



Research on placement moves: Seeking the perspective of foster children

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Received 5 May 2006; received in revised form 6 July 2006; accepted 3 August 2006
Available online 20 September 2006

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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Keywords: Placement; Move; Disruption; Instability; Breakdown; Foster care; Standpoint theory

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).

Foster children and foster alumni will likely describe their experiences without concern for rules, procedures, accreditation standards, law suits, professional roles, and other constraints that might otherwise affect the standpoints of people that are employed by the system or people interested in maintaining current system affairs. This point is illustrated in writing by Tameka Patterson (2005), a former foster youth, who has this to say about the topic of stability in care:

Whatever happens to stability when children go into foster care? Does it really matter to anyone in the system that children need a stable environment to help them develop? Too often, foster kids seem to exist only in the daytime lives of their caseworkers. When a caseworker needs to go to court, and wants to look good in front of the judge, then the child matters—but what about the rest of the time? When they claim to worry about children not attending school, do they mean it? Do they try to understand why these children stay away from school? Maybe they are tired of changing schools every three months. Maybe they are dealing with the psychological impact of losing contact with a parent or a sibling—or a whole neighborhood (Patterson, 2005).

Patterson's perspective is but one of many foster children and is used only to illustrate that both the tone and content of her message provide critical pieces of understanding that would help solve the puzzle of placement moves. The power of written words notwithstanding, the above illustration is not to suggest that Patterson's viewpoint is superior to other standpoints. The perspective of caseworkers, which is not voiced here, is another important piece of the puzzle, for example.

2.2. *Social hierarchy influences knowledge*

Science exists within the social order, and as such social structure and the production of knowledge are inextricably linked (Swigonski, 1994). Furthermore, the social order tends to be hierarchical. In understanding placement moves, the hierarchy can be thought of as a vertical knowledge–influence continuum. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the top of the continuum represents the standpoints of people that dominate the knowledge building and decision making arenas of child welfare, while the bottom represents standpoints of marginalized people that are affected by decisions made but have little, if any, power to influence how the system is understood, how it operates, or how it affects service users. Those in the dominant group have the power to decide how placement moves are studied, evaluated, understood, and acted upon (e.g., best practice guidelines) by others. This power differential between dominant and marginalized groups is further complicated by the disproportionate number of foster children that are also racial minorities.

Standpoint theory emphasizes the fact that dominant groups by virtue of their role or position in the care system have greater influence on what knowledge is produced. For example, the Child Welfare League of America has formed a national working group that has researchers and policy makers working together to develop “placement stability” definitions for the purposes of promoting consistency in state level reporting of federal outcome measures (Woodruff, 2004). The working group “consists of representatives from 51 state child welfare agencies (p. 5)” and sought input from child welfare professionals. It is not clear whether input from children in care was sought by or represented within the working group. Indeed, it is a rare occurrence to find child welfare executives, policy makers, or decision makers who were themselves former foster children raised within a child welfare system (Seita, 2004). Typically, members of marginalized groups are not free to “drop in” to dominant group discussions and often have no viable avenue to

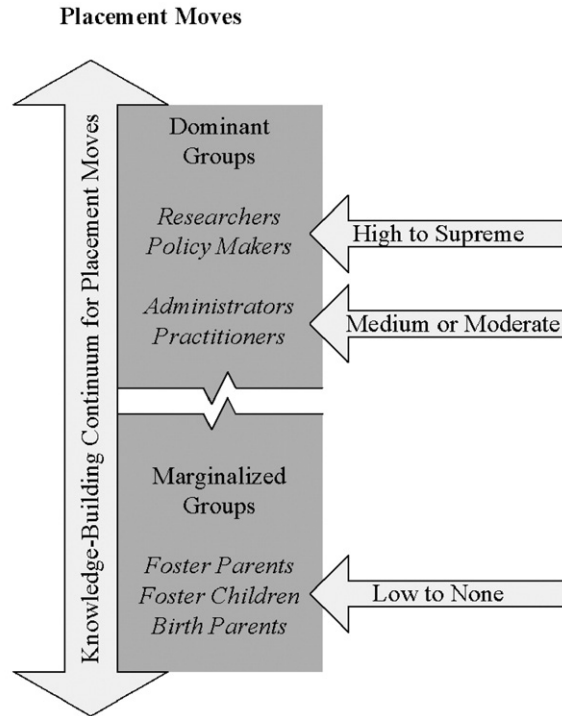


Fig. 1. Level of influence on shaping communication and understanding about placement moves.

