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Informal Kinship-Based Fostering Around the World: Anthropological Findings

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Abstract

Anthropological research around the world has documented informal, kinship-based foster care cross culturally. That research suggests that children are more likely to benefit from informal kinship-based fostering in cultural contexts where fostering expands the pool of relatives rather than substituting one parent for another, fostering is expected to provide children with positive opportunities for learning and development, and/or children are granted some autonomy or decision-making power. However, informal kinship-based fostering seems to place children at risk in cultural contexts where the process of children's attachment to caregivers resembles the Western child development model, communities are highly stratified along socioeconomic lines, and/or exploitation of children is permitted. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for both research and policy.

Keywords

foster care; kinship care; families; grandparents; apprenticeship; adoption

Anthropological research around the world has documented informal, kinship-based fostering cross culturally. Informal kinship-based fostering is “the full-time care, nurturing, and protection of a child by someone other than a parent who is related to the child biologically, by legal family ties, or by a significant prior relationship” (Groza et al., 2011, p. 168). This form of fostering is broad enough to include a child's godparents or close family friends, drawing on an anthropological theorizing of kinship as close relationships not limited to genealogical ties. However, it is distinct from legal plenary adoption, which involves formally transferring a child out of his or her original context and into a new family with new rights and obligations. Being informal, kinship-based fostering also implies that child welfare professionals are not involved (thereby distinguishing it from the foster care *system* in countries like the United States).

Informal care, including kinship-based fostering, is more common than institutionalization for the 163 million children worldwide who do not live with a biological parent (Groza et al., 2011; Lancy, 2008; The Leiden Conference on the Development Care of Children without Permanent Parents, 2012). Informal kinship-based fostering has been documented in many places, including West Africa (Bledsoe, 1990; Goody, 1982; Gottlieb, 2004; Notermans, 2004), Oceania (Barlow, 2004; Carroll, 1970; Carsten, 1991; Donner, 1999), Latin America (Fonseca, 1986; Leinaweaver 2008; Van Vleet, 2009; Walmsley, 2008; Weismantel, 1995), and minority communities in North America (Stack, 1974; Strong,

2001). Indeed, the more rigid biological definitions of kinship used to calculate foster care arrangements in North America and Western Europe are atypical worldwide (Keller, 2013).

Because informal kinship-based fostering is such a prevalent and integral component of many children's lives, examining how this form of caregiving affects children's experiences and is shaped by children's micro-environments is critical for understanding development in context (Montgomery 2009; Super & Harkness 1986; Weisner, 2002; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). In this article, I review anthropological findings about the circumstances under which children are more likely to benefit from informal kinship-based fostering and when it exposes them to risks. I also note implications for social policy and research.

I emphasize anthropological scholarship over work in cross-cultural psychology to familiarize child development scholars with research in a field that provides detailed descriptions of environments where children commonly grow up, learn social norms, and develop close relationships and moral sensibilities. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive literature review of all the anthropological studies of informal kin-based fostering, but rather to summarize general themes and trends across a broad and cross-cultural literature examining diverse forms of child care. I argue that informal kinship-based fostering is a viable option for the care of vulnerable children under the more positive circumstances I outline later, and that child development scholars should take a broad and balanced approach to a range of possibilities for these children—both when designing new research and when contributing to policy.

When Informal Kinship-Based Fostering Works

In this section, I describe an ideal type of informal kinship-based fostering that is largely positive for both the child and sending family. The cultural contexts in which children are most likely to benefit from informal kinship-based fostering are those in which fostering expands the pool of relatives rather than replacing one parent for another, fostering is expected to provide children with positive opportunities for learning and development, and/or children are granted some autonomy or decision-making power. In such cultural contexts, informal kinship-based fostering can preserve a child's identity, ease his or her transition to a foster home, and continue close relationships, including with siblings as well as with older relatives who take in the child (Groza et al., 2011). It can also provide a child with opportunities for growth and development that might not have been readily available in the natal home. In addition, it is a model that can in some circumstances take account of a child's wishes. A discussion of each of these beneficial traits follows.

