



Research on placement moves: Seeking the perspective of foster children

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the perspectives through which research findings about placement moves in foster care are communicated in the published literature. More specifically, the logic of standpoint theory is used to explore the extent to which foster children are included as data sources in a sample of 43 research studies investigating placement moves. The findings revealed that case record data, which does not reliably represent the viewpoint of any professional or client group within the system of care, was used in the majority of studies. The number of studies using data provided by foster children is small. Overall, the body of research on placement moves is fragmented by inconsistent use of terminology and operational definitions. Foster children are a marginalized group when it comes to research and empirical knowledge building efforts focused on understanding moves from one placement to another in the system of care. Implications for research and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines research studies investigating one particular aspect of child welfare service—placement moves, or the event of moving from one placement to another by children living in out-of-home care. To be discussed in more detail later, placement moves is a concept referred to by many different names in the literature—instability, disruption, breakdown, and placement change to name a few. Regardless of the label, most researchers agree that a placement move is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to conceptualize and a challenge to study. Yet,

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such measures are routinely used as indicators for placement “stability,” which is believed to have a mediating influence on the well-being of foster children.

The major purpose of this paper is to critically examine the lenses through which research findings about placement moves are communicated in the professional literature and to challenge some of the common “wisdom” passed on. The term “placement” is generally defined by the variety of living arrangements experienced by children in out-of-home care. Typical living arrangements include: foster homes, adoptive homes, group homes, residential facilities, institutions, and other substitute care facilities. The term “move” conveys the idea that children leave or exit a placement in one living arrangement and enter another with both placements monitored by the system of care.

2. Standpoint theory as a framework for reviewing research

The logic of standpoint theory is used in this paper as a framework to examine published research studies that investigate placement moves experienced by children in foster care. A basic tenet of the theory is that any one phenomenon or event—such as a placement move—has attached to it several standpoints, or points of view. Understanding comes from concrete experience that is tied to an objective location, or the place from which people view or interpret their worlds (Swigonski, 1994). The event of a placement move minimally affects the child in transit, caregivers on both the sending and receiving ends of the move, the caseworker and supervisor responsible for overseeing the transition, birth parents, and siblings or other relatives concerned with the child’s whereabouts and well-being. The location of the *next* placement also can have ripple effects on educators, friends, neighbors, and others that have established relationships with foster children who have moved elsewhere. The reason for the move may also involve other professionals, such as police, psychiatrists, or family court judges when they are called upon to investigate, assess or decide upon a move. In sum, there are many concrete and objective standpoints from which to view the event or phenomenon of a placement move.

Standpoint theory has its roots in feminist scholarship where the views of women are used to frame communication about understanding of social conditions that disadvantage or oppress people based on gender (McGlish & Bacon, 2003). The theory argues that women have a radically different view from men, and the difference has major implications for the “how” and “what” of knowledge development (Handrahan, 1998). The logic of standpoint theory provides a framework to examine published research findings that examine the extent to which views of foster children (versus the views of others) are used to communicate understanding of placement moves experienced by children who are temporary or permanent wards of the State. Standpoint theory posits that understanding about placement moves derived from people who live the experience will add a different kind of knowing than what is generated by professionals, academics or others that have not lived the experience. A closer look at four main tenets of standpoint theory reveals its utility for such analysis.

2.1. All standpoints offer partial views

The position that youth in care are the “best experts on themselves” (Seita, 2004) is compelling, but standpoint theory accepts all views as partial and none as value-free (Swigonski, 1994). However, standpoint theory argues that marginalized and oppressed people have more chance of being objective—seeing the reality of the situation—because they have less interest in maintaining the status quo and because it is in their best interests to understand the dominant groups that determine their fates (McGlish & Bacon, 2003).

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