offer unsolicited input. Consequently, perspectives of marginalized groups, such as that written by Patterson (2005), go unnoticed unless they are intentionally invited to participate by the dominant group.

2.3. Dominant groups have power over marginalized group experiences

In this paper, standpoint theory as a framework for analyzing research studies levels the knowledge-building playing field with reminders that marginalized groups, like powerful and dominant groups, possess their own values and perspectives (Moxley & Manela, 2001). Such reminders are critically important if one accepts that knowledge developers (e.g., researchers) and decision-makers (e.g., policy makers, judges, practitioners) because of their dominance influence how placement moves are understood by others; and in turn, this understanding has consequences in terms of what children (and other people) involved will experience. For example, the message a worker communicates to a child during a move will be influenced by any training and supervision received, agency policies, available and allowable services, and other system factors. Moreover, research findings have influence on how such policies, services, and practices are shaped.

2.4. Amplify the voices of marginalized groups not mute the voices of dominant groups

While standpoint theory aims to amplify the voice of oppressed groups, it does not attempt to mute the dominant group. Thus, the question raised earlier about the composition of the CWLA

national working group is not too discount the product created but rather to emphasize that the definition is incomplete; a point that is acknowledged in the report (Woodruff, 2004). In standpoint theory multiple “truths” are accepted. Dominant and marginalized groups, as well as any sub-groups, each contribute “distinctive knowledge emerging from its particular social situations” (Swigonski, 1994, p. 392). Not to be dismissed as a mere “theory” from which to criticize there is research to show that one’s position in the “world” affects what decisions one will make. For example, Britner and Mossler (2002) show that professional group membership is a stronger predictor of a professional’s decision to separate children from their families and place them in foster care than information related to the extent of the abuse or other child characteristics.

3. Research questions

The main purpose of this paper is to examine which standpoints are used to frame published research findings about placement moves. Of particular interest is to investigate which viewpoints are represented in current knowledge building efforts related to placement moves. And, in particular to what extent the standpoint of foster children is included. Data sources and operational definitions used to study placement moves in out of out-of-home care are examined to determine what researchers and their readers “see” and “do not see” (McGlish & Bacon, 2003) when communicating understanding about placement moves. Three questions are explored:

1. What data sources—or standpoints—are used by researchers to frame empirical findings about placement moves in foster care?
2. How are placement moves conceptualized and operationalized in research studies?
3. What does research based on the standpoint of foster children communicate about what is known or understood about placement moves?

4. Methodology

Forty-three books and articles presenting original quantitative and qualitative research published between 1959 and 2005 comprised the sample. The initial step in selecting items for the sample was a search of major article databases in social work, psychology, and sociology. The following search expression was applied to article abstracts in each database: (“foster care” or “foster child*”) and (disrupt* or stability or move*). Over 100 unduplicated citations resulted and each one was screened by the author to determine if the idea of placement moves was a key focus of empirical investigation. An article was initially included in the sample if the topic of placement moves (or related terms) was featured in the abstract. The article remained in the sample only if placement moves was a major or sole focus of investigation as evidenced by targeted discussion in the complete article.

