



The vital few foster mothers [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Many foster parents serve only briefly, and foster and adopt few children. Anecdotal reports suggest that a small percentage of foster parents provide a disproportionate amount of care; however, we know virtually nothing about these parents. This study applied the Pareto Principle, also known as the 80–20 rule or Vital Few, as a framework to conceptualize these foster parents. Using latent class analysis, two classes of mothers were identified: one accounted for 21% of mothers and the other 79%. We refer to the former as the Vital Few and the latter as the Useful Many. Vital Few mothers fostered 73% of foster children – 10 times more than Useful Many mothers although only fostering three times longer. They adopted twice as many foster children while experiencing half the yearly rate of placement disruptions. Vital Few mothers were less likely to work outside the home, had better parenting attitudes, more stable home environments, more time to foster, and more professional support for fostering, but less support from kin. Further, they were as competent as the Useful Many on numerous other psychosocial measures. Understanding characteristics of these resilient Vital Few can inform recruitment and retention efforts and offer realistic expectations of foster parents.

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1. Introduction

Many foster parents serve only briefly, and foster and adopt few children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001; Christian, 2002; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003). This makes it difficult to ensure the placement, care, stability, and well-being of foster children. Despite the decline in the number of children in foster care in the United States, from 523,000 in 2002 to 423,773 in 2009, state officials report having fewer foster homes than needed (APHSA, 2010). Contributing factors to the shortage of foster parents have included the poor image of foster care, low pay, and inadequate support services (U. S. DHHS, 2002a,b).

2. Background

2.1. Contemporary challenges to foster parent recruitment and retention

The outlook for increasing the number of foster homes is not promising. Demographic shifts over the past few years suggest

that the potential pool of foster parents is diminishing. In particular, women, traditionally the primary foster caregivers, are increasingly in the workforce and less available to foster (Barber, 2001). The increase in workforce participation reflects, to some extent, women's higher educational achievement and career aspirations; however, it is also a matter of economic necessity for many women to contribute to household income. Further, as women live longer, the age of retirement is increasing, and they experience increased pressure to secure an adequate income in retirement (Holden & Fontes, 2009; Maestas & Zissimopoulos, 2010; Malone, Stewart, Wilson, & Korsching, 2010). Concurrently, the aging population creates immediate demands on working adults who have dependent elders (Barber, 2001; Barrett, 2009; Ritchie, Roth, & Allman, 2011). All of these factors threaten the available pool of potential foster parents.

In addition to the shortage of homes is the evolving nature of foster parenting. Whereas fostering was once considered substitute parenting, over the past few decades there has been a trend toward the professionalization of foster care, driven by the needs of children and changing agency demands (Testa & Rolock, 1999). More children are entering care with highly complex conditions such as aggression, sexualized behaviors, delinquency, emotional disturbance, learning needs, developmental delay and disabilities, and substance use and addiction, including prenatal exposure (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2005; George, Van Oudenhoven, & Wazir, 2003; Orme & Buehler, 2001). Fostering therefore increasingly requires foster parents to be trained and skilled to address these issues (Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001; Lee & Holland, 1991), yet studies indicate that foster parents often do

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not have the specific knowledge that they need (Osmond, Scott, & Clark, 2008; Tyrrell & Dozier, 1999).

In addition to addressing specific child behavioral, emotional, physical, or medical needs, foster parents are called on for a wide variety of other tasks, including advocating for health and education, facilitating contact with birth-families (e.g., transportation, supervision), involvement in training, and attending and participating in case plan and other review meetings (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001; Children's Home and Aid Societies of Illinois, 2012; Dougherty, 2001; McHugh, 2002; Wilson & Evetts, 2006). Clearly, many foster parent responsibilities require specific knowledge, expertise and experience. As a result, both researchers and foster parents increasingly regard fostering as a professional service (George et al., 2003; Hutchinson, Asquith, & Simmonds, 2003; Isomaki, 2002; Rome, Blome, & Raskin, 2011; Sinclair, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2004).

To date, researchers have principally focused on foster parent experiences and longevity, the difficulty of retaining foster parents, and retention strategies (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001; Rhodes et al., 2003; Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998). With the move toward professionalization of foster parents, it is important to frame expertise as a focal point of foster parent research. Studies consistently show that expertise is a learned, not inherent, characteristic and is determined by the amount and quality of practice devoted to the skill (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). Therefore, foster parents who have fostered many children are likely to have developed expertise in fostering and are therefore the focus of our study.

