Connective Complexity: African American Adolescents and the Relational Context of Kinship Foster Care

Ann Schwartz

Attempts to address racial disproportionality in child welfare must include a focus on the benefits and challenges facing children in kinship care. African American children not only are overrepresented in the child welfare system, but also are placed disproportionately in kinship foster care. Using a sample of 18 African American adolescents ages 11 to 14, this article explores how the relational context of care experienced by adolescents in kinship foster care differs from that of adolescents in nonkinship foster family placements. Findings are presented regarding the stability of relationships as well as complex role dilemmas experienced by kinship youth as they relate to caregivers and birthparents in the child welfare context. Implications are given for practice with kinship families.

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In the United States, African American children comprise the second largest ethnic group in foster care (32%), after white, non-Hispanic children (41%; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2006), and the largest group in kinship foster care (40.1%; Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2006). Over the last few decades, states have increasingly placed children in kinship care, although both the proportion and number of children in kinship foster care seem to have leveled off in more recent years (Geen, 2003b). In addition, federal policy changes have also promoted the use of a child’s relatives as foster parents (USDHHS, 2000).

Although child welfare policies now encourage formal kinship placements, informal care of children by relatives is not a new practice among African Americans (Hegar, 1999). Such care has allowed children in West African societies to leave home to attend school. It has been prominent in the United States since slave children who were separated from their parents relied on family members and fictive kin and is prominent whenever parents have faced economic hardship (Gutman, 1976; Stack, 1985). Informal kinship care has also been necessitated by discriminatory practices that excluded African American children from formal child welfare institutions until after World War II (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972). As policies have shifted from exclusion to inclusion, and as relatives of African American children have become approved or licensed foster parents, the incorporation of children in informal caregiving arrangements into kinship foster placements may have contributed to more African American children in foster care (Testa, 1997).

Reliance on kin networks allows children to draw on an important, recognized strength of African American families. Strong extended family ties provide members with support in facing difficulties, achieving successes, and performing important social func-

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tions (Hill, 1971; McAdoo, 1978; Nobles, 2007). Billingsley (1968) recognized that kinship and community networks are also intertwined. Propinquity to kin remains a defining attribute of African American families, as 85% of all African Americans live in a city where relatives also reside (Hill et al., 1993). Among African Americans, kinship configurations continue to transcend the nuclear family to include extended blood relatives as well as nonrelatives (Dodson, 2007).

Within the kinship network, African American grandmothers have played an important role in socializing and caring for their grandchildren (Ruiz & Zhu, 2004; Jimenez, 2002). Older women have also served as caretakers for nonrelated children in their community. African American grandmothers have often taken children into their household so that their parents could work or even leave to find work elsewhere (Jimenez, 2002).

Strong kinship networks may serve as a protective factor against child maltreatment and help to explain why, despite the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system, National Incidence Studies find no statistically significant differences in overall maltreatment rates between African American and white families (Hill, 2006). In fact, African American families exhibit lower rates after controlling for income level, unemployment, and degree of urbanization.

The disproportionate number of African American children in the child welfare system together with the rise in kinship foster care placements raises important questions regarding how African American children are served by such placements and calls for more nuanced research examining the benefits and challenges of the kinship versus nonkinship setting. Little is known about how the relational context varies by placement type beyond evidence that children in kinship care remain more connected to people they know, including their birthparents, compared to those placed with nonrelatives.

Researchers have consistently shown that children in kinship placements maintain more connections with family and
community than those in nonkinship placements (e.g., Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Testa & Slack, 2002). Children placed with kin average fewer placements (Gibbs & Muller, 2000) and are also more likely to remain in their first foster care placement (Courtney, 1995). They are reunified with birthparents less quickly and less often than children in nonkinship homes (Testa, 1997), but once they leave care, they exhibit lower reentry rates (Courtney & Needell, 1997).

Although the kinship context may enhance connections to significant people, it may simultaneously result in confusion regarding relationships. Children in kinship foster care essentially have multiple parents—birthparents with whom they retain contact, relative caregivers, and the state. In such a situation, children may confront a certain amount of complexity regarding how they should act and their sense of identity.