Applying the same inclusion criteria, additional articles and books emerged in snowball fashion from the reference lists of selected articles. One such book (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987) qualified for the sample but is missing from the analysis because the book was not available at the time of analysis. The sampling strategy excluded many high quality research and evaluation studies that included mention of placement moves but did not study the topic per se. For example, studies that included placement stability only as one of several outcome indicators (but did not include targeted discussion of the concept) were excluded. Also excluded were clinical case studies presenting therapist’s narratives of individual child trauma and separation. Research investigating the initial removal of children by child protective services was also excluded

because the birth family is not typically classified as a living arrangement or placement *before* children enter foster care for the first time. The work of some researchers, such as Folman (1998) and Rittner (1995) has challenged this view, however.

It is worth mentioning that several informative literature reviews have been written with most having the purpose of fleshing out factors that hold some predictive power to foretell which groups of children are most at risk for placement moves or most likely to remain in one placement (e.g., Children and Family Research Center, 2004; Dore & Eisner, 1993; Herrick, Williams, & Pecora, 2004; Pardeck, 1985; Proch & Taber, 1985; Teather, Davidson, & Pecora, 1995). These literature reviews also were excluded from the sample because they were not original research studies.

The final sample of 43 books and articles make up a substantial portion of the body of literature on placement moves but it is not a complete set. Noteworthy is that the 43 studies included research from nine different countries including Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Scotland, Sweden, and the United States. Some studies used national samples, while others used regional or local samples. As it turned out, the studies also varied on several key dimensions of placement moves.

5. Results and discussion

The findings are presented and discussed below according to the three main research questions of this study.

5.1. *What data sources—or standpoints—are used by researchers to frame empirical findings about placement moves in foster care?*

Type of data source was used as a proxy measure for the particular standpoint represented in each study. Table 1 provides a list of all 43 studies and identifies the country where the research took place, as well as the particular data source used. The observation that nine different countries were represented in the collection of studies reviewed was an unanticipated finding, which suggests that placement moves is a phenomenon shared by foster care systems in North America, Europe, and Australia. The six types of data sources shown in Table 1 were derived from the studies sampled. Consequently, other possible data sources—such as therapists and siblings—absent from the collection of studies reviewed are thereby also omitted from this analysis.

Table 1 shows that over half of the studies relied on case record data (either in paper or electronic form) to measure placement movement. In contrast, about one-third of studies also included caseworkers, one-quarter included foster parents, one-fifth included foster children and only one study out of 43 included birth parents as a data source. Lining up these percentages alongside the knowledge building continuum illustrated in Fig. 1, it seems that the body of research on placement moves is vulnerable to the influence of social hierarchy, particularly when one considers that measures of placement moves derived from case records are constructs of researchers (Sallnas, Vinnerljung, & Westernmark, 2004).

All studies using case records derived data on placement moves from this source. Although some studies included parents and foster children as data sources, placement data were not often gathered from them. Instead, parents and children provided data for other key study variables, such as well-being measures or additional service history variables. A few studies had caseworkers or foster parents verify the accuracy of placement move data as documented in the case records. In no instance was any other data source asked to comment upon the value or meaning of placement move data gathered from case records.

