to which African American biological parents felt CWSP considered their unique cultural needs. Finally, this study identified the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately by CWSP and the system.

A critical ethnography methodology was employed in this study. A total of 18 in-depth individual interviews were completed. Each individual interview also included an ecomap

activity that identified the network of CWSP that participants interacted with during the period of time they were involved in the system.

Participants had both positive and negative experiences when working with child CWSP. With regard to how parents made sense of their experience, they experienced a combination of negative feelings about self, negative feelings about the system and CWSP, and positive feelings about CWSP. They experienced both negative and beneficial policy infractions that informed and influenced the relationship between participants and CWSP. Participants also identified both the inability and ability of CWSP to address their unique cultural experiences as an African American family. Finally, participants indicated that there were both CWSP practices and system characteristics that needed to be present in order for them to feel that their needs had been adequately met.

Findings indicate that African American biological parents experience a wide variety of negative and positive experiences with CWSP. Negative experiences appear to have a longer lasting impression and stronger influence on parents' perception of their overall child welfare experiences. Participants appeared to be most satisfied when they felt CWSP possessed an understanding of the context of their lives, which included an understanding of the effects of unique cultural experiences.

The findings of the study point to the need for additional cultural competency training for CWSP. Additional training is particularly important given the importance participants placed on CWSP acknowledging systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture. In addition, education regarding the policies that guide and regulate the work done by CWSP is needed in order to educate, empower, and better serve African American families.

DEDICATION

Grandmas hold our tiny hands for just a while, but our hearts forever – Author Unknown
This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmothers. Thank you for showing me the importance of education and for giving me the legacy of perseverance, for if I did not have it I would not have endured this process. I love you beyond words and can't wait to see you again.

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I give a special thank you to my grandparents for opening up to me a sharing their struggles with education and sharing how proud they were of my pursuit of education. I am honored to have shared so many special memories with you and I thank you for allowing me to stand on your shoulders.

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Chapter I

Introduction

This study explored the experiences of African American[1] biological parents who have a

history of being involved with the child welfare system[2] and working with child welfare service

providers (CWSP) [3]. More specifically, this study explored how a sample of parents make sense

of their child welfare service experiences, the extent to which they feel CWSP considered their

unique cultural needs, and the identification of cultural components that were adequately and

inadequately addressed by service providers. The use of critical ethnography as a methodology

not only guided the manner in which data was obtained but it also placed a particularly strong

emphasis on the identification of unjust practices that lead to the further oppression and

marginalization of African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system.

Participants of this study included a purposefully selected sample consisting of 18 African

American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system

and working with CWSP.

This chapter begins with an overview of the background and context that frames the

study. Following is an examination of the current state of the problem, overview of intervention

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[1] The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably. Both terms will be used with the intent of acknowledging a person who has origins in any of the Black race groups of Africa (McKinnon, 2001) but are born in the United States. The interchange of the two terms is consistent with 2000 U.S. Census termination.

[2] Child welfare system includes child protective services and all other follow-up services, which may include but are not limited to, foster care, kinship and guardianship placement, and reunification services.

[3] Child welfare service providers (CWSP) are defined as any person whose primary professional focus is to provide services that have the intention of reducing the harm and risk to children in their home environment. This includes, but is not limited to, caseworkers, psychologists, family therapists, parent advocates, guardian ad litems, and attorneys.

programs, the problem statement and research design overview. The theoretical framework and conceptual model is then presented, followed by the statement of purpose and research questions. The chapter also includes a brief discussion about the researcher's perspective and concludes with a discussion of the rationale and significance of the study.

Background and Context

Historical Context

Historically, African Americans have faced institutionalized oppression and marginalization (Dickerson, 1995; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005). The four hundred years of institutionalized enslavement of persons of African descent helps to establish the foundation for understanding how contemporary influences work to overtly and covertly fragment African American families. Through various forms of institutionalized social oppression and marginalization, African American families face increasing struggles which speak to the unjust treatment of not only African Americans, but other people and families of color. Efforts made by the dominant group to dismantle the nuclear Black family are prominent throughout American history.

During the slave trade, White slave owners saw Black people as property and separated Black families for a host of business and personal reasons. Black parents had limited, if any, legal avenues available that protested against such forms of family division. After the Civil War, "apprenticeship" (Berlin, Miller, & Rowland, 1988) and "indentured" (Scott, 1985) laws were passed with the intent of further limiting the parental rights of Black parents. The apprenticeship law allowed for slave masters to receive uncompensated labor until a child reached adulthood. Often times, the age of the child would be falsified at the start of the apprenticeship in order to extent the amount of free labor the master would receive. The indentured laws exploited Black

children in that children were made to work as indentured servants in order to pay off a debt determined by the slave master. Because of these laws, Black children remained enslaved and the dominant group maintained greater control over the socialization of Black children. Apprentice and indentured laws allowed members of the dominant group too not only financially benefit from the labor of Black children but also aided in the continued omission of the rights of Black parents. As concern increased about the maltreatment of children by their caretakers, the maltreatment of Black children, by White slave owners, was given little attention by the greater society. While society continued to put an increased focus and emphasis on the amount of responsibility that parents had in the abuse and neglect of their children it minimized its responsibility in the continuation of the abuse and neglect of African American children. These actions have ultimately attributed to a source of conflict between Black families and the system.

History of Child Welfare. In 1875, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty and Children (SPCC) was amongst the first organized efforts in the United States to protect children against child maltreatment (Crosson-Tower, 2008). The purpose of the organization was both intervention and advocacy for child safety. Family-centered treatment became the focus of the 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children. The conference recommended that families receive in-home services in order to promote family cohesion and decrease the effects of poverty. While public agencies continued to be held responsible for the investigation of child maltreatment, the Children's Bureau was developed in order to regulate and oversee the welfare of children (Crosson-Tower, 2008). From the 1930s through the 1960s, the investigation of child maltreatment continued to expand. While social workers were largely responsible for investigating and substantiating maltreatment, medical physicians began to participate in indentifying physical injuries that were a result of maltreatment. By 1974, the Child Abuse

Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) mandated the reporting of child maltreatment and provided funds for research, training, and service provision. Additional legislation was passed throughout the 1980s and 1990s to strengthen child protection laws and guide the efforts of the child welfare system. The expansion of the child welfare system was done in an effort to better meet the needs of families who were identified by the system; however, the needs of African American families were often overlooked and unaddressed despite child welfare expansion and reform.

Over the course of the child welfare legislative history, child welfare policies and practices theoretically addressed the need for necessary changes to be made to the child welfare system in order to better the needs of the families it served. Unfortunately, the actual implementation and application of such regulations did little in the way of meeting the full range of needs of non-majority populations. In particular, African American families faced higher levels of poverty and poverty-related stressors (e.g. shifts in family structure and increased demands on parenting) and therefore were in need of additional services that would protect against these stressors. The additional stressors often affiliated with racial oppression, marginalization, and injustice consistently went unaddressed by the system. Moreover, an undue amount of the responsibility for changing the large systemic stressors (poverty, racial oppression, etc.) that confronted African American families was placed on the families to resolve as opposed to a collaborative effort between the system and families. The systemic exclusion to address these matters demonstrated a large-scale negation of essential needs that were specific to not only African American families but also other families of color. In some instances, policies and regulations actually promoted the continued subjugated treatment of African Americans (Bell, 1965; Lawrence-Webb, 1997; Piven & Cloward, 1971). As the needs of African American

parents and families continued to receive minimal attention, disparities continued to grow larger within the system and the experiences of Black parents moved to the peripheral. Such trends have persisted over decades and are evident across states and on a national level (Casey Family Programs, 2007).

Present State

In 2009, African Americans were 12.4% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009a). In 2009, African American children made up approximately 15% of the U.S. child population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009c). On September 30, 2009, there were 423,773 children living in a foster care placement and 127,821 (30%) of those children identified as Black non-Hispanic (Adoption and Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS], 2010). It is the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system, relative to their proportion in the census population, which classifies Black children as disproportionally represented in the child welfare system.

The disproportionate representation of African American children and families in the child welfare systems has been disconcerting to social researchers and advocates for over two decades (Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003). The current concern is that while research shows there is no statistically significant difference between race and rates of maltreatment (Hill, 2006), African American families are at an increased risk for being reported to child welfare officials by mental health or social service agencies (Sedlak & Schultz, 2001; United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2002). When there are Child Protective Services (CPS) reports of emotional maltreatment, neglect, fatalities, serious injury, and perpetrator use of alcohol or other substances, compared to White and Latino counterparts, African Americans are more likely to be investigated (Sedlak & Schultz, 2001), have children

placed in foster care settings (Knott & Donovan, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office [USGAO], 2007), and have children remain in the foster care settings longer (USDHHS, 2002; USGAO, 2007). Moreover, compared to their Latino and European American counterparts, African American families are less likely to reunify and African American children are less likely to be adopted (Casey Family Programs, 2007; Courtney & Wong, 1996).

It appears that to some extent the issue that remains salient is twofold. First, is the issue of divergence related to cultural ways of living and second is the issue of inequality. Those reporting African American families to child welfare authorities appear to identify parenting styles and behaviors that they associate with being risky and harmful for Black children; however, the findings in the literature clearly demonstrate that maltreatment rates do not differ. It therefore seems evident that across professions and contexts there exists a lack of acceptance of a wide range of parenting strategies that are distinct from and to some extent unendorsed by mainstream society. Second, the issue of inequality is perpetuated throughout the system. Once Black parents and families are identified by the system, systemic issues such as the inability to appropriately determine occurrences of maltreatment and the inability to provide services that increase reunification rates for Black families is an indicator that the child welfare system is facing hardship when it comes to providing services for Black families. Acknowledging the disproportionate rate and the increased likelihood that African American parents will have some form of involvement with the child welfare system, it is the exploration of African American biological parents' experiences that can lead to further insight into the development of culturally-appropriate strategies that can better serve families currently in care and future families who will enter into care.

There is little data available that speaks specifically to the extent to which African

American families experience child welfare services as culturally sensitive and/or beneficial. What is known is that there is a systematic lack of understanding related to cultural differences and this misunderstanding impacts the manner in which the social service sector provides culturally appropriate resources and services to multi-stressed populations (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000). As the child welfare system continues to improve upon service delivery systems, intervention programs need to incorporate data that speaks to the lived experiences of African American biological parents have had while in the child welfare system. The data derived in the current study lead to conclusions and recommendations related to ways child welfare programs can effectively integrate service components identified by a sample of African American biological parents who have been involved in the system.

The literature that explores and describes the characteristics of the relationship between CWSP and African American biological parents is scarce and outdated. Much of what *is* known is based on theory and too little in scientific evidence. The literature is particularly scant when it comes to empirically and conceptually sound studies that provide a greater understanding of the extent to which the roles of CWSP are effectively meeting the needs of African American biological parents. Furthermore, the data that is available is typically derived from White samples and generalized to other non-White populations. Many areas of research demonstrate the unique qualities and features of African American families. In addition, norms and strengths established in poor families have been virtually ignored in development of policy for these families. African American families in the child welfare system often sit at the intersection of these two contexts of family life virtually unstudied. Given the limited empirical knowledge available and the lack of within group examination about the experiences of African American biological parents, it is appropriate to begin examining the experiences of this population using

qualitative methodologies in order to build the foundation for future quantitative inquiry.

      Between-group Comparisons. Generalizing quantitative and qualitative findings derived from research based on the experiences of White middle class samples does not provide sufficient insight into the experiences of African American parents. This is supported by Knight, Roosa, and Umaña-Taylor (2009) and Padilla (2004) who emphasize that some social science processes are not generalizable to racial/ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged groups. Coontz's (1992) examination of the historical experiences of African American families lead to an outspoken commentary on how little information White America generally possesses about the experiences of Black families.

> The truth is that Black people in America know far more about White families than White people know about Black families. Many Blacks, after all, have lived and worked inside White households, while Whites usually have learned about Black families from mass media reports that focus on atypical, sensational, and distorted incidents. Yet while most Blacks have maintained a dignified silence about what they saw and heard in White families, many White commentators haven't hesitated to sound off about Black family matters of which they know next to nothing. (Coontz, 1992, p. 236)

      Some social scientists have taken a comparative approach to understanding group processes. Although the comparative approach allows for variables to be studied and compared across cultures, the approach faces criticism in its inability to control for varying definitions of variables and concepts that are culturally determined (Ember & Ember, 1996; Phinney & Landin, 1998; Wong, Eccles, Sameroff, 2003). When research uses comparative approaches as a means of understanding and describing the experiences of African American parents, there exist an underlying assumption that both groups, which are being compared to one another, possess a level of sameness. This assumption of sameness is based on the premise that the control group (e.g. any population other than African Americans) and the experimental group (e.g. African Americans) have endured similar sociopolitical plights and sociocultural experiences. Therefore,

any difference in a given outcome variable (e.g. likelihood of entering the child welfare system, child maltreatment rates, likelihood for reunification, etc.) is viewed as a consequence of an intragroup process or in some cases a group deficit (Padilla, 2004) and are inadequate in helping to advance the understanding of social processes for groups of color (Johnson, Jaeger, Randolph, Cauce, & Ward, 2003).

Intervention Strategies and Programs

A great amount of work needs to be done in order to develop models of service delivery that are specifically designed to meet the needs of African American families in the child welfare system. In finding ways to address the needs of Black families some CWSP have taken a "color-blind" approach to the practice of child welfare. While the effort is valiant in terms of putting action behind the internal desire to activate change in the area of unequal treatment of African American families, the color-blind approach assumes that the values, morals, and practices of the dominant White culture are universal (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Carr, 1997). This approach can actually be more harmful to the families being served (Boyd Franklin, 2003). In essence, the color-blind approach erases the need to emphasize varying, yet effective, discipline styles and ways of living. Furthermore, the color-blind approach negates pertinent micro and macro level factors that affect the seriousness of an African American family's current situation (Mazzocco, 2006). Moreover, with the implementation of the color-blind approach, CWSP may be working from the assumption that a family's inability to meet the cultural expectations and standards of the dominant group is a direct result of cultural deficiency, lack of desire to achieve, or pathology (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Mazzocco, 2006). Working off the basis of this assumption creates further dissension between the child welfare system, CWSP, and African American families in so that if there is no recognition of racial differences then there is no need for specific

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practices or policies that seeks to reduce racial disparities and address the unmet needs of Black families. Moreover, interactions that are manifestations of client-provider dissension are particularly problematic given that research has found racial bias and distrust of the child welfare system are contributing factors for African American children's removal from their home into the foster care system and the extended time in which they remain in the child welfare system (USGAO, 2008).

Attending to the cultural needs of Black parents suggests a restructuring of intervention strategies and programs. Recognizing that child abuse and neglect are experienced and organized from the subjective viewpoint of the individual (Barber & Jager, 2008), tertiary prevention strategies is one domain of change that needs to be addressed when looking to adapt services for African American families who are involved in the system. Tertiary prevention services include intensive family preservation counseling with trained mental health counselors; parent mentor programs with stable, "non-abusive families acting as "role models" and providing support to families in crisis; parent support groups that help develop positive parenting behaviors and practices; and mental health services targeting communication and functioning improvement" (USDHHS & ACF, n.d.). The focus of this level of prevention is to reduce the negative effects of maltreatment and prevent future recurrences (Thomas, Leicht, Hughes, Madigan, & Dowell, 2003). Researchers and interventionist have also suggested improving the culturally responsiveness of CWSP so that African Americans are viewed as more credible and more culturally competent (Benkart, Peters, Clark, & Keves-Foster, 2006). Incorporation of this ideological shift is believed to positively influence client satisfaction and adherence to service plans (O'Malley, Sheppard, Schwartz, & Mandelblatt, 2004).

While intervention programs have identified strategies that seek to better meet the needs

of Black families, these programs and strategies are typically based on the findings and recommendations of studies that have not solicited the feedback of Black parents themselves. Not only does the knowledge that emerged as a result of the current study offer new insights into how CWSP practice and interact with African American biological parents but in addition, the findings inform recommendations about ways in which CWSP and intervention programs can better meet the needs of African American using the voices and experiences of the parents themselves.

Problem Statement

African Americans are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. Intervention programs and policies are continuously being developed and refined as a means of providing vital services to African American families being served. Although often unexplored, one component of all intervention programs is the relationship between the providers of the services and African American parents. There is little information as to the perception and experiences of African American parents who work with various CWSP (e.g. case workers, therapists, attorneys, Guardian ad Litem, etc.) and how this subset of parents make sense of their service experiences, the extent to which they feel child welfare system service providers consider their unique cultural needs, and their identification of service components that are essential to meeting their needs.

Research Design Overview

Currently, the extent to which quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies have surpassed the primarily theoretical focus of the child welfare field is unknown (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2002). What is known is that there is a tremendous need to spark research that builds bridges between theoretical frameworks and the empirical investigation of human and

social process within the field of child welfare. A critical ethnography is one qualitative method of exploring the dynamics of the interpersonal relationship between CWSP and African American biological parents.

With an emphasis on cultural systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority in society, the primary purpose of a critical ethnography is to qualitatively examine disenfranchised groups with the goal of advocating for the needs of group members (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnography emphasizes thinking outside of the box and acting against the status quo. The "critical" aspect of the approach necessitates that the researcher take an ethical stance against issues of unfairness and injustice and make recommendations that speak to the eradication of oppression and inequality. This critical ethnography had a specific focus on exploring the experiences of a sample of African American parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system. The focus also extended to providing additional information to CWSP with the intention of utilizing such information in order to improve intervention programs and policies that serve African American families involved in the child welfare system.

This study explored 18 African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. Participants did not have to be currently involved in the child welfare system or working with CWSP; however, they must have a history of involvement in the system and have worked with service providers for the purpose of attempting reunification with their child. Individual in-depth interviews served as the primary sources of data collection. To support the data acquired from the in-depth interviews, participants also completed an ecomap activity in which they identified key CWSP and the relational attributes that they perceived as being present between themselves and the CWSP. A

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member checking focus group served to validate the findings of the individual interviews. Each participant has been identified using a pseudonym and all interviews and the focus group has been electronically recorded either through audio or through videotape and transcribed verbatim.

Multiple forms of data collection enhanced probable triangulation and thereby increased the overall credibility of the study. All individual in-depth interviews and the focus groups were coded. While a particular emphasis was placed on codes that are consistent with past literature and common sense, special attention was paid to unanticipated codes, codes that are particularly unusual to the topic and codes that addressed larger theoretical perspectives in the literature (Creswell, 2009). Coding categories were developed and continually refined during the data analysis process until clear themes emerged. The findings reported are an accurate reflection of the data.

Theoretical Framework

The ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993) and feminist theory (Gordon, 1979), with a specific emphasis on Black feminist theory (Collins, 2008; Guy-Sheftall, 1995), provided the context for this examination of African American biological parents experiences in a child welfare context.

Human Ecological Theory

Human ecological theory provides a framework for identifying and understanding the qualitative circumstances of those who experience discrimination and prejudice. Bronfenbrenner's model examines "ways in which intrafamilial processes are influenced by extrafamilial conditions and environments" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 424). Through an ecological lens, individuals are examined within the context of their environment, and there is a focus on interactions and interdependence of humans in and across environments

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(Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Cole, 1996). The framework's consideration of broader social, economic, and political factors across systems provides a context for understanding both individual and large-scale group differences (Elder, 1998).

The original theory asserts that four systems (microsystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem) influence the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1986) later included a fifth system, the chronosystem, which expanded the ecological perspective, in that, age cohort generational effects were taken into consideration (Elder, 1998) and the effect of the past was used to understand present development in the environment in which the person is living. The microsystem is the immediate environment of an individual and involves face-to-face interactions and direct contact with physical settings. Examples of the microsystem in the current study include biological and/or foster family, CWSP, peer group, and neighborhood. The mesosystem represents the connections between the immediate environments. It is a link between two or more settings that directly involve a person. An example of the mesosystem is an interaction between the CWSP, state foster care office or agency, and direct contact with a foster family. The exosystem is the external environmental settings that indirectly influence development and a person's environment. The exosystem does not directly involve the person. An example of an exosystem is a parent's workplace or parents who do not have direct contact with a foster family but the foster family has direct contact with the state foster care office or agency. The macrosystem is the larger cultural and broad social context, which influences the micro-, meso-, and exo-systems. The macrosystem includes government and agency policies and the racial, political and economic climate. Finally, the chronosystem emphasizes time and involves the occurrence of environmental events and transitions that occur over the course of one's lifespan. An example of an environmental event

and transition includes death of a parent, long-term unemployment, and divorce. The chronosystem may also include sociohistorical factors that have systemic, group, and individual effects. Examples of sociohistorical circumstances include slavery and the increased opportunities for women to enter the workforce (Santrock, 2007). All influences are bi-directional within and between systems.

      Core Assumptions. There are four core assumptions at the foundation of the ecological perspective (White & Klein, 2008). First, elements of the system are seen as being interconnected. This assumption asserts that no individual can be viewed in isolation. For example, the outcomes or life trajectory for children in foster care are contingent on the experiences and actions of the developing child and the decisions that are made by caretakers (biological parents or foster parents). The second assumption is that systems can be understood only as wholes. The functioning of a family system must be viewed in consideration for the effect that other systems have on an individual or family. The next assumption is that all systems affect themselves through environmental feedback. Feedback is conceptualized as the influence that the collective system has on the environment and in turn the influence that the environment has on the collective system behavior. The fourth assumption is that systems are not reality. This assumption asserts that there is no one way to define a system, and depending on how one defines a system the outcome of the study of that system will be altered. These four assumptions provide a basis for understanding how systems should be viewed, the interconnectedness of systems and the subsequent effects that such connectedness has on the behavior of individuals and families.

      Roles, Norms, and Expectations. Particularly important to understanding families within the context of child welfare system, the human ecological theory posits that each system

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has roles, norms, and expectations for behavior. These concepts help to better understand behavior within a multitude of context. There are various ways in which members of the system understand the range of behavior that is acceptable for a system. The roles, norms, and expectations of one environment may not be easily transferred to another environment. For example, parents involved in the child welfare system quickly learn certain parenting behaviors (e.g. spanking) endorsed by their family system are not necessarily endorsed by child welfare professionals. Development is thought to progress normally when there exist some level of compatibility between systems exists. In the case of parents looking to regain full custody of their children, they are given the opportunity to regain their parenting duties once the child welfare system is provided with evidence suggesting that the parent's parental strategies and behaviors are compatible with child welfare standards for parenting. The systems lack of consideration of structural and process differences related to culture can lead to ideological friction between CWSP and Black parents.

  Variety. White and Klein (2008) define variety as, "the extent to which the system has the resources to meet new environmental demands or adapt to changes" (p. 159). Change is constant and a consequence of forces internal and external to the system. Variety reflects the ability for the system to successfully adapt to constant, internal and external change. Systems that have access to more resources have an easier adjustment process to changing environmental demands. Special consideration should be made for systems that do not have access to the resources necessary to adequately adapt to changing environments. For example, when children are removed from their family home, parents are expected to make use of informal and formal resources that will help them as they pursue full custody of their children. These resources might include, but are not limited to, access to transportation to get to and from appointments, stable

employment to demonstrate ability to financially support children, stable housing to demonstrate ability to provide shelter, and flexibility to adapt to external pressures to change parenting behaviors. Parents involved in the child welfare system who have limited access to resources ultimately are in danger of failing to adequately meet the challenges placed before them, thereby increasing the likelihood of parental termination of rights. Furthermore, when families are not provided with the necessary variety of support services needed meet their needs (physical, emotional, social, and cultural), they ultimately are hindered from optimally being able to pursue custody of their children.

Although human ecological theory has less of an influence on biological and cognitive processes, the theory provides a comprehensive model for understanding contextual and environmental influences on development. The ecological framework is used to help guide the process of understanding the confluence that various systemic level factors have on the experiences of African Americans with and in the child welfare system. While this framework serves to enhance the field's systemic understanding of interactions within and between systems, the feminist theory and more specifically Black feminism strongly emphasizes the systemic influences of race, class, and gender and the effects that these factors have on the individual experiences of Black women at multiple systemic levels.

Feminist Theory and Black Feminism

With an emphasis on social movement and change, feminist theory emerged. Gordon (1979) defined feminist theory as, "an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it" (p. 107). The primary focus of feminist theory is threefold; "emphasis on women's experience, the identification of oppression, and the emancipatory purpose of feminist theory" (Osmond & Thorne, 1993, p. 592). Feminist theory places an

emphasis on understanding the context by which groups have been marginalized in order to identify solutions for changing their situation. Variations of feminist theory have emerged out of a pursuit to shed light on and address the need for change across a variety of inequalities.

Black Feminism. Over the course of the both the Civil Rights and Feminist Movement, Black women, who were avid supporters and participants of the Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, became increasingly dissatisfied. They felt that the Civil Rights Movement did little to focus on the issues of women and children. The issues that were a focus for the Feminist Movement (e.g. the power to work outside the home) were not necessarily pertinent issues in the lives of Black women (Amos & Parmer, 2005; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Compared to White women, Black women have historically experienced more intense and pervasive forms of oppression. The work of Alice Walker (1983) highlighted that this more intense and pervasive form of oppression was often ignored in traditional feminist ideology. It is through Black feminism that Black women are able to locate themselves in two or more realities (Martin, 1993; Rahman, 2009).

Black feminism was founded on the premise that sexism, heterosexism, classism, and racism are indistinguishably linked, and any examination or call for change must be done in each of these areas. Each of the forms of oppression needs to be viewed through the lens of the patriarchal social structure that exists in the United States. Collins (1991) defines Black feminism as "women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary Black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society." Black feminists advocate for a critical analysis of societal structures that promote and sustain power imbalances and inequality between individuals, families, and minority groups. This advocacy is accomplished through the agency and self-determination of Black feminists.

Central themes. There are five central themes of Black feminism (Collins, 1993, p. 418; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). The first theme is the presentation of an alternative social construct for both the present and future based on African American women's lived experiences. African American women's experiences are essential to the theory. It is the acknowledgement of the diverse range of experiences that African American women have that legitimizes and empowers the perspectives of this population of women. The second theme is a commitment to fighting against race and gender inequality across differences of class, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. There exist an acknowledgment that injustice and oppression do not occur to any one singular group, but various forms of discrimination occur in a vast array of domains and groups. As such, Black feminism seeks to address inequality across many different dimensions of life. The third theme is recognition of Black women's legacy of struggle. The struggles faced by Black women (and other women of color) are qualitatively distinct from the struggles faced by Caucasian women. Black feminist theory seeks to shed light on the struggles that are unique to African American women. The fourth theme is a promotion of Black female empowerment through voice, visibility and self-definition. This includes providing the opportunity to share the individual and collective experiences that Black women have had in various arenas (e.g. social, political, work, education, etc.). The final theme is a belief in the interdependence of thought and action. The ability to identify forms of inequality is not separate from the need to take action to modify occurrences of inequality. These themes, which lay the foundation for Black feminist theory, highlight the centrality of acknowledging the diverse experiences of African American women across a wide range of context and social strata in order to identify and develop a plan of action for change that includes empowering all members of Black families.

Through the lens of Black feminism, experiences of oppression across multiple domains are acknowledged. The child welfare system is another representation of a domain of injustice and oppression that has muted the unequal experiences of Black women and families. Child welfare intervention services that fail to address the struggles unique to Black women and families further silences the realities of oppressive experiences. The lack of action by child welfare intervention services to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate intervention services leads to CWSP and parent relationships that are entrenched with power struggles thereby leading to a lack of fulfillment of cultural needs that promote the reunification of Black families in the system.

Synthesizing Human Ecological Theory and Black Feminist Theory

Human ecological theory and Black feminist theory provide the theoretical lens for examining the experiences of African American families in the child welfare system. Figure 1 depicts a skeletal model of human ecological theory and Black feminist theory infused into one working theoretical framework. The model illustrates both the interconnectedness of the five systems described in human ecological theory while considering the importance that Black feminist theory places on race, class, and gender.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model
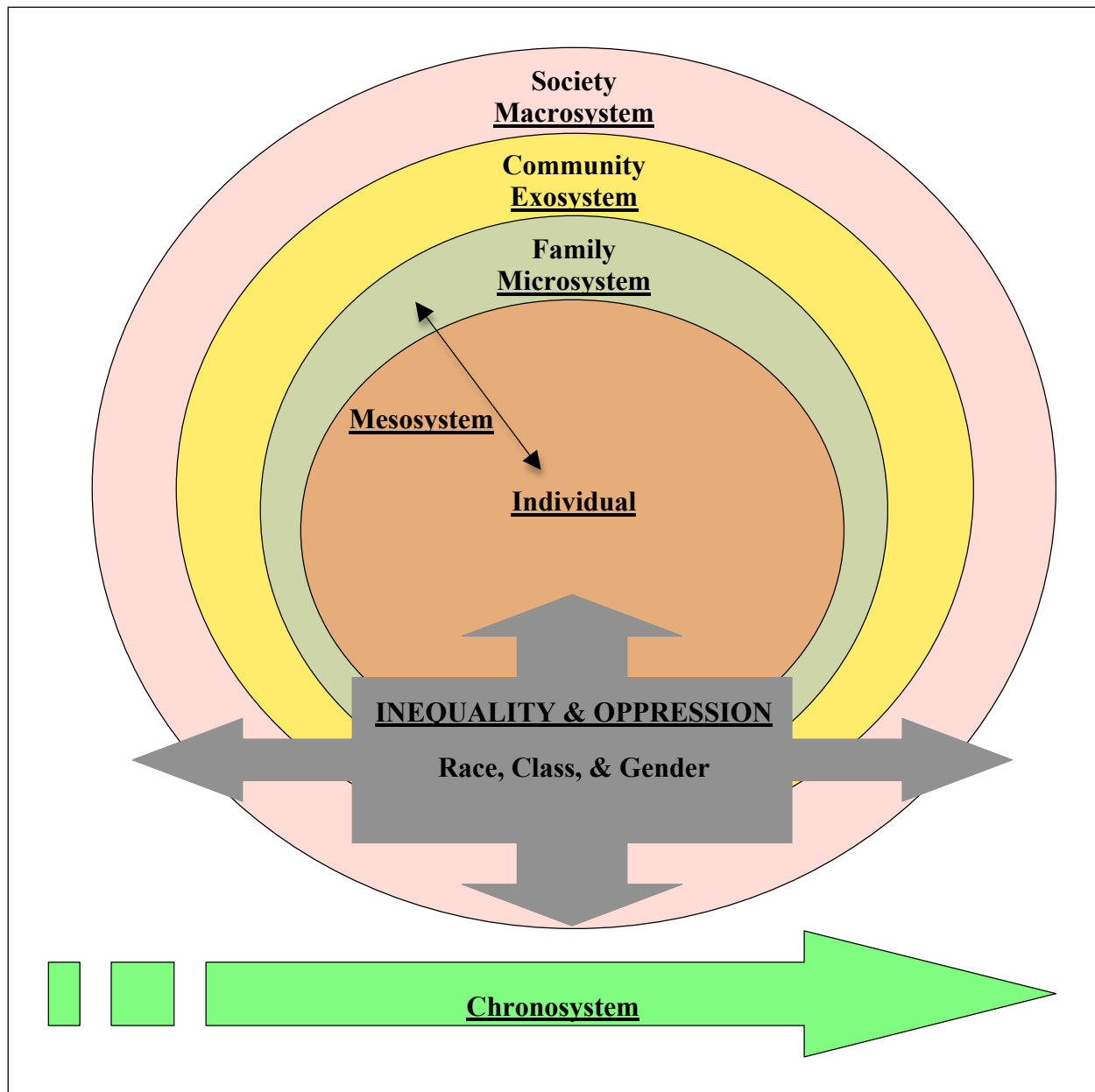
Note: For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation.