Connective Complexity: An Analytical Framework

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism provides a useful lens for examining the relational context of kinship foster care. Its central premise is that people attach symbolic meaning to things and then act toward such things on the basis of the ascribed meaning (Howard, 2000). Individuals reflect on the symbolic information they receive from others in order to define and evaluate themselves (Roberts & Bengston, 1993). The structural branch of symbolic interactionism assimilates role theory with the tenets of the interactionist perspective (Stryker, 1981). Role theory focuses on the behaviors of individuals dictated by the social positions they hold and presents a number of useful concepts regarding role dilemmas that may challenge a person’s sense of self (Biddle, 1986).

Coupling theoretical insights with current studies, this research contributes to the building of analytical frameworks through proposing the idea of connective complexity as a way of conceptualizing the relational context of kinship foster care. This construct refers to a possible relational situation in the kinship setting where a child
retains valuable connections that are also complicated in ways not present in the parental care setting.

When a relative, such as a grandparent, becomes a young person’s custodial caregiver, that caregiver must deal with the dual roles of grandparent and parent and determine how to balance the two. The gerontological literature addresses such role dilemmas facing grandparents (e.g., Burton, 1996), but corresponding dilemmas encountered by recipients of care have been ignored. Having dual connections to a caregiver, a child may experience role ambiguity when “shared specifications set for an expected role are incomplete or insufficient to tell the incumbent what is desired or how to do it” (Biddle, 1979, chap. 8). The child may wonder, “Is this person my grandmother or my mother?” or “Do I relate any differently to this person now that she has the responsibility to care for me?” Furthermore, because young people in kinship care often maintain contact with birthparents, this situation may create confusion for them as they seek to individuate and establish their own identity.

Role conflict may also emerge as the behavioral expectations of dual roles come into contradiction (Biddle, 1979). At times, children in kinship settings may experience tension when, for instance, the expectations of grandchild and foster child are contradictory. As young people strive to attain some degree of autonomy from their parents during adolescence, they often look to grandparents and other relatives for support (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992). If that supportive figure is now in a parental role, that source of support may be lost. Holman (2001) also theorizes that when children living with grandparents are unhappy with their birthparents, they may want grandparents who can function in a nurturing, outsider role. That may be difficult if those grandparents, now in a more parental role, must be disciplinarians and set rules.

Continuing contact with birthparents may result in some degree of role reversal for children in kinship care who may struggle with the desire to care for parents who cannot care well for themselves. These children may also experience role reversal with their caregivers, if such caregivers are older and facing health problems.
On average, kinship caregivers are older than nonrelative foster parents (Scannapieco, 1999).

**Methods**

Within a comparative, exploratory study, designed to investigate the effects of type of foster care placement on the experiences of African American adolescents, a particular emphasis was on how the relational context of kinship and nonkinship placements differ. Specifically, the following research questions were examined: *How does the maintenance of familial connections by African American adolescents in kinship and nonkinship foster family care differ? How do the role dilemmas faced by African American adolescents in kinship and nonkinship foster family care differ?*

To evaluate the research questions, African American adolescents, ages 11 to 14, from kinship and inracial, nonkinship foster family care were recruited for two samples.1 Those in kinship foster care were in the physical custody of at least one “relative or someone else emotionally close to a child (e.g., friends, neighbors, godparents)” (Leos-Urbel, Bess, & Geen, 1999, p. 1) and in the legal custody of the state. Early adolescents were selected since they are beginning a crucial stage of psychosocial development where they face the central crisis of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1968).

Data were gathered from participants through an interview constructed by the researcher, observations, and case files. Interview responses provided a qualitative assessment of the role dilemmas experienced by the participants. Placement history was measured through the interview, and case files were examined to corroborate responses. Participants’ connectedness to sig-

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1 Initially, a third sample was also comprised of African American adolescents in transracial, nonkinship foster family care. The transracial versus inracial dimension of placement was never a major focus of the study. Because the number of transracial participants was so small, the analysis of this group ended up being quite limited, so it is not discussed in this paper.
significant individuals was measured through specific interview questions, assessing whether participants’ contact with members of their birthfamily had changed because of being in foster care. Participants were asked if moving in with their current caregiver had involved changes in contact compared to their living situation prior to removal.