Table 1
Research studies by country and data source

Study (publication date)	Country	Data sources					
		Case record	Case worker	Foster parent	Foster child	Birth parent	Other ^a
Maas and Engler (1959)	US	CR					OT
Ambinder (1965)	US	CR					
Kraus (1971)	Australia	CR					
Stone and Stone (1983)	US	CR					
Pardeck (1984)	US	CR					
Taber and Proch (1987)	US	CR					
Staff and Fein (1995)	US	CR					
Usher, Randolph, and Gogan (1999)	US	CR					
Smith et al. (2001)	US	CR					
Strijker et al. (2002)	Netherlands	CR					
Ward and Skuse (2001)	England	CR					
Farmer et al. (2003)	US	CR					
Wulczyn et al. (2003)	US	CR					
Rubin et al. (2004)	US	CR					
Sallnas et al. (2004)	Sweden	CR					
Ryan and Testa (2005)	US	CR					
Kalland and Sinkkonen (2001)	Finland	CR	CW				
Hartnett et al. (1999)	US	CR	CW	FP			
Leathers (2002)	US	CR	CW	FP			
Leathers (2005)	US	CR	CW	FP			
Terling-Watt (2001)	US	CR		FP			
Fanshel and Shinn (1978)	US	CR			FC	BP	OT
Festinger (1983)	US	CR			FC		
Palmer (1996)	Canada		CW				
Fernandez (1999)	Australia		CW				
Barber et al. (2001)	Australia		CW				
Barber and Delfabbro (2003b)	Australia		CW				
Webster et al. (2000)	US		CW				
Holland et al. (2005)	UK		CW				
Newton, Litrownik, and Landsverk (2000)	US		CW	FP			
Sinclair and Wilson (2003)	England		CW	FP			
Gilbertson et al. (2005)	Australia		CW	FP			
Sinclair et al. (2005)	England		CW	FP	FC		
Lipscombe et al. (2004)	UK		CW	FP	FC		
Barber and Delfabbro (2005)	Australia		CW		FC		
McAuley and Trew (2000)	Ireland			FP			OT
Selwyn and Quinton (2004)	UK			FP			
Johnson et al. (1995)	US				FC		
Barber and Delfabbro (2003a)	Australia				FC		
Herrenkohl et al. (2003)	US				FC		
Chapman et al. (2004)	US				FC		
James (2004)	US						OT
James, Landsverk, and Slymen (2004)	US						OT
Sum ^b :		23	16	11	9	1	5

^a Other (OT) includes: community members, teachers, secondary research data set.

^b Sum totals to more than 100% ($N=43$) since multiple data sources were used in a single study.

The reasons why foster children's voices are not more common in research investigating placement moves is not obvious. It may be that the proliferation of electronic databases makes data extraction and mining a more appealing or convenient data collection method to researchers. Another obstacle to including foster children as research participants is custody status. Human Subjects review boards classify wards of the State as a protected population, which leads to increased scrutiny on research protocols and practices. Because foster children are cared for by the State, researchers necessarily must negotiate the socio-political environment of local child protection authorities in order to earn confidence and permission to access foster children (Berrick, Frasch, & Fox, 2000).

The fact that the current empirical knowledge base for placement moves is largely framed by case record data is an important consideration for determining what research findings have to offer the current knowledge base for understanding placement moves. Measurement problems aside, case record data are often gathered by multiple recorders. The type and format of case records vary by agency, region, or state. Moreover, case record data used to indicate placement moves are detached from or stripped bare of any context. In other words, case records do not qualify as an "objective location" or a "concrete experience" to be considered a standpoint (Swigonski, 1994). Case records do not have a stake in the experience of placement moves. The result is that researchers and their readers "see" how many children experience a particular number of moves, which has some value to foster care administrators. However, what we "do not see" is the quality of the move experience or its consequences for foster children and others. Without a measure of quality, any meaning given to high versus low numbers of placement moves is open to question.

5.2. How are placement moves conceptualized and operationalized in research studies?

The collection of 43 studies examined produced nearly two dozen concept labels to communicate the idea of a placement move, which included: move, disruption, breakdown, obvious breakdown, successful placement, placement success, placement pattern, transfer, shifts in placement, stability, instability, placement pathways, spell, placement change, change in placement, move event, patterns of movement, number of placements, status of placement, stability-within-placement, quality of placement, and placement failure.

Beyond the many concept labels used to name the event of placement move, the range of operational definitions used was equally unwieldy. However, after carefully comparing the similarity and differences of each operational definition used, the author created six non-mutually exclusive categories as follows:

- *No Operational Definition Given*: Three studies named a particular concept or variable label but offered no operational definition per se: placement change (Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995); disruption and breakdown (Selwyn & Quinton, 2004); and placement stability and moves (Gilbertson, Richardson, & Barber, 2005). These studies were carried out in England, the United Kingdom, or the United States.
- *Conditional Criteria Specified*: Three studies emphasized conditional criteria to decide whether or not a placement move would count as such. For example, one study only counted a move if "there was clear intent for it [the placement] to be permanent" (Ambinder, 1965), while two others counted only moves resulting from failure by the foster parent or unexpected reasons for termination (Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001; Sallnas et al., 2004). These studies were carried out in Sweden or the United States.