Given the focus on systems and emphasis on multiple forms of inequality and oppression,

both theoretical frameworks emphasize the interconnectedness of multiple systemic and

individual factors and the effects that such factors have on the oppressive and unjust experiences

of racial and ethnic groups, entire family systems, and women in family systems. Throughout life, African Americans are faced with a multitude of experiences related to racism, classism, and sexism. Individual development is not only affected by the individual and immediate environment but also the larger cultural environment (Few, 2007). It is the totality of these experiences across the lifespan that comprise of the systemic inequality experienced by African Americans. The most significant point of integration between the two theories is the consideration for the unique experiences and voices of individuals. Not only do experiences with systemic inequalities influence one's development but divergent structural and process differences related to culture also are contributing factors. Specific to the child welfare system, structural and process differences include parenting styles, kinship parenting and care, and family structure differences. While Black feminist theory has a particular emphasis on the experiences of African American women and how their experiences are qualitatively different from the experiences of Caucasian women, both theories highlight the view that all lived experiences are valid and real and effect interpersonal relationships regardless of the divergence in experiences. Together both theories provide a framework for understanding the complex experiences of African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system.

The conceptual model used in the current study is illustrated in Figure 2. The model identified postulates relationships among the key constructs and variables. Specific variables related to systemic inequality as experienced by African American biological parents (racism, classism, and sexism) and structural and process differences related to culture (parenting styles, kinship parenting and care, and family structure) are depicted in the figure. Both perceived systemic inequalities experienced by African American biological parents and the structural and process differences related to culture experienced by both parents and CWSP influences the

interaction between parents and CWSP. The model acknowledges the influences that systemic inequalities also have on CWSPs' perceptions; however, for the purposes of this study, the focus will be entirely on the influence of the parents' perceived systemic inequalities. Client-provider power dynamics are influenced by the experiences and practices of parents and the extent to which CWSP incorporate cultural sensitivity practices into their work with African American parents thereby affecting the overall client-provider relationship and the perceived parent fulfillment of needs by the CWSP.

Figure 2

Conceptual Model
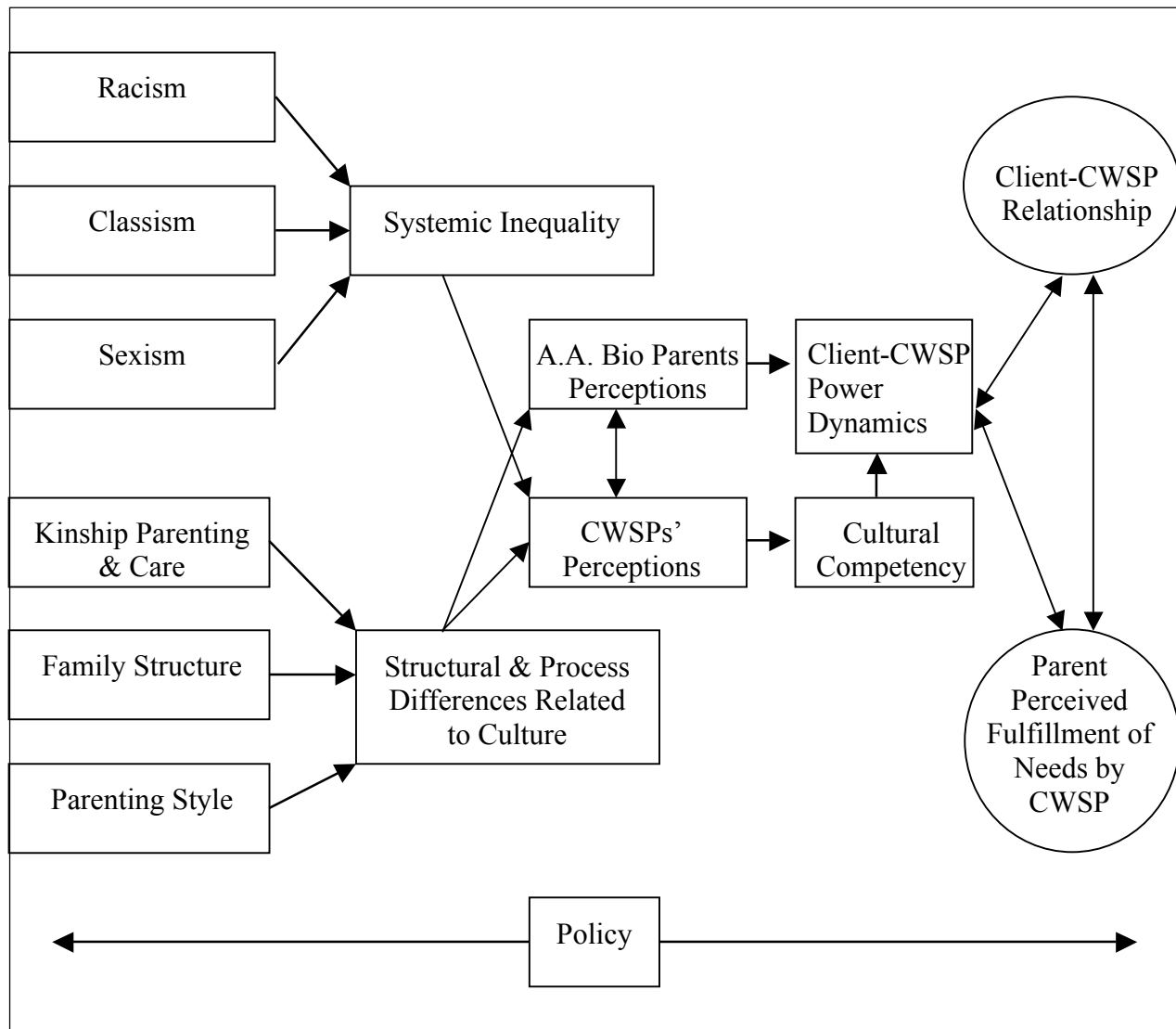
Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this critical ethnography was to explore the experiences of a sample of 18 African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. It was anticipated that through the exploration of these experiences and an analysis of the participants' cultural needs, new insights would be unveiled

related to the cultural needs of African American biological parents in the system. The ultimate

goal was to inform and improve intervention programs and policies that serve African American

families involved in the child welfare system. To shed light on this problem, the following

research questions were addressed:

(1)   How do African American biological parents describe their experiences of working with

        child welfare system service providers? What meaning do they ascribe to their

        experiences?

(2)   How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African

        American biological parents and child welfare system service providers?

(3)   Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel

        child welfare system service providers considered their cultural experiences and needs

        (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences

        related to culture) during service delivery?

(4)   Regarding the fulfillment of the cultural needs of African American biological parents,

        what are the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that

        their needs have been adequately met? In what ways can and do child welfare system

        service providers address these needs?

        Table 1 describes the interconnection between the study's conceptual model and research

questions. It should be noted that the concepts related to systemic inequalities and the structural

and process differences related to culture can be viewed and addressed through both the human

ecological lens and Black feminist lens. The decision to view the concepts through both the

human ecological lens as well as Black feminist theory provides an emphasis on both the group

cultural experiences of African Americans and the individual experiences of African American

parents, particularly mothers.

Table 1

Interconnections between Conceptual Model Features and Research Questions

Concepts	Research Questions (RQ)
Chronosystem – **Policy**	**RQ 2:** How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and child welfare system service providers?
Macrosystem – **Policy** **Systemic inequalities** •Racism •Classism • Sexism	**RQ 2:** How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and child welfare system service providers? **RQ3:** Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery?

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Table 1 (cont'd)

Microsystem – **Client-provider Power Dynamics** **Client-provider Relationship** **Parent perceived fulfillment of needs by providers**	**RQ 1:** How do African American biological parents describe their experiences of working with child welfare system service providers? What is the meaning that they ascribe to their experiences? **RQ 2:** How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and child welfare system service providers? **RQ 4:** When it comes to the cultural needs of African American biological parents being fulfilled, what are the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met? In what ways can and do child welfare system service providers address these needs?
Systemic Inequalities •Racism •Classism • Sexism	**RQ 3:** Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery?

Table 1 (cont'd)

Structural and Process Differences related to Culture •Kinship parenting and care •Family structure •Parenting styles	RQ 3: Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery?
Cultural Competency	RQ 3: Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery? RQ 4: When it comes to the cultural needs of African American biological parents being fulfilled, what are the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met? In what ways can and do child welfare system service providers address these needs?

The Researcher

The interpretive nature of qualitative research necessitates transparency between the researcher and the audience (Creswell, 2009). One means of transparency is to provide a description of the researcher's background and experience that lends itself to the researcher's interest in and knowledge about the subject. The description of the researcher's background contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study.

I am an African American female doctoral student matriculating through a Human Development and Family Studies Program and specializing in Couples and Family Therapy.

Since the onset of my clinical training, I have primarily focused on the delivery of systemic services to families who are involved in the child welfare system. In addition to the cultural foresight related to being a member of a socially marginalized and oppressed group, I brought to the inquiry process the graduate level research and clinical training. These assets not only provided me with critical knowledge pertaining to the interworking of the child welfare system but also the relevance of recognizing and incorporating the role of culture in treatment modalities.

I recognize that the same experiences that prepared me to carry out this study also had the capacity to serve as a potential bias in terms of over-estimating the role that culture may play for African American biological parents receiving reunification services within the child welfare system. Subsequently, I was not only invested in undergoing this exploration at the level of quality expected for graduate study but as the researcher I was equally invested in ensuring that the findings of the study were clearly indicative of the data obtained from participants. A discussion related to decreasing the subjectivity of myself as the researcher and increasing the credibility of the study occurs in the methods chapter (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001).

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study originated from the researcher's experiences of witnessing the child welfare system consistently lack success in the consideration and fulfillment of the cultural needs of African American families. A major dilemma arises when the child welfare system does not employ interventions that are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of the families in which they serve. The absence of the delivery of culturally appropriate services hinders effective service provision and impedes subsequent reunification efforts for African American families in the child welfare system.

Exploring the experiences of African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP is an initial step in terms of exploration. While this step does not resolve the entire issue of developing usable culturally appropriate child welfare interventions, the study does identify key challenges and benefits of child welfare interpersonal working relationships, identified by African American biological parents. These challenges and benefits should strongly be considered when improving current services and developing future intervention services. By incorporating the findings of this study into future intervention programs and policies, program developers and CWSP can seek to better meet the needs of current and future African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The purpose of this critical ethnography is to explore the experiences African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. More specifically, this study explored how a sample of parents make sense of their child welfare service experiences, the extent to which they feel CWSP considered their unique cultural needs, and the identification of cultural components that were adequately and inadequately addressed by service providers. The critical review of the literature situates the current study in both an empirical and theoretical context.

The actual structure of this review is such that it emphasizes the theoretical framework guiding this examination in that the experiences of African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system are effected by a range of macro and micro systemic factors. The literature review first explores the political context of the child welfare system. This context focuses particularly on the policies that drive the work of the child welfare system and the everyday practices of CWSP. Following that section is an examination of systemic inequalities and various structural and process differences that are related to culture that have both historical and contemporary effects on intergroup and interpersonal processes between African Americans and CWSP. This section includes discussions on factors and experiences related to racism, classism, and sexism and the compounding effects these factors have on African American parents and families involved in the child welfare system. In addition, the section will include a discussion related to the examination of kinship parenting and care, family structure, and parenting styles and how divergent ways of being effect client-providers relationships. The focus will then shift to a review of client-provider relationships. Here, an emphasis will be

placed on the importance of including cultural competency practices into the everyday transactions of CWSP and the role that power plays in client-provider relationships.

Policy

Child welfare policies are critical to the services that are offered to and mandated for families brought to the attention of the child welfare system. Historical and current policies have not sufficiently provided support to the most vulnerable populations in society. Considerations must be made regarding the manner in which policies have in the past and continue to have an effect on African Americans families.

Single female-headed African American families are particularly vulnerable to the impact of emotional and financial strain in addition to biased social opinions regarding untraditional family configurations and structures. In the 1935 Social Security Act, racial inequality related to family configuration and structure, was built into and permeated the practice of child welfare (Gordon, 1990; Mink, 1990; Quadagno, 1988; Skocpol, 1988). The state led decision-making process allowed states to deny families services based on such policy infractions as the "home suitability clause," "substitute father rules," and "illegitimate father clause" (Bell, 1965; Piven & Cloward, 1971). Policies such as these excluded otherwise eligible needy children from receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits if the mother's home was deemed "unsuitable," if the mother had a relationship with a man outside of the context of marriage, or if the child was born to an unmarried couple or single woman. As a result of the state decisions, non-married, divorced, remarried, and cohabitating African American families were denied public assistance program benefits. These early policies which lead to single female-headed African American families being exempt from the receipt of AFDC benefits and

services created further distance between system representatives and the African American community.

The Flemming Rule. In response to the discriminatory practices that frequently denied African Americans receipt of public benefits, under the Eisenhower administration, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Dr. Arthur Flemming, established the Flemming Rule of 1961 (Lawrence-Webb, 1997). The Flemming Rule established a formal policy allowing families to receive (a) due process protections, and (b) interventions for families labeled "unsuitable" (1997). The enactment of the Flemming Rule meant that the child welfare system could no longer overlook, deny, or expel families deemed "unsuitable." The implementation of the Flemming Rule ultimately was a monumental step toward addressing child abuse and neglect against African American children. This policy also systemically shifted the child welfare system toward a child-centered practice while moving away from determining welfare eligibility based on the evaluation of moral standards contingent on family configurations and parental behavior (Pappas, 1996). While the Flemming Rule provided services to families regardless of family configuration, distrust between members of the African American community and the child welfare system was still evident and continued to play a role in service provision quality (Lawrence-Webb, 1997).

Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272). Although the Flemming Rule aided in the systemic adoption of a more child-centered practice, there continued to exist a need to address institutional inconsistencies. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 amended titles IV-B and XX of the 1935 Social Security Act (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 has been viewed by some as the most important piece of federal legislation that has shaped the

current day principles and service delivery strategies of the child welfare system (Allen & Bissell, 2004; Sanders, 2003). For parents who experienced difficulties related to a multitude of life stressors, this act ensured that child welfare providers made "reasonable efforts" to prevent removal of children from their home and return those who were removed as soon as possible. The act established a mandated every six months review of the status of a child in any non-permanent foster setting and further emphasized returning the child home as soon as possible. Other major provisions included adoption assistance payments, defining and identifying children with special needs, establishing permanency plans within an 18 months period, and the creation of reunification and prevention programs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). Acknowledging the varying degrees of individual and social difficulties that families experienced, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 sought to aid in the prevention of unnecessary separation of children from families and the protection of family autonomy.

Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994. The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 was established in order to put parameters around transracial adoptions and same-race placement of foster children. Congress approved MEPA primarily in response to foster placement delays and denials of children of color. Reports provided to Congress indicated that minority communities had been historically discouraged from becoming foster or adoptive parents (Hollinger, The ABA Center on Children and the Law, & National Resource Center on Legal and Court Issues, 1998). Before the enactment of MEPA, racial matching policies were standards of practice when working to place foster children. During the time when racial matching policies were heavily practiced, more children of color, particularly African American children, were entering the foster care system and the available pool of minority foster and

adoptive parents was shrinking.

Through MEPA the practice of denying any individual the opportunity to become an adoptive or foster parent solely on the basis of race was barred. In addition, MEPA made it illegal to delay or deny a child's placement based on the child's or prospective parent's race, color, or national origin. In 1996, the language in MEPA was amended through the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption amendments included in the Small Business Job Protection Act. Language amendments included the overt articulation that "discrimination is not to be tolerated." In accordance with the Civil Rights Acts, discrimination would not be accepted toward children in need of a home nor toward any communities who could potentially provide placement resources (Hollinger, The ABA Center on Children and the Law, & National Resource Center on Legal and Court Issues, 1998). The overall goals of MEPA and the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption amendments were to (a) decrease the length of time that children wait to be adopted, (b) facilitate the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents who can meet the distinctive needs of children awaiting placement, and (c) eliminate discrimination on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the child or the prospective parent. Although state and local agencies and child welfare providers, have been provided with government-outlined strategies for the implementation of MEPA, data continues to illustrate that African American children remain in foster care settings for longer (USDHHS, 2002) and there continues to exist decreased recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents of color (Casey Family Programs, 2005; Hill, 2004).

Interethnic Placement Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 (P.L 104–188). The Interethnic Placement Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 modified MEPA in that it removed the consideration of race during the adoption-

decision making process (McRoy & Grape, 1999). The Multiethnic Placement Act language that

allowed states and other entities to consider culture, ethnicity, and race of a child and the extent

to which prospective parent(s) could meet the needs of a child was repealed. Within the

Interethnic Placement Provisions of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 any entity

that was receiving Federal Government funds and was involved in foster care or adoption

placement could not deny any individual the opportunity to become a foster or adoptive parent

based on the condition of race, color, or national origin of the parent or child. In addition, a

child's foster care or adoptive placement could not be delayed nor denied based on the race,

color, or national origin of the parent or child. While the act removed racial and ethnic barriers

to foster and adoptive placements, the act also required the recruitment of foster and adoptive

families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the state needing foster and

adoptive homes. The act opened door for more children of color to be placed more quickly in

foster and adopted homes; however, the sustained recruitment of foster and adoptive families of

color has not been adequately achieved to date.

   Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89). Under President Clinton's

administration, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 was signed into law. With

overwhelming bipartisan support (U.S. Administration for Children, Youth & Families

[USACYF], 1998), ASFA set the stage for the present day major reconstruction of the United

States child welfare system. In particular, ASFA modified and clarified numerous policies made

under the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Child Welfare League of

America, n.d.). The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 shifted the focus from family

preservation to the best interest of children and finding them permanent placements with

minimum delays. In the interest of finding permanent placements, familial and community ties

were severed (Anyon, 2011). Major components of ASFA included reasonable efforts and safety requirements for foster care and adoption placements (Title I), incentives for providing permanent families for children in foster care (Title II), additional improvements and reforms to the overall child welfare and foster care process (Title III), and coordination of systemic resources and practice standards (Title IV). It was through these components that new standards were created under which the current child welfare system currently operates.

Although ASFA was created in order to heighten standards of practice for all families involved in child welfare system, it has become evident that the act has not sufficiently or adequately addressed the needs of African Americans involved in the system. Under ASFA, provisions were made that permitted states to pursue termination of parental rights sooner so that children could have increased chances for adoption. The act imposed a 15-month timeframe at which time mandatory filing of parental termination may begin. This component is particularly troublesome considering the unaddressed continued existence of institutional structural inequality that continues to perpetuate the disproportionate number of African American children involved in care. More specifically, child welfare providers, at multiple levels of power, not practicing using culturally-informed and sensitive lens, have the potential to make decisions and recommendations that are geared toward premature termination of parental rights as opposed to family reunification when stagnation in the reunification process occurs. The time parameters of ASFA provide legal ground for increasing the number of legal African American orphans in the child welfare system. As a result, a continued need exists to mend discrepancies at the macro, exo, and micro levels of child welfare practice.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351). The largest child welfare reform in ten years, the Fostering Connections to Success and

Increasing Adoptions Act (the Act) of 2008, was established to promote living permanency and improved outcomes for children living in foster care. The Act focuses on six main areas: (1) support for kinship care and family connections, (2) support for older youth, (3) coordinated health services, (4) improved educational stability and opportunities, (5) incentives and assistance for adoption, and (6) direct access to federal resources for Indian Tribes. The support for kinship care and family connections is particularly salient for children and families of color who experience foster care placement at higher rates than their Caucasian counterparts. The Act requires states "within 30 days after the removal of a child from the custody of the parent" to "exercise due diligence to identify and provide notice to all adult grandparents and other adult relatives of the child (Fostering Connections Resource Center, n.d.)." Given the relative newness of the Act and the fact that it has not been fully implemented, the long-term effects that the Act will have on African American families is yet to be determined.

Systemic Inequalities

Racism. The roots of racism are grounded in historical injustice and despair. Such injustice and despair are related to present-day conditions and systematically influence the experiences and circumstances of large groups of individuals (Harrell, 2000). More recently, studies have begun to increasingly explore the experiences of African Americans when they encounter racism (see Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Wills, & Brody, 2004; Giscombe & Lobel 2005; King, 2005). When exploring and understanding the entirety of racial experiences, racial internalization must be understood through the lenses of interpersonal, collective, cultural-symbolic, and sociopolitical racism (Harrell, 2000).

Racism inherently affects the well-being of African Americans and unfortunately, CWSP have failed to receive systematic guidance in understanding and exploring the potential ways in

which racism may affect a client's overall well-being (Harrell, 2000). Jones (1997; 1972) explored multiple contexts and circumstances in which racism occurs. He noted that at the interpersonal level, direct and indirect experiences of prejudice and discrimination are exhibited. Sustainability of interpersonal racist behavior is supported by and done in conjunction with institutional racism.

Racism can result in trauma, hurt, humiliation, rage, confusion, and ultimately hinder optimal growth and functioning of individuals and communities (Carter, 2007). Additionally, perceived racism, the subjective experience of prejudice or discrimination, has been found to be an important factor in the health outcomes of African Americans (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000) and acts as a stressor that may be associated with a number of negative psychological consequences in African Americans (Carter, 2007; Clark et al., 1999). African Americans who cite increased levels of perceived racism have been found to demonstrate higher levels of anger and hostility and an increased tendency to blame others for negative outcomes in ambiguous situations (Combs, Penn, Cassisi, Michael, Wood, Wanner, & Adams, 2006). Given the multiplicity of effects that racism has in the lives of African Americans, it is evident that CWSP need to possess a robust understanding about these effects in addition to providing services that address racism as a stressor in the lives of Black clients. Similarly, classism has also had profound effects for African Americans. This is particularly the case for African Americans involved in the child welfare system.

Classism. After the Civil War, Blacks saw a decline in two parent households amongst the poorest sections of the population. In the mid 1800s, as large numbers of ethnic minorities entered the United States, Black workers experienced a drastic decline in wealth. Evidence of the decline in wealth included Black adults living as servants in White households. This was a

consequence of the unavailability of work and the displacement of unskilled and semiskilled

Black workers by Irish immigrant workers (Coontz, 1992). Traditionally stringent delineations

between breadwinner and homemaker were less of an option for African American couples and

families given the lack of economic opportunities (Hill, Murry, & Anderson, 2005). Working

outside of the home was and still is particularly important for Black women given that the

survival of most Black families is contingent on this occurrence (Hill, 2001). This social reality

reinforces the African (Burgess, 1994) and American traditions of labor force participation by

Black women. While African American families work to sustain the strength that is inherent in

their ability to survive historical and contemporary strife, the current national climate with

regards to economic problems, disproportionate unemployment in community of colors, and

limited access to community resources and quality healthcare must not be underscored for its

influence on the experiences of African American in the child welfare system.

The 2008 poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was $21, 834 (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2009b). The poverty threshold for a family of three with two children was

$17,346. U.S. Census Bureau trends show that African Americans continuously maintain high

rates of poverty. Until 1995, the poverty rate for Blacks was steady at or above 30%. In 2000,

the poverty rates for Blacks fell to 22.5% with no statistical change being observed in 2001 (U.S.

Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, n.d.-b). At 24.7%, the

2008 poverty rate for African Americans remained statistically unchanged from the 2007 rate.

Yet and still, African Americans had the highest rate of poverty compared to non-Hispanic

Whites (8.6%), Hispanics (23.2%) and Asians (11.8%; U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and

Household Economic Statistics Division, n.d.-a).

"While many Blacks have achieved economic and social mobility, Black people are still

overrepresented among the poor" (Hill, 2001, p. 499). With 65% (6,195,000) of African

American children being raised in single parent homes (the majority being single mother homes;

Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009) and 33.9% of Black children living in poverty, the

unfortunate effects of single parent, low-income families are particularly felt by this segment of

the population. The poverty rate for children and people living in households headed by women

is significantly higher than the overall rate (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). Poverty rates are

highest for households lead by single African American or Latino women (National Poverty

Center, 2006).

When understanding the experiences of Black children, research has shown that

regardless of class, Black children are often portrayed in ways in which universalize and

pathologize the experiences of the poor (Haveman & Wolfe, 1993; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller,

2007). While it is certain that poverty-related effects include health, social, and academic arenas

of life (Wood, 2003), one must not downplay the impact that poverty-related stress has on a

parent's ability to both financially and emotionally invest in children. Particularly for parents

involved in the child welfare system, poverty-related stress includes having to balance between

the needs of their children, often times multiple jobs, and satisfying the demands put on them by

the system. Parents are often pressured to care for their children according to the standards,

typically representative of the White middle class, set by CWSP. Child welfare service providers

who are unable to acknowledge the additional stressors that poor families experience as a result

of their socioeconomic status ultimately set parents up for failure when assigning unreasonable

goals to attain.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2008) reported that poverty is a major

factor that accounts for the high proportion of African American families in the child welfare

system. The report goes on to say that families living in poverty have a more difficult time gaining and maintaining housing, mental health, and other child welfare support services needed to keep families stable and children safely placed at home. Considering the struggles associated with single parenthood, the economic stress is an all-pervasive stress that heightens a family's potential for entry into the child welfare system (Crosson-Tower, 2008). Using a multivariate model, Rivaux, James, Wittenstrom, Bauman, Sheets, Henry, and Jeffries (2008) explored the relationship between race, poverty, and risk for CWSP' decision to take action on a case (e.g. removal of children or provision of family-based services). What is particularly salient about the work of Rivaux, James, Wittenstrom, Bauman, Sheets, Henry, and Jeffries (2008) is that when risk scores are compared, scores are lower for African American families; however, compared to Caucasian counterparts, African Americans were 20% more likely to have their case acted upon. When action was taken on a case, Caucasian families were more likely to be assigned to family-based services, while African Americans were more likely to have children removed. Findings of Rivaux, James, Wittenstrom, Bauman, Sheets, Henry, and Jeffries' (2008) study indicate that risk assessment scores do not contain racial bias but rather the bias resides on the part of the service providers.

Black families are particularly affected by poverty and as a consequence, they are vulnerable to entry into the child welfare system. Child welfare service providers' ignorance related to the influence of poverty and poverty-related stress further marginalizes Black parents ultimately putting them at risk for the termination of their parental rights. Given the number of African American children living in single female-headed homes and the increased rate in which these homes are susceptible to poverty, poor Black women are particularly at risk for involvement in the system.

Sexism. With the overwhelming majority of single parents being women there is an ever-increasing implicit message being transmitted that women are to be primarily responsible for childrearing and are expected to excel regardless of the level of resources they receive. When identified by the child welfare system as not being able to manage the childrearing tasks according to White middle-class standards, mother-blaming often occurs, and fathers rarely ever receive the same level of social backlash and consequences. With the majority of African American children being raised in single parent households, Black mothers are particularly vulnerable to social ostracism and critique in addition to the factors related to poverty that contribute additional forms of oppression and marginalization.

Individually, African Americans, low-income families, and women all have an increased likelihood of being identified by the child welfare system. It is the convergence of these attributes that increases the odds of being targeted by the system therefore resulting in African American low-income single mothers being at an even greater risk of being targeted by the system. The pile-up of these attributes is further complicated by divergent cultural standards as it relates to parenting and ways of living. Needless to say, the structured patterns of inequality persist because there are both external and internal factors that help to sustain such patterns (Kane & Kyyrö, 2001).

Synthesis of Systemic Inequalities

While varying forms of overt oppression, bias, and marginalization have somewhat diminished African American parents and families continue to experience unequal treatment in various domains. Individuals who possess multiple attributes are faced with the duty of integrating multiple identities into their everyday reality. These individuals represent a distinction from the dominant culture and often experience multiple forms of oppression in a

variety of contexts. Given the numerous social systems involved in the lives of low-income

African American families, families often find it difficult to effectively interact with child

welfare agencies, in addition to meeting life's demands and socioeconomic realities (Boyd-

Franklin, 2003). While it is evident that the child welfare system continues to represent a system

in which African Americans experience unequal treatment contingent on factors related to race,

class, and gender oppression, little research has been done to examine how these families make

sense of these experiences.

Structural and Process Differences Related to Culture

Culture has been defined as "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that

characterizes an institution or organization"; "the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief,

and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to

succeeding generations"; "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial,

religious, or social group"; and "the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated

with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic" ("Culture", 2010). While no one

definition of culture truly encapsulates the totality of the experiences of African Americans, for

the purposes of this study, culture was defined as "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and

practices that characterizes an institution or organization." Cultural attitudes, values, goals, and

practices encompass a wide range of variation and while culture has the capacity to influence

changes, cultures also changes as a result of external influences. Pertinent to the present

discussion is the idea that there exists an array of cultural practices more likely endorsed by

African Americans compared to the dominant White culture. Distinctions in these cultural

practices often lead to points of contention between African Americans, the child welfare

system, and CWSP. Negotiations of such conflicts ultimately become an essential component of

the child welfare services. Three central areas of culture that often surface during the duration of time African American parents are involved in the system are the nature of kinship ties, family configuration preferences, and parenting style differences.

Kinship Parenting and Care. It was during slavery, the Civil War, reconstruction, and the years following, when Black families made use of informal adoption and child fostering as a means of establishing new extended family relations when biological and non-biological family members were sold to other slave owners (Berlin, Miller, & Rowland, 1988; Coontz, 1992). Rooted in the spirit of the West African extended family tradition, the larger Black community banded together to demonstrate a shared obligation of kinship. This tradition was particularly evident when it pertained to the childrearing process (Berlin, Miller, & Rowland, 1988; Brown, Cohon, & Wheeler, 2002; Hunter & Taylor, 1998). During these tumultuous and uncertain times in history, establishing a means for maintaining formal and informal familial ties was imperative for ensuring that children were taken care of regardless of biological parents being present.

Traditionally, African American grandparents have provided various levels of care and support for members of their biological family and the larger community (Billingsley, 1992). It was during slavery that grandparents were heavily relied on as caregivers (Sudarkasa, 1997; Wilson, 1989). During slavery and reconstruction, Black biological parents did not have the option to provide stay-at-home care for their children. It was during this time period that parents heavily relied on grandparents as a means of providing much needed supervision for young children. During and after reconstruction, when African American parents migrated to northern regions to find better employment opportunities, it was not uncommon for children to be left in the care of grandparents or other relatives (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). Hill, Murry, and

Anderson (2005) describe African American's shared sense of kinship as being essential in ensuring that families remained connected.