2.2. Pareto Principle

The Pareto Principle provides a useful framework for conceptualizing this research. Developed by the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), this principle, also known as the 80–20 rule or the *Vital Few*, states that roughly 80% of effects come from 20% of causes. Pareto originally hypothesized this principle when he observed that 20% of Italy's population owned 80% of the land – he later confirmed a similar distribution in other countries (Hafner, 2001). This principle has since been employed in a number of fields including business, computer science, and occupational health and safety.

In the business literature, studies show that 80% of profits come from 20% of customers, and 80% of sales are made by 20% of the sales staff (Koch, 2001, 2004). The utility of the principle in business is to identify the 20% most productive workers, analyze their characteristics, and then focus on them in order to retain those workers and/or to recruit more of the same (Myrna, 2009). Also, these best performers can be studied to identify the best practices they use that make them so successful (Karuppusami & Gandhinathan, 2006; Talib, Rahman, & Qureshi, 2011; Zairi & Whymark, 2000). For example, a telecommunication company applied the Pareto Principle to increase developer productivity by identifying and prioritizing the best practices of these employees. This approach resulted in a significant increase in productivity and quality of a software system as well as a decrease in errors (Kvam, Lie, & Bakkelund, 2005).

The Pareto Principle has also been applied in total quality management (TQM) to identify critical success factors (CSFs) (e.g., Fard, Mansor, Mohamed, & Bahrui, 2011; Huang, Wu, & Chen, 2012; Talib et al., 2011) and in project management (e.g., Cervone, 2009; Clarke, 1999; Fernández-Sánchez & Rodríguez-López, 2010; Frame, 2002). The application of the principle is similar in both contexts: to determine which tasks or issues will have the most impact in an organization and then focus on those factors. Typically this is done by gathering frequency data and then ranking the factors in descending order of occurrences from highest to lowest. The *Vital Few* are those factors that account for 80% of the frequency of occurrences. For example, Cervone (2009) proposed an application to digital library

project management to identify which library user problems should be addressed first.

2.3. Pareto Principle application to foster parents

Foster parents have a professional role and are compensated for the work they do. Therefore, if they are viewed as employees, the Pareto Principle might apply. The “productivity” aspect of workers may be considered analogous to productivity (“provision of care”) of foster parents. An analysis of these highly productive parents would provide an understanding of the characteristics that best identify the *Vital Few*. Identifying these parents and their characteristics would afford agencies the opportunity to attend more closely to their needs, as well as to devise targeted recruitment activities toward those in the general public who have similar profiles.

A possible criticism of the Pareto Principle applied to foster parenting is that more is not always better: that is, fostering more children (productivity) may be associated with poorer quality foster care (Dozier & Lindhiem, 2006). Child and family studies have identified a number of characteristics important for positive social and emotional development of children. These characteristics include demographics, parents' mental health, parenting, family and marital functioning, family home environment, and social support (Orme & Buehler, 2001). However, good parenting practices are considered necessary, but not sufficient, for effective foster caregiving (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012) and a number of measures that assess important attributes specific to foster parenting have been developed (e.g., ability to deal with challenging children (Orme, Cuddeback, Buehler, Cox, & Le Prohn, 2006); available time to foster (Cherry, Orme, & Rhodes, 2009)). As a response to the concern about quality of care, we suggest that, at a minimum, it is reasonable to expect the *Vital Few* to meet or exceed competence in general parenting and specific foster parenting constructs as compared to the rest of the foster parents, whom we shall refer to as the *Useful Many*.

To date, there is limited evidence of the Pareto Principle in foster parenting research. Although not explicitly applying the principle, Gibbs and Wildfire (2007), in a study of length of service of foster parents, reported that a small percentage of foster parents provide a disproportionate amount of care and that foster parents with longer tenure were, on average, older, lived in urban areas, were more likely to care for infants, adolescents, or children with special needs, and were more likely to care for more children at a given time. They focused on correlates of length of service rather than correlates of productivity. However, the Pareto Principle has been applied to the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1993) data. In this study, 19% of the foster mothers foster 74% of all children in the sample (Cherry & Orme, 2013).

2.4. The current study

The primary purpose of the current study was to determine whether there are two discrete subtypes (subpopulations) of foster mothers in which one relatively small group (approximately 20%) provided a disproportionate amount of care to foster children. More specifically, we anticipated that mothers in the smaller subgroup would have fostered much longer, fostered and adopted more children, had more children in their homes at the time of the study, and requested the removal of a much smaller number of children relative to the number of children fostered.

Assuming there is evidence of the hypothesized subgroups, the second purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which demographic variables differentiated the identified subtypes of foster mothers. Further, the third purpose was, to the extent possible, to compare the *Vital Few* to the *Useful Many* across psychosocial variables that indicate healthy family environments and desirable foster parent attributes.

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