Expanding the Family

Plenary adoption in North America and Europe—where a child belongs to and is cared for by one family at a time—*limits* family members, while informal kinship-based fostering *expands* the number of people a child considers to be family members. In many cases, transferring a child continues and strengthens the relationship between the birth family and the foster family (Bledsoe, 1990; Carroll, 1970; Donner, 1999; Goody, 1982). A large family can be highly adaptive, particularly for low-income and marginalized children, because it comprises a larger pool of people who are culturally obligated to assist the

transferred child. Children are not permanently separated from their families of origin and they often retain the option of returning. Indeed, the United Nations observes that informal fostering is often preferred precisely because it lets parents “put children in the care of others (usually relatives) without having to cut all ties with their children” (United Nations, 2009, p. xv). For example, in rural Malawi, where between 7% and 15% of children were fostered at some point during a two-year study, nearly half (45%) of children who lived with a foster parent at the start of the study were living with a biological parent two years later (Grant & Yeatman, 2014). In contexts where relations with natal families typically continue, foster children are more likely to experience positive outcomes (e.g. maintaining relationship with family of origin, viewing foster care as beneficial). They are able to draw on more kin as they receive simultaneous instead of serial care. Having more parents, rather than fewer, can provide mobile or marginalized children with a stronger safety net and more perspectives from which to learn.

Education and Apprenticeship

Informal kin-based fostering can provide opportunities for children that they would not otherwise have, for example, chances to pursue education, become familiar with urban life, or apprentice to a new trade. The Beng in Ivory Coast commonly send children to live elsewhere, whether to aid the receiving relative or for the good of the children (education or apprenticeship) (Gottlieb, 2004). Young women in highland Peru often move from their rural towns to live with relatives with more means in the city so they can attend superior public schools (Leinaweaver, 2008). The Peruvian girls’ parents largely supported and encouraged these relocations, convinced that education was their children’s route to upward mobility. In these cases, which involve school-age children rather than infants or toddlers, informal kinship-based fostering offers new opportunities.

Child’s Involvement

Depending on their age and cultural context, sometimes children are involved directly in decisions about where they will live. In contexts as varied as Malaysia and Peru, children can instigate informal fostering arrangements (Carsten, 1991; Leinaweaver, 2007). While a child’s participation in this decision is often challenging to promote due to uncertainties about what children understand and can consent to, children’s participation is nonetheless valued as a best practice in formal foster care decisions as well because it is more likely to result in an appropriate decision (Groza et al., 2011) and it is a positive feature of those informal caregiving arrangements when it occurs.

When Informal Kinship-Based Fostering Puts Children at Risk

While informal kinship-based fostering has positive features, it can also place children at heightened risk (Groza et al., 2011). In this section, I describe aspects of informal kinship-based fostering that appear to place children at risk. The cultural contexts in which informal kinship-based fostering seems to place children at risk are those in which the process of children’s attachment to caregivers resembles the Western child development model, communities are highly stratified along socioeconomic lines, or exploitation of children is permitted. In such cultural contexts, informal kinship-based fostering can challenge a child’s

attachment to his or her caregivers, result in a situation in which birth and foster children are treated differentially, or lead to exploitation of foster children.

It should be remembered that fostering may be a response to a difficult situation that is itself traumatizing, such as epidemics (Brown, 2009) or historical practices of separating colonized children from their parents (Bohr, 2010), making it impossible to determine whether the foster situation or the traumatic event has increased the child's risk. To fairly evaluate informal kinship-based fostering, it should be taken as axiomatic that extreme cases can be incredibly harmful for children. Consequently, I instead examine some of the more common but less clear-cut potential risks. In the conclusion, I address the challenges of evaluating these more common risks, given a lack of comparative studies.