Today, a source of conflict occurs when African American families are in the child welfare system and biological parents have to demonstrate their ability to care for their children without depending on extended family members and other forms of informal support. While the child welfare system values the use of informal social supports, the system also values familial autonomy as a measure of successful parenting and a determination for family reunification. Adherence to non-interconnected family constellations is counterintuitive to the communal strength of the Black family. With shared parenting emerging out of need for adaptability and flexibility during times of social and economic adversity (Brown, Cohen, & Wheeler, 2002), research has shown that a normative and key feature in the socialization practices of Black families includes shared child rearing practices (Burgess, 1994; Collins, 1987; Hill, 1999; McAdoo, 2007; Pachter, Auinger, Palmer, & Weitzman, 2006; Sarkisian & Gerstel 2004). The practice of shared child rearing serves as a present day protective factor in that parents are able to balance the demands of life while knowing that trusted community members are caring for children (Henderson & Cook, 2005). Additionally, research has shown that children who are cared for by extended family supports are better protected against disruption brought on by unemployment and marital and housing instability (Bengston, 2001; Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1971; Murphy, Hunter, & Johnson, 2008; Sarkisian & Gerstel 2004; Stack, 1974). Moreover, research has shown that being cared for by extended kin units help Black children develop the values of strong families, cooperation, respect for the elderly, shared household work, practical skills, racial pride, and flexible role relations (Collins, 2008; Gallagher & Gerstel, 2001). Kinship care placement for children in foster care has been one way the child welfare system has

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worked to incorporate extended family care into the practice of child welfare.

Kinship care placements, as an option for foster care, have been found to be particularly beneficial for African American children. Brown, Cohen, and Wheeler (2002) found that this form of out of home foster placement is not disruptive for children because often this segment of children have had a multitude of experiences living with extended family members. Given that children are often familiar with the kin caregivers, kinship care placements have been found to minimize the trauma of being placed in the foster care system (Brown, Cohon & Wheeler, 2002). While this form of placement has been seen as a positive in terms of child adjustment, kinship care has also been identified as one reason African American children remain in care longer. Long-term placement in kinship care settings, without the occurrence of adoption or legal guardianship, still classifies Black children as being in the foster care system.

In working to find ways to reduce the length of time and actual number of Black children in care, federal funds which subsidize guardianship placements has been seen as a particularly promising solution (USGAO, 2008). Through subsidized guardianship programs, financial support is provided to kinship care providers who assume the legal responsibility for children but are unwilling or unable to adopt. Illinois and California have seen the largest increase in permanent placement for African American children through the subsidized guardianship program; moreover, Illinois also observed a decrease in the disproportionate number of African American children in foster care (USGAO, 2008). Understanding the communal nature of Black families and the need to endorse this inherent strength through federal and state-funded programs is paramount in moving forward with solutions.

Family Structure. As ethnic immigration to the United States increased, African American adults found it increasingly more difficult to maintain stable employment and the

single female headed household emerged (Coontz, 1992). Older studies have found that the dissolution of marriage has been particularly detrimental to the African American community because marriage was one of the primary institutions that brought together families and communities (Billingsley, 1968; 1992; Hill, 1971; Staples & Johnson-Boulin, 1993) during times of hardship. Declining marriage rates have not only contributed to larger social concerns such as the increase in out-of-wedlock births and single-parent households (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008), but also to child-related social issues such as, child poverty (Fass & Cauthen, 2007), criminal victimization (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999; Stack, 2007), and poor academic performance (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Particularly in the later part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, urban poverty, unemployment, and underemployment were often factors cited as being associated with the rise in female-headed families (Coontz, 1992). While race had previously been seen as the major factor contributing to discrimination, with the rise in poverty and the subsequent hardships that came with living in poverty, differential treatment became more and more an issue of race, class, and gender.

Children living in single-parent homes and in homes that survive on a single-earner income have an even greater chance of being negatively affected by familial stress. While child maltreatment occurs across all races, family structure, and income levels, research has predominantly focused on low-income single-parent families of color and the rate of child maltreatment that occurs within these families. Research findings show that these families are more likely to be targeted for investigation by the child welfare system (Sedlak & Schultz, 2001; USDHHS, 2002). Research has also shown a relationship between income and child maltreatment (USDHHS, Children's Bureau, & ACF, 2003; USGAO, 2008). The Fourth National Incidence Studies (NIS-4) found that low income families were five times more likely

to experience child maltreatment compared to their higher income counterparts (Sedlak, Mettenburg, Basena, Petta, McPherson, Greene, & Li, 2010). Poverty-related effects that can lead to increased likelihood of child welfare involvement impacts African Americans at an increased rate given that Black children are more likely to be living in single-parent homes with lower incomes compared to their White and Hispanic counterparts (Ventura & Bachrach 2000).

The dominant cultures perceived preference for the idealized traditional two-parent household puts African American families at risk for increased investigation and subsequent disapproval by child welfare officials. The disapproval of single-parent households is supported by research that has shown that being raised in a single-parent household has negative implications for child poverty and criminal victimization (Fass & Cauthen, 2007; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999; Stack, 2007). Federal regulations and state level child welfare agencies are the governing bodies that help to ensure that single-parent and other households are not inundated with stressors that put children at risk for multiple forms of maltreatment (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000). Given that family break up has been found to be a contributing factor to family strain (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007) and recent data shows that African American children are more likely to live in single-parent impoverished families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009), it might be assumed that there is an increased likelihood that African American families will somehow become involved in the child welfare system; however, this likelihood should be examined cautiously. Turner, Finkelhor and Ormrod (2007) found that single parent families and two biological parent families do not differ significantly on exposure to child maltreatment and although this evidence indicates that there is no difference in child maltreatment rates across family structures, African American children continue to experience

increased negative outcomes associated with living in a single-parent household (Harris & Courtney, 2003).

An acknowledgement of the numerous hurdles related to being a single-parent family, increased unemployment for African Americans (15.4%) compared to Whites (9%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009), added to the difficulty related to balancing employment expectations within the context of child welfare system, African Americans have an extremely complicated reunification process to endure. Being involved in the child welfare system further exacerbates stress related to financial strain. This is particularly true for single parents. When striving to meet the demands set fourth by child welfare officials, parents who are employed often find themselves having to negotiate with their employers for additional time-off in order to attend mandated services and meetings. This becomes particularly detrimental when parents are on a limited budget, working for hourly wages, and job security is uncertain. It is not uncommon for parents involved in the child welfare system to express difficulty with maintaining stable and secured employment as a byproduct of being involved in the system. For parents who are not employed upon entry into the system, the challenge for them is to locate and maintain a source of legitimate income. Especially during hard economic times, unemployed parents from impoverished backgrounds may find themselves competing for fewer employment opportunities in a pool of more qualified candidates. Low levels of education, lack of job experience and history, criminal histories, and a limited schedule due to being involved in child welfare mandated services all play a role in the difficulty experienced in meeting the child welfare system's employment expectations. As single African American parents work to reduce financial stressors and fulfill child welfare requirements, they are forced to work within a system that has partiality for traditional two-parent homes. While research consistently has documented

the lack of difference in maltreatment rates across family structures and racial groups, the reality

exist that African American single parent families are negatively impacted by both biological

and contextual factors.

Parenting Styles. Four distinct parenting styles have been identified in the literature:

authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and rejecting-neglecting. Authoritarian parenting is

typically classified as a style of parenting that establishes a strict set of rules that children are

expected to follow. Parents often fail to provide a rationale for the rules and failure to follow

rules often result in punishment as a disciplinary method. Baumrind (1991) describes

authoritarian parents as "obedience- and status-oriented" with an expectation that orders be

obeyed. Thought to be most preferred within the child welfare system, authoritative parenting is

defined as a more democratic style of parenting. Similar to authoritarian parents, authoritative

parents also have rules and guidelines; however, they are more open and responsive to questions

that children have regarding the rules. Discipline styles of authoritative parents are supportive as

opposed to punitive and the overall style of parenting is more assertive rather than intrusive and

restrictive. Permissive parenting is characterized by parents who make very few demands on

their children. They allow their children to employ a wide range of self-regulation strategies and

have very few, if any, expectations as it relates to the demonstration of age-appropriate behavior

(Baumrind, 1991). While these parents are nurturing and communication is present between the

parent and their child, permissive parents rarely employ any discipline and are often times seen

as friends rather than parents. Finally, rejecting-neglecting parents are neither demanding nor

responsive. They have few demands for children and little communication exists between

parents and children. Rejecting-neglecting parents have a general rejection and can even be

negligent of their children's needs and parenting responsibilities as a whole. Adoption of

parenting styles is contingent on an array of factors and no one factor can be the sole predictor of one's parenting style.

The general stereotype that many CWSP hold is that African American parents ascribe to and endorse the authoritarian style of parenting. When examining the body of work on parenting styles, the bulk of studies have used between-group comparisons. Findings from these studies should be viewed cautiously given that the use of between-group comparisons is often done with upper class Caucasians and lower class African Americans (Horn, Cheng, & Joseph, 2004). Horn, Cheng, and Joseph (2004) found that there is heterogeneity in parenting beliefs and disciplinary practices of African American parents. They found that African American parents more commonly endorse the use of positive discipline methods (e.g. teaching, removing, etc.) rather than negative methods (e.g. spanking and other harsh means of discipline) and CWSP should cautiously consider the complex factors associated with addressing the use of physical punishment as a disciplinary method with any parent (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007).

Very few studies have examined the conflict in disciplinary strategies that exists between Black parents, the child welfare system, and CWSP. Child welfare parenting services that directly address physical punishment often misunderstand Black parents' rational for its use. While there are instances when physical punishment is done to harm children, there are however many instances when physical punishment is a "response to the fear of negative consequences from society if children misbehave (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000)." According to Boyd-Franklin and Bry (2000), parents who use physical punishment out of fear often have residual effects of trauma related to the history and the general mistreatment of African Americans. While clinicians are mandated to report incidents of child abuse, working with parents to understand their perspective(s) related to discipline is crucial. With full consideration for the physical health

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of children, child welfare services and providers must demonstrate and acceptance of cultural variations in parenting values, expectations, and strategies.

Support services that only endorse traditional White middle class standards of parenting often prove to be of little benefit for Black parents. The work of Hill (2001) suggests that in order for services to be beneficial for Black parents, they should include child-rearing strategies which target African American parents' specific perceived opportunities, risks, and barriers that their children are likely to confront in the larger society. The ability for services to meet the cultural needs of African American parents is critical in that all parents are required to demonstrate that they have benefited from services (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2006). Furthermore, service providers are required to show evidence of the parents' ability to consistently demonstrate the improvement of parenting skills. With the demonstration of service benefit having significant bearing on case outcomes, it is imperative that services meet the cultural needs of Black families so that they can benefit from services.

Client-Provider Relationship

As CWSP work to deliver sound services that are aimed at reducing risk and harm to children, research has shown that a positive relationship between clients and service providers is a highly influential professional tool (Woods & Hollis, 2000). The existence of a positive client-provider relationship has been positively associated with positive case outcomes (i.e. reunification; Cole & Caron, 2010). The development of a positive client-provider relationship sets the context for providers to offer sound treatment services that serve as an added benefit to the family system and work toward reunification efforts. While research has shown the benefit of positive client-provider relationships, the voices of parents who are involved in the child

welfare and foster care system are often omitted from studies that explore the process by which

positive client-provider relationships are helpful.

Cultural Competency. Cultural competency has been identified as one domain that is

particularly relevant to client satisfaction in child welfare services (Kapp & Vela, 1999, 2004).

Service providers' ability to demonstrate a culturally competent skill set is critical in that race,

ethnicity, social class, and culture have been found to have a significant impact on the

experiences of individuals (Wells, Merritt, & Briggs, 2009). Wells, Merritt, and Briggs (2009)

defined cultural competency in the child welfare arena as:

> 1) an unyielding commitment to learn about and understand the world from the clients'
> point of view with specific appreciation of the racial, ethnic, and cultural influences
> that shape and inform their experience; and 2) the development of a partnership with
> the client to ensure the appropriate incorporation of this understanding in all stages of
> intervention.

Service professionals are in the privileged position of having to make an ethical decision

on whether they will acknowledge and consider a client's background when working with clients

from diverse backgrounds (Gushue & Constantine, 2007). A 2008 USGAO report showed that

bias or cultural mistrust between child welfare decision makers and Black families contribute to

entry into both the child welfare and foster system. When states were surveyed about factors,

related to bias, in which affected higher entry of African American children into the foster care

system, the following factors were described in order of most impactful: (a) distrust of the child

welfare system within the African American community, (b) racial bias or cultural

misunderstanding among those reporting abuse or neglect to the child welfare agency, (c)

caseworker bias, cultural misunderstanding, or inadequate training in making placement

decisions, and (d) racial bias or cultural misunderstandings in judicial rulings. Inclusion of a

cultural perspective can take place on and across multiple systemic levels.

Cultural consideration at the macro- and exosystem include hiring and utilizing staff that are representative of the populations served, increasing the numbers of available foster parents from diverse cultural backgrounds, improving the provision of preventive and supportive services to families of color, and improving services for families impacted by poverty. Especially when providing in-home services, at the micro- and mesosystem level, it is critical that service providers demonstrate respect and regard for client's lives and their homes (Woolfolk & Unger, 2009). Emphasis has been placed on the development and implementation of programs that take into consideration the cultural attributes and strengths of the family (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000; Slaughter-Defoe, 1993). Moreover, human service professionals have an obligation to consider and collaborate with the cultural-ecological communities of the populations being served (Department of Human Services [DHS], 2006; Murphy, Hunter, & Johnson, 2008). One must acknowledge the role cultural mistrust has played in inhibiting the creation of sound client-service provider relationships. Acknowledgement is necessary in order to heighten service providers' awareness of related cross-cultural experiences that inevitably have and will continue to shape African American clients' openness to services (Constantine, 2002). As a system, it is important that CWSP work to systematically increase the trust that the African American parents have with the overall system.

Power Dynamics. The decision to employ service strategies and skills that convey cultural competency is one aspect of power that CWSP make decisions about. Upon entry into the system, parents are often made overtly aware that they are in a position of less power when working with caseworkers and other service providers. This one-down position forces families to demonstrate their ability to adequately parent according to the guidelines and expectations of the system, which is often reflective of traditional mainstream Eurocentric views on parenting

and family functioning. Although this designation of power is often felt, the dynamics associated with such power often times goes unmentioned.

Using a qualitative grounded theory approach, Dumbrill (2006) explored the perceptions of 18 Canadian parents who received child protection intervention services. Results of the study showed that parents' felt that child protective workers were significantly more powerful and the imbalance of power affected parents' ability to collaborate with service providers. Two types of power were identified: (1) power "over them" and (2) power "with them" as a form of support. The identification of whether specific providers had power "over" or "with" parents was provider specific. The reassignment of providers brought about new potential to reassign the type of power dynamic that existed within the client-provider relationship. An overwhelming majority (16 of the 18 participants) expressed feeling that the system had power "over them" and associated this form of power as negative.

Dumbrill's (2006) research also identified parental cynicism about caseworkers and other CWSP stated intention of seeking out the best interest of the child. Understanding such cynicism is particularly important given that lack of trust has been noted as a barrier to positive client-provider relationships and has the potential to negatively affect child welfare case outcomes (USGAO, 2008). Parents felt that providers held pre-conceived narrow negative views of their family's dynamic and there was little opportunity to dialogue and challenge these pre-conceived opinions. Dumbrill's findings are supported by Boyd-Franklin's (2003) work that articulates the difficulty that many families experience as they strive to balance everyday life demands, socioeconomic realities, in addition to the demands of having numerous social systems involved in their lives. Dumbrill's work identifies power as central, for understanding how parents perceive and cope with services that the CWSP provide. His work also highlights the importance

of gathering client feedback in order to gain critical insight into the genuine manner in which child welfare services and service providers are being perceived by clients.

Understanding the experiences of clients and obtaining data that provides insight into the experiences of clients is highly useful. This data speaks to the level of client satisfaction with child welfare services and the extent to which clients feel they are receiving client-centered services that meet their needs. While research of this kind is beginning to emerge, to date much of the research has been done with Caucasian samples. Acknowledging the role that factors related to race, class, gender, and culture have played in both policy development and implementation in addition to the role that the client-provider relationship plays, it is necessary to appropriately consider these factors when investigating and exploring African American biological parents experience in the child welfare system. With the literature's emphasis on the importance of incorporating culturally competent ways of providing child welfare service, it is critical that future research evaluate the extent to which clients are able to recognize and are satisfied with the incorporation of key cultural attributes into child welfare intervention services. Considering that African American families are particularly vulnerable to being brought to the attention of the child welfare system, entering the system, and ultimately having children placed in foster care, it is vital that the experiences of this population are actively included in future research of this kind.

While some foundational work has been done to explore the experiences of predominantly Caucasian samples of parents involved in the child welfare system, an extraordinary amount of work needs to be done to examine child welfare experiences through the eyes of African American biological parents. The current body of literature lacks sufficient studies that examine the child welfare experiences of African American biological parents who

have children in foster care and the extent to which CWSP are successful in meeting the cultural needs of this segment of the child welfare population. Few studies have comprehensively examined the extent to which clients' perceive CWSP as satisfying their cultural needs. To date, no study was found that exclusively examined this phenomenon using a predominately African American sample. Given the omission of African American feedback, it is uncertain the extent to which findings from predominantly White samples applies to African American populations.

The literature's acknowledgment of the role that systemic inequalities, structural and process differences related to culture, and cultural competency plays into the understanding of the experiences and behaviors of African American parents in the system, speaks to the need to explore the effects these concepts have on the interactions that take place between African American parents and CWSP. While several studies have used secondary data to explore the various roles of CWSP, the methodologies employed and the data analysis processes of these studies vary widely. The wide variation in methodology and data analysis techniques complicates readers' ability to identify methodological consistency and the strengths and weaknesses of particular methodological approaches suitable for the inquiry of various problems and processes within the field of child welfare. A qualitative critical ethnography approach that explored the experiences of African American biological parents not only allowed for the voices and experiences of this population to emerge but it also lent itself to the thoughtful transparent critic of systems and institutions that uphold practices of oppression and injustice.

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this critical ethnography was to explore the experiences of a sample of 18 African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. This study provided parents the space to voice their experiences and understand how they (the parents) make sense of their service experiences. Through the exploration of these experiences and an analysis of the sample's cultural needs, new insights related to the extent that CWSP are actually meeting the needs of African American biological parents in the system were identified. The ultimate goal of the study is to inform CWSP, programs, and policies so that they may improve the services provided to African American families involved in the child welfare system.

Acknowledging the gap in the literature, this chapter describes the study's qualitative critical ethnography research methodology and includes discussions around the following areas: (a) rational for design, (b) research design, (c) sample, recruitment, and location of interview, and (d) data analysis methods. The chapter culminates with ethical considerations.

Rationale for Design

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

The goal of qualitative research is to determine the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a problem (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative inquiry is unique in that it calls for an interactive collaborative process between researcher and participant in order to make sense out of emerging themes and findings (Creswell, 2007). Given that African Americans are rarely included in the current body of child welfare research, use of qualitative research approaches with this

population serves to provide a rich context for highlighting larger systemic factors that contribute to social issues and processes.

Qualitative inquiry affords a deeper understanding of the experiences of biological parents who have children in foster care. Through the use of various interviewing formats, researchers and consumers of research are granted the opportunity to better understand how a multitude of phenomenon are experienced differently amongst individuals involved in the child welfare system. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to note important demographic variables. Depending on the nature of the open-ended questions, the experiences of participants can emerge in unobtrusive ways. Qualitative interviews also allow participants to direct the nature of the inquiry and provide researchers/interviewers with the flexibility to explore newly identified concepts that may surface throughout the data collection process. It is through these qualitative modes of inquiry that a high level of depth and understanding can be obtained.

Rationale for Critical Ethnography Methodology

Assuming a critical worldview conveys the researcher's belief in addressing issues and processes of injustice or unfairness (Madison, 2005). Critical ethnography acknowledges current discrepancies in the treatment of people and seeks to reestablish systems that maintain such incongruity (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 2001; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnographers use empirical methodologies to identify social conditions that are in need of emancipation (Madison, 2005). The goal of critical ethnography research is to develop a plan for reform that will change the lives of the groups and individuals studied. Fine (1994; p. 17) has identified three key stances or positions that ethnographers assume when involved in critical ethnography research: (1) the *ventriloquist* stance transmits data in a neutral manner and the researcher is consciously omitted from the text; (2) the positionality of *voice* stance conveys the

voices of the participants and the meaning they attach to their experiences; and (3) the *activism* stance boldly takes and maintains a position against discriminatory practices in addition to offering alternatives practices that seeks to eliminate oppression and marginalization of groups and individuals. A thorough understanding of positionality is critical to the researcher's ability to acknowledge power, privilege, and bias of both self and others.

Critical ethnography research is one form of qualitative inquiry that can be used to address the gaps in knowledge related to understanding of the experiences of African American biological parents who are in some form involved in the child welfare system. This form of inquiry provides CWSP with critical insight pertaining to ways they can better meet the cultural needs of African Americans. Specific to African American parents and families, issues surrounding race (USDHHS, 2002), class (Hill, 2001; USGAO, 2008), and gender (USDHHS, ACF, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families [ACYF], & Children's Bureau, 2010) continue to be primary factors influencing not only the disproportionate number of Black families in the child welfare system but also the poor outcomes for Black children and families. Acknowledging these and other forms of inequality and oppression within the child welfare system, the purpose of critical ethnography research was to provide child welfare professionals with a clear description of the experiences of African American biological parents, identify domains of inequality and injustice, and develop and improve upon services that specifically address the cultural needs of the population. The ultimate goal of this critical ethnography was to improve intervention programs and policies that serve African American families involved in the child welfare system.

Research Design

The current study is guided by a structured research design; however, in accordance with qualitative research, flexibility is built into the design. The review of literature provides insight into what is currently known about the experiences of parents in the child welfare system. In accordance with the critical aspects of the ethnography design, an ongoing review of literature throughout the data collection, data analysis, and synthesis phases of the study occurred. The ongoing review served to validate the extent to which the findings of this study were similar to or different from what is currently known about biological parental experiences in the child welfare system. The sample consisted of 18 African American biological parents who had a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. Data collection and analysis was ongoing until saturation was reflected through the data. Interpretation of findings and synthesis of findings into the current body of literature ultimately lead to the discussion of the study's findings and conclusions, and recommendations for ways to improve services for the target population. Figure 3 is a flowchart representation of the research design of the current study.

Figure 3

Flowchart of Research Design
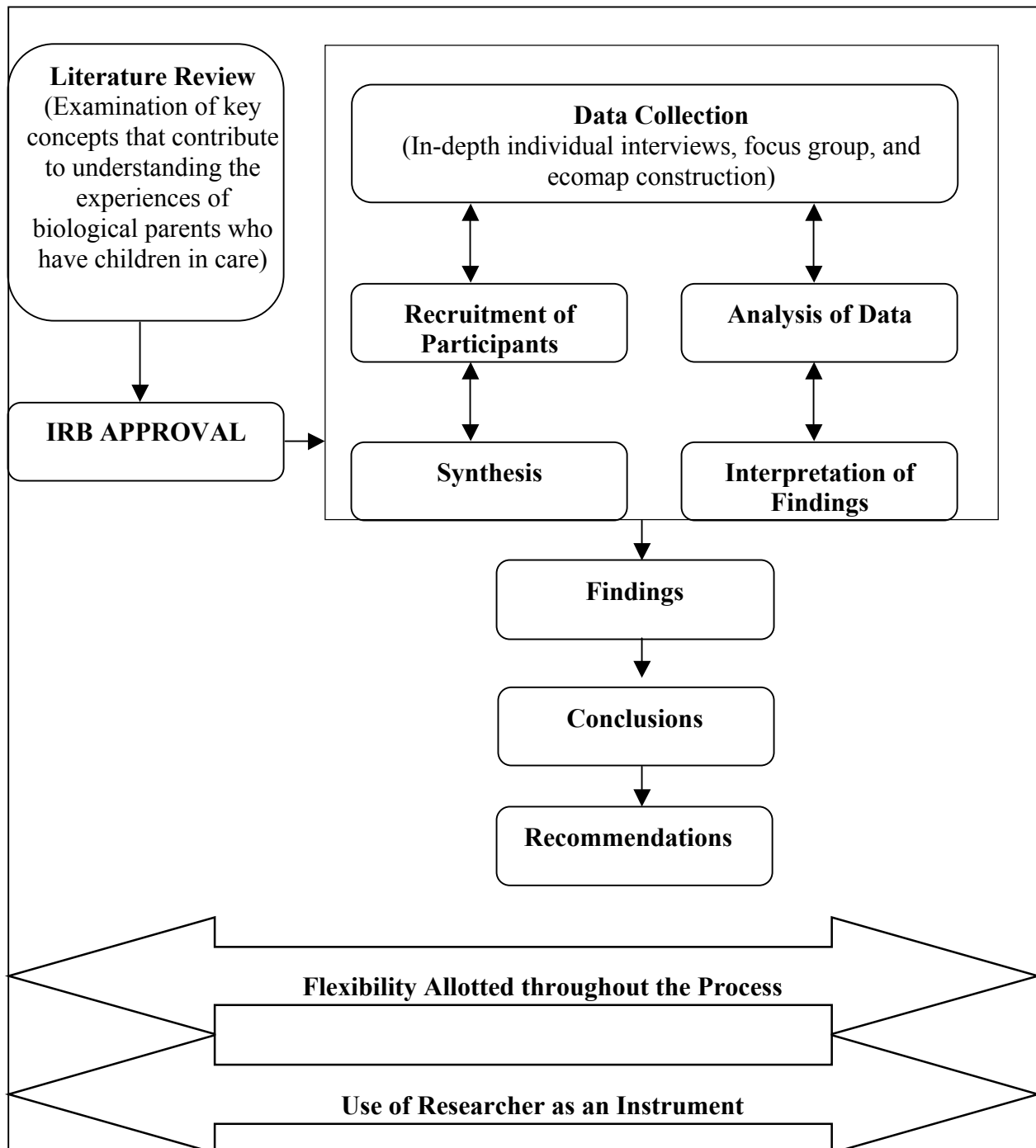
Data Collection Methods and Design Features

The data collection methods of this study included in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, and ecomap construction. The decision to use both in-depth individual interviews and focus groups was made to generate complementary views on the experiences under study, to increase the ability to compare and contrast participants' perspectives, and increase data confirmation (Adami 2005, Halcomb & Andrew 2005; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Interviews were particularly useful because they provided the researcher with the opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information. Furthermore, use of three distinct methods of data collection ensured triangulation and that the data interpretation was credible (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The two interview styles took place at two distinct phases of the project. The individual interviews served as the primary phase of data collection and the focus group served to validate the data analysis of the individual interviews. In order to protect the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences, particularly those currently involved in the system, individual interviews consisted of a mix of both participants currently involved in the system and participants who have excited the system. This mixture served to include a diverse range of experiences. The focus group phase of the project was used primarily for data member checking purposes. At the onset of the study, participants only had the opportunity to be involved in one phase of the project, either the interview or the focus group phase. In line with the flexibility build into the study, this criterion was later changed due to failed attempts at conducting multiple focus groups in various geographical locations. As a result, three individual interview participants were selected to also participate in the member checking process. This was done to further ensure the findings of the study were representative of the experiences of the individual interview participants. Throughout both the individual interviews and focus group, the

researcher engaged in memoing in order to capture immediate responses to participants'

narratives and interpersonal and intergroup dynamics. Memos added to the description and

richness of the data. Interview prompt questions were used for the in-depth interviews. Both the

individual and focus group interviews began with demographic questions, that provided

information about the participant's age, socioeconomic status, household structure (single parent

or two parent household), the number of episodes that facilitated their involvement with CWSP,

identification of the type of allegation or substantiation brought against them (specific abuse

form or neglect), their length of contact with CWSP, and age and number of children involved

with the system. Initial individual interviews helped to inform subsequent interviews that took

place. Immediately following the background questions, with the assistance of the researcher, all

individual interview participants constructed an ecomap in which identified key CWSPs and the

relational attributes that the participant identified as being present between themselves and the

identified CWSP.

     In-depth individual semi-structured interview strategy. For the purposes of this

study, 18 individual in-depth interviews provided a detailed description of their experiences with

CWSP. Ten of the interviews were conducted with participants who are currently involved in

the system and eight of the interviews were conducted with participants that had exited out of the

care of the DHS child welfare system. Splitting the interviews in this way privileged both the

experiences of parents who are currently involved in client-worker relationships and the

experiences of parents who are more removed from direct client-worker relationships.

Individual in-depth 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). This interview strategy allowed for the thorough exploration of the

participants' experiences using their own words to describe such experiences. More importantly, the individual interviews allowed for the emergence of information that might otherwise be inhibited in a focus group format. The flexibility that is incorporated into the semi-structured interviewing style allows for the researcher to follow-up with clarifying questions and any additional questions that might surface as a result of the interview. The individual in-depth interviews lasted between 36 minutes and 1 hour and 21 minutes.

Table 2 describes the interconnection between the study's theoretical framework, research questions, and the individual interview prompt questions. The interview prompt questions were created in order to generate discussions that helped to answer this study's research questions (see Appendix D). They served as an informal "grouping of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195). In order to establish a baseline of experience across all participants, each participant was asked about five primary CWSP. The primary CWSP that participants were asked about were their most recent DHS or foster care caseworker(s), the attorney that represented them in court, the attorney that represented their child(ren), the attorney that represented state, and the judge in their case. Additional CWSP that were discussed were identified by the participant and were based on the specific services that the participant had been involved since the time they had entered the system. The scope of the interview prompt questions was wide in order to allow for a variety of perspectives and experiences to emerge as reported by the parents themselves.

Table 2

Individual Interview Prompt Questions: Interconnection between Theoretical Framework, Research Questions, and Individual Interview Prompt Questions

Theory	Research Questions (RQ)	Interview Prompt Questions
Human Ecological Theory	**RQ 1:** How do African American biological parents describe their experiences of working with child welfare system service providers? What is the meaning that they ascribe to their experiences?	Please describe your experiences with working with CWSP. CWSP include caseworkers, psychologists, individual or family therapists, parent mentor, etc. Do you find there are differences when working with specific providers? If so, please describe the differences. After interacting with or receiving services from a CWSP, how do generally walk away feeling? To what extent, if any, do you feel empowered?
	RQ 2: How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and child welfare system service providers?	Have you ever had any experiences where you felt that CWSP you were working with went against procedures? Explain.

Table 2 (cont'd)

Human Ecological Theory & Black Feminist Theory	**RQ3:** Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery?	When working with CWSP, what have been your experiences with them incorporating various aspects of African American culture into services? This may include but is not limited to CWSP recognizing difficulties related to race and class, supporting the use of extended family for care and support, acknowledging the struggles related to raising children in a home where two parents may or may not be present, or endorsing different styles of parenting. Acknowledging that your race, social class, and gender are all factors that influence your experiences not only in the world but also with CWSP, in what ways and to what extent have you witnessed CWSP considering these factors during service delivery? In instances when you feel CWSP *are not* considering and incorporating components of and experiences related to African American culture into services, what are your response(s)? In what way(s) are your responses helpful or hurtful to you? In instances when you feel CWSP *are* considering and incorporating components of African American culture into services, what are your response(s)? In what way(s) are your responses helpful or hurtful to you?

Table 2 (cont'd)

Human Ecological Theory & Black Feminist Theory	**RQ 4:** When it comes to the cultural needs of African American biological parents being fulfilled, what are the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met? In what ways can and do child welfare system service providers address these needs?	When reflecting on being an African American parent working to maintain custody of your child, what are the components of a service that would be most beneficial in helping you work toward your goal of maintaining custody? What do you see as currently being done by CWSP to meet your needs? What do you see as a practice that is not being done but could be done in order to meet your needs by CWSP? Do you feel that the practices be done and the practices you described as could be done should be incorporated in response to the specific needs of African American parents in the system or do you consider them general practice for all parents in the child welfare system? Why?