Using information from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, packets were sent to individuals randomly selected from three regional areas. Several attempts to increase the response rate resulted in the 18 cases used in the analysis discussed in this paper—9 kinship and 9 inracial, nonkinship placements.

All but two interviews took place in participants’ homes. Matching interviewers and respondents on social characteristics may result in respondents feeling more comfortable and reduce reactive effects (Fontana & Frey, 1998). Since all of the adolescents interviewed were African American and the researcher was Caucasian, the researcher consciously recruited African American cointerviewers.

Data analysis entailed combining descriptive analysis of quantitative data and thematic analysis of qualitative data from interviews and observations, following the template organizing style of interpretation. This approach, developed by Crabtree and Miller (1992), allows the researcher to develop codes a priori from known empirical or theoretical findings and apply these to the collected data. Templates can be modified during analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Results**

Participants from the two samples were similar on demographic characteristics such as average age, grade level, and gender. The nine participants in kinship care were placed with a variety of relatives and fictive kin, with the majority (56%) residing with a grandparent caregiver. Adolescents in kinship placements exhibited stronger connections to people and places than those in nonkinship placements but also greater role complexity in their relationships with caregivers and birthparents as a result of those connections.
Placement Histories

Overall, adolescents in both samples had averaged 3.78 placements and 27.17 months in foster care, with an average duration per placement of 6.99 months. Comparing samples, kinship participants exhibited greater placement stability than did nonkinship participants (Table 1). Only one relative caregiver had permanent managing conservatorship (PMC) of a participant at the time of the interview, but by the end of data collection, another three had obtained PMC of adolescents in their care, and one had adopted her granddaughter. In contrast, six nonkinship participants remained in the same foster home, one had returned to his birthmother, one had entered a relative placement, and one was in a residential treatment center.

Contact With Birthmother

In the two samples, all but one adolescent stated that they saw less of their birthmother being in care. One young woman in a kinship placement with her grandmother saw her mother on a daily basis. In general, those in kinship care saw more of their mothers in their current placement than did those in nonkinship care. Of the other eight kinship participants, three reported seeing their birthmother once a week, one several times a week, one twice a month, and one

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once a month. One reported that he had only seen his birthmother once in the last 10 months, and only one reported having no contact. In contrast, five of the participants in nonkinship placements reported having no contact with their birthmothers.

**Contact With Birthfather**

For most participants in both samples, being in care had little impact on their relationship with their birthfather because they either had never had a relationship or a very tenuous one. Of the 18 participants, 8 (44%)—three in relative and five in nonrelative placements—had never had any contact. Two kinship participants and one nonkinship participant stated that prior to removal, their contact with their birthfather had ceased, even though they had previously had contact.

Three nonkinship and two kinship participants reported that they saw less of their birthfathers in their current placement compared to when they were not in foster care. Two other kinship participants did not find that their contact had diminished in care. One participant, living with her maternal grandmother, continued to see her father on weekends when she visited her paternal grandparents, as she had before entering care. Another placed with his paternal grandmother actually reported seeing more of his birthfather after entering this placement.

**Contact With Siblings and Extended Family**

All nine (100%) participants in nonkinship placements and six (67%) in kinship placements reported seeing less of at least one biological sibling than they had when they were not in foster care. No nonkinship participants reported seeing siblings who did not live with them more than once a week. In contrast, one participant in kinship care saw his brother every day before and after school while the brother waited for his father to pick him up from his maternal grandmother’s home where the participant resided. One kinship participant was actually able to see one of his sisters more often since being placed with his grandmother than he did when
he lived with his birthmother. Two others in kin placements had remained with all of their siblings.

Adolescents in kinship placements were also living in households with additional adults besides their assigned caregivers. Six (67%) participants had an adult aunt or uncle living in their household. In comparison, only two (22%) nonkinship households contained other adults—a foster mother’s boyfriend and an adult child.