- *Quality of Placement Moves*: Seven studies took care to include a measure of quality as an effort to capture some element of the placement move experience from the standpoint of children, their caregivers, or others. Three studies added measures of quality to give context from which to judge the significance of moves for children (Lipscombe, Moyers, & Farmer, 2004; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005). Two studies also added other measures of change, such as change in schools or community (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 2003; Holland, Faulkner, & Perez-del-Aguila, 2005). Finally two other studies gave voice to youth in care by having them share or rate their experiences related to placement (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003a; Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004). These studies took place in Australia, England, the United Kingdom, or the United States.
- *Reference Point*: Seven studies emphasized the occurrence of one or more moves relative to a particular frame of reference. The frame of references included a specific time frame, such as 18 or 24 months (Kraus, 1971; Stone & Stone, 1983; McAuley & Trew, 2000), move from the initial placement (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001), move from kin placement (Terling-Watt, 2001), or placement move occurring after the onset of the study (Strijker, Zandberg, & van der Meulen, 2002; Leathers, 2005). These studies took place in Australia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, or the United States.
- *Cut-off Values*: Eight studies used “cut-off” values to create multiple sample groups. In almost all cases, the groups created by a study were then labeled as “stable” versus “unstable.” The most popular cut off value discussed in the literature seems to be that children with one or two placements are regarded as having a stable care experience, while children with three or more placements are regarded as experiencing unstable care (e.g., Pardeck, 1984; Rubin, Alessandrini, Feudtner, Mandell & Hadley, 2004). However, other more complicated cut-off values are used. For example, Barber and his colleagues apply a more conservative approach by counting two or more placements as unstable, so long as they occurred within a specified time frame (Barber, Defabbro, & Cooper, 2001; Barber & Delfabbro, 2003b; Barber & Delfabbro, 2005). Others combined conditions and cut-of-values to arrive at definition (Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers, & Testa, 1999; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000; Farmer, Wagner, Burns, & Richards, 2003). These studies were carried out in either Australia or the United States.
- *Counting Units*: The remaining studies (listed in Table 1) approached measurement of placement moves by straightforward counting. However, the exact unit counted varied across studies and included: types of placements, addresses, date of relocation, and placement codes. Most studies using a counting method specified exclusionary criteria. Placements often (but not always) excluded from move counts were: return home, adoptive home, re-entry to care, runaway, detention, hospital, emergency shelter, and any placement that may have occurred in the days (or months) immediately following children’s first entries to care. These studies took place in Australia, Canada, England, or the United States.

The above groupings of studies by operational definitions reveals that the majority of definitions used to study placement moves is disconnected from the move experience felt by children as they shift from one placement to another—a finding expected given the disproportionate number of studies relying on case record data. Also noted is that the operational definitions used do not show any pattern by the country in which the research takes place. Thus, the problem of defining the concept of placement moves may well be one of international concern.

It is worth noting that variation also existed in the sample compositions across the 43 studies examined. For example, study samples varied by age group (e.g., infants, adolescents) and cohort

(e.g., entry, exit, cross-sectional). Other studies used exclusionary criteria based on type of placement, level of child functioning, or whether children have any siblings placed in care to comprise their samples. It is reasonable to expect that placement moves will affect different groups of children differently. However, the various dimensions of samples appearing in the 43 studies reviewed did not bring order or understanding to the array of definitions used.