Semi-Structured Focus Group. For the member checking purposes, a focus group interview was used. The focus group interview guide can be found in Appendix E. A second focus group interview was planned; however, none of the three scheduled participants attended. As a result of failed attendance, three of the original individual interview participants were re-interviewed, via phone, as part of the member checking process. The individual interview participants were asked the same questions that guided the first focus group interview. Given the failure of the second planned focus group, contacting the three additional individual interview was particularly important to ensure that the member checking process was representative of the individual interview sample.

The member checking process took place after the individual interviews had been conducted and the individual interview data had been analyzed for themes. Use of the member checking focus group protected the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences, particularly participants' who are currently involved with the system. Focus group interviews are particularly useful when participants may be hesitant to provide sensitive information and some features of similarity are present across participants (Krueger, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In addition, in a focus group setting, group conversations may stimulate a richer response, clarify ambiguous themes, and potentially provide new and valuable insight. Data that emerged from the individual interviews was cross-checked with the focus group members as a means of further articulating, confirming, and/or denying the individual interview themes. Flexibility was built into the actual interview process in order to facilitate individual and group comfort. This flexibility allowed for the refinement of the focus group prompt questions and overall procedure (Sampson, 2004). The focus group lasted a total of 2 hours and 3 minutes.

Ecomap construction. Ecomaps are typically used to visually represent the ecological system of personal and social relationships and the influences that such relationships have on families or individuals (Hartman, 1995; Rempel, Neufeld, & Kushner, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the use of ecomaps was appropriate in that the study aimed to not only examine the lived experiences of participants but also to identify the network of CWSP that participants interacted with during their involvement in the system and the nature of those experiences. Immediately after obtaining demographic and background information (see Appendix C), each individual interview participant constructed an ecomap that identified CWSP and represented their experiences with the providers. During the course of the ecomap construction, participants had the opportunity to identify CWSP, articulate the generalized experiences with CWSP and the

meaning they attached with such experiences, and the emotional effects that such experiences had on them personally (see Appendix F). The data that emerges from the ecomap activity was incorporated into the final analysis of the study.

Informed Consent

Each participant was provided with two informed consent forms immediately before participating in the study. One consent form was used for participants to sign and return to the researcher. Participants were also given a consent form, which was signed by the researcher, to keep for their records. The consent form was read aloud to each participant. The consent form explained the research study including possible risks and benefits, inclusion criteria, considerations around confidentiality and anonymity, information about the research participant rights, in addition to obtaining written consent. A copy of the research consent form can be found in Appendix A.

Incentives

The participants that completed the individual interview and ecomap activity received $20 for their involvement in the study. Participants that completed the focus group interview received $15 for their involvement in the study. The focus group participants were also served light refreshments. Each participant signed a receipt indicting they had received the appropriate monetary incentive (Appendix G).

Sample, Recruitment, and Location

For any study, there is a need to distinguish the population that the sample derived from. Particularly when studying African American there is a need to discern between individuals born in the United States and foreign-born African Americans (e.g. West Indians, Africans, and Central and Southern Americans). This is important because although foreign-born African

Americans and African Americans born in the United States are often considered members of the same ethnic group, the countries and cultures they originate from are very different (Knight, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2009). Differences between the two groups include circumstances surrounding immigration (e.g. voluntary versus involuntary) and the subsequent effects such experiences have on individuals' connection to the mainstream culture.

Eligibility Requirements. Participants in the current study included self-identified African American biological parents (male or female), born in the United States, who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with a minimum of one CWSP. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age to be included in the study. Participants did not have to be currently involved in the child welfare system; however, they did need to have a history of being involved in the system for a minimum of three months. Participants who were currently involved in the system at the time of the interview also needed to have been involved for a minimum of three months. The three months minimum timeframe was established to ensure that participants had contact with a minimum of one child welfare provider on more than one occasion. The three months minimum was also established based on a quarterly case review process that is performed by the child welfare caseworker and typically done in conjunction with biological parents, the parent's, children's and state's attorneys, and a judicial system representative. Participants were eligible to participate in the study whether or not their children were physically removed from their care during the time they were involved in the system and regardless if they retained legal custody of their child in care.

Sampling Procedure

Criterion sampling served as the primary sample design. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance. The criterion sampling

method is theoretically in line with critical ethnography in that both the methodology and the

sampling method seek to identify cases that can maximize insight into a program or system that

needs improvement (Patton, 2002). As such, I will target individuals who can likely provide the

most information by virtue of the extent of their experience in the system. Furthermore, this

sampling design served as a good fit for this study in that data derived from this method

routinely undergoes in-depth qualitative analysis.

        Sample Size. The individual interviews included 18 participants. Strictly for member

checking purpose only, four additional participants participated in the member checking focus

group and two of the original individual interviewees were re-interviewed. For the individual

interviews, the researcher sought to obtain an equal number of participants currently in the

system and those out of the system. Recommendations for an adequate sample size in

ethnographic studies that focuses on single culture-sharing groups have been ambiguous, and

therefore should remain flexible. It is typically recommended that researchers continue 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 (Creswell, 2007; Marshall &

Rossman, 2006). It is at the point of redundancy that theoretical saturation is achieved with the

given sample size.

        Participant Recruitment. Recruitment of minority participants is often difficult due to

the distrust minorities have toward large institutions, this is inclusive of educational and child

welfare institutions (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005; Knight, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2009;

Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). One of the most infamous examples of mistrust occurred

as a result of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. Conducted between 1932 and 1972 in Tuskegee,

Alabama, the Tuskegee experiment treated 399 Black males for "bad blood". Participants were

never told by researchers that they had syphilis, nor were they ever treated for the disease throughout the duration of the study, although penicillin was a known cure during the 1940s. Particularly amongst African Americans the negative legacy left behind, in part, by the Tuskegee syphilis experiment continues to hinder contemporary recruitment efforts of research studies (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). Participants were recruited using several different methods. Given the distrusting nature of African American parents in the child welfare system, snowballing served as a bridge between distrusting potential participants and the researcher. Snowballing was used as a recruitment method to identify "cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28)." In addition, advertisements in the form of fliers were placed in and around local agency buildings that provided services to African American families involved in the child welfare system. Using professional partnerships already established, the researcher provided current CWSP with verbal information about the study and fliers that they could distribute to possible participants. A particularly strong emphasis was placed on involving African American service providers as recruitment agents. This was critical given that research has shown that using providers from the target community helps to build trust and decrease negative attitudes related to participating in research (Dilworth-Anderson & Williams, 2004; Herring, Montgomery, Yancey, Williams, & Fraser, 2004; Mims, 2001). Additional participants were also recruited through individuals who had already participated in the study. Upon the completion of an interview, participants were provided with fliers that included the researcher's contact information that could be used to distribute to other interested participants (see Appendix B).

Sample Description. Each participant self-identified as African American and resided in the United States. Each of the participants came from one mid-western state and was dispersed

throughout the state. There were a total of fourteen females and four males that participated in the individual interviews. This sample of 18 participants provided the core data that were analyzed. Ten of the participants were currently in the system and eight had transitioned out of the system. The current age for the participants ranged from 23 years old to 58 years old with the average age of the individual interview participants being 35 years old. Of the 18 individual participants, one was married, two were married but separated, nine were single, five were in a committed relationship, and one identified their relationship as "other, extremely complicated". Each participant had between two and eight children. There were a total of 70 children affiliated with the primary sample of 18 parents. Neglect was the predominant reason for the participant's most recent involvement in the system. The majority of the sample had previously been involved with the child welfare system meaning the current allegation was not the first allegation under which the parent had been brought to the attention of the child welfare system. Amongst the sample of 18 participants, there were 11 neglect allegations, two physical abuse allegations, two failure to protect allegations, one emotional abuse allegation, one sexual abuse allegation, and one participant was unsure of the allegation that brought them to the attention of the child welfare system. On average, individual interview participants were involved in the system for 2.25 years.

There were a total of four females that participated in the member checking focus group. These four participants did not participate in the individual interview phase of the study. Two of the original four males and one female that participated in the individual interview also participated in the member checking process. One focus group participant was currently in the system and the other three had previously transitioned out of the system. The current age for the focus group participants ranged from 31 years old to 50 years old with the average age of the

participants being 44 years old. Of the four focus group participants, one was married, one was married but separated, one was single, and one was divorced. Each focus group participants had between three and five children. There were a total of 15 children affiliated with the focus group sample of four parents. Similar to the individual interview sample, neglect was the predominant reason for the focus group participant's most recent involvement in the system. Fifty percent of the focus group sample had previously been involved with the child welfare system. On average, focus group participants were involved in the system for 2.79 years.

Location of Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted at places where the participants identify as being comfortable. Locations included local libraries, a local agency's conference room and office suite, and the private homes of participants. When the individual interview participant did not identify a preference for the interview location, the researcher selected a relatively quiet public location within close distance to the participant's neighborhood. The focus group was conducted at a local library in a room designated for group use. The library was selected based on the neighborhood proximity of the majority of focus group participants.

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Data Analysis Methods

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All individual interviews and the focus group were transcribed from audio/videotapes by the researcher, an undergraduate research assistant, and a professional transcriptionist. All data analysis was performed exclusively by the researcher. From the multiple sources of data collected, data was analyzed for a "description of the culture-sharing group." Wolcott (1994) defines the "description of the culture-sharing group" as themes that emerge from the group, and an overall interpretation. The detailed descriptions of experiences underwent a theme analysis of patterns or topics that was representative and indicative of how the sample experiences CWSP.

Simultaneous coding and analysis occurred in order to identify evolving themes, ideas, categories, and patterns that were representative of the experiences of the sample. The coding and analysis process continued until a working set of themes and patterns emerged. The final product is a result of the subjective experiences of both the participants and the researcher (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005).

Coding

The researcher coded each of the interviews and performed all data analysis. There was a particular focus on high-level coding which has a concentration on more abstract ideas (Carspecken, 1996). Open coding was performed line-by-line for each of the interviews. Open coding is often recommended as an initial step in the data analysis process and entails "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61) in terms of properties and dimensions. Open coding continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Grouping, also known as cluster analysis, occurred in order to put together similar themes that emerged from the open coding process. Following, axial coding occurred. Axial coding is a process of relating individual codes to each other in order to understand relationships and phenomenon. Axial coding allowed for the segmented data to be restructured in a manner that allotted for the provision of new understandings in connection with coding categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).

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Ethical Considerations

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Assumptions

As the researcher, based on my experience and background as a couple and family therapist and a provider of family therapy reunification services for families involved in the child welfare system there were three primary assumptions that were held going into this exploration.

First, African American biological parents are not given a fair chance to reunify with their children. This assumption is based on the premise that impoverished neighborhoods offer little in terms of support services that help serve as a protective factor for children and families at risk for maltreatment. Furthermore, once involved in the child welfare system, African Americans are not offered the same amount, or quality of, reunification support services compared to other racial and ethnic counterparts (USDHHS, ACF, ACYF, & Children's Bureau, 2008). Second, the cultural needs of African American biological parents are not being adequately addressed within the context of child welfare service delivery. This assumption is based on the premise that many, not all, non-Black child welfare providers reject the idea that race is a lens through which many African Americans consciously and unconsciously view the world (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). While this is often done unconsciously, it leads to disjointed professional relationships between child welfare professionals and African American parents thereby decreasing the efficacy of services. The third assumption is that the dialogue between African American parents and CWSP pertaining to the cultural needs of African American parents is strained. This assumption is based on Dumbrill's (2006) qualitative study that found that a common experience amongst parents who receive child protection intervention services is that they feel service providers have "power over" them. If parents experience disempowerment and feel as if they have no voice and CWSP select not to discuss the extent to which cultural needs are being met, the chances that such a conversation would occur is unlikely. Furthermore, should a conversation occur, parents who feel disempowered are not likely to openly articulate their needs and the extent to which providers are or are not meeting such needs.

Positionality

"Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects (Madison, 2005, p. 7)". In line with the work of Fine (1994), I assumed primarily the positionality of *voice* and *activism* stance. It is through the voice stance that the participants and their voices remained the central focus of the study. Through the activism stance, I maintained a firm position against dominant discourse practices that disempower, silence, and ultimately further marginalize African American biological parents in the child welfare system and as such, I strived to expose such practices and offer alternatives to the child welfare.

In keeping with the critical ethnography framework, Davis (1999) recommends a "reflexive ethnography" which is an examination of the motivations of the researcher. Madison (2005) and Few (2007) challenges researchers to examine how their power, privilege, and biases also influence participants and the study.

What are you going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? This research will be used to provide child welfare stakeholders with pertinent information related to the experiences of African American biological parents and ways in which multiple systems can further enhance such experiences. In addition to presenting the work in dissertation format, the dissertation format will be converted to both peer-reviewed journal and lay reading format. It is my hope that while the current study can provide an outlet for the experiences of African American biological parents to be heard, ultimately those with power in the system can incorporate the conclusions and recommendations into their everyday work with African American parents and families.

What is gained? There is potential gain for the participants, other African American biological parents involved in the system, future researchers, and myself. For participants, this study provided an outlet to discuss their experiences either in individual interview form between themselves and me (the researcher) or in focus group form with other African American parents who may or may not have the same experiences. Articulating their experiences has the potential to empower participants and demonstrate the value of their experiences. Other African American biological parents who are currently involved in the system or have the potential to be involved in the system in the future will also possibly benefit from the study. The findings and conclusions that emerge from the data, will lead to recommendations on ways in which the child welfare system can better meet the needs of African American biological parents as they matriculate through the system. If these recommendations are incorporated into child welfare practices and policies, all African American biological parents and families in the system will benefit from enhanced intervention services that better meet their needs. Future researchers benefit because they will be able to build upon the current study. Future researchers might select to use the same critical ethnographic approach to examine prevention strategies that will reduce the number of African American parents and families involved in the system. In addition, this study creates a stronger body of literature to help future researchers develop practice models for working with African American parents and families.

I will benefit because the current study has and will continue to provide me with an avenue for openly talking about the everyday injustices that I have witnessed as a family therapist who has provided child welfare services to African American families. In many ways, these acts of injustice have silenced parts of myself in the name of being "politically correct." In my role as a family therapist, I have worked tirelessly to spare professional relationships with

those identified as being "in power" within the system and often this comes at a cost, silencing of self. This study is my avenue to provide African American parents with the opportunity to feel empowered in a system that has historically been so disempowering.

How are you exploitive and how are you liberating participants? To be frank, as an African American woman who was raised in a middle class family and now working to complete my dissertation, I recognize that participants may view me as a person who is using them in order to get my degree. Perhaps, some participants may have felt as if I was engaging in this work for the sole purpose of individual gain. Feeling such as these, leave participants feeling exploited. Particularly with African American populations, there is a longstanding history of being exploited for scientific purposes and quite frankly there was little reason to believe that my study was any different. I addressed these feelings by being transparent with participants about my motives for conducting the study and the potential benefits I foresaw as a result of the study. From the onset of a participant's interests, I stressed the value of their experiences and voice. With each subsequent interaction, whether face-to-face or via phone, I continued to stress the participant's value and highlight how essential their authenticity was not only for the research process but also for demonstrating their strength to other African American biological parents who are silenced in the child welfare system.

What difference does it make when the ethnographer comes from a history of colonization and disenfranchisement? As an African American woman, I acknowledge that there is a history, within the United States, that has informed my thinking about injustices that occur within the context of the child welfare system. Not only as a person of color but also as a woman, I am keenly aware of acts of oppression and injustice and the emotional and psychological consequence of such acts. In my experiences, this awareness infiltrates every

facet of my life. Although I am particularly sensitive to acts of oppression and injustice, I

recognize the need for me to be sensitive to the notion that not all African Americans and women

share similar experiences, or even affected to the same extent, as I am. Acknowledging my roots

as an African American and as a woman, I have an understanding of what it means to not have a

voice and the constant struggle that ensues as in all dimensions and facets of life. This

understanding is ultimately reflected in my desire to provide an avenue to have the voices of

other disenfranchised African Americans heard.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative modes of inquiry, trustworthiness refers to the traditional quantitative

concepts of validity and reliability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Guba and Lincoln (1998)

prefer the use of the terms credibility and dependability. Research that is credible/valid reflects

the process under exploration. Dependable/reliable research means that if and when the same

phenomenon is studied again, similar observations and findings will emerge (Babbie, 2007).

Given that no statistical means are used to measure validity and reliability within the context of

qualitative data, it is critical that qualitative researchers actively work to control for potential

biases that hinder the credibility and dependability of their study.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher triangulated data sources and

data-collection methods (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data collected from multiple sources enhanced the richness of the data thereby increasing the

likelihood that a thicker description of experiences, themes, and perspectives would emerge

(Creswell, 2007). The benefit 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). In addition, the provision of the researcher's assumptions and

positionality laid the foundation for transparency and the acknowledgement that without

appropriate consideration for the researcher's biases, such biases would sacrifice the overall

credibility of the study thereby ultimately silencing the experiences of the participants (Harrison,

MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001; Merriam, 1988). To maintain transparency throughout the study,

an audit trail was developed. The audit trail provided a detailed account of all decisions made

within the study, why the decisions were made, alternative decisions, and the final results of the

decisions. Member checking was also incorporated into the study's data analysis process. The

practice of member checking has been cited as being, "the most critical technique for

establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314)." Moreover, member checking is

theoretically succinct with critical ethnography's approach to providing voice to marginalized

populations. The member checking focus group was used to report individual findings and

receive feedback and additional clarification on the findings.

Chapter IV

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this critical ethnography was to explore the experiences of a sample of 18 African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. I anticipated that through the exploration of these experiences and an analysis of the participants' cultural needs, new insights would be unveiled related to the cultural needs of African American biological parents in the system. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from 18 in-depth individual interviews. Findings were organized according to the research questions. In line with traditional qualitative research, extensive samples of quotations from individual interview participants were included throughout the chapter. Ecomap activity data, collected during the 18 individual interviews, provided the foundation for the analysis of the individual interviews. The member checking served to increase the trustworthiness of the data.

Ecomap Findings

The ecomap activity identified the network of CWSP that participants interacted with during their involvement in the system and the nature of the experiences. Participants identified CWSP, articulate their generalized experiences with CWSP and the meaning they attached with such experiences, and the emotional effects that such experiences had on them personally. First, I will provide descriptive information about the CWSP identified then I will present the findings about the nature of the experiences. When describing the nature of experiences, participants were asked to identify and describe the specific experiences that were particularly relevant for them with each of the providers. In addition, participants were asked to identify the providers

that they felt provided the most support to them and the providers that they felt truly wanted

reunification to occur for the family.

Descriptive findings. The 18 individual interview participants identified a total of 184

CWSP. Seventy percent (n=129) of the CWSP were women. Participants identified an average

of 10 CWSP that they interacted with throughout the course of their involvement with the

system. Forty-six percent (n=84) of the CWSP were White. Forty-one percent (n=75) of the

CWSP were Black. Eight percent (n=14) were identified as "other". The remaining 5% of

CWSP were identified as undecided or undeclared by the participant.

Nature of experiences. Of the 184 CWSP identified, participants described having

predominantly negative experiences with 35% (n=65) of the CWSP. Negative experiences were

most commonly identified as occurring with caseworkers. This may have been a consequence of

participants having multiple caseworkers during the course of their involvement with the system.

Of the 184 CWSP identified, participants described having predominantly positive experiences

with 62% (n=114) of the CWSP. Participants reported having predominantly neither positive

nor negative experiences with the remaining 3% of CWSP. Sixty-four percent (n=118) of the

CWSP were described by participants as being supportive. Fifty-four percent (n=99) of CWSP

were identified by participants as genuinely wanting family reunification.

In this next segment of the findings, I will provide a detail of the nature of the

participants' experiences with CWSP. Table 3 presents information on the links between the

study's research questions and the corresponding findings of the study organized according to

the major themes and sub-themes. The first column reiterates the research questions that guided

the study. The second column identifies the major themes that emerged during the axial coding

process. The third and fourth columns are the themes that emerged as a result of the cluster

analysis that occurred after the open coding process. These themes were the foundation for the

major themes that addressed the research questions.

Table 3

Links between Research Questions and Findings

Research Questions (RQ)	Major Themes	Sub-Themes 1	Sub-Themes 2
General Experiences of Working with CWSP (RQ 1; Part A): How do African American biological parents describe their experiences of working with child welfare system service providers?	Negative Experiences	CWSP Specific Experiences	CWSP negativity Lack of contextual understanding Double standards Lack of support CWSP not fulfilling role obligations Unrealistic expectations
		Participant Specific Experiences	Distrust of CWSP Feeling silenced "No win" situation Uncertainty of decisions Getting the "runaround"

Table 3 (cont'd)

	Positive Experiences	Interpretations of CWSP	Fairness Validation
		CWSP approach to work	Helpful Supportive Related well to children Straightforward Challenged parent Professional
Meaning Making (RQ 1; Part B): What is the meaning that they ascribe to their experiences?	Negative Feelings about Self	Helplessness Fearfulness Feeling degraded Emotionally overwhelmed Feeling insulted Feeling threatened	
	Negative Feelings about System and CWSP	System corruption Disconnected from CWSP CWSP were untrustworthy Unfairness Expectation to fail Lack of recognition of best efforts CWSP lacked professionalism	

Table 3 (cont'd)

	Positive Feelings about CWSP	Supported Hopefulness CWSP was caring Empowerment CWSP was trustworthy	
Policy Violations (RQ 2): How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and child welfare system service providers?	Negative Infractions	Cutting off from welfare assistance Not closing prior child welfare cases Inaccurate information utilized in decision making Not receiving information regarding children Insufficient time to work toward reunification Authorizing forbidden activities Unethical negotiations	
	Beneficial Infractions	Unauthorized unsupervised visits Provision of additional resources	

Table 3 (cont'd)

Consideration of Cultural Experiences (RQ 3): Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery?	Inability to Address Needs	Services were Not Compatible	Parenting Values
		CWSP Lacked Awareness	Systemic inequalities Power dynamics
	Ability to Address Needs	Awareness of Systemic Inequalities	Effects of class Effects of race
		Services Had an Added Value	Services added to parent's ability to be a better parent

Table 3 (cont'd)

Essential Components (RQ 4): When it comes to the cultural needs of African American biological parents being fulfilled, what are the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met? In what ways can and do child welfare system service providers address these needs?	CWSP Practices	Ability to relate	
		Being supportive	
		Communication with parent	
		Being present	
		Being genuine	
		Transparency	
		Being realistic	
		Acceptance of kinship parenting and care	
		Providing the space to have a voice	
	System Qualities	Availability of resources	
		Endorsement of differences	
		Providing a fair opportunity	
		Addition of workers	
		Collaboration	
		Provision of incentives	

Throughout this section, illustrative quotations taken directly from interview transcripts, the emphasis here is on letting the participants speak for themselves. The "thick description" (Denzin, 2001) provided an avenue to present a broad range of experiences. This form of description also provides the reader an opportunity to enter into this study and better understand the reality of the participants. Multiple participant perspectives will be portrayed and as such, the

richness and complexity of the subject matter emerges. The more in-depth discussion includes the member checking focus group data, which supports the findings of the individual interview data. The excerpts provided were taken primarily from the individual individuals. Excerpts that come from focus group participants will be denoted. Each participant has been identified using a pseudonym name.

General Experiences of Working with CWSP

When describing the participants' experiences of working with CWSP there were a wide variety of responses which included both negative and positive experiences. Across CWSP, participants identified a total of 11 different negative experiences and eight different positive experiences. It was possible that participants could have both negative and positive experiences with the same CWSP. Changes in the nature of the relationship could move from both negative to positive and from positive to negative. Table 4 illustrates the participants' endorsement of the major themes associated with the general experiences of working with CWSP.

Table 4

Data Summary Table: General Experiences of Working with CWSP

Participant	Negative Experiences		Positive Experiences	
	CWSP Specific Experiences	Participant Specific Experiences	Interpretations of CWSP Behavior	CWSP Approach to Work
1	x	x	x	x
2	x	x	x	x
3	x	x	x	x
4	x	x	x	x
5		x	x	x
6	x	x	x	x
7	x	x		x
8	x	x		x
9	x	x	x	x
10	x	x		x
11	x		x	x
12	x	x		x
13	x	x	x	x
14	x	x		x
15	x		x	x
16		x		x
17	x	x		x
18	x			x
n=18	16 (88.9%)	16 (88.9%)	10 (55.6%)	18 (100.0%)

Negative Experiences

When describing the participants' experiences of working with CWSP there was a wide variety of negative experiences. Within the negative experiences theme two sub-themes emerged. These sub-themes included (a) CWSP specific experiences and (b) participant-specific experiences. The sub-theme CWSP specific experiences refer to the participants' perceived qualities of the CWSP based on interactions with CWSP. The sub-theme participant specific

experiences reflect the feelings that participants went through as a result of their interactions with CWSP.

CWSP specific experiences. Child welfare service provider specific experiences refers to the participants' perceived qualities of the CWSP based on interactions with CWSP. These experiences described are a culmination of interactions that participants had throughout their entire working relationship with CWSP. There were six sub-themes related to CWSP specific experiences. These sub-themes included: (1) CWSP negativity, (2) lack of contextual understanding, (3) double standards, (4) lack of support, (5) CWSP not fulfilling role obligations, and (6) unrealistic expectations.

CWSP negativity. Slightly more than half (10 of 18 [55.6%]) of the participants experienced CWSP as negative. The CWSP negativity sub-theme manifested itself in several ways. These forms included being verbally negative toward the parent, having negative exchanges with the parents, and maintaining a focus on what the parent is doing wrong. Being verbally negative was the most commonly cited form of CWSP negativity:

> And I needed some help with drugs, the worker looked at me I forgot her name, but she worked out at the [agency], and she said, "You know why your eyes is brown?" So, I'm thinking she about to give me a compliment on my eyes. She said, "Because you're full of shit." Them was her exact words to me. I said, "What you mean?" I'm like I come to you I ain't going to no one else and that you're supposed to be my worker to help me. I said I needed to get into a rehab center to get myself together and to get my son back and those were the exact words she told me.

> She [the judge] doesn't like me. She makes remarks and telling me that I'm not capable of seeing my kids without being supervised. She thinks I'm lying. She's evil. She called me a bad parent. I just don't like her. I wish I had another judge.

Lack of contextual understanding. Slightly less than half (8 of 18 [44.4%]) of the participants felt that CWSP lacked a sound contextual understanding of the context of their lives. More specifically, participants felt that CWSP lacked an understanding about their life

experiences, daily challenges they faced, the limited resources available to them to meet the needs of their family, and the challenges they experienced when trying to gain access to resources and services. One participant said, "They [the caseworker and attorney for the state] didn't look at any reason as to why things happen. They felt anything I said was just a justification." Even as participants worked to establish some level of understanding between CWSP and themselves, they often were unsuccessful in their efforts:

> She [the caseworker] was young, she didn't have any kids, newly married…you know I guess she really wouldn't understand why a person would do what they would do in that particular situation. And I guess you know at the time my relationship between my husband and I wasn't the greatest, but I didn't feel a sense of support from her or you know, just basic understanding.

The lack of contextual understanding often resulted in a breakdown in the client-provider relationship, particularly as it pertained to the parent's desire to interact with CWSP:

> She [the caseworker] has a nasty attitude. She doesn't understand. Like prime example, I have to take parenting classes every Tuesday and the agency gives you ten bus tickets but what she doesn't understand is that [I'm given] two bus tickets, two transfers. I have to get three buses to go to my parenting classes and that's three buses back. And she doesn't understand that. Plus, I have to catch a bus to see the boys and I was just asking her, is there any way that she could give me extra tickets and she said, "Nah we can't do that." She just (sigh). I don't like her. I only put up with her because she has something to do with my kids.

Double standards. Slightly less than half (8 of 18 [44.4%]) of the participants felt that CWSP held a double standard of treatment. Participants described two forms of double standards. These forms included a double standard for the biological parents v. foster parents and for Black biological parents v. White biological parents involved in the system. Participants described double standards as glaringly blatant when they compared the treatment of their situation to the treatment of other parents and family's situations. It was not uncommon for participants to describe both forms of double standards as they discussed their child welfare experiences. Participants described the double standards they experienced in this way:

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They took my daughter, my 1 year old away from me at 3 weeks old. She was 3 weeks when they took her. My children was in a foster home. My 4 year and my 5 year [old] they were in a foster home and the reason they said they took my children from me due to the fact because I physically discipline them. They were in a foster home getting physically disciplined and came up with bruises, bumps, scars, everything on them and she [the caseworker] couldn't give me an explanation of what was going on or anything.

If I had have been White I might have had more opportunities and more chances because I got two friends and they're White and CPS is always calling them and their kids and their kids haven't been removed from them. [If I was White] my kids wouldn't have been snatched away from me so quickly.

Lack of support. Some (7 of 18 [38.9%]) participants felt that CWSP lacked the ability

to provide the support they needed as a parent. Forms of support that the participants identified

as lacking included the ability of CWSP to assist in obtaining the necessary resources in order to

help meet the case goals, being an advocate for the parent when meeting and working with other

CWSP, and the ability to encourage the efforts that the parent was making. The most commonly

cited form of lack of support was the inability of CWSP to assist the parent in obtaining the

necessary resources. The need for support was described by one participant in this way:

How would we get anywhere if they [CWSP] wasn't going to help us? We went to the parenting classes by ourself. We found that out and went on our own, so basically we was doing everything on our own even though they was supposed to help.

Particularly when working with other CWSP, participants desired and expected the

support of particular CWSP. The attorney for the parent as well as the caseworker(s) were

identified most as the CWSPs that parents expected support from. When participants were not

able to obtain the support they needed from CWSP, some participants found it difficult to cope

with the stress related to lack of support, "I did all of that on my own and so I just gave up

because I didn't have nobody on my side to help me and I was stressed out. I just said forget it."

CWSP not fulfilling role obligations. Several (5 of 18 [27.8%]) participants felt that

CWSP did not fulfill their professional role obligations, based on the parent's understanding of

the CWSPs' role. Examples of CWSP not fulfilling their role included not taking the time to

learn about the case background and what had occurred up until the current point, CWSP that

were granted the power to make decisions in areas that the CWSP was not trained in, not

following through on family court and agency procedures and policies, and demonstrating an

overall lack of professionalism and experience. One participant described her frustration:

> She [the family therapist] has to be in control of everything. She's only a family therapist but she wants to have the last say so in everything, like when I see my kids, at what time, whether it's supervised or unsupervised, and she's only the family therapist. She doesn't have that right.

Particularly during times when DHS and foster care caseworkers turnover occurred,

participants found it frustrating when new caseworkers did not take the time to learn about their

case background and the most current developments of the case:

> She's [the caseworker] really like new to my case and I break my neck to do these visits with my baby at the agency and I knew that I was going to be dealing with FIT [a local family therapy program] because that was what the process was supposed to be. So I asked her about [FIT] every since she been on the case. She act like she didn't know about it. Like she can't go read on my case. Like she just don't know nothing.

Unrealistic expectations. A few (3 of 18 [16.7%]) participants felt that CWSP held

unrealistic expectations for what they should be accomplishing and the timeframe to meet goals.