**Role Dilemmas**

To explore how an adolescent’s connections in the kinship foster setting might impact role dilemmas, several interview questions centered on the language both the participants and their caregivers used to talk to and about one another. Responses revealed that adolescents in nonkinship placements demonstrated less role ambiguity compared to those in kinship placements. The nonkinship participants could be placed in three categories based on the way in which they referred to their caregivers. One group of two participants called their foster parents “Miss” or “Mr.” followed by their first name and referred to them as “foster” parents when discussing them with others. A second group of three participants called their foster parents “mom” and “dad” but also used the word “foster” when describing their relationship to other people. The remaining four referred to their foster parents using parental terms and stated that they did not ever refer to them as their “foster” parents; however, two of these referred to their foster parents only by their first names during the entire interview.

Most nonkinship participants did not seem to view their caregivers as replacing their actual parents, since five (56%) used the terminology of “foster” in reference to their caregivers, and two (22%) showed that they did not firmly think of their caregivers as “mom” and “dad.” Despite discrepancies between what some of the participants said they did and what they actually did in the interview, they did not seem to be confused about their caregivers’ role as they did not correct themselves in the course of discussion.
No participants in nonkinship placements had a prior relationship with their caregivers; thus, they had not known them in a different role. This was not the case for the kinship participants. None of them referred to their relative caregivers—directly or in talking to others—using the term “foster”; however, some did use different relational labels to refer to them. They confronted two kinds of role ambiguity—lack of clarity over whether a caregiver was to be viewed as a parent or a grandparent (or other relation) and confusion as to who is the true parent, one’s caregiver or birthparent.

Four (44%) kinship participants clearly exhibited these struggles. When one participant, living with her grandmother, was asked “What do you usually call her?” she replied, “Grandma or, sometimes I slip up and call her mama.” Remarks by her grandmother reiterated this ambiguity; she told the researcher that she made a point of telling her grandchildren to call her “granny” even though “the state calls me their mother.”

Along similar lines, another participant, in explaining his relationship to his caregiver, said that since his aunt used to be married to the son of his caregiver, his caregiver was “kinda like my grandmother too.” At the same time, this young man, who had lived with his caregiver for 10 out of his 13 years, stated that he called her “mom,” referred to her as such when talking to others, and that she referred to him as her “son.”

Not only did this participant demonstrate some confusion regarding the role of his caregiver, but he also pointed out that it could be confusing as to who was really his mother. During the interview when referring to his birthmother, he would often call her “my mom” and then correct himself—“I mean, my real mom.” A second participant stated that she called both her birthmother and her grandmother with whom she lived by “mama.” She remarked, “They don’t know which one I’m calling, so I’m like, ‘No, my mama.’” This statement suggests that the role ambiguity was compounded by frequent contact; when the birthmother and grandmother were together, it was unclear whether the grandmother remained in the parental role or shifted to a different role.
Another role dilemma of interest was possible role conflict emerging from contradictory expectations of dual roles. Adolescents might experience difficulties if their caregivers only enacted the role of a parent and not the role of a grandparent to avoid role conflict. The kinship participants, however, did not articulate the expectations of parents as extremely different from the expectations of grandparents, although two participants did express appreciation for their grandparents playing more of a nurturing, outsider role. One mentioned that his grandparents “always give good advice,” while another stated that her grandmother will “do anything for us as long as we want it and she got it.” These remarks indicated that the grandparent caregiver could sometimes fulfill the role of spoiler or wise elder and less of parent.

One kinship participant articulated some degree of role conflict in relationship to her birthmother. She was her mother’s child but also a child in foster care. She expected her mother to perform certain roles, but because of the restrictions associated with foster care, her mother had to take more of a hands-off approach to parenting. The participant remarked that her birthmother could “no longer tell me what to do like she used to,” despite their frequent contact. The young woman was frustrated that she now had to listen primarily to her grandmother, who gave her less freedom than her birthmother had; thus, the expectations of being a grandchild versus being a child were also in conflict.