Given the wide range of operational definitions (and samples) used in research investigating placement moves, it is reasonable to ask: Precisely what is it that researchers are investigating in studies that claim to examine placement moves? Efforts of more recent research studies provide helpful guidance to what perhaps should be studied. Sinclair and colleagues (2003, 2005), for example, give consideration to understanding that comes from foster children by taking care to have social workers and foster parents consider “the child’s point of view” when rating the quality of a placement as going “very well,” “as well as can be expected,” or “not very well.” Similarly, Lipscombe, Moyers, and Farmer (2004) build in an aspect of quality into their measures allowing for a continuing placement to be rated poorly if difficulties are present and a move to be rated as good if the placement ending was planned. And, Barber and Delfabbro (2003a) present the first qualitative results that specifically explore foster youths reactions to placement moves. However, there is a long way to go before research definitions on placement moves communicate a message similar to Herrick and colleagues (2004) who state “a child’s living situation is where the child lives and what they view as their ‘home’—temporary or not” (p. 4).

5.3. What does research based on the standpoint of foster children communicate about what is known or understood about placement moves?

The number of studies representing the standpoint of children in the body of research reviewed is small but their message is compelling. A brief summary of key studies is presented below in chronological order.

- Festinger (1983) asked 277 young adults discharged from care after at least a stay of 5 consecutive years to recall their placement move experiences. Only 167 were able to remember the experience of moving in care. Of those that could recall their placement moves, 30% reported having moved too much, 5% indicated they would have preferred to move more, and 62% felt they had moved “about the right amount.” Of significance to considering the standpoint of foster children in research, Festinger (1983) also found former foster youth to be more critical in their general opinions of placement moves as 72% of the sample agreed with the statement that “children in foster care are moved around too much.” Festinger suggests that youths opinions about moving in care were influenced more so by what they had seen and heard than by their own experience in care. It also seems plausible that the temporary nature of the foster care experience may have foster children thinking or anticipating the possibility of moving, even when a move is not imminent.
- Johnson, Yoken, and Voss’s (1995) interviews with 59 children aged 11 to 14 years old in Cook County communicate understanding that youth have both positive and negative perspectives about their overall placement experiences. With respect to placement moves, 58% of children reported not having involvement in the decision to move, and over three-quarters said they tried to get along in the foster home. Most youth felt that the foster parents were trying to help them but nearly one in five (17%) of youth reported serious problems in their current foster home.
- Barber and Delfabbro (2003a) interviewed 13 foster youth ages 10 to 15 years old and 19 foster carers in South Australia. All the youth in the sample had experienced at least one move after

exhibiting problematic behavior (e.g., noncompliance, sexualized behavior, property damage, running away). Youth characterized their moves in two ways. Some were unhappy with their placements and welcomed the move. Others reported that they had liked the initial placement and regretted the move. All but one youth that disliked their placements reported talking to someone about their concerns. However, some did not speak to their workers because they either believed their workers to be disinterested or powerless to do anything about their current living situations.

- In a study by [Chapman, Wall, and Barth \(2004\)](#) interviews were conducted with 727 children aged 11 years and older and living in foster care across the United States. This study did not study placement moves per se but asked youth, a majority of whom had experienced a placement move, their perspective about their current placements. A key message of this study was that most (but not all) children in care wished to see more of their parents during their foster care stay and to be reunited with their parents. The latter was consistent with findings reported by [Fanshel and Shinn \(1978\)](#).
- [Lipscombe, Moyers, and Farmer \(2004\)](#) interviewed 68 youth in care ages 11 to 17 years old, as well as their foster parents to assess parenting strategies for fostering teenagers. They found that changes in relationships between youth and foster parents were related to the quality of a placement, as well as to whether a placement ended in a move. Specifically, they reported that foster youth presenting new types of difficult behaviors challenged foster parents to adjust their parenting styles, which did not always occur. Furthermore, youth behavior that negatively affected other children in the household seemed to draw less commitment and warmth from the foster parent, which had a negative impact on outcomes. Other research focused on better understanding foster care placement (versus placement moves) supports the conclusion that relationships between foster children and foster parents are complicated and delicate matters ([Sinclair et al., 2005](#)).