More specifically, participants experienced CWSP holding unrealistic expectations about the

parent's ability to find a job and obtain housing given the economic climate of the state and the

individual struggles that the parent faced. Participants described their experiences with CWSP

holding unrealistic expectations in this manner:

> The timeframes like finding a job. How do you tell someone to find one in 30 days? My [drug] counselor, they're trained to know about how long I need, whether 6 months, 90 days, whatever, how do you tell them 30 days?

> I have been looking for a job, but it's like as soon as you go on your interview you going to tell them all these problems you have and they're not going to help you because you

have to work around their schedule because they're not going to work around your schedule.

Participant-specific experiences. Participant-specific experiences reflect the feelings that participants went through as a result of their interactions with CWSP. There were five sub-themes that participants identified related to the participant specific experiences theme. These five sub-themes included: (1) distrust of CWSP, (2) feeling silenced, (3) "no win" situation, (4) uncertainty of decisions, and (5) getting the "runaround."

Distrust of CWSP. Slightly more than half (10 of 18 [55.6%]) of the participants were distrusting of CWSP. Participants described four primary areas of distrust. These areas of distrust included being skeptical about the extent to which CWSP were on their side and in support of having the children returned home, being wary of the advice that CWSP would give to the parent, feeling like CWSP were overtly presenting mistruths about the parent, and being suspicious of the nature of working relationships between CWSP. Being skeptical about the extent to which CWSP were on their side and in support of having the children returning home and being wary of the advice that CWSP would give to parents were the two most common forms of distrust cited. One mother felt that, "I don't think they really care about us. There's some that do and there's just the ones that don't really give a care…I think more don't care." The lack of trust made participants feel CWSP were not working toward reunification:

> I can sum her [the caseworker] up in one word but I found her to be very rude, um, I didn't find her to be honest, and to me she was untrustworthy. She would tell me well if you do this it will happen like this and it was always just the opposite. It was never what she said.

> Not trying to be funny or sound prejudice, a lot of these White workers they don't really work to help you. They work against you and you know they say one thing that you never did say to them and they go back and repeat it and they try to hold this against you.

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Written statements in court reports were another opportunity for participants to experience distrust. Mistruths written in court reports and presented during court proceedings resulted in participants distrusting CWSP:

> She's [the caseworker] a bitch and a liar and I can't put it any kinder. I don't think there's nothing positive about her. What came out of her mouth was lies. You tell us you all for us. You come into our house and interview us and all that stuff and say our house is fit and then you go and turn back 'round and tell the judge that it's not of living capability. That is a lie.

Being distrustful of the nature of working relationships between CWSP was particularly difficult for participants because they were unable to determine who was a trusting person they could confide in when unsatisfied with the services they were being provided:

> I guess what I was saying how [my caseworker] was causing me a problem and they say if she's causing you a problem then talk to her supervisor, and I talked to her supervisor and she would tell [my caseworker] what I said and [that] was supposed to just stay with her [the supervisor].

Feeling silenced. Half (9 of 18 [50.0%]) of the participants described feeling silenced when it came to working with CWSP. The absence of the participant's voice included inadequate legal representation in which the rights of the parent were insufficiently advocated, being excluded from legal proceedings pertaining to his/her case, and feeling as if CWSP were not listening to feedback the parent would provide. The most commonly cited form of silencing amongst participants was legal representation that poorly advocated for the rights of the parent. This was especially true with court-appointed attorneys. One participant commented: "She's [attorney for the parent] not representing me in any way, shape, or fashion. She's not saying things that I'm trying to tell her to say. I'm trying to tell her what to say and she's not saying it." Other participants also struggled in their effort to remain visible during court proceedings and have their voices heard:

Like with my drug situation, they would bring that up in court and I tap her [the attorney for the parent], "well they not giving me no help, I need to go to rehab" and she would just sit there and just won't say nothing. The last two times we went to court about my son, they was telling us then they was going to take my son away from me and I literally got up and told them, "Ya'll was unfair." She didn't get up and try to help me speak my mind or nothing.

Participants also expressed feeling excluded from legal proceedings. This was particularly challenging given that participants had strong opinions about their case and they felt that they were not given the opportunity to express their opinions in the legal proceedings:

I couldn't talk to her [the attorney for the state] either, so I talk to my attorney to relay it to her. I said, "It's stupid how come I can't talk to her and we sit right across from each other like you get to say stuff to me, but I can't say stuff to you." That's dumb.

Another participant had a similar experience in which she was actively silenced by a CWSP while trying to evoke her legal rights:

They [the friend of the court representative] were so rude, you couldn't say nothing, they didn't wanna hear nothing because we changed our mind and didn't want to deal with them. They took our visitation rights because we didn't want to be there and we wanted to go to a judge. We went there [friend of the court facilities] that one day, that's it and that one day he took our visitation rights because we didn't want to be there because we wanted a judge. It just seemed like they don't really care, they don't wanna hear nothing. Well not from us anyway.

"No win" situation. Slightly less than half (8 of 18 [44.4%]) of participants described being put in a "no win" situation. "No win" situations typically included CWSP downplaying the parent's progress and sacrifices they were willing to make for their children, CWSP being dissatisfied with the form of employment the parent obtain, parent's following the advice of CWSP, against their wishes, and not receiving the anticipated benefit described by the CWSP, and having to make difficult decisions with respect to cutting off family and other close relationships in order to satisfy the request of CWSP. Child welfare service providers disregarding the parent's progress and sacrifices they were willing to make for their children was the most commonly cited form of being put in a "no win" situation. Even when participants

worked to provide resources for their children, they were faced with criticism from CWSP. One

mother recalled: "…and if I give my kids some money she [the caseworker] get an attitude about

that. I didn't have no problem with the first foster care worker. No problem. And now she has a

problem with that." Despite hurdles, participants worked to demonstrate that they too had the

best interest of their children in mind:

> I was like, "Ya'll going to take my rights from me and my son, and my mother she would
> take my son, she got a 2 bedroom apartment." I said, "I'd give my room to my son." I
> said, "I can go sleep with a friend something like that." That's when I would get my life
> together because we were family.…That means you'd still have rights, coming to your
> mother's house and see your son and I was like, "but what's the purpose of me being a
> father if I'm giving up my life for my son and you're telling me I can't do that?" I'm
> giving up my room, he had a bed, dresser, tv, radio in this room. I was like, "For him to
> be home with my mother, I will stay away. Can my mother get my child?" "No, because
> once we get him to your mother, you gonna go over there and see him." Well that's the
> point about it, I'm still supposed to have the rights to go see him but not destruct his life .
> . . . They terminated my rights and gave my son to the system.

As participant's struggled to find employment they increasingly realized they were

limited not only by the employment opportunities available and the willingness for employers to

work with the parent given their difficult schedule but they were also faced with the value CWSP

placed on the jobs they secured. One participant expressed:

> She [the caseworker] was a doubter, no matter how much I tried to progress, she'd knock
> it down. Like I said, "yeah I got a job" and she said, "little housekeeping job that ain't
> going to get you no house." She was negative, extremely negative.

As parents worked to satisfy the demands of the system they were faced with making

difficult decisions based on the recommendations of CWSP. Following the recommendations of

CWSP did not necessary produce the outcome that participants anticipated:

> She [the caseworker] had given me advice and I had taken her advice.… She had told me,
> you know, things would be better if I moved in with my dad. So I gave up my home, my
> 2 bedroom house and moved in with my father and once I moved in with my father it was
> like if you don't move out you're going to lose your kids. So it was like they had
> recommended for me to move in the beginning with my dad and now they're telling me if
> I don't move, they're gonna take my kids.

Uncertainty of decisions. Several (5 of 18 [27.8%]) of the participants described confusion related to the decisions that CWSP were making. Specific areas of uncertainty were around the rationale for certain services and the goals for the case. Participants most often questioned the need for certain services. One father commented, "I wouldn't want to go back [to the therapist]. I feel there wasn't a need. It was something the state wanted." Even as parents approached CWSP to understand the rationale behind how decisions were made, their questions were sometimes left unanswered:

> She [the caseworker] didn't really say why she wanted the courts to terminate my parental rights and she did not explain why she didn't want to the courts to not terminate my kids dad's rights on the basis of Brittany [the youngest daughter]. I'm looking at her like, "Why is she on my case?" Because the other worker I had he was not asking the courts to terminate my parental rights.

Getting the "runaround". A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) of the participants described feeling like they were getting the "runaround" from CWSP. This was particularly the case when participants felt that they were close to being reunified with their children:

> Every time we was close to get our daughter home they'd pile more stuff on us that are more negative. Like do we need to be doing any [more] classes. Ya'll said we were about to bring her home. What do we do it for?

Positive Experiences

When participants described their experiences of with working with CWSP there was a wide variety of positive experiences. Within this theme there were two sub-themes: (a) interpretations of CWSP behaviors and (b) CWSP approach to work. Interpretations of CWSP behaviors refer to the participants' assessment of the positive effect that CWSPs' behavior had on them as clients. Child welfare service providers approach to work describes the direct service delivery behaviors that CWSP engaged in while working with participants.

Interpretations of CWSP behaviors. Interpretations of CWSP behavior refers to the

participants' assessment of the effect that CWSPs' behavior had on them as clients. There were

two salient sub-themes that participants' identified. These two sub-themes included: (1) fairness

and (2) validation.

Fairness. Slightly less than half (8 of 18 [44.4%]) of the participants identified CWSP as

having the capacity to be fair. Child welfare service providers' ability to be fair was evident

through their ability to ensure that all parties (e.g. biological parents, foster parents, kinship

placements, etc.) were treated equally, there was ample acknowledging of parent's effort, and the

best interest of the children was maintained at all times. Participants identified the ability of

CWSP to ensure that all parties involved in the case were treated fairly as the most common way

in which provider's demonstrated equality. Judges were the most common CWSP that

participants identified as facilitating a sense of equality across parties. In this regard, a father

said, "I feel like he's doing his [the judge] job and he's listening to every side that everybody has

to say and he's not just taking anybody's just one side and I feel like he's like right is right and

wrong is wrong." Participants were particularly satisfied when judges overtly demonstrated

fairness not only amongst parents but also when CWSP were challenged about questionable

professional practices:

> I had missed a visit with my son due to me working. I was working doing landscaping
> and they [the caseworker and attorney for the state] bring that up in the courtroom, "Well
> your honor he missed visitation because he was at work and you know I [the caseworker]
> feel like he shouldn't miss another one." The Judge looked at her and she said, "Wait a
> minute you [the parent] were at work?" I said, "Yes, I had called and told them I wasn't
> going to be able to make because I'm all the way in Hillside Lakes doing a landscape job
> trying to finish it up and get paid." So [the] Judge turned around at her and looked at
> them and said, "Don't ever bring some petty stuff like that up in my court like that
> again." He said, "At least he's working."

When participants were able to identify a CWSP as being fair, it made it easier for the parent to respect the CWSP and the decisions they made. One mother said, "I'm not going to say the hardest judge, she's one of the most no nonsense, no nonsense for the child. If she sees that the parent isn't ready she's not going to jeopardize the child into no situation."

Validation. One-third (6 of 18 [33.3%]) of participants described feeling validated as a result of their work with CWSP. Service providers were most validating when they recognized and endorsed the parent as indeed a good parent. Other forms of validation included CWSP recognizing that the parent was managing the current situation well given the circumstances. One participant described the manner in which the judge provided him with validation:

> [The judge was] professional, observant, and she was just. I mean she was really impressed at how diligent I was in reunifying and she made a point of that too. She told the court that it was a pleasure to reward me my children back in those words, "You know every time you come it gets better and better. You made my day and it's a pleasure to reward you custody of your children."

Child welfare service providers who were able to validate the efforts of parents provided parents not only with critical insight about their ability to endure their experiences in the child welfare system but also how to endure other difficult experiences they may face:

> When I get mad, I just sit down and block everybody out and count. That's the best thing for me and she [the anger management teacher] understood that when I got mad that's what I did and for me not to get up and provoke anyone or seriously hurt them. She said that works.

CWSP approach to work. Child welfare service providers approach to work describes the direct service delivery behaviors that CWSP engaged in while working with participants. There were six sub-themes that were under the lived experiences. These six sub-themes included: (1) helpful, (2) supportive, (3) related well to children, (4) straightforward, (5) challenged parent, and (6) professional.

Helpful. A majority (16 of 18 [88.9%]) of participants identified CWSP as helpful.

Child welfare service providers that were helpful actually engaged in activities with or on behalf

of the participant. Behaviors that participants identified as helpful included, providing needed

resources to the parent and family, providing advice that helped move the parent closer to their

goal of reunification, advocating for the parent, and explaining the process of being involved in

the child welfare system. The provision of resources and sound advice were the two most

common ways CWSP were helpful to participants. Child welfare service providers that were

helpful were more positively regarded by participants: "As long as you doing the right thing she

[the caseworker] will help you with whatever you need."

> Oh my she [the psychiatrist] did a lot. She brought us a long way. We was good after
> going to see her. She went all out of her way. I didn't have to buy school clothes, I
> didn't have to do anything. The lady was just like a grandmother.

> I love [the parent mentor]. She help with everything…everything (emphasis). They [the
> parent mentor program] basically tried to help out a lot too, they really did. When we
> were looking for housing they'd help us. Like if they knew someone who owned a
> house, she would try to help us get the house. They helped us with clothes, everything
> they gave us tissue, household items, told us about free clinics.

When participants engaged with CWSP that could provide them with advice and insight,

parents walked away feeling an increased sense of social support: A participant recalled, "She

[the behavioral specialist] helps people. She's there to help people and she don't talk bad or

down to you, she tells you what you need to do, make you appointments, she's a loving person,

kind person." Another participant conveyed this view when she said:

> She's [the parent mentor] my friend, she's my play mom, she really help me out a lot a
> whole lot. If you have any kind of problems you can call her. I know one day when I
> went to her office I was so depressed. She told me that I need to call my psychiatrist and
> let him know I need a different kind of medication.

CWSP who were perceived as truly working and advocating for the reunification of the

family were also identified as helpful. This was particularly the case for attorneys:

He [the attorney for the parent] fights, he just doesn't sit there and just whatever, he listens, he's a good listener . . . he asks questions pertaining to the case and why I'm not getting treated the same way the other party is getting treated…he ask the judge or he asks me questions, but he listens, he goes out of his way sometimes . . . well all of the time (Dina)

Supportive. Slightly more than half (10 of 18 [55.6%]) of the participants identified CWSP as supportive. The support identified by participants was more process related and occurred within the context of the client-provider relationship. Supportive CWSP provided the parent with the space to have a voice, provided encouragement, focused on the parent's positive traits, and accepted the parent's mistakes of the past. Providing the parent space to have a voice about their experiences and providing encouragement to the parent were the most common forms of support cited by participants. One father described being given the opportunity to voice his frustration about feeling that no matter how hard he tried there were always more obstacles put in his path to being reunified with his children:

Aww, I love them [the parenting class teachers]. They was cool. They let us be us. They let us get our feelings out…our emotions out of the way and what could we do to help. It's the same thing about how do we feel about what we're going through and when you do everything they tell you to do the more garbage you still go through which we know is a bunch of b.s.

Regardless of the length of time that parents were involved in the system, CWSP that provided continuous support and encouragement to parents were highly valued:

He's [the parent's pastor] wonderful, wonderful, amazing, um, inspiring…He really kept my head up through this whole mess. He always encouraged me to do a "little bit" more. There were times when I wanted to give up but he told me don't give up. He told me that he seen light at the end of the tunnel for me. Even when I was at my lowest standard. When I felt like I had no hope. He was always there.

Related well to children. Some (7 of 18 [38.9%]) participants described the importance of the CWSP relating well to their children. Based on the description of experiences, participants took notice of how CWSP related with children special attention was given either

when there was an obvious connection or when there was a blatant disconnect between CWSP and children. Participants only identified the importance of CWSP relating well with their children after observing the obvious connection or blatant disconnection in relationship. Caseworkers and family therapist were the two most commonly cited CWSP that related well with the participants children. A mother recalled: "I remember she [the caseworker] loved my daughter and she would come bring her over for the visit and they would have better communication than me and my daughter would." Interactions such as these increased the trust between the parent(s), children, and CWSP. With one family therapist a participant recalled: "I mean my girls grew a relationship, I mean we have a relationship with her [the family therapist]. My girls really grew a relationship with her. She's very trusting, trustworthy I should say." This was also the case for another participant's children: "I think she's [the attorney for the children] one of the only people that my kids trust."

Straightforward. Several (5 of 18 [27.8%]) participants described the importance of CWSP being straightforward with them in regards to the progress of their case and areas of concern that CWSP felt needed to be further addressed before reunification could occur. Child welfare service providers who were straightforward were appreciated by participants because the parent was able to adjust their course of action in response. In one father's situation, he received a new foster care worker immediately after the court had decided to move toward parental termination or rights. Given the move toward termination, the new foster care provided straightforward advice to the father about visitation with his son:

> [The] 3rd social/foster care worker and he got to the case and they had already decided what they was going to do [move toward termination of parental rights] and within that month the only things he was telling me was, "just come visit your son because the way things looking you know you not…they not going to give him back to you because you still staying with your mother, you ain't improved in the drug rehab system."

Participants considered it particularly helpful when CWSP were able to be straightforward. Being straightforward also included CWSP being able to articulate the short and long-term goals that parents needed to meet in order to address the concerns of the system and increase chances of reunification.

> At first I don't know, I didn't think that he [the attorney for the parent] was trying to help us but it turned out that he actually was. He helped out a lot too. He's a nice person. He gets right to the point. He would let us know what we need to be doing so we can get the kids back.

Challenged parent. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) of the participants described positive experiences that they had with CWSP challenging them to do better in order to be reunified with their children. Participants perceived the challenges by CWSP as motivation for making the necessary changes that would lead to reunification. One participant's experience illustrated this best:

> Sometimes we need that little kick. Me and her [the caseworker] argued the first time we met. Me and [the judge] argued the first time we met. 'You not going to just talk to me any way in front of my daughter', but these are the people that pushed me and sometimes we need a little push. Neither one of them were so harsh where I felt less about myself, you know, they were really argumentative but you can do better, that type of argument. Not saying that you'll never be nothing or you'll never amount to nothing, so I want you to understand what the arguments were, positive arguments.

Professional. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) of the participants experienced CWSP as professional. Professionalism was predominantly represented by the demeanor of the CWSP when working with the parent and children. When CWSP demonstrated a particularly high level of professionalism, participants appeared to possess an increased level of respect for CWSP:

> Fortunately I had a lot of respect for her [the caseworker] too. Professional. She carried herself in a very professional manner. And she for the most part was there for me. I mean she supported me in my efforts even though I realize she dealt with many more cases and I gave her that respect so I didn't try to contact her unless I actually needed her but I liked her professional the way she carried herself.

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For this participant, being professional including CWSP taking the time to work with parents and families as if the family before them were the only case that the CWSP was assigned. When CWSP were able to work in a respectful manner that addressed the unique needs of the family, it appeared that parents were more inclined to mirror the same level of respect and professionalism.

Meaning Making

Meaning making entails how participants made sense of the experiences they shared during the ecomap activity. The meanings that participants attached to their experiences are a result of the emotions they experienced and their assessment of how they were treated by CWSP and the system. In this regard, there was a wide range of responses to how parents made sense of their experiences. Major themes related to meaning making included negative feelings about self, negative feelings about the system and CWSP, and positive feelings about CWSP. Given this study explored the generalized nature of experiences, determining the direct relationship between participants' specific experiences and the specific meaning they attached to every experience was outside the confines of the study. What can be assumed however, is that the negative experiences of participants most closely align with the identified themes negative feelings about self and negative feelings about the system and CWSP. Similarly, the positive experiences of participants most closely align with the theme positive external sentiments about CWSP.

The negative feelings about self that were described by participants were a result of interactions with CWSP. The feelings are representative of the overall feeling(s) that participants had about themselves after working with certain CWSP. The negative feelings about the system and CWSP described the feelings that participants had toward CWSP and the overall child welfare system. Positive feelings about CWSP described the positive feelings that

participants developed toward their CWSP as a result of their interactions. The positive feelings

described are an overall representation of the positive regard that participants had for certain

CWSP. The positive experience that participants had with CWSP were often contributing factors

that lead to the overall development of positive feelings about CWSP. Participants identified a

total of six different feelings about self and seven negative feelings about the system and CWSP.

Participants also identified five different positive about CWSP. Similar to the exploration of

experiences, it was possible that participants could have both negative and positive feelings with

the same CWSP throughout the course of their relationship. Changes in the nature of the

relationship could shift from both negative to positive and from positive to negative feelings.

Table 5 is a data summary table that illustrates which participants endorsed the major themes

associated with how participants made sense of the experiences and interactions with CWSP.

Table 5

Data Summary Table: Meaning Making

	Negative Feelings		Positive Feelings
Participant	Self	CWSP & System	CWSP
1	x	x	x
2	x		x
3	x	x	x
4	x		x
5		x	x
6	x	x	x
7	x	x	x
8		x	x
9			x
10		x	x
11	x	x	x
12	x		x
13	x	x	
14	x	x	x
15		x	x
16			x
17			
18		x	x
n=18	10 (55.6%)	12 (66.7%)	16 (88.9%)

Negative Feelings about Self

The negative feelings about self were a result of participants' interactions with CWSP. The feelings identified represent the overall feeling(s) that participants had about themselves after working with certain CWSP. There were six sub-themes associated with the theme negative feelings about self. These six sub-themes included: (a) helplessness, (b) fearfulness, (c) feeling degraded, (d) emotionally overwhelmed, (e) feeling insulted, and (f) feeling threatened.

Helplessness. One-third (6 of 18 [33.3%]) of participants described their experiences of working with CWSP as leading them to feelings of helplessness. Helplessness was described by

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participants as having two forms: feeling as if they were not going to be reunified with their

children and there was little they could do to change this outcome, and feeling that they would

never receive the services that they needed to become better parents. The majority of the

feelings of helplessness centered on feeling that they were not going to be reunified and there

was little they could do to change this outcome. As participants worked to understand the

complexity of their emotions, they often questioned why they continued to fight for reunification

given the sense of hopelessness they felt. Participants described feeling that despite the

emotional ordeals they had experienced and the energy they expended working toward

reunification, they felt there was little hope that reunification would actually occur:

> I really understood what pain was and fear. I also, I was the type of person and as a child even, I didn't dislike people or hate people but I actually felt hatred . . . . the pain was that I was a loser. No one believed in me. What was the purpose of me being here? Why was I trying for? Nothing, because the kids would never be back; so I just might as well give them [the caseworker] their way and give up. Forget it.

Fearfulness. Several (5 of 18 [27.8%]) participants described their experiences of

working with CWSP as leading them to be fearful of interacting with CWSP. The fearfulness

that participants described was related to the extreme trepidation that they would do or say

something wrong that could potentially affect their case outcome in a negative way. Given that

participants had an overwhelming concern about the uncertainty of the outcome of the case, the

feeling that their actions could potentially affect their case negatively was the most commonly

cited form of fear. The fearfulness that participants possessed often lead to a breakdown in the

client-provider relationship:

> I felt emotional fear that they [the caseworker and the attorney for the state] was trying to make me feel like something was wrong with me. Like everybody that committed crimes or did drugs were crazy and then I had this fear of not even talking because then if I said something would they change it around, which a couple times they did. I just wanted them to go away. Sometimes I would go in and just close my eyes and tune them out. You know, and then they thought something was wrong cause I wouldn't talk but that

was because I was afraid that every time I did you were going to say something I didn't say and it was like their word against mine.

Feeling degraded. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described their experiences of feeling degraded while working with CWSP. Child welfare service providers identified as degrading made participants feel like they were bad parents and "less than" other individuals. Being made to feel "less than" other individuals was the most commonly cited example. Child welfare service providers could make participants feel degraded in both verbal and non-verbal ways:

> It was like they was looking down on me…. You see this gentlemen he's reaching out for help. Ya'll [the system] get him some help and he's a Black judge and I'm looking at him with tears in my eyes saying that I need help…give me some help and let me get myself rested and get my mind clear right and think right. I'll come back and show them a better man and he looked at me like, like I was like garbage…straight up like I was like garbage.

Emotionally overwhelmed. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described their experiences as leading them to feel emotionally overwhelmed. Feeling emotionally overwhelmed included elevated levels of stress, extreme levels of shame and anger, and symptoms of depression. Feeling overly stressed was the one emotion that participants identified most. As participants become more emotionally overwhelmed, it inhibited their ability to meet the expectations of CWSP and the system:

> . . . at that time and moment when I had to do that psych [evaluation], I was just tired of them giving me the run around and always making me do things just to get my own kids back and it's just a lot of stress and with that time and moment I just couldn't bear with that stress. So I was like very emotional, teary through the whole thing. I just couldn't do it.

Feeling insulted. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) participants described feeling insulted when CWSP insinuated that, as parents they would purposely put their children in harm's way. When participants perceived client-provider interactions as insulting, parents often felt an

increased desire to advocate for themselves by providing the CWSP with examples of ways they

had demonstrated being good parents while keeping their children safe. One parent described

her experiences with trying to help the judge understand that she indeed worked to protect the

safety of her daughter:

> I told her [the judge] the whole story. I left out nothing and yet she's like you're a liar.
> You're unfit to be a parent. I don't trust you to be with your kids by yourself…why? I
> took care of my son. I had my oldest when I was 19. I didn't know nothing about being
> a parent but look at him he's fine. He never missed a doctor's appointment none of that,
> like you honestly think that I would sit there and watch somebody do this to my daughter
> and not stop them. . . .

Feeling threatened. One (1 of 18 [.06%]) participant described experiences of working

with CWSP as leading him to conclude that there was a viable threat that presented by the CWSP

that included moving toward termination of parental rights. The participant described a situation

in which his being 5 minutes late to a visit with his son was followed by what the father

perceived as a threat from a CWSP:

> . . . we [the participant and his wife] came late one time and they [the caseworker] going
> to tell us, "if you late again, you ain't going to see your son the following week. . . . " So
> you sitting up her ragging on us about being 5 minutes late that we can't help due to the
> bus situation. I said, "You is petty." He was like "calm down" and I said, "No because
> you sitting up her threatening me! I don't like people threatening me. I take it very
> seriously."

Negative Feelings about System and CWSP

The negative feelings about the system and CWSP described the feelings that participants

had toward CWSP and the overall child welfare system. Although 12 of the participants

identified having negative feelings about the system and CWSP, the relative low number of

responses per sub-theme indicates that these experiences varied more across participants. There

were a total of seven sub-themes that included: (a) system corruption, (b) lack of connection with

CWSP, (c) CWSP are untrustworthy, (d) unfairness, (e) expectation to fail, (f) lack of recognition of best efforts, (g) and CWSP lacked professionalism.

System corruption. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants felt that the child welfare system was corrupt. More specifically, participants expressed feeling that CWSP were simply "going through the motions" and not truly considering the individual needs of families. In addition, participants felt that the child welfare structure created more chaos within the family system than was present when the system was not involved. Participants also felt that children were being placed in and made to remain in the system longer in order for agencies to receive more money from the state and that the system did not truly work to keep children safe while in care. The participants' perceptions and feelings about corruption in the systems went largely unreported to CWSP. Participants were often unsuccessful even when they attempted to have their concerns addressed. One mother recalled bringing her concerns about her daughter's safety to the attention of her caseworker:

> My youngest [daughter]…when she was in care, she had got a Black eye and her whole eye was shut closed. They [the caseworker and supervisor] say because she was teething. I was so upset and I asked them like, "…well no, that's not true because they didn't take [my oldest daughter] away from me until she was 3 months, and when she did start teething I was around…" and I said, "She never had a Black eye." So then I said, "Are you sure?" She argued me down, "I know what I'm doing, if you wanted to be a worker you need to go get this job." I said, "okay okay." So I went over her head. Everybody was on [the caseworker's] side and I said, "That's not right."

Lack of connection with CWSP. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described their experiences of working with CWSP as leading them to feel a lack of connection with CWSP. For participants, the lack of connection stemmed from the perception that they had nothing in common with CWSP and that CWSP lacked empathy. Participants found it particularly difficult to connect with CWSP who did not have children. Additionally, participants that were working

with White CWSP described feeling disconnected based on the attribute of race and feeling like White CWSP could not understand their experiences as Black parents:

> I just felt like you know she [the caseworker] had a hard time trying to relate not only because she didn't have any kids but we were Black and like I said she was young, newly married and . . . I don't think that she was even in her position for that long when we first got started with her so I think a lot of the stuff was kinda new still, definitely for me, but that's new for me, but I just I don't know I just never really felt too comfortable with her. Pretty much got to the point that I would just tell her what she wanted to hear just so that I could just go ahead and get my kids back.

CWSP are untrustworthy. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described their experiences of working with CWSP as leading them to feel that CWSP cannot be trusted. This feeling manifested as a result of experiences that participants had with CWSP manipulating information pertaining to the facts of their case and conversations that occurred between the participant and the provider during the course of their interactions. Particularly when participants felt safe enough to open up about their life experiences to CWSP, if they later determined that the CWSP could not be trusted, participants typically experienced feeling a sense of distrust: "[They] manipulate you whenever you open to them and try to get help for it they'll turn around and use it against you. Instead of helping they use it against you."

Unfairness. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described feeling that the treatment they received from CWSP was unfair. Participants came to understand their experiences as unfair when they experienced CWSP holding a different standard for biological parents compared to other parties involved in the case, when CWSP allowed preconceived stereotypes to influence the client-provider relationship, and when CWSP continued to hold on to the past mistakes of parents despite the increased efforts of parents. Participants cited CWSP that held a different standard for biological parents compared to other parties as being most indicative of CWSP being unfair. Family court was the environment where participants' felt that they were

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treated unfairly most often. Participants who felt they were being treated unfairly described a

barrier in the client-provider relationships:

> I'm going to say with the attorney the barrier was that he never took me out of a box, he
> came near…[but] I felt just to get his money and it's probably because he saw so many
> people who didn't get their kids. I think his mindset was already set.

Expectation to fail. A few (3 of 18 [16.7%]) participants described experiences of

working with CWSP as leading them to the feel that CWSP expected them to fail as parents. For

participants, failing as a parent also meant that CWSP expected that they would not be reunified

with their children. In some instances, CWSP would verbally articulate this expectation. In

other cases, the expectation to fail was something the CWSP initially withheld but later

expressed to participants once the family was reunified:

> They'll [caseworkers] take it for granted the parents aren't going to do everything they
> need me to do. I mean that's what my foster worker [did]. It kinda surprised me when
> she said that [she never expected that I would be reunified with my children] because I
> never felt that from her but it really kinda threw me when she said after I closed [the
> case]. I forget exactly when she told me that but…at one point she did tell me you know
> at first I had my doubts.

Lack of recognition of best efforts. A couple (2 of 18 [16.7%]) participants described

feeling that their efforts were not truly recognized and valued by CWSP. The lack of recognition

manifested itself in that participants felt CWSP did not acknowledge the genuine effort that

parents were putting forth. Receiving recognition appeared to be important to participants in that

they made strives to demonstrate their commitment to parenting and being reunified as a family.

Participants felt particularly dissatisfied when they worked with CWSP that they experienced a

connection with and the CWSP would not acknowledge the progress and sacrifices that the

parent was making in order to be reunified with their children:

> She [the caseworker] would always tell me, "Oh, oh ok, well I can tell [the CPS worker]
> this and we can go and do this and this." And see what she was really doing was try and
> see what was going on in my household and like I told her, "If I'm told to do something

and it's by order and if I have somebody over me telling me to this because they will take this from me, you better believe it's going to be done." See at the time she was trying to go to doctor appointments and stuff with me. I let her go just so she could see what was going on and it's like she still betrays me. It left me disgusted but that was a lessoned learned.