A final role dilemma examined was the role reversal between participant and caregiver. Since kinship caregivers tend to be older and in poorer health than nonkinship ones, adolescents in their care may be called on to function as caregivers themselves. Interviewer observations found that the kinship caregivers appeared to be either younger or older than the bulk of the nonkinship caregivers, who were closer in age as a group, with the oldest caregivers in the kinship sample.

When asked whether they ever felt like they had to take care of their caregiver, four (44%) kinship participants indicated that they had to assume a caregiving role compared to only two (22%) non-
kinship participants. One nonkinship participant felt this way because her foster mother was also caring for four other young children; the other said she sometimes felt like she had to care for her foster parents but did not describe specific situations. In comparison, three kinship participants described particular instances of caring for their caregiver. One discussed rubbing alcohol on her grandmother’s legs and helping care for her little brother; she explained, “Lots of time I have my brother outside while she get a little rest, so we go outside the house.” Another participant talked about caring for her step-grandmother after her recent hospitalization. One other participant, who lived with her aunt, stated that she felt that she had to help care for her aunt because “I know that she didn’t have to take responsibility for us.” For her, the role reversal did not result from caregiver characteristics but from the fact that she was in a kinship placement.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored the experiences of adolescents in kinship and nonkinship foster family care, emphasizing the link between placement type and the relational context of care. Because of small sample size, the findings could not be tested for statistical significance nor generalized to the larger population of African American adolescents in foster care. Still, they suggest important differences between the two care settings and their effect on adolescents.

A summary of the findings provides support for the concept of connective complexity as an accurate depiction of the relational context of the kinship foster care setting. In comparison to adolescents in nonkinship placements, those in kinship placements displayed greater continuity of connections as well as more complexity in their relationships with birthparents and caregivers. The placement histories suggest that adolescents in kinship care are involved in webs of enduring connections, spending more time in fewer placements. In this study, the kinship participants actually had spent less time on average in foster care than the nonkinship participants; however,
other findings regarding the placement trajectories of the two samples were consistent with prior research (Scannapieco, 1999).

Most kinship participants had not experienced a great disruption in relationships upon assuming their current foster care placement. A recent qualitative study of 40 early adolescents living informally with relatives reported that participants “did not feel that their transitions into care were exceedingly difficult,” and most maintained significant continuing contact with their birthmothers (Messing, 2005, p. 19). They, like the adolescents in this study, also had minimal contact with their birthfathers.

Although kinship participants displayed more connectedness to others, they also exhibited more evidence of role dilemmas. Placed in situations where they had preexisting relationships to caregivers, they demonstrated some ambiguity regarding how to view their caregiver. In contrast, nonkinship participants seemed to understand their caregivers as surrogate caretakers, not confusing them with their birthparents or assigning them dual roles.

One interesting finding that emerged in exploring role dilemmas was the fact that kinship participants did not differentiate much between parental expectations and the expectations attached to other familial statuses such as grandmother. A lack of this distinction may reflect the involved role African American grandparents, especially African American grandmothers, often play in the lives of their grandchildren. Jimenez (2002) asserts that for many African Americans, there has been “no constituted role of grandmother” (p. 525).

African American children have also referred to their grandmothers by designations used for mothers. One study of 30 extended families found that the majority of children called their grandmother by only “Momma” and their biological mother by “Momma” followed by her first name; others distinguished their grandmother as “Big Momma” and their mother as “Little Momma” (Martin & Martin, 1978). Aunts also sometimes received the reference of “Momma.” Several kinship adolescents in this study did refer to their grandmother or other female caregiver as “mama,” a
usage which may reflect the influence of their cultural context, rather than simply role confusion. At the same time, however, the adolescents made specific comments indicating that they were experiencing some level of discomfort over how to refer to their caregiver and how to distinguish in their language between their caregiver and biological parent.

Although all the adolescents in nonkinship placements were also living with African American foster parents, the lack of prior connection—through biological or fictive kinship ties—may have explained why these adolescents were less likely to think of their caregivers in parental terms than those in kinship settings. Another factor may have been the higher economic status of the caregivers in nonkinship settings. Census data for individual zip codes revealed that in the nonkinship neighborhoods, the mean percentage of families in poverty was 6.68, while the average family poverty rate for kinship neighborhoods was 21.62 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). In middle-class or more affluent African American families, the grandmother role is still central but more differentiated from the mother role, attached to special privileges and regulated by parents in a way more similar to the grandmother role in white families (Jimenez, 2002).