Attachments

The field of child development generally accepts the premise of attachment theory, that a stable relationship with a key caregiver is essential in a child's early years (Bohr, 2010). Informal kinship-based fostering is thus seen as problematic for a child's development because it exposes the child to relationships with many caregivers. However, anthropologists strongly caution against using attachment theory indiscriminately, arguing that it reflects the outcomes of specific, Western child-rearing practices and ideologies and is not applicable in other cultural contexts where maternal thinking and child attachment patterns differ (Barlow, 2004; Bohr, 2010; Keller, 2013; Lancy, 2014; LeVine, 2004, 2007; LeVine & Miller, 1990; LeVine & Norman, 2001; Mageo, 2011; Otto, 2008; Otto & Keller, 2014; Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Rogoff et al., 1993; Scheper-Hughes, 1987; Seymour, 2004). Indeed anthropologists argue that having many caregivers is not only not harmful, but can result in many meaningful affective relationships supporting a child's development (Seymour, 2004).

Differential Treatment

Informal kinship-based fostering can lead to foster children being treated differently than birth children. Even when differences are not salient, they may be deeply felt, as in Oceania where adoptive and birth siblings felt jealous of one another (Carroll, 1970). Of far greater concern, foster children in Sierra Leone are more likely than birth children in the same household to be malnourished, to be severely punished, and to die (Bledsoe, 1990).

Socioeconomic Hierarchies

Socioeconomic factors affect informal kinship-based fostering arrangements. In contexts that are highly stratified socially and economically, poverty-stricken parents may place their children with wealthier relatives, a relationship that is sometimes experienced as a form of labor exploitation. For example, in Haiti, many extremely impoverished foster children (who are called *restavecs*, from the French for *stay with*) are maltreated and exploited (Collard, 2005). And some To Pamonan children in Sulawesi, Indonesia, describe their relationships to their foster families as slavery and labor exploitation (Schrauwers, 1999). In such contexts, fostered children may not be given the apprenticeship or educational opportunities for which they were ostensibly relocated (Leinaweaver, 2013). For example, in Ghana, Gonja girls may be "fostered" by kin as an entrée into obtaining positions as domestic servants (Goody, 1982).

Not all forms of child labor that emerge in informal kin-based fostering arrangements are harmful; some are age- and culture-appropriate, and indeed, most societies have “the expectation that a child will contribute to the household economy” (Lancy, 2008, p. 103). These relationships characterized by inequality are in some ways the flip side of those that offer the potential for upward mobility. For example, in Sierra Leone, informal fostering (called *maake-lopoi* or *training*) follows socioeconomic hierarchies. By providing poorer children the opportunity for education and formalizing relationships between less affluent and affluent families, such fostering arrangements carry risks as well as the rewards of upward mobility for the children and their kin alike (Bledsoe, 1990).

Implications of Anthropological Research on Informal Kinship-Based Fostering for International and Domestic Child Welfare Policy and Practice

As we weigh these positive and negative factors and analyze outcomes, we should exercise caution. The young people who move between households via informal kinship-based fostering are usually structurally disempowered because they are young. Many are also members of marginalized groups—low-income youth in a context where moving to a wealthier patron’s house can provide some semblance of opportunity, or Native youth in a context where Native populations are disempowered and lack access to services and education. The history of large-scale removal of Native (Sarche & Whitesell, 2012) and African-American (Roberts, 2002) children from their natal families has left such minoritized populations at a particular disadvantage by removing traditional sources of support. In such cases, we must work against further disempowerment and stigmatization.

The cross-cultural data on outcomes suggest that informal kinship-based fostering is not necessarily harmful for children and can sometimes be beneficial. The fact that in some cases it bears associated risks is of no small concern, but is not a reason to exclude such fostering from consideration as a valuable option for vulnerable children. When deciding what is in the best interest of the child, those involved should consider local norms, the range of alternatives, and children’s own wishes. In numerous indigenous or non-Western contexts, informal kinship-based fostering is normalized. Thus, when Western efforts to protect children lead to plenary international adoptions, birth mothers might place their children for adoption assuming that the children will come back after receiving an education abroad, a misapprehension documented in the Marshall Islands (Roby & Matsamura, 2002). And when a larger colonial state or international legal framework declares informal fostering aberrant, as occurred in the informal adoptions called *hanai* in Hawaii (Modell, 2002), marginalized people may feel more alienated from state authorities. Furthermore, in many cases, particularly in resource-poor nations, the only viable alternative to informal kin-based fostering is to institutionalize a child. The Leiden Conference on the Development Care of Children without Permanent Parents insists, based on empirical research, that this should be avoided unless absolutely necessary (Leiden Conference, 2012).