CWSP lacked professionalism. A couple (2 of 18 [16.7%]) of the participants described experiences in which they felt that CWSP lacked professionalism. Professionalism was particularly important in that it had an effect on the extent to which participants respected CWSP. Participants not only observed the professionalism that was displayed at the organizational level with regard to how CWSP interacted with other CWSP but they also observed individual provider professionalism toward them as parents. One mother recalled her reaction to the manner that her caseworker dressed during a case review hearing: "She looks like a hooker when she comes to court. You're supposed to dress professional not like you're going out to the bar or club half naked…"

Positive Feelings about CWSP

Positive feelings about CWSP described the positive feelings that participants developed toward their CWSP as a result of their interactions. These feelings are an overall representation of the positive regard that participants had for certain CWSP. There were five sub-themes that were under theme positive feelings about CWSP. The five sub-themes included: (a) supported, (b) hopefulness, (c) CWSP was caring, (e) empowerment, and (f) CWSP was trustworthy.

Supported. Slightly less than half (8 of 18 [44.4%]) of the participants described feeling supported. Participants felt supported when CWSP illustrated to the them that they were truly there to help, when they had the capacity to be understanding, demonstrated a belief in them as parents, were non-judgmental, and provided parents with needed resources. The two most common indicators of support were when CWSP conveyed to parents that their true

intention was to help and they possessed the capacity to understand. The combination of

multiple forms of support helped to create a more positive client-provider relationship. One

participant emphasized the combination of these two forms of support:

> She [the parent mentor] listens, she understands my pain, and she doesn't judge me....
> He's [the attorney for the parent] a fighter. He's a go getter. Any way possible if there's
> a loop somewhere he's going to find it. . . . It makes me feel good because I finally have
> someone besides my mom and [the parent mentor], there's finally a stranger, stranger
> who's really trying to help me.

Hopefulness. Some (7 of 18 [38.9%]) of the participants described a sense of

hopefulness about the progression of their case. Participants gained a sense of hopefulness that

their life could be better as a result of being involved in services, that their children would be

returned home, and that CWSP were able to recognize that they were good parents. The sense of

hopefulness that life could be better as a result of their involvement in services and that their

children would be returned home were the two most commonly cited indicators of hopefulness

that CWSP were able to convey to and instill in parents. Having a sense of hopefulness provided

participants with the additional motivation to continue to pursue custody of their children:

> I felt like there was a new way of life. I felt like I could change. You know that I failed
> but I wasn't a failure. That's what they [the drug counselors] made me believe in that I
> was not a failure and that there would be things in life that I would be good at and some
> things I would [not] be and they taught me what acceptance was because I punished
> myself a lot by feeling like I was just a loser. They had a saying that once an addict,
> always an addict. So I said, "I done did it now, so I'm gonna always be this way." They
> made me believe in myself enough to know that I didn't have to be [an addict] and that
> wasn't true. . . . I felt good, I felt like there was a chance and I felt like I didn't have to
> give up . . .I felt like there was a lot of hope

CWSP was caring. One-third (6 of 18 [38.9%]) of participants described their

experiences with CWSP as an indication that CWSP were caring toward them. Participants felt

cared for when CWSP listened to the concerns of parents, provided encouragement, had the

ability to acknowledge the positive, demonstrated empathy, provided additional resources, and

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were fair to all parties involved. Listening to the concerns of parents was the most common

indicator that CWSP were caring. One participant described her positive experience of working

with parenting instructors that made her feel cared for. She recalled: "It was just them [the

parenting instructors] and being so helpful and nice, especially when you need it and they listen

and they talk back and we conversate. It helped a lot."

Empowerment. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described a sense of

empowerment. Through work with various CWSP, participants were empowered to overtly

acknowledge the negative experiences they experienced while being in the child welfare system

to other CWSP, were able to advocate for themselves in order to have the opportunity to speak

during legal proceedings, and found the strength to stand up for themselves despite not having

the support of others. Participants' ability to overtly acknowledge the negative experiences they

endured while being in the child welfare system to other CWSP was most commonly cited form

of empowerment:

> She [the judge] doesn't know me. She doesn't walk in my shoes . . . I think she was
> looking for me to fail actually cause we went to court last week and she said, her exact
> words were, "You're 24 right, you just had a birthday?" I said "yes." She said, "You're
> the same age as my daughter, I couldn't picture my daughter with 5 kids." And like I told
> her, this came out of my mouth, I told her, "It's not easy but I'm getting it done. Not
> once have my children ever walked around here hungry. Not once have my children ever
> walked around her without clothes on their back, a roof over my, we've always had a
> room over our head so it's not like I'm not providing for my children and being the
> mother I'm supposed to be. I might not be able to be give them the world but I'm giving
> them the values that they need in life."

CWSP was trustworthy. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants described feeling that

CWSP were trustworthy. Participants felt they could trust CWSP when they demonstrated that

they had the best interest of the children and parent in mind, there was a genuine desire for the

family to meet the goal of reunification, and when they kept sensitive information confidential.

Child welfare service providers that were able to consistently demonstrate that they had the best

interest of the children and parents in mind and that they genuinely wanted the family to meet the

goal of reunification, were the two most common indicators of trustworthiness. Child welfare

service providers that were trustworthy afforded parents the comfort of knowing that the advice

and guidance they were receiving would in no way be aversive to their goal, "I always took like

everything she [the caseworker] told me, I took it to heart because I knew it was in the best

interest of me and my children." This was also the experience of another participant: "The

advice that she [the drug court counselor] would give me I felt as though it was genuine and she

wasn't just saying stuff to I guess you would say confuse me or make my situation any worse."

Policy Violations

When understanding how child welfare policies inform and affect the relationship

between African American biological parents and CWSP, it was evident that parents lack

knowledge of child welfare policy. The lack of knowledge inhibited parents from being able to

accurately identify when there was a policy breach. Slightly less than half (8 of 18 [44.4%]) of

participants were able to describe what they identified as policy breaches. It should be noted that

some of the policy violations that participants described were not definitive violations in policy

but was moreso the participant's perspective of unfair treatment by CWSP. Participants

identified a total of nine different policy violations. Seven of the violations were negative

infractions and two were beneficial infractions. Negative infractions were identified as the

policies that CWSP violated which were detriments to the participant and their case. Beneficial

infractions were identified as the policies that CWSP violated which provided some sort of

benefit to the participant, even if it did not have a direct effect on case outcome. Particularly

when CWSP engaged in negative infractions, participants questioned the ethics of the CWSP and

there was a subsequent negative effect on the client-provider relationship. Engagement in

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beneficial infractions were viewed more favorable by participants and had a positive effect on the client-provider relationship.

Negative Infractions

Negative infractions were identified as the policies that CWSP violated which were detriments to the participant. Within this theme there were seven sub-themes: (a) cutting off from welfare assistance, (b) not closing prior child welfare cases, (c) inaccurate information utilized in decision making, (d) not receiving information regarding children, (e) insufficient time to work toward reunification, (f) authorizing forbidden activities, (g) and unethical negotiations.

Cutting off from welfare assistance. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) of the participants discussed the effect of having their welfare assistance cut off or reduced as a result of having their children removed from their care. The forms of welfare assistance that was identified as being affected included food, housing, and cash assistance. Changes in the level of assistance were particularly difficult for the participants to manage given the additional stressors and demands they faced with being involved in the child welfare system. Participants worked to understand this policy violation:

> There's a program eligibility manual for all social workers in the state…and it states that if reunification is the goal and the parent is trying to get their child back, cash assistance cannot be cut off. And that's in the manual and I don't know if it's because the state is so broke, but they don't follow that, that goes under the policy breaking.

The lack of welfare assistance made it more difficult for them to meet their case goals. Participants were forced to not only work to regain custody of their children but they also had to determine an alternative way to make ends meet during already difficult financial times:

> You know that's another issue, they tell us we can't cut your cash back on because you don't have the kids but how can we get the kids back if you don't cut the cash back on so we can find suitable housing.

Not closing prior child welfare cases. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant described how a former caseworker did not close his adoption case and as a result, when the participant's wife birthed a subsequent child, the newborn child was immediately removed from care due to the open case. From the viewpoint of the participant, had the caseworker closed his adoption case in a timely manner, his new born child would have had a better chance of being released from the hospital with he and his wife. In this regard, the participant felt that the caseworker's delay in closing the open adoption case had a detrimental effect for both the participant and his family. The participant described his reaction:

> So this was when the adoption was over it, I'm sitting looking at this and I'm like, I be damn. That's what them White folks did because they knew, we would've gotten [the newborn child]. He would've came home with us. It [the adoption for the first son] wasn't even closed yet. They could've of closed that case and still have opened this one…

Inaccurate information utilized in decision making. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant described how in her case, the attorney for the state often presented inaccurate information about her criminal history during her termination of parental rights trial. Particularly for this participant, the inaccurate information was critical in that her criminal background was a major reason why the system was pursuing termination of rights. The inaccurate information lead not only to a skewed presentation of the participant but it also confused other CWSP:

> You know, like when they would talk about cases and I would know that the case would be the same thing it's just different court dates . . . but it was the same case and they were trying to say I was a 4 and 5 time loser and I was trying to tell that's the same thing…the CPS worker and court CPS worker, [and] social worker would try to make it make sense why they were different things.

Not receiving information regarding children. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant described how the CWSP she worked with refused to provide her with information regarding the well-being of her children while they were in care. The participant discussed how on several

occasions she attempted to get updates about her children. Her numerous attempts to be involved in the lives of her children, despite being physically separated from them, was simply not supported by CWSP. Not receiving information about her children's well-being lead this mother feeling further marginalized as she continued to pursue custody of her children:

> . . . by right, when my children are in foster care I'm supposed to be notified what's happening. What's going on? When's doctor appointments? I have that right to be there and I kept telling them I needed to be there. I wanted to be there and I didn't get it.…I was not involved in neither one of my children's schooling, um, I couldn't go to none of their programs for school. As a matter of fact, I didn't even get a report card and I requested information about report cards and stuff and I didn't get that. I felt like my rights hadn't been taken. It was just my custody at that particular time and it felt like they stripped me from my rights as well.

Insufficient time to work toward reunification. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant expressed feeling that she was not provided with a sufficient amount of time to work toward reunification with her children. After being released from jail, the participant was faced with not only readjusting to life after incarceration but also pursuing custody of her children without adequate supports and resources:

> What's 4 months? They usually give you 6 months to a year. They gave me 2, 3, 4 months and I just got out of jail. How am I going to get myself together in that amount of time and I'm just coming out and I don't have nowhere to live, no job, no nothing? They didn't give me enough time. It's like they didn't pay for anything. I had to pay for it all out of my pocket and then I didn't have no job.

Authorizing forbidden activities. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant discussed how one particular caseworker authorized a forbidden activity that resulted in the removal of her children from her care. While the participant went through the proper protocol to ensure that she was following agency guidelines, the caseworker's violation of this policy not only had an impact on the relationship between this mother and her children but also between the mother and the caseworker: "I can't stand her [the caseworker]. I hate her. Everything, everything about her.

She was the reason why they took my kids. She put us in a home with somebody else that had an open CPS case and they weren't supposed to do that and she okayed it."

Unethical negotiations. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant discussed how she was worked with a CWSP who pressured her into putting a personal protection order (ppo) against the father of her children in exchange for unsupervised visitation with her children. This can be particularly problematic when parents are so desperate to progress their case forward and move toward unsupervised visits. In situations such as these, parents are put in the position of accepting potentially unethical request, even if they feel that their rights have been violated:

> I think they [the caseworker] kinda like bribed me but I didn't tell the judge because he asked me. They told me to put a ppo against my kid's dad in order for me to get unsupervised visits to prove to them that he wouldn't be around and they're not supposed to do that...they're not supposed to say that in order for you to see your kids by yourself, out in public, you have to get this ppo.

Beneficial Infractions

Beneficial infractions were identified as the policies that CWSP violated which provided some sort of benefit to the participant. Within this theme there were two sub-themes: (a) unauthorized unsupervised visits and (b) provision of additional resources.

Unauthorized unsupervised visits. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant described how her foster care caseworker allowed her to have an unsupervised visit even though it had not been approved by the agency. The caseworker's extension of trust improved the client-participant relationship in that it provided the parent with encouragement that her worker did not view her as a threat to the well-being of her child:

> In a positive way, and I really don't want to call no names on this one, but my foster care specialist would come and let me have time with my daughter that was supposed to be supervised and let me have time to my daughter by myself and that built up my encouragement to know that she trusted me enough. And I know it was against policy but I think she felt that she'd be alright, plus it was an agency. I was in an agency apartment, and I thought that her doing that . . . that really encouraged me.

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Provision of additional resources. One (1 of 18 [0.56%]) participant described how the CWSP she worked with would provide her with additional resources and services not authorized by the agency. Although against agency policy, the provision of various forms of support were much needed and therefore well-received by the parent:

> I guess [my parent mentor] wasn't supposed to drive me but she did. When we got out of court I was supposed to take the bus back home but she would drive me down there. She would stay there but she wasn't supposed to . . . she gave me money. She gave me tons.

Consideration of Cultural Experiences

Participants had a variety of responses with regard to the extent to which they felt that CWSP considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery. More often than not, participants felt that CWSP did not adequately consider their cultural needs. In general, participants felt that CWSP lacked an understanding of structural and process differences related to culture. While some participants acknowledged that system inequalities were also not adequately addressed during service delivery, compared to addressing structural and process differences issues, there was a greater likelihood that CWSP addressed systemic inequalities related to race and class. Issues around gender were larger ignored by CWSP.

Two major themes emerged when participants discussed the extent to which they felt that CWSP considered their unique cultural experiences. The two major themes were inability to address needs and ability to address needs. The inability to address needs describes the CWSP incapacity to consider the cultural experiences and needs of participants. The ability to address needs describes the CWSP capacity to consider the cultural experiences and needs of participants. Table 6 is a data summary table that illustrates which participants endorsed the

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major themes associated with the extent to which they felt that CWSP considered their unique

cultural experiences during service delivery.

Table 6

Data Summary Table: Consideration of Cultural Experiences

	Inability to Address Needs		Ability to Address Needs	
Participant	Services were not compatible	CWSP Lacked Awareness	Awareness of Systemic Inequalities	Services had an Added Value
1	x	x		
2		x	x	
3			x	
4	x	x		
5				
6	x			
7				
8		x	x	x
9		x		x
10			x	
11	x	x	x	
12				
13		x		
14	x	x	x	
15				
16				x
17				
18	x		x	x
n=18	6 (33.3%)	8 (44.4%)	7 (38.9%)	4 (22.2%)

Inability to Address Needs

The inability to address needs describes the CWSP incapacity to consider the cultural

experiences and needs of participants. There were two sub-themes that were under the inability

to address needs theme. These two sub-themes included: (a) services were not compatible and

(b) CWSP lacked awareness.

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Services were not compatible. Participants that described services not being compatible focused solely on divergent parenting values between them as parents and CWSP and how the differences in values contributed to CWSP inability to address the participant's needs.

Parenting values. One-third (6 of 18 [33.3%]) of participants expressed services not being compatible based on opposing parenting values. Participants identified three ways in which the parenting values held or endorsed by CWSP were considered incompatible to those of the participant. These ways included the CWSP awareness around the role that culture plays into child rearing, understanding and accepting different forms of parenting styles, and understanding the importance of kinship parenting and care. The most commonly cited parenting values that were incompatible to the values of the participants were CWSP having awareness of the role that culture plays into child rearing and CWSP understanding and accepting different forms of parenting styles. Particularly when disciplining practices were endorsed by CWSP, participants expressed a cultural disconnect:

> They need to find a new way of trying to tell a Black mom how to discipline their child rather than if it was physical, sit in the corner. I don't care what kind of discipline a parent give a child that corner does not work with Black kids. It does not work.

> We did try some of the stuff but and some of it did work, but it was kinda short lived, so I guess we kinda did it just to satisfy them I guess the experience was good let's try something different something new something you know but I don't [use] a lot of it. It just it just didn't click. It just didn't work because I guess we were brought up differently you know what I'm saying we just you know. We're more quick to discipline than pretty much White people are and they kinda stressed trying to talk it out which of course I'm going to try to do that, but after a while if you ain't getting it or you just being defiant then you know out comes the belt but that was a problem because they said you can't use objects. You can't use a belt. You have to use your open hand and I'm like, okay [sarcastically]. You know who is this going to hurt worse, my kids butt or my hand, so…but I try, I did put forth the effort to try their little techniques and stuff like that but some of it worked and some of it didn't.

Participants reported that as they worked to develop informal forms of social support in the form of kinship parenting and care, their efforts were larger discouraged by CWSP:

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The way she [the caseworker] treated me because I was a younger female, I didn't know what to do. I never went through this ever in my life and my mom was trying to stay by my side and help me and be there for me and it's like she bashed my mom whenever she would see my mom, whenever she would see my mom and like visits, when my kids would go to my mom, their her first grandchildren, their you know prone to go to granny if momma's not listening or if mom's doing something else there gonna go to granny um…its I could never get a good response out of her about anything. It was like it was always negativity.

CWSP lacked awareness. Participants expressed that CWSP lacked awareness of the effects that systemic inequalities and power dynamics had on the experiences of the parent. The lack of awareness lead to parents feeling that CWSP could not meet the needs of parents. There were two sub-themes that were under the theme CWSP lacked awareness. These two sub-themes included: (1) lack of awareness of systemic inequalities and (2) lack of awareness of power dynamics.

Systemic inequalities. One-third (6 of 18 [33.3%]) of participants described working with CWSP that lacked an awareness of systemic inequalities. More specifically, the effects of race and class were identified as the forms of systemic inequalities that CWSP lacked awareness of. The most commonly cited systemic inequality that CWSP lacked awareness of was the effects of race. With regard to race, participants described experiences in which CWSP were unaware of how their behaviors were indicative of covert racism, how stereotypes informed their work with Black parents, and how the fear(s) that Black parents, particularly fathers, affected the client-provider relationship. Participants described how they felt race played a role in their service delivery:

For some reason, this is my personal opinion but sometimes I feel like it's favoritism being thrown somewhere from the little bucket swarming with all the parents and I'm not trying to play the race card or anything it's just when it comes to White parents, I feel like they get, you know they could ask for something so simple or ask for something so big and they get it and it's like either, I just asked for that or you know whatever it can be, I feel like in the end there is favoritism being played over the African American parents.

They [CWSP] looked at me like a drug dealer…a thug here you got a guy been in and out of prison that's all he knows . . . yeah, a lot them [CWSP] played into it. A lot of them played into it. They did. They really did because that's something you know that we try to sweep under the rug so that nobody can see what's going on but that's like I was saying, I sit back and really watch them and study them and do a profile on them and I was like you sneaky ass people.

Participants also described the intersection between race, class, and gender. A central focus of participants' experiences was related to the difficulties they experience when identifying employment opportunities:

That's the issue down in the court. A lot of Black guys don't want to go down to court to try to fight for their kids because they know they come to court they going to try to lock them up for back child support, tickets, warrants stuff like that. They don't understand that a lot of guys, I ain't going to speak on the ones that sell drugs because they can go out and do something other than selling drugs, but a lot of guys in my predicament go out and try to do a little home improvement if they got a truck. Go and see if people throwing out washers and dryers. They go try to make a legitimate dollar they pound us the worse.

. . . the fact that single parents get it real hard so it takes a little longer for us. It gets very overwhelming. Depression sets in. Fears. So they just consider the fact that we need more resources. It's not like we got a $75,000 a year job and all of this. Then you run into places where there is a prejudicial issue about hiring you anyway.

Power dynamics. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) of participants described experiences in which power dynamics were essential contributors to CWSP inability to meet the needs of parents. Participants identified CWSP that were derogatory toward parents and as a result parents described feeling that they were in a one down position and the CWSP had power over them. Even as participants worked to articulate their areas of need, the behavior of a CWSP could lead to the disempowerment of the parent:

You know when you try to ask them a question and they don't want to hear you or you try to suggest something and they're like this ain't your job this is my job and I'm like well you're not doing your job and that's why I'm asking you for help.

Ability to Address Needs

The ability to address needs describes the CWSP capacity to consider the cultural experiences and needs of participants during service delivery. There were two sub-themes that were under the theme ability to address needs. These two sub-themes included: (a) awareness of system inequalities and (b) services had an added value.

Awareness of systemic inequalities. Participants expressed that CWSP possessed an awareness of systemic inequalities and this awareness contributed to CWSP ability to meet the needs of parents. There were two sub-themes under the theme awareness of systemic inequalities. These two sub-themes included: (1) effects of class and (2) effects of race. Having an awareness of the effects of class was cited most often by participants.

Effects of class. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants identified CWSP having an awareness of the effects of class as a vital contributor to CWSP ability to meet their needs as parents. Child welfare service providers that had an awareness of the effects of class provided additional resources, made services more accessible, and acknowledged the difficulties of the current economy and as such advocated on behalf of the parent to extend the amount of time they were given to pursue custody. The provision of additional resources was the most common way in which participants were able to identify CWSP that possessed an acknowledgment of class. Child welfare service providers that were able to be accommodating to the circumstances of parents were viewed more positively by parents. One participants said: "The only good thing about it is at the therapist, she comes out to the house once a week and it's easy for me to see her because I'm always there."

Effects of race. A few (3 of 18 [16.7%]) participants identified CWSP that had an awareness of the effects of race as having an increased ability to meet their needs as parents.

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Child welfare service providers that had an awareness of the effects of race demonstrated the ability to practice in culturally competent ways and acknowledged racial prejudice that exists within the system. Practicing in culturally competent ways cited most as being an indicator that CWSP acknowledged the effects of race. One participant recalled her experiences of a CWSP that was able to accommodate the cultural needs of her children in foster care:

> …I mean when my kids were in foster care [the caseworker] would ask certain questions about certain situations. I guess what can we [the system] do to make the kids feel more comfortable? Now whether it was followed or not I don't know.

Services had an added value. Participants expressed that services that had an added value to them as parents better met their needs. There was one sub-theme that was under the theme of services had an added value. This one sub-theme was the services added to the parent's ability to be a better parent. The CWSP that facilitated the services was central in providing the parent with a service that met their needs.

Services added to parent's ability to be a better parent. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants identified services that added to their ability to be a better parent as meeting their needs. These services were able to provide participants with essential parenting techniques and provided them with a more in-depth understanding of themselves as individuals and as parents. Services like these had a profound influence on parents: "They were real great teachers about my kids. They teach me how to be a better a parent. I was thinking about going back [laughter]." A participant recalled her experiences with a parenting class: "I liked them, they was really nice and taught me different stuff to do, even today they taught me a lot of stuff how about a parent is a child's first teacher…it was like a lifestyle not like a technique."

Essential Components

Participants had a variety of responses with regard to the essential components of services that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met. As participants identified the essential components of services, they also identified ways that CWSP could better delivery these essential components. As essential components were identified, participants were asked some variation of the following question: "Are the components that you identified specific to Black parents or do you feel that any parent in the system, regardless of their background, need these things in order to feel that their needs are being met?" Interestingly, while participants expressed being treated differently as a result of their race and socioeconomic status, the majority of the participants also expressed that the essential components they identified were not race or class specific and all parents should be entitled to access to the essential components.

Two major themes emerged as participants identified the essential components of services. The two major themes identified were CWSP practices and system qualities. Child welfare service provider qualities are defined as the essential practices and ideologies that CWSP could engage in as a means of meeting the needs of parents. System qualities are defined as the essential practices and ideologies that guide the overall child welfare system's approach to working with parents. Table 7 is a data summary table that illustrates which participants endorsed the major themes associated with the essential components of services that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met.

Table 7

Data Summary Table: Essential Components

Participant	CWSP Practices	System Qualities
1	X	x
2	X	x
3	X	x
4	X	x
5	X	x
6	X	x
7	X	x
8	X	
9	X	x
10	X	x
11	X	x
12	X	x
13	X	x
14	X	x
15	X	x
16	X	x
17	X	x
18	X	x
n=18	18 (100.0%)	17 (94.4%)

CWSP Practices

Child welfare service provider practices are defined as the behaviors that CWSP could engage in order to meet the needs of parents. There were nine sub-themes that were affiliated with the CWSP practices theme. These nine sub-themes included: (a) ability to relate, (b) being supportive, (c) communication with parent, (d) being present, (e) being genuine, (f) transparency, (g) being realistic, (h) acceptance of kinship parenting and care, (i) and providing the space to have a voice.

Ability to relate. Half (9 of 18 [50.0%]) of participants identified the ability of CWSP to relate to them as an essential component of service. Child welfare service providers could do

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this by working with the parent to identify the things that both the provider and the parent have in common, giving advice based on real life experience, getting to know the parent, acknowledging to the parent that they understand that people make mistakes, and having a generally open disposition when working with parents. Finding things that the parent and the CWSP have in common was the most frequently cited way in which CWSP could relate to parents. Participants' stressed the importance of CWSP being able to relate as a means of letting the parent know that it was alright to open up to CWSP and establish a trusting relationship. One participant said, "Remember I told you how he [the attorney for the parent] look like he's mean? I can't approach you if I think you're angry." Similarly, even if participants assumed that they had things in common with CWSP it made a difference in their ability to open up to the CWSP:

> We kinda clicked cause we were kinda close in age even though he never divulged his age to me. I never asked but just seemed like we were on the same level but I was able to be very open with him you know and he was very knowledgeable in his position and I respected that and he gave good advice.

Being Supportive. Half (9 of 18 [50.0%]) of participants identified the ability of CWSP to be supportive of the parent as an essential component of service. Child welfare service providers could do this by providing inspiration and encouragement to the parent, being an advocate for the parent, collaborating with the parent, emphasizing the parent's strengths, and by providing resources to help the parent meet the case goal. The ability of CWSP to provide inspiration and encouragement was most frequently identified as the manner in which CWSP could demonstrate support. One participant clearly described the difference between "good" CWSP and "bad" CWSP: "The big difference is that the good people that work with me they don't criticize me. The negative people, they do." Another participant described the exact form of support that is needed:

…it's like don't put me down or don't you know make me feel like I'm not a good mother when I've gotten this far raising my kids. You know mishaps happen and this is where it landed us.… [I needed] encouraging support, loving support.

Communication with parent. One-third (6 of 18 [33.3%]) of participants identified communication between themselves and the provider as an essential component of service. There was specific information that participants wanted CWSP to communicate to them. This information included explaining the process of being reunified, the expectation(s) that the system had for the parent in order to achieve reunification, providing the parent with an indication of the length of time they could expect it to take for CWSP to follow through with their request, and identifying all the services that are available to parents. Participants also identified a desire for CWSP to request and accept feedback from parents about their experiences and ways that CWSP could improve their experiences while they were going through the process. The information that participants identified as most essential was an explanation of the process of being reunified with their children. When participants lacked an understanding of the process, they were less to successfully navigate through the system:

> A better understanding of the process I didn't have anybody . . . there were gray areas with me again because I had a lot of respect for [the] foster care worker and she had dozens of other cases so there was times when I was just waiting anticipating what I had to do at first because at first when it first happened it took a few weeks for me to start interacting with the foster care worker . . . to contact her, find out who she was you know . . .

Participants also described the importance of communication within the client-provider relationship:

> . . .just even in a relationship you gotta have communication, communication is the key to you know either a relationship between boyfriend and girlfriend, a relationship between you and I, you know any kind of relationship you have with another person that you have to work with them . . . you know, communication, honesty, it's what gets to me I guess that would that would really help.

Being present. Several (5 of 18 [27.8%]) participants identified the ability of CWSP to

be present and be in the moment with parents as an essential component of service. For

participants, being present included CWSP taking the time to listen to parents, establishing a

relationship with the children, and knowing the "right" questions to ask regarding the

experiences of parents. Taking the time to listen to parents was the most identified way that

CWSP could demonstrate that they were present. Participants expressed feeling that being

present with parents was something that was not taught to CWSP during their training and as

such CWSP struggled to make connections with parents:

> They [CWSP] need to really be more one on one with us because everything is just by the
> book, they need to change some stuff because a lot of these people [CWSP], they don't
> even get to know these people [parents]. Like [the caseworker], she still doesn't know
> me, she thinks she knows me but she doesn't.

> A CWSP capacity to be in tune with the emotions of the parent was identified as a

component of service that could assist in the development of positive client-provider

relationships:

> They should ask what their [the parent's] background was and like you're doing right
> now. How does it make you feel when you did this? Yeah because you can't talk to a
> parent if they're agitated or hungry or get no sleep. Yeah, so they need to be more
> attentive to asking questions like that…

Being genuine. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) participants identified the ability of CWSP

to be genuine as an essential component of service. Being genuine included CWSP ability to be

authentic in their interactions with parents and not passing judgment on the parent's past

behavior. When CWSP were able to be genuine it opened the door for parents to be genuine in

their interactions also. In addition, parents identified the ability to be genuine and authentic as

contributing to the positive experiences they had while in services:

> It feels good when you sit down and you can relate to someone that's in there [the
> parenting class], that's going through there, or just coming to take the class because they

can get insight into other people and just be themselves instead of being somebody that you're not. . . . Find a program that's going to help you, that's going to let you be who you are and your husband or your boyfriend that can give you in the right direction . . .

Transparency. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) participants identified the ability of CWSP to be transparent as an essential component of service. Child welfare service providers could demonstrate transparency by not privileging certain voices and being forthcoming with details of a case. Participants were particularly interested in increased transparency within the legal context. They described wanting to be more involved with family court proceedings and the conversations that were occurring about the future of their family unit and their children:

> I feel this way, when you approach that bench, I should approach that bench because you talking about my children. I should know the same thing that you two are talking about to the judge. It should be no sworn stuff, keeping secrets about nothing because this is my life. This is my children's lives. That's exactly how I feel.

Being realistic. A couple (2 of 18 [11.1%]) participants identified the ability of CWSP to be realistic about what could be accomplished in a given period of time as an essential component of service. Child welfare service providers could demonstrate their ability to be realistic by working with the parent to come to a consensus on what is a reasonable length of time to change their behavior in order to meet the standards of parenting that the system requires and by not expecting the parent to "perfect" as they work to make changes. When participants felt that CWSP were not realistic, they struggled within the client-provider relationship.

> Every time I do something she [the caseworker] is too strict, I can't even get upset about something. Like come on. . . like she's never gotten upset before too. Like how are you going to sit up there and act like that. . . . These people, the courts just want me to be perfect perfect. Like seriously when they're not perfect, don't even play me like that. That's the one thing I don't like.

Acceptance of kinship parenting and care. One (1 of 18 [0.06%]) participant identified CWSP who were accepting of various styles of kinship parenting and care as an essential component of service. This was cited as being particularly important in that the

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participant wanted to help his children in foster care maintain extended family relationships

despite their placement:

> They [the caseworker] could've let both families like every other week get together with
> the kids to mingle so that my kids can know their first cousins and vice versa. I mean if
> you talking about building a relationship and getting your children back with your family
> and all that sometimes it takes a whole group to correspond with one another. They
> could've let us have more support from our family too. I mean that wouldn't hurt
> nothing. We all could have met up at DHS in the visiting room and we all could've
> played.

