

# Paradigms Found in Reunification Research

Matthew A. Walsh, MSW, LSW

## Abstract

*When children are removed from their parents by the child welfare system, reunification is almost always the initial goal and is actually the most likely scenario (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2014). It is not surprising, then, that the process of reunification is an important area of focus within child welfare research. As with all research topics, child welfare literature is shaped by the studies and the researchers that contribute to it. Those researchers, in turn, are shaped by their own individual paradigms or frameworks in that these paradigms influence the type of research questions that social work researchers attempt to answer and the sources of data they use to do so. The paradigms of positivism, constructivism, and critical theory can be found in much of the reunification literature. The purpose of this paper is to highlight that, while each paradigm has its own strength, a combination of all three provides the best research for explaining, understanding, and addressing the reunification process as a whole. Individual studies are used to highlight this point.*

**Keywords:** paradigms, child welfare, reunification, positivism, constructivism, critical theory

The child welfare system often focuses on reducing the time children spend in foster care prior to reunification without increasing reentry rates (USDHHS, 2014). It follows, then, that the reunification process and factors associated with successful reunifications are common and important topics within child welfare research. This research is shaped by those conducting it, who are, in turn, shaped by their own paradigms. With this in mind, child welfare studies on the topic of reunification were reviewed with a particular focus on any underlining paradigms of positivism, constructivism, and critical theory. These paradigms have long been acknowledged as having influence within research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and are still found in today's research. Though each paradigm has its strengths, the purpose of this paper is to advocate for multiple paradigms to be used in conjunction with each other in order to deepen the research surrounding reunification. A deeper understanding of the people involved in reunification and the issues they face will improve reunification practices. This paper will briefly outline the reunification process and how different paradigms are found within child welfare studies before advocating for researchers to use a combination of those paradigms when contributing to child welfare research.

## Reunification

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2012) lists several different types of child maltreatment that result in a family having an open case with the child welfare system including: neglect, physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and medical neglect. Removal is required when there are safety concerns for the child. Upon removal, children are placed in foster care, relative care or kinship care, or a residential facility, depending on the need. During the removal process, parents are involved in services, visitations, and regular court proceedings. Cases remain open until they are resolved; "resolution" could mean

any of the following: reunification, termination of parental rights, or another permanency plan such as guardianship or emancipation. While reunification with the family is the desired outcome after removal, safety takes precedent; if returning a child to the family of origin cannot safely occur, alternatives are pursued (Indiana Department of Child Services [INDCS], 2014).

Reunification is defined as a child being discharged from the foster care system in order to return to the family of origin. This is the most common resolution when a family is involved in the child welfare system; 51% of discharges in 2012, the latest year of available federal data (USDHHS, 2014), were reunifications. There are contributing factors that appear to aid in reunification outcomes. Some of these factors are personal characteristics of the parents, such as the ability to trust service providers and control anger (Blakely & Hatcher, 2013). Other personal characteristics relate to understanding change; the parents' ability to seek change, understand why it is necessary, and then follow through to produce change, have been shown to increase the chances of reunification (Talbot, 2008). A strong, positive support system may also aid in producing reunification (Lietz & Hodge, 2011; Lietz, Lacasse, & Cacciatore, 2011).

The most influential factor in achieving reunification appears to be the parents' ability to complete court-ordered services (D'Andrade & Nguyen, 2014; Talbot, 2008). However, previous studies have shown that successfully navigating services is a challenge for some parents (Blakely & Hatcher, 2013; Carnochan, Lee, & Austin, 2013; Lietz & Hodge, 2011; Lietz et al., 2011). Behavioral issues, mental health issues, and substance abuse are common challenges for parents involved in the child welfare system, while issues related to transportation, time, and intelligence also play a role in making it difficult for these parents to procure services (Carnochan et al., 2013; Lietz & Hodge, 2011; Lietz et al., 2011).

The removal of a child or children from parents' custody can be very traumatic for parents and can negatively impact how they view themselves (Blakey & Hatcher, 2013). This may be particularly difficult for mothers who incorporate their motherhood into their self-identity (Wells, 2011). Feelings of anger, confusion, and hopelessness can all manifest during this removal process, and these emotions may compound with the initial issues that caused the removal. Parents must then address most, if not all, of these concerns in a timely manner or run the risk of losing custody of their children. This may lead some parents to doubt if they can, or even should, get their children back (Blakely & Hatcher, 2013; Wells, 2011).

## **Paradigms**

Reunification in a timely manner without risking reentry is the desired outcome of the child welfare system (USDHHS, 2014); as such, this has been a focal point of child welfare research. This research includes studies that use both quantitative and qualitative approaches, focus on a variety of topics, and view the issues from differing perspectives. A search within this topic reveals studies that embody different paradigms; some focus on parents, children, or service providers, while others focus on risk and protective factors. A researcher's paradigm shapes his or her work, because it guides the researcher to ask certain questions and seek specific data. A researcher conducting a study from a positivist paradigm will create a very different design than a researcher operating from a constructivist or critical theorist perspective.

