



Research article

Child welfare caseworkers' characteristics and their attitudes toward non-custodial fathers[☆]



Julia Arroyo^{*}, Chuck W. Peek

University of Florida, Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, 3219 Turlington Hall, P.O. Box 117330, Gainesville, FL 32611-7330, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 March 2015

Received in revised form 11 June 2015

Accepted 15 June 2015

Available online 20 July 2015

Keywords:

Non-custodial fathers

Father engagement

Decision-making

Attitudes

Race/ethnicity

ABSTRACT

Despite increased attention to the caseworker's role in the successful engagement of fathers and in producing successful child welfare outcomes more generally, little is known about child welfare caseworkers' attitudes toward non-custodial fathers. Using generalized ordinal logistic regression to analyze attitudes in a sample of child welfare caseworkers from four U.S. states, the present study examines how caseworkers' demographic, education, and employment characteristics affect their attitudes toward non-custodial fathers. Race/ethnicity and employment characteristics predicted differences in opinion on whether fathers want to be involved, increase children's well-being, need help parenting, and whether involving fathers is troublesome and complicated. Results suggest that caseworkers' backgrounds serve as inputs into their approach to fathers and indicate a need for further study of the relationship between caseworkers' characteristics and attitudes, and how these might influence case outcomes.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Increasingly, child welfare researchers are investigating the role of non-custodial fathers in children's case outcomes and overall well-being (Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005; Scourfield, 2001; Zandoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2014). The growing body of work suggests that non-custodial fathers, once largely overlooked and dismissed, are often involved in their children's lives (Bellamy, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2012). This involvement, whose character and extent went undocumented by caseworkers and researchers alike, has more recently been shown to enhance children's case outcomes and well-being (Maxwell et al., 2012; Zandoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2013). At the same time, an emphasis on greater efficiency and improved outcomes in child welfare systems has led to a renewed interest in caseworkers' roles in the production and enhancement of child well-being (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Graham, Dettlaff, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015). Despite assertions that negative attitudes and low expectations for fathers impede caseworkers' efforts to engage fathers, and despite promising advances in research on caseworkers' broader child welfare attitudes and their effect on decision-making, there have been fewer efforts to understand variability in attitudes of child welfare caseworkers toward non-custodial fathers (Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & McColgan, 2013; Ghate, Shaw, & Hazel, 2000; Ruck, 2005; Scourfield, 2001, 2006; Scourfield et al., 2012; Strega et al., 2008). This study attempts to extend and clarify research

[☆] Funding for this research was provided by the University of Florida's Graduate School and Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law.

^{*} Corresponding author.

in this area by systematically examining the relationship between caseworker characteristics and caseworker views on the challenges and rewards of working with non-custodial fathers.

Background

Involving non-custodial fathers has been viewed as having simultaneous potential for peril and payoff. Fathers represent both resource and risk to caseworkers, mothers, and children (Maxwell et al., 2012). While families involved in the child welfare system typically consist of low income custodial mothers and their children, a majority of mothers report that a non-custodial biological father or another male caregiver is involved in their children's lives (Bellamy, 2009; Harris, 2007; Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). Given the disproportionate experience of discrimination and poverty among child welfare-involved families who often struggle with housing insecurity, unemployment, alcohol and substance dependency, and strained, non-intact, and sometimes violent relationships, engaging non-custodial fathers can be both beneficial and problematic (Davidson-Arad, Peled, & Leichtentritt, 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2005; Zanoni et al., 2013). Attempts to involve non-custodial fathers have the potential to revisit negative dynamics in families or disrupt newfound normalcy. Meanwhile, not engaging fathers potentially deprives children of additional financial and emotional resources, thereby exacerbating risk (Bellamy, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2013).

Despite the growing body of work addressing the important and complex implications of involving non-custodial fathers in child welfare casework, and despite parallel growth in evidence that practitioners' information processing and judgments are susceptible to bias due to prior beliefs and attitudes, caseworkers' opinions of non-custodial fathers are rarely addressed (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Maxwell et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2014). O'Donnell et al. (2005), a notable exception, asked caseworkers about father involvement and found agreement that fathers should be more involved, but observed less consensus on the appropriate route to involvement. During focus groups in which caseworkers were asked general, open-ended questions regarding non-custodial fathers' status in child welfare practice, descriptors applied to these fathers included "marginal" and "afterthought" (O'Donnell et al., 2005). As distant (peripheral) others, non-custodial fathers are likely subject to some stereotype and trepidation as child welfare caseworkers interpret perceptions and form attitudes. In fact, the above-mentioned focus group interviews and other research based on analyses of case files provide some evidence of this (Davidson-Arad et al., 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2005). Others have suggested fathers are often not addressed in case plans, regardless of whether caseworkers perceive them to be a risk, and that caseworkers' negative attitudes and agencies' overall low expectations of fathers discourage father engagement (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2013; Ghatte et al., 2000; Scourfield et al., 2012; Strega et al., 2008; Zanoni et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Small, but growing literatures with rich and diverse theoretical origins suggest a rationale for linking caseworkers' attitudes to their demographic, employment, and education characteristics. Studies which rely on socialization frameworks posit that caseworkers' beliefs and attitudes mediate the relationship between caseworkers' demographic characteristics and case outcomes (McBeath, Chuang, Bunker, & Blakeslee, 2014; Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006). While some have emphasized differences in synergy among culturally matched and mismatched caseworker–client dyads (McBeath et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2006) others have focused on how caseworkers' backgrounds lead to differential perceptions and attitudes (O'Donnell et al., 2005), especially regarding clients and caseworkers' appropriate role in serving them. Specifically, caseworkers' gender (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2005) and race (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006; McBeath et al., 2014) were found to influence both case management strategies and outcomes. Underlying these attempts to link caseworkers' characteristics to case outcomes is the idea that people of different backgrounds, even within the same profession or the same workplace, construct experiences according to their own underlying cultural "syndromes" or norms (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Davidson-Arad et al., 2008; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002). These constructed experiences, in turn, are assumed to produce beliefs, opinions, and expectations that shape caseworkers' decisions and case management strategies. Beyond an association between positive attitudes toward fathers and enhanced efforts at engagement found in an exploratory study conducted by Malm, Murray and Geen (2006) there exists little empirical support for these assertions.

Representative bureaucracy theory, commonly applied in the field of administrative research, has inspired a rich tradition of systematically investigating how workers' backgrounds shape how they make sense of their work, and so, how they go about working (Salanick & Pfeffer, 1978; Weick, 1977, 1995). Using representative bureaucracy theory, studies have examined how workers of different demographic origins form differential perceptions, values, and attitudes and rely on these in forming their attitudes about the work environment (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 1995; Hindera, 1993; Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002; Salanick & Pfeffer, 1978). Evidence suggests that some backgrounds are more facilitative of certain attitudes. For instance, coming from a minority background has been associated with the workers' perception of their professional role as "minority representative" (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011; Hindera, 1993; Sowa & Selden, 2003). Selden, Brudney, and Kellough (1998) and Sowa and Selden (2003) provided evidence for this, demonstrating that public administrators' attitudes and perceptions are connected to their actions and clients' outcomes. Specifically, workers' espousal of the "minority representative role", or thinking of one's professional role as that of an advocate for minority interests, was associated with a higher percentage of favorable minority applicant loan decisions (Selden et al., 1998; Sowa & Selden, 2003).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/344608>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/344608>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)