Providing the space to have a voice. One (1 of 18 [0.06%]) participant identified the

ability of CWSP to provide the space for parent's voice to be heard as an essential component of

service. The participant felt that their experiences were being privileged and she was able to

highlight key factors that she felt were not considered in her case when CWSP provided her with

the space and opportunity to express her experiences and feelings. One participant commented:

"Basically my voice and basically me just to be heard seriously because without me being able to

say nothing they [CWSP] don't know nothing."

System Qualities

System qualities are defined as the characteristics and components of the system that help

to guide the overall child welfare system's approach to working with parents and meeting their

needs. There were six sub-themes that were under the system qualities theme. These six sub-

themes included: (a) availability of resources, (b) endorsement of differences, (c) providing a fair

opportunity, (d) addition of workers, (e) collaboration, and (f) provision of incentives.

Availability of resources. Over half (11 of 18 [61.1%]) of the participants identified the

system's ability to make resources available as an essential component of service. Specific

resources that participants identified as needing included assistance with housing, transportation,

financial support, employment opportunities, food sustainability services, mental health services,

physical health services, and substance abuse services. In addition, participants also identified a

need for the system to ensure that services help parents acquire new parenting skills and that

parents receive access to all of their case reports prior to their court date. Housing assistance was

the most commonly cited resource that participants identified as being an essential component of

services. Several of the parents expressed needing multiple resources and saw the availability of

and access to resources as a means for them to either keep their children in their home or

expedite the reunification process:

> Basically help with everything. Everything they ask you to do and to get, that's what you
> need help for. Housing, counseling, therapy…they just need help with everything…. It's
> kinda funny to me that they [the system] wouldn't help the parents but where your kids
> go, they would rather help them. . . . Whatever the problem is that they feel that they
> should take them [the children], like I said I was smoking weed. Okay, send me to a
> substance abuse place. If it was the house, help me with it. Don't take my kids from me,
> help me.

> Specific to the county in which 10 of the 18 participants resided in, one participant

described how a change in county practices would help to reduce additional stressors brought on

by loss of resources and improve a parent's likelihood for success through the provision of

financial support for parents who are involved in the system and experiencing financial hardship:

> One of the main things is…the African American parents who are on welfare to not cut
> off their cash so quick, because it's a trickle effect. Once you cut off their cash, they're
> evicted from their home, and 90 days they get in [the predominantly White counties]
> before their cash is cut off. Can we [African Americans] have that? Those are
> predominately White counties. Can we in [this] county, which is predominately Black,
> can [we] have the same opportunity? It's like there's a connection line. If we can get that
> 90 days like the other parents do and that way we can get ourselves together and our rent
> will still be paid and we won't have to struggle with okay now I'm being evicted too, I
> got to go to court to get my baby and I don't even know where I'm going to bring her and
> where I'm going to live. When you don't know where you're sleeping at night you can't
> think about anything else. You can't think about no parenting classes. You can't think
> about you know none of those things because you don't even know where you're
> sleeping at night.

Endorsement of differences. Some (7 of 18 [38.9%]) participants identified the

system's ability to endorse parenting differences as an essential component of service. The child

welfare system could do this by acknowledging and accepting that parents raise their children

differently and an aspect of these differences are related to culture. Participants wanted the

system to include services that address the variety of non-abusive and non-neglectful ways that

parents' select to raise their children: ". . . all women are different the way they raise their

children…it should be different techniques of how all different people raise their kids." For

several of the participants, they wanted the system to acknowledge cultural differences and

consider such differences when making placement decisions. More specifically, they were in

favor of placing Black children with Black foster families:

> Knowing that there are cultural differences I would of course, if I could, suggest that
> foster parents be allowed to foster children of the same ethnicity because I think each
> race is different as far as when it comes to nurturing the children. We have our own ways
> you know. It seems to me anyway. I never was raised outside of my race but I think it
> would benefit because it would be a better understanding of the effect of nurturing you
> know it would be a better understanding of the need of the child to be redirected or held.

Providing a fair opportunity. Several (4 of 18 [22.2%]) participants identified the

system's ability to ensure that every parent is receiving a fair opportunity to be reunified with

their children as an essential component of service. Each of the participants that endorsed the

need for the system to give them a fair chance indicated that the child welfare system could do

this by providing them with the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to parent their child

without holding race, class, or gender stereotypes against them:

> I think they gotta give me a chance at being a parent. To see how can I really deal with
> my baby see how when I feed my baby, see how I change my baby, bath my baby. They
> gotta give you a chance.

> I'm not saying it to be racial you know what I'm saying but look at the poor folks
> because it's a lot of Caucasian and other nationalities out there who are in the same

situation that Black folks going through. Get these degrees and come back and look at us like we ain't nothing like we just a parade to them.

Addition of workers. A few (3 of 18 [22.2%]) participants identified the system's ability to increase the number of CWSP as an essential component of service. Participants felt that CWSP, particularly caseworkers, had too many families on their caseloads and as a result the needs of some families were being neglected. Participants felt that by increasing the number of CWSP, more families would receive the assistance they needed. Participants also endorsed increasing the number of CWSP of color, particularly African American CWSP. Participants felt that if there were more CWSP of color, White CWSP would be held accountable for the mistreatment of families of color. Participants described feeling that CWSP of color would be able to better relate to and understand the experiences of families of color:

> More Black caseworkers . . . it's a lot of White caseworkers and most of them don't have kids and don't know what it feels like to be a single mother and yet they say they understand where you're coming from and they don't understand. They say they understand. They really don't understand anything. Where you're coming from, who you have to be around but they say they do and I really don't think they do. And I think if there was more Black caseworkers that actually come from the areas where we stay and had to grow up in the neighborhoods that we grew up in then they could relate to why we are in the situation that we are in. Because they told me my case was for neglect but all I did was stay with a man in order to make sure my kids had what they needed and I was wrong for it . . . they wouldn't be so quick to take the kids or so quick to say you're abusing them or neglecting them because it's harder than what people think it is . . .

Collaboration. A few (3 of 18 [22.2%]) participants identified the system's ability to collaborate amongst professionals and help in the facilitation of creating collaborative relationships amongst parents as an essential component of service. Participants saw the collaboration amongst professionals as way to not only disseminate information amongst CWSP but to also ensure that everyone was on the same page regarding the case progression and the same message to parents was being conveyed across providers. When it came to helping to facilitate collaborative relationships amongst parents, participants felt that through the

development of relationships with other parents in the system, they could receive support from others that understand their experiences and was going the same process. In addition to support, participants identified the potential for parents to share resources amongst one another, one participant added, "It's like getting say, all or most of all of the African American families together to kind of come up with a support group within themselves for each other." Another suggested the notion of sharing resources, "They [the parents] can have a car pool and all them get jobs together…. You never know if you not getting them together."

Provision of incentives. One (1 of 18 [.06%]) participant identified the system's ability to provide incentives as a means of motivating parents as an essential component of service. The participant felt that by providing incentives, parents would be rewarded as they continued to address the goals that set forth in the case plan:

> Setting long and short term goals, giving me some incentives, putting incentives into place like helping with transportation, if I accomplish something then I got more visits, umm, certificates, um they created a program around me where I had certificates to put me places where I could get certificates that I could present in court.

Member Checking

The member checking phase of the study served to validate the findings of the individual interviews. The member checking process followed the analysis of the ecomap and individual interview data. Data that emerged from the individual interviews was cross-checked with participants involved in the member checking phase as a means of further articulating, confirming, and/or denial of the individual interview themes. Particularly within the focus group setting, group conversations stimulated richer responses, clarified ambiguous themes, and provided new and valuable insight.

Through the member checking process, the major themes and sub-themes associated with the general experiences and feelings identified in the individual interviews were endorsed.

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Specific to the general experiences of Black parents, the underlying tone of the member checking feedback was that the culmination of negative experiences between parents and CWSP was an indication that CWSP were not receptive to the experiences and needs of African American parents and subsequently disconnect within the client-provider relationship manifest. While participants endorsed having positive experiences with CWSP, compared to the negative experiences that occurred across multiple CWSP, it was evident that the positive experiences occurred with less frequency and amongst fewer CWSP. Moreover, the negative experiences appeared to have a greater effect on the totality of the parents' experiences.

Given the wide variety of feelings that individuals experienced when making sense of their experiences, it was not surprising that the member checking participants did not experience every specific sub-theme identified. However, many of the feelings described were also reported by member checking participants and they too endorsed that based on their experiences, negative feelings about self, negative feelings about the system and CWSP, and positive experiences about CWSP developed. These feelings were also a result of how the participants assess their treatment by CWSP and the system.

With regard to policy, the ability of member checking participants to endorse or reject the policy infractions was particularly important given that all but one of the policy infractions were made by one individual interview participant. Member checking participants endorsed each of the negative and beneficial policy infractions. It should be noted that member checking participants were reluctant to share beneficial infractions out of fear that the benefits of the infraction would be withheld from future families involved in the system. Ultimately, these endorsement were significant because it enhanced the trustworthiness of the sub-themes and it is

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an indication that when parents are made aware of policies that guide the work of CWSP, they are able to identify when there are both negative and positive breaches in policies.

Member checking participants also endorsed all the themes associated with consideration of cultural experiences. Participants confirmed that the sub-themes identified were reflective and representative of the ways in which CWSP do and do not address the unique cultural needs of African American parents during service delivery. Unlike the individual interview participants, member checking participants emphasized that the majority of CWSP who were able to demonstrate an awareness of systemic inequalities were African American. Member checking participants suggested that African American CWSP had greater insight about systemic inequalities, particularly inequalities related to race.

Participants involved in the member checking process also overwhelmingly endorsed each of the sub-themes related to the CWSP practices and system qualities that were essential components for meeting African American parents' unique cultural needs. Endorsement of the sub-themes, acceptance of kinship parenting and care, providing the space to have a voice, and provision of incentives, was important in that only one individual interview participant identified these components as being essential for meeting African American parents' unique cultural needs at the CWSP and system level. Participants expressed overt excitement over the sub-theme provision of incentives. They even provided several creative ways that the system could provide valuable incentives that would possibly offer additional forms of motivation for all parents involved in the system.

Overall, the member checking feedback enhanced the trustworthiness of the themes developed through the individual interviews. The ability of member checking participants to endorse or reject themes identified by only one of the individual interview participants was

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particularly important with regard to trustworthiness. Moreover, the feedback provided through the member checking phase of the study gave additional support for and expounded upon similar experiences that member checking participants also endured while being involved in the child welfare system.

Chapter Summary

Data from individual interviews, the ecomap activity, and the member checking process revealed a sample of African American parents' perceptions, assessment, and feelings about their experiences with working with CWSP and being involved in the child welfare system. The findings of the study show that with regard to the general experiences that this sample of parents had when working with CWSP there were both positive and negative experiences. There were two types of negative experiences, which included CWSP specific experiences and participant specific experiences. Negative experiences that were related to CWSP specific experiences included CWSP being negative, lack of contextual understanding, double standards, lack of support, CWSP not fulfilling role obligations, and unrealistic expectations. Negative experiences that were related to participant specific experiences included distrust of CWSP, feeling silenced, "no win" situation, uncertainty of decisions, and getting the "runaround". There were also two types of positive experiences, which included interpretations of CWSP and CWSP approach to work. Positive experiences that were related to interpretations of CWSP included fairness and validation. Positive experiences that were related to CWSP approach to work included CWSPs' ability to be helpful, supportive, related well to children, straightforward, challenged parent, and professional.

With regard to how this sample of parents made sense of their experience, this study found that participants experience a combination of negative feelings about self, negative

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feelings about the system and CWSP, and positive feelings about CWSP. There were six sub-themes associated with the theme negative feelings about self that included participants feeling helpless, fearful, degraded, emotionally overwhelmed, insulted, and threatened. Negative feelings about the system and CWSP included participants' feeling that the system was corrupt, there was a lack of connection with CWSP, CWSP were untrustworthy, unfairness existed within the system, there was an expectation to fail, CWSP lacked of recognition of parents' best efforts, and CWSP lacked professionalism. Positive feelings about CWSP included participants' feeling supported, hopeful, that the CWSP was caring, empowered, and that CWSP were trustworthy.

Negative and beneficial policy infractions informed and influenced the relationship between participants and CWSP. Negative infractions cited included cutting off from welfare assistance, not closing prior child welfare cases, inaccurate information being utilized at key decision points, not receiving information regarding children, insufficient time to work toward reunification, CWSP authorizing forbidden activities, and unethical negotiations amongst CWSP. Beneficial infractions identified included CWSP allowing unauthorized unsupervised visits and CWSP providing additional resources above and beyond what they should.

The participants in this study identified both the inability and ability of CWSP to address the unique cultural experiences of African American families. There were three ways that CWSP were unable to address the cultural experiences of Black families, these included not providing services that were compatible and CWSP lacking awareness. Participants cited that services that were not compatible did not match their parenting values. They also cited that CWSP lacked awareness of systemic inequalities and of power dynamics.

There were both CWSP practices and system qualities that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met included. The CWSP practices

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included the ability to relate, being supportive, communicating with the parent, being present, genuine, transparent, realistic, accepting of kinship parenting and care, and providing parents with space to have a voice. The essential system qualities included providing parents with resources, endorsing parenting differences, providing parents with a fair opportunity to pursue reunification, adding additional workers to better meet the needs of family, collaborating with all members of the system, and providing parents with incentives.

Findings from the member checking process corroborated the findings from the individual interviews. Participants involved in the member checking process endorsed the themes that emerged from the individual interviews and provided further support for the legitimacy of these findings.

The following chapter will interpret and discuss the major themes and sub-themes presented in this chapter. Relationships between major themes will be also be further explored. The discussion will explore how programs, practices, and policies can better serve African American families involved in the child welfare system.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this critical ethnography was to explore the experiences of African American biological parents who have a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. It was anticipated that through the exploration of these experiences and an analysis of the participants' cultural needs, new insights would emerge related to the cultural needs of African American biological parents in the system. The ultimate goal was to inform and improve intervention programs and policies that serve African American families involved in the child welfare system.

This research used multiple forms of data collection to collect qualitative data from 18 African American biological parents who had a history of being involved with the child welfare system and working with CWSP. Data were confirmed through a member checking process. Data were coded, analyzed and organized first by research question and then by themes and sub-themes as guided by the conceptual model, as depicted in chapter I (see page 23). This study investigated the following four research questions:

(1)   How do African American biological parents describe their experiences of working with child welfare system service providers? What meaning do they ascribe to their experiences?

(2)   How does child welfare policy inform and affect the relationship between African American biological parents and child welfare system service providers?

(3)   Based on African American biological parents' experiences, to what extent do they feel child welfare system service providers considered their cultural experiences and needs

(e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery?

(4)   Regarding the fulfillment of the cultural needs of African American biological parents, what are the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs have been adequately met? In what ways can and do child welfare system service providers address these needs?

The overarching finding in this study revealed that African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system experience an array of both negative and positive experiences with CWSP. While all of the participants had positive experiences with CWSP, it appeared that the negative experiences had a greater effect on how this sample of parents interpreted their experiences. As such, participants' identification of the essential components of services that were needed to meet their needs, in addition to recommendations for ways in which CWSP could better meet their needs was predominantly based on the deficit in services they experienced to date.

The remainder of the chapter summarizes, interprets, and synthesizes the findings of this study. The chapter is organized by the following broad analytic categories:

(1)   The relationship between general experiences of working with CWSP, policy violations, and meaning making.

(*Research Questions 1* [*Part A and B*] *and 2*)

(2)   The relationship between consideration of cultural experiences and essential components.

(*Research Questions 3 and 4*)

The prior broad analytic categories directly aligned with each of this study's research questions. These same analytic categories were used to code the data and present the findings in

the previous chapter. Combining the analytic categories in this manner allowed for integration

of the individual research findings in an attempt to examine the holistic experiences of the

participants. The analysis connected patterns within the themes, as well as identified the sub-

themes that emerged among the various broad themes. Special emphasis was placed on the most

important findings from each of the research questions.

Whereas the presentation of findings chapter presented a detailed account of the data in

order to create an understanding of the participants' experiences, this chapter reconstructs a more

holistic or comprehensive understanding of the findings. The discussion is intended to depict a

more integrated picture, and what emerges is a layered synthesis. The discussion takes into

consideration the literature on the child welfare system, CWSP and the development of helping

relationships, and the experiences of individuals and families of color. The implications of these

findings augment the understanding of the effect that the experiences of African American

biological parents have on client-provider relationships and their perceptions of how CWSP met

their needs. The implications section of the chapter addresses the study's theoretical framework

and conceptual model, clinical practice, and policy. The chapter concludes with a reexamination

of the researcher's assumptions, which were identified in the third chapter, limitations of the

study, and a final conclusion.

Analytic Category 1: The Relationship between General Experiences of Working with

CWSP, Policy Violations, and Meaning Making

The first analytic category addressed how African American biological parents described

their experiences of working with CWSP, how child welfare policy informed and affected the

relationship between African American biological parents and CWSP, and the general meaning

that African American biological parents ascribed to their experiences. In the current study, the

sample of African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system experienced a wide variety of both negative and positive experiences with CWSP. Each participant experienced a combination of negative and positive experiences. Throughout the course of a client-provider relationship, a participant's experiences and the meaning they attached to their experiences could shift both negatively and positively. For the purpose of this discussion, the policy infractions described by participants were also viewed as another experience that participants endured during the course of their involvement with the system. Within this study, the negative and beneficial policy infractions identified seemingly added to the overall experiences of African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system. Given the large number of CWSP that participants worked with during the course of their involvement in the child welfare system, the extent of negative and positive experiences contributed to how participants made sense of their experiences of being in the child welfare system and working with a variety of CWSP.

Negative experiences. The negative experiences participants' identified included CWSP specific experiences, participant specific experiences, and negative policy infractions. Given the sporadic mention of negative policy infractions, it was concluded that while negative policies contributed to participant's overall negative experiences with CWSP, an understanding of the effects of the policy infractions were less pervasive for the larger sample. Negative participant experiences that were most common included CWSP being negative, parents having a distrust of CWSP, and parents feeling silenced.

Child welfare service provider negativity took the forms of being verbally negative toward parents, engaging in negative exchanges with parents, and focusing on what parents were doing wrong. This finding was particularly relevant in that Doucet (2004) found that service

provider hostility, measured through their tone of voice, was most detrimental to working relationships when the customer's need for the service was high and when providers did not meet the needs of customers. For parents that are involved in the child welfare system, the services that are facilitated through CWSP are imperative if the parents are going to have their children returned to their custody. Lack of support in the form of the parents not being able to meet the needs of the parents coupled with CWSP negativity has potentially negative effects for the client-provider relationship.

This study provided further evidence that distrust of CWSP continues to be an issue that the child welfare system faces. African Americans distrust toward large institutions has been evident since before the 1960s and continues to be an impediment to service delivery systems today (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005; Knight, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2009; Lawrence-Webb, 1997; USGAO, 2008; Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). Research has shown that particularly for African Americans, when services are not working, discrimination is often attributed to their understanding of the service failure (Baker, Meyer, & Johnson, 2008). If discrimination is one of the perceived reasons for service failure, client-provider relationships are at risk for severe breaches that are based on race and manifested in the distrust of CWSP and the system.

Parents' description of feeling silenced when working with CWSP was supported by Drew and Heritage's (1992) description of institutional silence. Particularly in legal settings, parents experienced poor legal representation and did not have the opportunity to speak. Given that parents of color are less likely to know how to negotiate, especially when it comes to court (USDHHS, Children's Bureau, & ACF, 2003), this form of institutional silence constrained the contributions that parents were able to make in their own defense. In cases when CWSP made

inferences about the meaning of a parent's silence, client-provider relationships became quite problematic. This is particularly the case when understanding communication styles between distinct cultures. Intercultural communication styles can only be understood when there is agreement on what constitutes efficient, successful, and sincere communication behaviors (Jaworski, 2005). It is uncertain the relationship between parents feeling silenced and the effects on client-provider relationships. The current findings suggest that additional research is needed about the communication process behind silencing behaviors and the consequence of silence on client-provider relationships.

As in any relationship, relational dynamics can shift throughout the course of the client-provider relationship making it extremely difficult to track and ultimately predict the course of client-provider relationships (Labianca & Brass, 2006). Given the complex nature of the interactions that participants experienced with CWSP, definitively determining the direct relationship between experience and meaning was beyond the exploratory nature of this study. What can be inferred, however, is that the negative experiences identified by participants most closely aligns with the negative feelings identified by participants.

Most participants described the development of negative feelings that were a result of how they made sense of their experiences with CWSP. The negative feelings identified included negative feelings about self and negative feelings about the system and CWSP. Feelings of helplessness and fearfulness were the two most reported negative feelings.

The feelings of helplessness that participants described included feeling that they were not going to be reunified with their children and there was little they could do to change the outcome, and feeling that they would never receive the necessary services that would help them become better parents. Research has found that when parents are not offered the help they need there is a negative perception of quality of the client-provider relationship (Chapman, Gibbons,

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Barth, McCrae, & the NSCAW Research Group, 2003). The current study also identified a similar dissatisfaction with the client-provider relationship when their needs were not being met. Participants also identified feelings of fear. Fearfulness was found to be the result of parents feeling that they would do or say something wrong which would have damaging effects on the outcome of their case. The findings were consistent with prior research that found when parents do not feel engaged in services they reported workers having inconsistent responses to their needs (Kapp & Propp, 2002) and they experience a sense of fear and vulnerability within the client-provider relationship (Diorio, 1992). The negative experiences and subsequent emotional effects described by participants of this study provided additional validation for the relationship between negative experiences and negative feelings. Future research should examine the relationship between parent experiences and feelings and determine the exact nature of the relationship and the effects these experiences and process have on the client-provider relationship.

Positive experiences. Positive experiences included interpretations of CWSP, CWSP approach to work, and policy infractions that benefited the participant. Similar to the negative policy infractions, given the limited beneficial policy infractions that were identified by the sample, it was concluded that while beneficial policy infractions contributed to participant's overall positive experiences with CWSP, the ability of participants to identify these types of policy violations were less frequent and therefore likely to be even less pervasive for the larger sample. Overall, positive participant experiences that were most common included CWSP being helpful, supportive, and fair.

Child welfare service providers that were helpful provided needed resources, advice, advocacy support, and assisted the parent in understanding child welfare system processes. The

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findings on helpfulness were particularly important given the previous findings in the help-seeking literature regarding the link between client satisfaction and attitudes about help-seeking and empathy of provider (Diala, Muntaner, Walrath, Nickerson, LaVeist, & Leaf, 2000; Constantine, 2002; Mitchell, 1998). Participants that identified CWSP as helpful possessed more empathy for providers when they were unable to be of help due to policy or resource limitations. Findings suggest that positive effects may be seen in the client-provider relationship if CWSP are able to be helpful on a consistent basis during the entirety of a case.

Positive experiences of support included CWSP providing the parent with the space to have voice, being encouraging, maintaining a focus on the parents positive traits, and being accepting of the parent's past mistakes. Fernandez (2007) also found that parents identified client-provider relationships as positive when CWSP were able to acknowledge parents' hard work and work collaboratively with them to move toward reunification goals. Additional research on the role of CWSP support may serve to provide insight on the extent to which support may be an indicator of case outcome.

The ability of CWSP to be fair was another common positive experience amongst participants. The demonstration of fairness included CWSPs' ability to ensure that all parties involved in the case were treated equally, acknowledgement of parents' efforts, and maintaining the best interest of the child at all times. Fontes' (2000) emphasized the ability of service providers to acknowledge individual and institutional barriers to fairness and subsequently incorporate measures that promoted fairness when working with families. From the parents' perspective, it appeared that CWSP and the system faced challenges related to ensuring interpersonal and institutional fairness. Continued efforts to increase fairness across families is

critical in that fairness has been found to help buffer against potential negative effects associated with the high demands placed on families (Janssen, 2001).

The most common positive feelings that participants developed about CWSP were feelings of support and hopefulness. Participants felt supported when they perceived CWSP as truly wanting to help improve the situation, being understanding, demonstrating a belief in the parent, being non-judgmental, and providing needed resources. When parents feel supported, children are best protected against potential harms (Bell, Wells, & Merritt, 2009). An increased number of positive experiences with CWSP led participants having a greater sense of hopefulness. Hopefulness included gaining the sense that life could be better as a result of their involvement with the system and that there was an increased chance that their children would be returned to their care. The findings on hopefulness are important in that it has been found to be a motivator for maintaining a partnership within the client-provider relationships (Altman, 2008). Future research should further explore the role that parental support and hopefulness plays in biological parents retention in services.

Analytic Category 2: The Relationship between Consideration of Cultural Experiences and Essential Components

The second analytic category addressed the extent to which African American biological parents felt CWSP considered their unique cultural experiences (e.g. an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture) during service delivery. The category also identified the essential components that must be present in order for parents to feel that their needs had been adequately met by CWSP and the system. The majority of the sample felt that CWSP did not adequately consider their cultural needs and lacked an understanding of the structural and process differences related to culture during service delivery.

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An overwhelming majority of participants identified essential components related to CWSP and system qualities that, if present, would have helped to better serve and meets their needs as African American biological parents. While an understanding of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture were not necessarily part of the services that the majority of participants received, these two components were identified by participants as being essential components of services that would have led to parents feeling that their needs were adequately met.

When describing the extent to which CWSP considered their unique cultural experiences throughout service delivery, participants' response grouped CWSP into two categories, the inability to address needs and the ability to address needs. There were more participants that described experiences in which CWSP were not able to address their cultural needs. More specifically, parents felt that the services they received were not compatible with their parenting values and CWSP lacked an awareness of the systemic inequalities that contributed to the hardships parents had and currently were experiencing. Given the overall experiences of parents, the essential components of services that were identified as being most important to parents included the CWSP ability to relate to and be supportive of parents and the overall ability of the system to make resources available for parents.

Services that were not compatible with the parents' values about various parenting topics did not meet the needs of parents. Participants were looking for services that included an awareness of the role that culture played in the child rearing process, an understanding and acceptance of different forms of parenting styles, and an understanding of the usefulness of kinship parenting and care. It appeared that when parents did not feel services were compatible with their values, they were not able to benefit equally from services. This finding has also been

found in a sample of Black parents in England and Norway (Križ & Skivenes, 2010). When previous findings and the current findings are considered together it is especially concerning when a parent does not benefit from services because one of the primary criterion parents are assessed on is the extent to which they benefit from services. As a result, the parents that do not benefit from services due to cultural incompatibilities are then at risk for permanent separation.

Experiences are viewed through the lens of culture (Snowden & Yamada, 2005). When CWSP lacked an awareness of systemic inequalities parents' needs were not adequately met. The systemic inequalities that parents wanted CWSP to have an awareness of included the effects of race, class, and gender. Participants described wanting CWSP to be aware of how their behavior, including the stereotypes they held, indicated hidden forms of racism and how parental fear influenced the client-provider relationship. Interestingly, research has found that even CWSP agree that not all workers are prepared to understand or take into account the impact played by culture or race (Chibnall, Dutch, Jones-Harden, Brown, & Gourdine, 2003; Harris & Hackett, 2008) and that it is essential for providers to understand "their own biases, prejudices, racist thoughts and feelings" (Harris, 2004, p. 163). The parents appeared to believe that if CWSP possessed greater insights related to systemic inequalities they would be able to use such insight in order to interact with parents in a manner that was culturally relevant and sensitive to their experiences. These interactions would then result in improved client-provider relationships.

One component of services that was essential to participants included CWSP ability to relate to the parent. Having things in common, providing advice based on real life experiences, taking the time to get to know the parent, acknowledging parents make mistakes, and having a generally open disposition when working with parents were all ways that CWSP could relate to parents. For some participants, they endorsed matching families of color with CWSP of color

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with the assumption that providers would relate more to their experiences with race and racism. While research has found no benefit in matching families of color with CWSP of color (Derezotes & Poertner, 2005), ethnic matching of clients has been found to be a predictor of retention in services (McCabe, 2002). Parents also identified the CWSP ability to relate as an important means of developing trust in the client-provider relationship. Snowden and Yamada (2005) found that when CWSP were able to relate to parents, the result was the development of trust. Additional research is needed on the relationship between factors that contribute to CWSP ability to relate to African American parents and the development of trust.

Another essential component of services was the CWSP ability to be supportive of parents. Forms of support included providing inspiration and encouragement, advocating for the parent, collaborating with the parent, emphasizing the parent's strengths, and providing resources to help the parent meet case goals. Specific to providing resources, parents made a distinction between CWSP and the system's ability to provide resources. The system's ability to provide resources consisted of the larger child welfare system developing community-based relationships in order to make necessary resources available for parents and families. The CWSP ability to provide resources was geared more toward service providers actually telling parents about all the resources they were entitled to in addition to the services they could seek out on their own in order to increase their chances of reunification. The distinction between these two forms of resource provision was critical because one required ensuring resources were available and the other required ensuring access was granted to the resources. In addition, CWSP that advocated for and with Black parents were particularly helpful in that studies have shown that African Americans do not always know their rights when it comes to social service systems and therefore are at a disadvantage when it comes to advocating for themselves and their children (USDHHS,

Children's Bureau, & ACF, 2003). Given the absence of support that parents described experiencing as a part of their child welfare experiences, the forms of support described by participants have the potential to make an immense impact on parent's overall child welfare experiences.

The overall ability of the system to make resources available for parents was also identified as an essential component of service distinct from CWSP ability to provide resources. The most salient resources that the system could provide were housing, transportation, financial support, employment opportunities, food sustainability services, mental health services, physical health services, and substance abuse services. Particularly in resource-poor communities, the need for resources has been found to be an essential component for other parents of color experience as well (USDHHS, Children's Bureau, & ACF, 2003). Removal of barriers related to the needs of resources has been shown to decrease African American drop out from services (Armistead, Clark, Barber, Dorsey, Hughley, & Favors, 2004). The participants in this study worked to obtain necessary resources to meet their family's needs; however, when they were not faced with the stresses related to providing for necessary life needs, they were better able to focus on the needs of their children. This suggested that the system's ability to help families meet the most basic of needs would help to improve overall service quality.

Contributions of the Study

Although research has examined factors that influence the outcome of child welfare cases for African Americans, no study to date has explored the generalized experiences that African American biological parents have with CWSP from the parent's perspective. As it relates to the experiences of African American biological parents, the findings presented in this study are new findings for the field of child welfare and professional relationship development. These findings

lay the foundation for additional exploration about the ways that generalized and specific experiences effect Black parents' interpretation of their service experiences and the effects that such experiences have on case outcome.

Implications

Human ecological theory. With an emphasis on the effects that the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem have on the experiences of individuals, it was evident that the described experiences predominately affected individuals when they interacted with the micro-, meso-, and exo-systems. Much of the experiences described by participants centered on the theory's understanding of how roles, norms, and expectations were negotiated. In the case of this study, negotiation of the rules, norms and expectations occurred between the biological parents and CWSP. Negative experiences appeared to be the result of the parent's expectation that CWSP would assist them more in their reunification efforts. When parents' expectations were not met in this regard, they often expressed feelings of abandonment as a result of the experiences that were identified as negative. In these cases, it is very possible that the roles, norms, and expectations that are more consistent with the communal values held by some African Americans could not be transferred to the child welfare environment in which they found themselves in.