The few studies summarized above provide some clues about the nature of placement moves that are not typically captured in the operational definitions used by the majority of studies reviewed for this study. Studies that included foster youth as a data source reports both positive and negative aspects to the placement move experience. This understanding from foster youth challenges the underlying assumption of most research definitions that are based on case record data; that is, placement events are absolutely negative and therefore should *always* be avoided. The understanding that any placement move has potential to be both helpful and harmful to children in their journey through care is an important dimension to build into definitions of a placement move. Particularly if researchers wish to avoid errors that judge placement moves as events to be avoided when in fact the circumstances of the moves are in the best interests of the children or “placement preservation” as the preferred event when the circumstances of placements are harmful to children.

The quality or dynamics of a particular placement is an essential factor in deciding whether or not a placement move may have potential to harm or benefit the foster child being affected. The relationship (or perceived relationship) between foster child and birth family or kin is one factor that deserves continual attention as foster children move from one placement to another. Additionally, the interpersonal relationships between children and the adults who care for them are in all likelihood more important than the individual characteristics of each. In sum, the standpoint of foster children suggests that a research definition of placement moves should incorporate some measure of interpersonal relationships that make up the placement move experience.

A recent report by [Testa, Fuller, and Rolock \(2005\)](#), which surfaced in the final stages of writing this paper, provides an example of the shift that researchers need to make to give focus to this relationship dynamic. Although Testa and his colleagues rely on case record data to portray

what is happening with foster children in Illinois, they take care to highlight the idea of family stability (versus placement stability) and add the concept of continuity, or the idea that foster children need to stay connected to kin, community, or school in spite of any placement moves through care. Their report provides an example of how case record data can be paired with the personal recollections—the standpoint—of the person whose experience we seek to understand.

6. Conclusions and implications

Sallanas and her colleagues (2004) aptly capture the general concept of placement move as “a construction of researchers, difficult to conceptualize on a theoretical and phenomenological level” (p. 150). Indeed, the wide net of concept labels and operational definitions cast off by the 43 studies reviewed for this paper provide evidence to support this statement.

The findings of this study point to several areas needing attention in research on placement moves. First, data or views about placement moves from the perspective of foster children, as well as other marginalized groups (e.g., foster parents, birth parents) is lacking in the research. Second, to date case record data, which does not reliably represent any particular standpoint, is the most common data source used to study placement moves. Third, more attention is needed by researchers to develop clear conceptual definitions of placement moves so that research findings can better contribute to systematic knowledge building efforts that have utility for improving the placement move experience for foster children. Fourth, studies that report the perspectives of foster children on placement moves need to be integrated into the definitions and measures used to study the phenomenon of placement moves.

There are several implications of these conclusions for researchers but all rest on the major tenets of standpoint theory, which include: multiple standpoints are necessary for full understanding of placement moves, what is presently known about placement moves is influenced by social hierarchy since dominant groups are afforded more opportunity to share their perspectives than marginalized groups, researchers as a dominant group have influence on how foster children experience placement moves, and balance of perspectives from different groups is essential to understanding and addressing the problems of placement moves in the foster care system.

Since research on placement moves is being conducted in at least nine countries, there is an opportunity to study the placement move experience across and within cultures. However, before any such research efforts—international or otherwise—continue or get underway, there is much groundwork to do. For one, placement move as an *event* (i.e., something that happens at a particular place and time) versus *experience* (i.e., something that a person lives through) each need to be clearly defined in ways that communicate the separation of these two important concepts. The question of “what” researchers are studying must be addressed before research can investigate “how” placement move experiences affect “whom.” The results of this study summarize several groupings of definitions for how placement events are counted. These may offer a beginning point of dialogue that might encourage researchers to reflect on the relative value of case records and existing data sets for studying placement moves. Inviting foster youth (including alumni) and other marginalized groups to such discussions will add to the fruitfulness of such dialogue.