Role dilemmas could contribute to situational identity issues among adolescents but would not seem to result in core identity struggles. Although an adolescent might experience confusion over expectations or use of language in relationship to a relative caregiver, through the bond with that caregiver, the young person has a valuable social mirror, a window into his or her self through a familial and ethnic group connection. An understanding of the relational context of kinship care points to more conflicts for adolescents regarding “who am I under the circumstances of foster care?” rather than “who am I?” generally. Nonetheless, as such adolescents face the process of individuating from their parents and navigating new roles, they also face the task of figuring out their role in relationship to both parents and caregivers within the complex circumstances of their care setting.
These findings regarding placement and relational context propose that kinship placements buffer African American adolescents from some of the stresses experienced by those in nonkinship placements such as frequent moves and alienation from birthfamily and thus, offer some practice implications that may mitigate the consequences of disproportionality in child welfare. The finding that adolescents in kinship care maintained connections to family members supports a recommendation for greater use of family group decision making or conferencing programs, which convene members of a child’s kinship network to discuss the needs of the child and caregiver (Scannapieco & Hegar, 2002). In one study of families in Washington state, this practice approach was found to increase the likelihood that children are placed with kin or members of their community as well as accelerate parental reunification, permanency with relatives, or adoption (Shore, Wirth, Cahn, Yancey, & Gunderson, 2001); thus, the use of family group decision-making programs with African American families could serve to reduce the disproportionate representation of African American children in foster care. Such efforts to involve family members require child welfare workers to become more familiar with the broad perspective of family held by African Americans (Carter, 1997).

One fragile family bond for most participants in both placement settings was the relationship with their birthfather. O’Donnell (1999) found that caseworkers seldom worked to involve the fathers of children placed in kinship care and also exhibited disinterest in father involvement. Practitioners should have adequate training on how to reach out to fathers and to involve paternal relatives, even when a child is placed with maternal family members.

The proximity of birthparents in the kinship setting may allow for collaboration between parents and caregivers regarding the rearing of adolescents, but it may also result in some confusion for young people in care regarding to whom they should listen, who can make decisions for them, and with whom they should identify. Role ambiguity experienced by birthparents and caregivers may also impede positive cooperation between the two groups. As a re-
sult, practitioners working with kinship families may be able to propose strategies regarding boundary setting and role clarification as well as resources. For instance, if a practitioner discovers that a child is facing too much responsibility for a caregiver’s well-being, she may be able to connect the caregiver to services that would alleviate the child’s sense of responsibility.

A central concern regarding disproportionality is not simply that African American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system, but also that within the child welfare system, disparity in treatment related to race also exists (Hill, 2006). African American children are overrepresented in kinship care, and although child welfare agencies appear to be improving service delivery to kinship families, one recent study found that caseworkers offer fewer services to kinship caregivers than they do to nonkinship foster parents (Geen, 2003c). Relative caregivers also request fewer services, are less aware of their availability, and confront more access barriers. Agencies need to better educate kinship caregivers regarding available services (Geen, 2003a). Although this study did not intentionally explore the issue of service disparity, in the case records of participants in this study, caseworker notes indicated that several kinship caregivers asked about clothing vouchers, wondering if they were eligible for this source of help.

Although suggestions have focused on kinship families, this comparative study also has implications for work with adolescents in nonkinship placements. Increased efforts should be made to combat the frequent placement disruptions of youth living with nonrelatives. More programs are also needed to connect youth to mentors, individuals with whom they can remain attached even if their placement changes.

These recommendations may prove helpful to African American adolescents experiencing different placement environments. Studying the relational context of different foster care placements brings to light a picture of the kinship foster setting as one of connective complexity—a web of connections that requires navigation. A fuller picture of the relational context of different forms of foster care is needed in order to continue to improve practice with vul-
nerable adolescents.

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