Given these issues, practitioners and policymakers should support, rather than condemn or even criminalize, the informal movements of children described here. Informal kinship-based fostering should be one of many options in a child welfare worker’s tool kit, along with adoption, formal foster care, and institutionalization. It is likely to be the least

expensive of these options (Groza et al., 2011), but this is not the only reason countries should embrace it. Child welfare in the United States faces unprecedented challenges and many see it as failing the vulnerable children entrusted to its care. The prevalence of children in formal foster care (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2013) and the developmental harm it causes compel us to explore and promote alternatives. Greater financial and social support for potential family caregivers of vulnerable children could help caregivers and protect children, not by removing them from kin who are actively engaged in their care, but by promoting fair treatment, education, and age-appropriate, kinship-appropriate tasks for such children.

Recommendations for Research on Informal Kinship-Based Fostering

Precisely because of the legislation protecting children's rights (including rights to legal and formal families), it will be difficult for governments to condone informal kinship-based fostering *until* researchers can demonstrate strongly and comparatively that supporting such caregiving helps vulnerable children and prohibiting it harms them. I call for child development scholars to research informal kinship-based fostering both in the West and cross culturally because such scholars can produce broad and generalizable findings. As Brown argues based on her work with Ovambo in Namibia, "developmental theory provides a useful framework by which to understand some of the more proximal causes of fostering and its implications to the welfare of the child" (Brown, 2009, p. 9). Factors to examine more closely include the child's age at the time of transfer (a younger age of transfer could promote stronger attachment if attachment is evaluated in line with Western psychological theory; an older age of transfer could point to children being more likely to be consulted about their wishes) and differences in socioeconomic status between the sending and the receiving family (Groza et al., 2011). More research is needed to understand the conditions under which informal kinship-based fostering supports vulnerable children and families.

An exemplary multi-country study would require at least five comparison groups: children who are not fostered but might have been, children who are fostered and remain with the foster family for a considerable length of time (e.g., two years), children who are fostered and return to their natal home within two years, the natal children of the foster family, and children living in situations that are alternatives to fostering, such as local institutions. The study must be longitudinal in nature (two years at a minimum) to capture children's adjustment to the new setting. Data should be collected from children, natal parents and other relatives in the home of origin (e.g., grandparents or siblings), foster parents and other relatives in the foster home, and institution staff. Data from adults may be collected through semistructured interviews, but data from children should be collected using a larger set of methods including observation, participant observation, and interviews designed to be child appropriate.

Negative causes of fostering such as divorce or AIDS mortality should not be presumed, a priori, to be the main factor in the child's experiences in the informal care situation. Data should be analyzed with regard to children's gender, age of transfer, expectation of permanence, possibility of return and age of return, relative age compared to siblings, locations of other siblings, and norms about children's contributions to the household

economy and responsibility for school fees or other locally meaningful expenditures. Cross-cultural research clearly shows that many ways exist to ensure social trust and care for children (e.g., that they are secure). Thus, in analyzing the data, researchers should not rely exclusively on attachment security or sensitivity measures. Instead, they should identify local indicators of trust and “good enough” parenting, such as whether a child is willing to ask a parental figure for assistance. Furthermore, within each country under study, researchers should evaluate the degree to which the research sites are stratified socioeconomically to determine whether fostered children are moving within their socioeconomic context. A cross-national comparative study of this nature would help determine how children are faring in informal kinship-based foster care arrangements, how this differs based on factors such as socioeconomic stratification or age at transfer, and how their outcomes compare to the alternatives (e.g., remaining in their strained natal home or living in an institution).

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