Creating research definitions to study the experience of placement moves is a more complex matter. And, what foster children know about moving must be regarded as central to any efforts at creating such definitions. Indeed, being a foster child presupposes a placement move. Or said another way, a placement move is an event that is dependent upon one’s status as a foster child or

ward of the State. Placement moves by the State do not happen to individuals outside any system of care. Absence of knowledge generated from the viewpoint of foster children will result in a disconnection or break in understanding of the placement move experience as was illustrated in Fig. 1. Studies using foster children as data sources pointed to the importance of continuity of relationships as a central dynamic of the move experience. Moreover, their perspective raises awareness that placement moves have both positive and negatives aspects.

For children in care, moving from one placement to another seems to be less about a physical location transfer and more about how their connections with people are changed by the move experience. Indeed, research reporting the standpoint of foster parents tells us that they too are often frustrated by a system that gives them responsibility to care for foster children but no authority to “parent” them (Selwyn & Quinton, 2004). Furthermore, placement breakdown has been reported to be an equally unhappy experience for foster parents as for the children moved from their homes (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003a).

Greater care must be taken by researchers to ensure that operational definitions and the labels given to placement moves lend themselves to a common knowledge building effort. Without uniform definitions and measures, it is impossible for research findings on placement moves to build knowledge about this important feature of the foster care experience. Furthermore, if researchers wish to generate knowledge that will ultimately benefit foster children who experience placement moves, then greater care must be taken to craft operational definitions that are meaningfully connected to this vulnerable client group. For example, researchers could consult foster children when deciding which criteria to use for including or excluding particular placement moves as part of their measures.

Case record data represent placement moves as an artifact of the system instead of an event experienced by children and other people in the context of the system. Ignoring or overlooking the standpoint of foster children in research on placement moves leaves a major gap in understanding this important dimension of the foster care experience, as well as the impressions or scars left by the move experience. Such gaps in research can also lead to incomplete policy. For example, despite the fact that case record data only account for physical living arrangement locations of children, the cut-off value of three or more placements has routinely been interpreted by researchers and policymakers to infer placement stability versus instability. The origin of this dichotomy appears to lead back to Fanshel and Shinn who in 1978 summarize the number of placements experienced by foster children in their sample, and simply state: “Three or more placements would reflect what many experts consider excessive moves...(p.139).” It may be that this statement—made by two researchers who have earned their place at the top of the knowledge generating hierarchy—has stimulated an arbitrary dichotomy that has other researchers communicating one or two placements as “stable” versus three or more placements as “unstable” (e.g., Pardeck, 1984; Rubin et al., 2004).

One does not have to look too much further to see the policy implications derived from this arbitrary dichotomy. Indeed, the federal standard used to judge individual states on the dimension of placement moves in out-of-home care is “all children who have been in care less than 12 months from the time of the latest removal, 86.7% or more children had *no more than two placement settings*” (ACYF-CF-IM-01-07, August 16, 2001 emphasis added). Monitoring the number of placements that children experience during their foster care stay is an administrative responsibility that all agencies should carefully conduct. However, if researchers are to generate knowledge that adds to our understanding of placement moves and how the experience of such moves impact children, then a concerted effort must be made to investigate dimensions of placement moves other than frequency. Indeed, measures that capture the quality and

consequence of the move experience for foster children should be added as routine entries into case records and administrative databases.

While efforts to gather input from foster children are becoming more common (e.g., Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004), children and their families have historically been excluded from child welfare decision making arenas. The relative absence of research findings presented from the standpoint of foster children may further marginalize this already vulnerable group of society's children. Researchers have a dominant role in shaping what is known about placement moves. The understanding about placement moves communicated via research findings has the power to impact peoples' day-to-day experiences of placement moves. And, researchers have the power to ensure an overall balance of perspective in knowledge building efforts by ensuring that multiple standpoints are represented in the body of literature on placement moves.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented by the author in February 2006 at the 52nd Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education. Chicago, Illinois.

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