## Positivism

Positivism was, at one point in time, the dominant worldview. It provided the social sciences with many of the standards of rigor, such as objectivity, validity, reliability, and generalization that are still standards today (Glesne, 2010). However, positivism is widely criticized for its assumption of a fixed reality that can be measured and understood (Glesne, 2010; Guba, 1990; Padgett, 2008). Many studies that evaluate the effectiveness of child welfare programs derive from the positivist paradigm, in that they seek to find that “true reality” through rigorous controlled studies (Glesne, 2010; Guba, 1990; Padgett, 2008). These researchers seek to determine the effectiveness of the studied program and its impact on the issue (Brook, McDonald, & Yan, 2012; Chaffin, Hecht, Bard, Silovsky, & Beasley, 2012; D’Andrade & Nguyen, 2014). The results of these studies may then be used by the child welfare system to shape methods and practices used by services providers working for agencies or states. They may also provide important evidence to support programs already in place or ones being piloted. Without these studies, one would not be able to speak fully about the effectiveness of programs like the Strengthening Families Program (Brook et al., 2012) or how the use of targeted services, parenting classes, and counseling increases the likelihood of reunification (D’Andrade & Nguyen, 2014).

Research derived from a positivist paradigm is useful but, at times, limited. For example, D’Andrade and Nguyen (2014) evaluated the effectiveness of using problem-targeted services, counseling, and parenting classes with parents seeking reunification. They found that reunification rates increased as parents engaged and participated more in their referred services. This would appear to answer the research question and may satisfy those with a positivist perspective. Their findings raise an unanticipated question of whether the services were completely effective in addressing the concerns of the child welfare system or if caseworkers were merely looking for compliance. Court reports reviewed by the research team revealed that progress and compliance were often reported together and were not distinguishable. This is alarming because one does not guarantee the other, though it is often viewed this way, especially when looking at the results from a positivist perspective. Smith (2008) studied parents and caseworkers’ perceptions of case plans and found that both view case plans as a list of tasks to be accomplished and as an end of itself rather than a means to create a desired change. Smith (2008) also found that referred services do not always align with what parents feel they need.

These studies show that parents may not be fully engaged and invested in services as potential change agents, which calls into question their true effectiveness. Even if the parent is motivated to change, this cannot be ascertained strictly by looking at their attendance record. This raises the question of whether services are truly effective at reducing the targeted problems they are designed to address. Child welfare studies will assert their effectiveness, because they do assist parents in achieving reunification, but a gap in the literature still exists; these families are not followed long term to determine if the issues reoccur. To fully determine if reunification efforts were successful, one should follow the children throughout their childhood to monitor for reentry into the system or reoccurrence of maltreatment.

## Constructivism

Constructivism, as opposed to positivism, states that reality is socially constructed and that multiple realities exist (Glesne, 2010; Guba, 1990; Padgett, 2008). Reality is not something that is discovered as much as it is something that is formed by subjective experiences. The goal in constructivism research is to obtain a better understanding of the subject matter itself. A constructivist researcher hopes to provide context for, and an interpretation of, an issue by using inductive reasoning while becoming a part of the research (Glesne, 2010). A constructivist study on reunification would attempt to articulate the experience of parents having their children removed and then reunifying.

Parents involved in the child welfare system may see different solutions to their issues than their caseworker. They sometimes disagree on the services they are required to complete, as Shim and Haight (2006) found when parents voiced frustration for being referred to services they believed were unrelated to their reason for child welfare involvement. Studies by Smith (2008) and D'Andrade and Chambers (2012) also found that parents experience a disconnect between the services they are ordered to complete and the issues that they perceive need to be addressed before reunification can occur.

Smith's (2008) qualitative study about case plan compliance is another example of how constructivism has shaped some of the research in the reunification process. Smith (2008) sought to better understand the perceptions of both parents and their caseworkers on individual case plans. The findings suggest that they differ in some areas, particularly in how compliance and motivation are viewed. Caseworkers viewed them to be related, meaning that if parents are motivated to reunify they will comply with the case plan. However, parents generally stated that they were able to distinguish and separate their love for their children and motivation to be with them from their motivation to complete case plan tasks. This motivation, which was independent of their love for their children, was based on the belief that the work they did would lead to reunification and how relevant they viewed the services to be. For example, if parents viewed completing their case plans as impossible, they would be less motivated to try regardless of how much they love their children. In addition to this, relevance of services was another factor where the caseworkers and parents differed, as caseworkers saw all the tasks as relevant but parents disagreed (Smith, 2008).