Participants possessed relatively little knowledge of the macrosystem policies that support and guide the work of CWSP. While participants were only able to identify few policy violations, both the positive and negative policy infractions described were viewed as additional dimensions of experience that had an effect not only on the client-provider relationship but also on the relationships across and within the micro-, meso-, and exo-systems. While all of the participants affirmed that they had positive experiences with CWSP, the influence of the

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negative experiences appeared to have a greater effect on how participants related to and made sense of their CWSP experiences. Possessing an understanding of Bronfenbrenner's (1986) chronosystem and how policies have historically and contemporarily facilitated inequality and oppression, participants' identification of predominantly negative policy infractions speaks to the inequality that they described feeling as an aspect of their policy-related experience.

Participants' experiences with race and racism reinforced the importance of understanding the socio-cultural effects that the pervasive nature of institutionalized racism has on Black families and all of the systems that they encounter. Particularly for African Americans, when matters around race are not acknowledged it appears to be a re-traumatization of previous egregious omissions and missteps made by the child welfare system and other health care institutions (Benkert et al., 2006). Institutionalized racism creates an environment within the child welfare system that perpetuates racial inequality and fails to provide adequate and appropriate services to people of color (Jones, 1997). Understanding the role of institutionalized racism is particularly important given research has found that racism is a chronic stressor in the life of most African Americans (Clark et al., 1999). Furthermore, when CWSP fail to acknowledge the role and effects of race, cultural mistrust within the helping relationship can emerge. Such cultural mistrust can potentially influence interpersonal processes and outcomes of client-provider relationships (Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001). It is vital that CWSP and the child welfare system adequately assess and acknowledge the larger historical, cultural, and social contexts that influence the functioning of the child welfare system, particularly as it relates to race. Based on the findings of this study, it would appear that the child welfare system's ability to be transparent about the role that past and current racial climate has played into the treatment

of African American families would help to restore the already fragile relationships between African Americans and the system.

Participants' identification of the essential components further speaks to the importance of viewing the findings of this study through the ecological lens. While the theory asserts that there is no one way to define a system (White & Klein, 2008), it is essential for CWSP to consider and understand how African American biological parents define the system wherein they interact. This is particularly important given the distinct social histories and the privilege that CWSP have over their ability to assert their views on families. Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that it is critical to view African American biological parents within the context of the whole and not strictly as individuals. Both the CWSP and system qualities that participants described as being essential in order to feel that their needs are being adequately met indicated that parents desired CWSP to view them within the context of system. To better understand the context of the lives of African American biological parents, their functioning as individuals and as a family system must be viewed with consideration for the effect that other systems have on the individual or family. Child welfare service providers' ability to view parents in this way speaks to the importance of working with multiple systems in order to improve services and better met the needs of Black biological parents.

Black feminist theory. From a Black feminist perspective, where a value is placed on the expression of the experiences of Black women, this study is an example that when given the opportunity, African Americans are not only willing to share insight into the diverse range of their experiences but also provide important recommendations for improvement strategies (Collins, 2008; Rahman, 2009). The individual and collective experiences presented in this

study privileged the voices of African Americans, allowing them to define themselves by making their experiences and concerns visible.

The Black feminist framework helped to better understand the findings related to CWSP consideration of cultural experiences, both structurally and through process, particularly as a function of systemic inequalities. Both female and male participants located themselves in at least two realities (e.g. race, class, and/or gender). Their location had an effect on their lived experiences, how they viewed the world, and their needs given their social realities. Through the lens of race, participants' described feeling a sense of inequality as they compared the treatment they received against that of majority parents. Through the lens of class, participants expressed concerns that given their limited financial capacity they did not have the ability to access resources that would aid in reunification efforts. Particularly for women, the lens of gender expressed feeling that the system put more pressure and responsibility on them as mothers and the same level of pressure was not placed upon the fathers of their children. On the other hand, fathers described feeling that they were given less opportunity and less support to reunify with their children because the system was designed to provide more support and resources to mothers. Together the locations of race, class, and gender influenced participants' decisions about kinship parenting and care, family structure, and parenting styles. This points to that when the system and CWSP do not have a thorough understanding of where and how Black parents locate themselves, the needs of parents are improperly assessed. The improper assessment of and the subsequent failure to meet parental needs perpetuates power imbalances that lead to inequality between the system and individuals, families, and minority groups (Arredondo & Perez, 2003).

Conceptual model. The findings of the study supported the original conceptual model's postulation that the perceived systemic inequalities experienced by African American biological parents, and their understanding of structural and process differences related to culture experienced by both parents and CWSP influenced how between parents perceived their interactions with CWSP. The findings provided evidence that CWSPs' incorporation of culturally sensitivity practices, as perceived by parents, influenced client-provider power dynamics. Parents positively endorsed CWSP making use of culturally competent practices as a means of improving the client-provider relationship and addressing their needs. Findings suggest that CWSP would be able to more effectively mange difficult client-provider power dynamic if they deliver culturally competent services that consider systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture. Practices like these increase the likelihood that parents will view the client-provider relationship as positive and identify their needs as being met by CWSP. Furthermore, parents' perceptions of their experiences with systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture, in addition to how CWSP address these experiences informed how parents perceived CWSP management of client-provider power dynamics and their subsequent satisfaction within the client-provider relationship.

As it pertains to policy, the findings of the study supported the model in that policies were shown to have an influence on the experiences of parents. While parents were less knowledgeable of the federal, state, and local policies that guided the child welfare system and the work of CWSP, these policies had an effect on factors related to systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture. The findings showed that CWSP' understanding of and adherence to policies also effected the client-provider relationship and the

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extent to which African American biological parents' felt their needs were met within the child welfare system.

      Clinical practice. Throughout the course of a child welfare case, each CWSP serves a different purpose within the lives of the families involved in the system. The different roles are critical to providing a vast array of support services to families. While the role of CWSP can range from investigator to advocate, the findings of the study are still valid in that the components of services that Black parents identified transcend the role of CWSP. These findings demonstrate that on a personal level, parents possesses a respect for the given roles of CWSP and are looking to have positive interpersonal exchanges across all CWSP regardless of their professional role.

      Child welfare service providers should pay special attention to the influence that the development of negative relationships has on negative affect development. This is particularly important given that research has shown that negative relationships develop at a much faster pace and have greater negative effects on individuals (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Only in a limited number of cases were participants in this study able to use their negative experiences as a motivation for working toward reunification. Given that participants had an increased focus on the negative feelings that derived from their unique set of individualized experiences, there is speculation that the negative feelings identified played a larger role in how participants' understood their experiences. This finding is supported by research that has found negative events to be stronger determinants of mood and affect than positive and neutral events (Reis & Gable, 2003). Moreover, negative events elicit greater physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral activity, and lead to more cognitive analysis of interactions (Baumeister et al., 2001; Taylor, 1991).

Participants appeared to be most satisfied with CWSP when they felt CWSP possessed an understanding of the context of their lives, which included an understanding of the effects of unique cultural experiences. The work of Lambert and Ogles (2004) found that good helping relationships are commonly characterized by mutual respect, acceptance, trust, warmth, liking, understanding and collaboration. The understanding that participants described extended beyond the concepts of systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture and ultimately influenced the parent's perceived cultural competence of the CWSP, the overall client-provider relationship, and the participant's assessment of the extent to which their needs were fulfilled. Even as participants identified the essential components of service, understanding incorporated a basic level of respect, openness, and consideration shared between the participant and CWSP. This finding is similar to the work of Drake (1996) who found that a poor helping relationship consists of judgment, demeaning behavior, and a lack of desire to listen or understand. When participants perceived there to be an absence of understanding, they felt that their needs were not adequately addressed.

It is imperative that current and future CWSP be trained in the provision of culturally competent services delivery methods and practices. Eurocentric norms and customs that the current system is based on (Corneille, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2005) do not fully incorporate the values and customs that are central to African American culture. Given that participants highlighted the importance of CWSP acknowledging systemic inequality and structural and process differences related to culture, additional cultural competency training would serve to help bridge the gap between understanding and real world application and practice (Parrish & Hargett, 2010). Acknowledging that African American sub-group norms and values vary greatly, at minimum services need to acknowledge the importance of developing therapeutic

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relationships that incorporate cultural knowledge and values and incorporate practices that promote adaptive identity, respect, and coping, emphasis on the protective value of a sense of self-respect and connection to spirituality, community, friends, and peers, styles of expressive communication, and positive racial and ethnic identify (Akbar, 1991; Briggs, Bank, Fixsen, Newell, & Hood, 2009; Corneille, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2005). Briggs' (2009) outlined 11 key practice principles that are useful for working cross-culturally and removing the barriers of racism and discrimination. He recommends that CWSP and service agencies incorporate these principles into their practice as a way of developing and disseminating culturally competent evidence-based practices.

While only two participants directly acknowledged the role of client-CWSP power dynamics, the description of participants feeling marginalized and silenced through their experiences with CWSP is an indication that power dynamics within the client-provider are at work. Participants described respecting CWSP who were able to judiciously make use of their power. The findings on power dynamics support and extend the work of Boer and Coady (2007) who examined the characteristics of positive helping relationships within child welfare and found that positive helping relationship included the CWSP understanding of the fear that parents had around the power of CWSP and how such fear makes it difficult for parents to listen to and actively engage with CWSP. Child welfare service providers who are able to acknowledge this fear and use a shared collaborative approach help to create a trusting positive client-provider relationship.

Child welfare service providers should also be cognizant of the value that this sample of Black biological parents placed on the delivery of services that they deemed important and compatible with their parenting values. Aarons and Palinkas (2007) have also found that the

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perceived suitability of services effects the implementation and success of child welfare evidence based practices. The current study suggest that the ability of CWSP to deliver services that include an understanding of systemic inequality, structural and process differences, and client-CWSP power dynamics potentially can increase parents feeling that their unique cultural experiences are provided for throughout the course of services.

Based on the experiences of the sample, over half of the participants identified resource acquisition as an essential component. Although the work of Lee and Ayón (2004) found that the receipt of public assistance was a small predictor of a good client-provider relationship, the participants in this study identified the availability and access of resources as a vital component. Participants identification of the increased need for CWSP to assist in obtaining critical resources (e.g. housing, transportation, financial support, employment opportunities, food sustainability services, mental health services, physical health services, and substance abuse services) is in line with human ecological theory's understanding of variety, "the extent to which the system has the resources to meet new environmental demands or adapt to changes" (White & Klein, 2008, p. 159). For the participants in this study, they were faced with enormous hardship related to having the ability to obtain the necessary resources needed to make the changes that were being requested. The participants that were given access to needed resources were more likely to meet the demands of the child welfare system. For the majority of participants they expressed a desire to make the changes being requested by CWSP; however, had limited capacity to implement the changes. Child welfare service providers should strive to work in a collaborate fashion so that parents have the opportunity to demonstrate their desire to make changes and together work can be done to help clients obtain the necessary resources that will move them closer toward reunification.

In addition to resources, the additional essential components that have to do with the provision of various forms of support are also particularly relevant in that research has found that tertiary prevention services help develop positive parenting behaviors and practices which reduce the negative effects of maltreatment and prevent future recurrences (Thomas et al., 2003). Within the sample, 10 of the 18 participants worked with parent mentors. This is significant in that parent mentor programs which model stable, non-abusive families in addition to helping address the immediate needs of families have been found to be a tertiary prevention strategy that is more successful that other types of family support programs (Chaffin, Bonner, & Hill, 2001). Given the information known about tertiary prevention services and the endorsement that these forms of services was given by participants, involvement in tertiary services could potentially better serve African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system.

Policy. Given that the participants in this study were less likely to identify similar policy infractions, it appeared that policies were less pervasive of an influence on the experiences of African American biological parents. As it relates to reunification, the experiences of African American biological parents in this study, suggested that both federal and county policies do not adequately promote family reunification for Black families as they intend. While the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 was a more family-focused policy, families involved in the system today are still feeling the repercussions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 that focused on expedited placement permanency for children. Parents, in this sample, were clear that in a number of ways, they experienced pressure to make the required changes despite being provided with a lack of adequate resources to support the necessary change. Even at the county level, policies geared toward providing aid to parents as they pursued custody of their children were ignored due to what parents identified as limited county resources available

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to meet such needs. While the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 seeks to support kinship care and family connections, the Act remains in its implementation phase and therefore the potential benefits of the Act have not been fully experienced.

In general and as indicated earlier, the participants in this study possessed a limited knowledge of policies that guide the child welfare system and the work of CWSP. Still, the policy findings in this study do add to the literature in that they specifically speak to the effect that policy infractions have on the daily interactions between parents and CWSP, something not found in the current body of literature. The findings of this study illustrate that given the opportunity, paired with accurate knowledge, parents possess the capacity to identify both negative and beneficial policy infractions. Parents that are unaware of the child welfare policies that guide the work of the system are not equipped to identify when policies are violated by CWSP. The lack of knowledge privileges the dominant groups' oppressive behavior and has a crippling effect on client-provider relationships. This is particularly the case when parents report policy violations that are not true violations but rather perceived injustice. Findings indicate that when parents' reports go unaddressed there is an increase in the parent's perception that their concerns are not being heard and validated by members of the child welfare system. Parents are in need of additional education regarding the policies that guide and regulate the work done by CWSP. This is necessary if parents are going to move toward a greater sense of equality thereby having the capacity to not only accurately identify policy violations but also accurately report and receive appropriate follow-up when policies are violated.

Revisiting Positionality and Assumptions from Chapter III

Positionality. As an African American woman who has trained as both a couples and family therapist and researcher, I entered this research process acknowledging that my background and training had the potential to be both an obstacle and a benefit, particularly during the data collection phase of the study. My affiliation with a university had the potential of making participants skeptical of my underlining intentions. On the other hand, the patience and understanding that I approached each participant with appeared to be welcomed by participants and increased their desire to open up about their child welfare experiences.

While I was admittedly nervous that my university affiliation would be off putting to participants, I found the opposite to be true. Participants expressed excitement to meet with me and share their story. One participant even asked, "Where have you been?" It was excitement such as this that both warmed my heart yet saddened me. Knowing that this population of Black parents had an enthusiastic desire to share their experiences yet are so infrequently approached is a testament to the fact that there is a lot more work that needs to be done in order to ensure that the voices and experiences of these silenced populations are heard.

At the onset of the study, I recognized that my experiences had the potential to serve as a bias in terms of over-estimating the role that culture may play for African American biological parents receiving reunification services within the child welfare system. As I concluded this phase of my analysis, I am even more certain that culture does play a role in our everyday interactions and that the complex nature of culture makes it difficult for people to fully comprehend the pervasiveness that it has in our lives.

During the design, data collection and analysis phase of the study, I assumed the positionality of *voice* in order to convey the voices of the participants and the meaning they

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attach to their experiences. As I have delved into the discussion and implications phase, I have taken the stance of the *activism* against the discriminatory practices that have allowed for an environment of oppression and marginalization of groups and individuals to develop and here I offered alternatives to such damaging and hurtful practices.

Assumptions from chapter III. In the beginning of the study, I indentified three assumptions that I held based on my experience and background as a couples and family therapist and a provider of family therapy reunification services for families involved in the child welfare system. The three assumptions were as follows:

(1)   African American biological parents are not given a fair chance to reunify with their children.

(2)   The cultural needs of African American biological parents are not being adequately addressed within the context of child welfare service delivery.

(3)   The dialogue between African American parents and CWSP pertaining to the cultural needs of African American parents is strained.

Assumption one was originally based on the premise that impoverished neighborhoods offer little in terms of support services that help to serve as a protective factor for children and families at risk for maltreatment. The findings of this study reaffirmed my original assumption in that the experiences of participants revealed the need for additional resources to support reunification efforts. Parents viewed the resources they were given access to as far inferior to those afforded White families in the same situation. Their observations of inequities reinforced their assessments of being limited and constrained by social, economic, and racial struggles in the reunification process.

Assumption two was originally based on the premise that many, not all, non-Black child welfare providers reject the idea that race is a lens through which many African Americans consciously and unconsciously view the world (Boyd-Franklin, 2003) and when systemic inequalities are not disjointed professional relationships develop. The findings of this study also reaffirmed the assumption in that although parents did not describe a need for CWSP to overtly discuss issues related to systemic inequality, participants did express a need for CWSP to understand the manner in which systemic inequality has influenced Black parents' life experiences. When CWSP were unable to incorporate this level of understanding into the provision of services to Black parents, participants described a sense of disconnect and lack of support from CWSP.

Assumption three was originally based on Dumbrill's (2006) qualitative study that found that a common experience amongst parents who receive child protection intervention services is that they feel service providers have "power over" them. The findings of this study also provided credence to this assumption in that when parents attempted to discuss their cultural needs with CWSP, CWSP still possessed substantially more power to decide whether or not take the cultural needs into consideration when rendering services. When parents' attempted to articulate their needs and were repeatedly ignored or invalidated by CWSP, the dialogue between parents and CWSP closed. This closure left disempowered parents to instead choose to "go along" with CWSP in hopes that doing so would move them more quickly toward reunification.

Limitations

Location. All the participants came from one mid-western state. Future studies should strive to make use of a national population in order to create a nationally representative sample to

examine the experiences of African American biological parents involved in the child welfare system.

Sample Size. For the purpose of the current study, the sample size of 18 was sufficient to confirm the major categories and sub-themes. Given that this study was exploratory in nature, the assumptions about the extended population are based on the results of this sampled population. Future research should include a larger sample size in order to increase the likelihood of the sample representing the entire population of African American biological parents' experiences.

Future Research

As qualitative and quantitative inquiries of 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 currently marginalized population. While the variety of generalized and policy-oriented experiences identified were specific to the participant's unique situation that brought them to the attention of the child welfare system, the fact that multiple participants described similar experiences indicates that the interpersonal patterns that emerged should be examined further for the effect(s) they on African American biological parents. Understanding more about the interpersonal patterns between African American biological parents and CWSP is critical in that such experiences effect both the parents' and CWSPs' perceptions in addition to having an impact on child outcomes (Cole & Caron, 2010; Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006). Given the current study examines the experiences of African American biological parents, CWSP should also be studied about the extent to which systemic inequalities and structural and process differences related to culture informs their service delivery with Black biological parents. Research of this form will help to provide a more robust picture of the client-

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provider relationship. Additional research is also needed regarding the extent to which policy

effects the daily interactions of CWSP with African American parents. Finally, future studies

should test whether the essential components identified in this study hold true for African

American biological parents from diverse living and social backgrounds.

Conclusion

This research endeavor not only produced a nuanced and multilayered synthesis, but also

a holistic and integrated analysis. The challenge throughout the interlocking phases of data

collection and data analysis was to make sense of larger amounts of data, reduce the volume of

information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the

essence of what the data revealed given the purpose of the study. This study found that although

negative experiences with CWSP appear to have a longer lasting impression and stronger

influence on African American biological parents' perception of their overall child welfare

experiences, upon greater reflection, it is through these experiences that African American

biological parents are able to identify how their needs are being met by CWSP. In instances

when their needs are not being met, it is often through an understanding of the negative

experiences that parents are able to identify the essential components of services that were

omitted, but deemed necessary, during their service delivery experiences. In summary, the prior

discussion illustrated the multifaceted and complex nature of African American biological

parents' child welfare experiences. The discussion reveals the effects that multisystem

influences, inequality, and oppression have on client-provider relationships and how parents

come to interpret and make sense of their service experiences. The findings suggests that given

the chance, African American biological parents can continue to provide in-depth insight that can

shed lights on ways the child welfare system and CWSP can better service Black families.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Research Study: A Critical Ethnography Exploring African American Biological Parents' Experiences with Child Welfare Service Providers

Thank you for considering participating in this study! The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences that African American biological parents have when working with child welfare service providers.

How to Participate and What Will Happen

By signing this consent form, you are giving permission to be involved in a one-on-one interview *or* in a focus group discussion. Individual interviews and focus group discussions will center on your experiences with child welfare service providers during the period you were involved in the child welfare system.

Your active participation will include:
1) A complete explanation of the study and this consent form for each participant.
2) One meeting with the researcher to engage in a one-on-one interview *or* participating in a focus group discussion.

During your meeting with the researcher, you have the option to engage in a one-on-one interview or a focus group discussion. Whether you choose to participate in the one-on-one interview or the focus group discussion, it should only require one to two hours of your time.

Today, I will explain the project as we go over the informed consent form with together, and you will then be asked to participate in the study and to choose either the interview or focus group format. Upon completion of the one-on-one interview you will be given $20. If you participate in the focus group discussion, instead, you will be given $15.

The purpose of this project is to help identify the service needs and better serve African American families involved in the child welfare system. Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. Each one-on-one interview will be audio taped and each focus group discussion will be video taped. You may refuse to be audio taped or video taped, or request at any time that the taping be stopped. You may also refuse to participate or withdraw your participation from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled.

Risks /discomforts and Benefits:

There is the potential for minimal risk involved with participating in this project. Some psychological discomfort could be experienced from revealing personal information or thinking about things that are related to your past or current experiences. You are able to take a break at any point during the interview process; you are also able to refuse to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. If you are unable to complete the one-on-one interview or focus group due to psychological discomfort, you will still receive the appropriate compensation for your

time. After the interview, should you feel overwhelmed or stressed please contact the researchers, or the Family & Child Clinic at (517) 432-2272.

There are also some potential benefits. In addition to the small payment for your time, you may experience indirect benefits from your participation by sharing your experiences with others. Furthermore, your participation in this study may contribute to the larger community having a better understanding of the service experiences of African American biological parents.

Recording:
All individual interviews will be audio taped and all focus group session will be video taped. You will not be permitted to participate in the study without being taped. Only the researchers will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be transcribed (typed word for word) and deleted once the typed transcripts are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products related to the study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from this study. Immediately following the interview, you will be given the opportunity to have the recording deleted if you wish to withdraw your consent to participate in this study. By consenting to the researcher's recording, you are agreeing to have your interview recorded, to having the recording transcribed and to the use of the written transcript in presentations and written products.

Confidentiality:
Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. The researchers would like to audio tape the one-on-one interviews and video tape the focus group discussion in order to ensure accuracy. As audio tapes are transcribed (written word for word), any identifying information will be deleted (i.e., names of people or places) so that you cannot be identified. Typed transcripts of your interview will be kept as password protected files, and access to the information will be limited to the researcher, the research team members and the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Michigan State University may review your research records. All research data for this study will be kept in password protected files at the primary researcher's Michigan State University address for a minimum of 3 years after the conclusion of the project. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products related to the study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from this study. Immediately following the interview, you will be given the opportunity to have the recording deleted if you wish to withdraw your consent to participate in this study.

Other than this form, all questionnaires and data will be identified with a code number. A list linking your name to the code will be kept in a locked file for the duration of the study. Once all the data are collected and analyzed, the list linking the names to the code numbers will be destroyed.

Your confidentiality during focus group discussions cannot be guaranteed as other participants may discuss what you say in discussion to others outside of the group. However, everyone will be advised that what is discussed in the focus group should remain confidential.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may decline to answer any question in the study. You may decline participation at any point during the study by simply telling the interviewer you no longer wish to participate.

Rights and complaints:

If you have any concerns or questions about this research study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or if you believe you have been harmed because of the research, please contact the researcher

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barbera7@msu.edu, or john1442@msu.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 207 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

YOU HAVE READ THE CONSENT FORM. YOUR QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. YOUR SIGNATURE ON THIS FORM MEANS THAT YOU CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. YOU ALSO CERTIFY THAT YOU ARE 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER.

❑ I voluntarily agree to participate in a one-on-one interview.
❑ I voluntarily agree to participate in a focus group discussion.
❑ I voluntarily agree to having my interview audio recorded and transcribed and to the use of the written transcript in presentations and written products as explained to me.

_____

Initials

❑ I voluntarily agree to having my focus group discussion video taped and transcribed and to the use of the written transcription in presentations and written products as explained to me.

_____

Initials

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Signature of Researcher

_____   _____
Typed/Printed Name of Participant   Typed/Printed Name of Researcher

_____   _____
Date   Date

APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Flier

African American Biological Parents Needed for Study on Child Welfare Service Providers Experiences!!!

Purpose of the Study

Learn more about your experiences as an African American biological parent working with child welfare service providers.

Your Participation Includes Either....

One-on-one Interview
(receive $20 for participating)
OR

Focus Group Interview
(receive $15 for participating)

Eligibility Requirements

✓ African American

✓ At least 18 years old

✓ Biological Parent

✓ Have been involved in the child welfare or foster care system at least 3 months

For more info contact
Asha Barber Sutton

(847) 769-7532

APPENDIX C

Background Information

Background Information

Research Study: *A Critical Ethnography Exploring African American Biological Parents' Experiences with Child Welfare Service Providers*

Directions: Please complete the following information.

1. **Age** _____

2. **Sex**

   ☐ Male

   ☐ Female

3. **Current Relationship Status**

   ☐ Single   How Long: _____

   ☐ Married   How Long: _____

   ☐ Married but Separated   How Long: _____

   ☐ Divorced   How Long: _____

   ☐ Committed Relationship   How Long: _____

   ☐ Live in Partner   How Long: _____

   ☐ Other   Describe:_____

       How Long: _____

4. **Number of Children** _____

5. **Sex & Age of Children**

   ☐ Male   ☐ Male

   ☐ Female   ☐ Female

   Age:_____   Age:_____

   ☐ Male   ☐ Male

   ☐ Female   ☐ Female

   Age:_____   Age:_____

   ☐ Male   ☐ Male

   ☐ Female   ☐ Female

   Age:_____   Age:_____

   ☐ Male   ☐ Male

   ☐ Female   ☐ Female

   Age:_____   Age:_____

6. **Household Structure**

☐ Single parent household

☐ Two-parent household

☐ Single-parent but partner helps with children

☐ Other   Describe:_____

7. **What was the allegation that most recently brought you to the attention of the child welfare system (e.g. neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, etc.)?**

8. **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.**

9. **Based on your most recent allegation, briefly describe the reason you were involved with the child welfare system:**

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

   _____ years   _____ months

11. **What was the outcome of your case (e.g. reunification, parental termination, guardianship, adoption, etc.)? If you case is still pending, please indicate your current case plan (e.g. reunification, parental termination, guardianship, adoption, etc.).**

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide: Individual Interview

Individual Interview Questions

Research Study: *A Critical Ethnography Exploring African American Biological Parents' Experiences with Child Welfare Service Providers*

➢ Individual interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Parameters of the study, areas of inquiry:

General experiences with child welfare service providers.
Perspectives on the cultural needs of African American biological parents.
Barriers and contributors to meeting the needs of African American biological parents.
Suggestions on ways to improve child welfare service delivery.

Interviewer's Script: The purpose of this one-on-one interview is to gain an understanding of your experiences as an African American biological parent within the child welfare system. I will be asking an array of questions and remember that at anytime 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 working 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.

3. After interacting with or receiving services from a child welfare service providers, what how do generally walk away feeling?

4. Have you ever had any experiences where you felt that the child welfare service providers you were working with went against foster care procedures? Explain.

5. Do you feel there are cultural factors specific to African Americans that providers need to consider when working with parents? What are those factors? Explain.

6. What have been your experiences with providers incorporating various aspects of African American culture into services?

7. In what ways do you feel child welfare service provider consider cultural factors during service delivery?

8. How do you let providers know your needs are not being met? What have been the effect(s) or outcome(s) of letting them know your needs are not being met?

9. How do you let providers know your needs are being met? What have been the effects(s) or outcome(s) of letting them know your needs are being met?

10. What are the components of a service that would be most beneficial in helping you work toward the goal of maintaining custody of your child(ren)?

11. What do you see as currently being done by child welfare service providers to meet your needs as an African American biological parent?

12. What practices are not being done but could be done in order to meet your needs better?

13. Do you feel that the practices be done and the practices you described as could be done should be incorporated in response to the specific needs of African American parents in the system or do you consider them general practice for all parents in the child welfare system? Why?

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

Additional Notes/Memos

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide: Focus Group Interview

Focus Group Questions

Research Study: *A Critical Ethnography of African American Biological Parents' Experiences with Child Welfare Service Providers*

➢ Focus groups will be videotaped and transcribed verbatim. Videotaping adds a dimension of clarity in the group process.
➢ Focus groups will be used primarily for member checking purposes.

Interviewer's Script: Thus far we have collected information from individuals on their experiences with child welfare service providers as an African American biological parent. The purpose of this focus group is to check with members of our target population to ensure that the themes, findings, and conclusions we have thus far are truly reflective of the experiences of African American biological parents in the system. I will be asking an array of questions and remember that at anytime any member of the group can take a break, request to skip a question, or even excuse themselves from the interview all together.

Sample prompt questions:

1. During the individual interviews, several themes about the general experiences of African American biological parents working with child welfare service providers came up. Themes include [*insert themes based on findings*]. To what extent do you agree with each of these themes?

2. When it comes to the general experiences that African American biological parents have with child welfare service providers, are there any ideas or themes that we are missing?

3. There was a focus on the identification of the cultural needs of African American biological parents, specifically the needs of these parents in the system. The needs identified include [*insert needs based on findings*]. What is your thoughts about the needs identified? Are there other cultural needs that have not been identified?

4. The individual interview participants' highlighted areas they feel that providers are doing a good of meeting the needs of African American biological parents. These areas include [*insert areas based on findings*]. What is your opinion about these areas? Are there other areas that have not been identified?

5. The individual interview participants' highlighted some possible suggestions for ways that the system can better meet the needs of African American biological parents. These solutions include [*insert solutions based on findings*]. What is your opinion about these solutions? Are there other solutions that we might consider?

Additional Notes/Memos

APPENDIX F

Ecomap Activity Guide

Ecomap Activity

➤ Ecomap Activity will occur in the beginning portion of the individual interviews.

Interviewer's Script: Before we begin the interview, I would like you to take some time to complete an eco-map. Eco-maps are diagrams that show the various parts of an ecosystem: in this case, people interacting with their environment. In this study, eco-maps will be used as another way for me to collect data and get a better sense about the nature of your relationship with various child welfare service providers. I would like you to fill out this diagram with the first names, nicknames or initials of the child welfare service providers you interacted with. For the purpose of this study child welfare service providers include your current or past caseworkers, individual, couples, and/or family therapist/psychologist(s) that you worked with as a part of your case plan, perhaps a parent advocate, your attorney, or even the guardian ad litems (GAL). Essentially I am looking for information on any person whose primary professional focus is or was to provide services that will help reducing the harm and risk to children in your home. Think about your relationship and experiences with the service providers and please write the names of service providers who you had positive overall experience with in blue ink, and the names of those providers who you had a negative overall experience with in red ink. Take your time, and let me know when you are finished so we can continue.

1. Tell me about the providers in your ecomap: what is their relationship to you and how long have you known them?

2. Where there specific experiences that were particularly relevant for you with each of the providers? (Probes: Tell me about the experiences. What happened? How did you respond? How did you feel about the experience?)

3. With each of the providers you identified did you feel like they really wanted your children to be back or remain in your care?

4. When thinking about what you needed as an African American parent, do you feel that each of the providers you identified adequately met those needs? (Probes: Tell me in what ways your needs were or were not met? How did you feel about their approach to either meeting or not meeting your needs?)

APPENDIX G

Receipt of Study's Incentive

Receipt of Study's Incentive

Research Study: *A Critical Ethnography Exploring African American Biological Parents' Experiences with Child Welfare Service Providers*

By signing below you are indicating that you have received $_____ for participating in an individual interview or focus group for the above named study.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Signature of Researcher

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