Parents often construct their own reality as to why their children were removed and how they can get them back or, in cases of successful reunifications, how they were actually able to get them back. An important aspect to note when looking at the reunification process and this population is the fact that parents may not always agree with the reasons for removal. This has enormous practice implications for those working with these parents. Many studies (Berrick, Young, Cohen, & Anthony, 2011; Leake, Longworth-Reed, Williams, & Potter, 2012; Lietz et al., 2011) have shown that a positive working relationship with a team member is critical in assisting parents in the reunification process. The workers who are able to recognize the parents' struggles, efforts, and strengths are reported to be the most helpful by the parents (Lietz et al., 2011). Workers must be aware of the parents' constructs and willing to acknowledge and work within those constructs. The parents' culture may be an important aspect in forming and

maintaining those constructs, as it may influence parenting style and decision-making; caseworkers may need to take this into consideration as well.

A study by Lietz et al. (2011) showcases elements of constructivism when they looked at how social support is effective in assisting families to reunify. Lietz & Hodge (2011) also used narrative analysis to discuss ten factors identified as elements of family resilience, which in turn are helpful in obtaining and maintaining a successful reunification. Talbot (2008) looked at the social workers involved in this process and attempts to better understand the way they view these families and how they make the decision to either support or oppose reunification. Here the reader gets a glimpse of how decision-makers construct their own realities and how they judge who is and is not permitted to reunify. These studies acknowledge that social workers construct their own reality in these situations, which can then shape their decisions and behavior.

## **Critical Theory**

Critical theory moves beyond describing reality and acts as a call for action to create a new reality (Glesne, 2010; Guba, 1990). According to critical theory, there is an imbalance of power within the concept of knowledge, or the creation of reality itself. Those with power dictate what constitutes as “knowledge” and, perhaps more importantly, what does not (Creswell, 2012). Using this paradigm, a researcher hopes to liberate families involved in the child welfare system. This type of researcher views their research as a political act aimed to transform an injustice, while also focusing on how this inequality is maintained. Studies may focus on power and highlight how race and economic status impact families’ ability or inability to reunify. A critical theorist will also strongly focus on practice and will ensure theories tie into practice (Glesne, 2010). To help emancipate the participants, the researcher can adopt a dialogic approach to help families become aware of this inequality and rally them around how things can and should change (Guba, 1990).

A researcher doing a study of reunification from a critical theory paradigm may select parent participants who belong to a minority group, as they are more likely to be victims of power differentials and in need of advocacy. The questions may focus on how parents struggle with lack of power, issues related to their socioeconomic status, or what services were or were not put in place to help address those issues.

For example, Blakely and Hatcher (2013) studied the effects of trauma on parents’ ability to navigate the child welfare system. The study focused on African American women with substance abuse issues. All parents in the child welfare system are at the mercy of caseworkers and judges who hold the ultimate power in the reunification process. This particular study focuses on how the child welfare system often neglects the trauma of parents. While some may see parents as lazy or not caring about their children, this critical theory study proposes that the effects of trauma may be a misunderstood or ignored source of the parents’ lack of progress. With this knowledge, caseworkers can better serve these parents.

## Combining Paradigms

A single study does not need to operate from the perspective of just one paradigm. While there is often a dominant paradigm within a study, authors can insert elements of other paradigms. This must be done with some thought, though, as failing to fully comprehend each paradigm can result in underdeveloped or muddled research questions, designs, and results. Again, D'Andrade and Nguyen (2014) can be used as an example to demonstrate this point. Elements of critical theory are evident in their discussion section where the authors advocate for change. The authors suggest that fully complying with services in the reunification process can be made easier for parents if services were combined or located in the same building (D'Andrade & Nguyen, 2014). Evidence of positivism is found when they assert that the use of services increases the likelihood of reunification; however, they were also able to further this concept from a critical theory lens by advocating for change in service delivery. Additionally, elements of constructivism become salient as they question whether their results were based on progress or compliance, suggesting that the "truth" they discovered could have multiple explanations.

Studies that combine paradigms are important to the literature of reunification. Social workers are expected to have cultural competency (NASW, 2008), and this applies to both research and practice. In order to demonstrate this in research, multiple paradigms are required. Positivism allows the researcher to obtain relevant facts about the culture. Constructivism can be used to demonstrate how different cultures impact people's lives and parenting, which acknowledges the different experience families will face when challenged with removal. Finally, critical theory can help examine the power differential between cultures, as often the dominant culture influences how parents are expected to change in order to reunify with their children. This shines a light on the minority cultures that too often find themselves overrepresented within the child welfare system and without a voice.

Combining paradigms in research can also address another aspect of the values and ethics of social workers. As part of the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2008), social workers are called and expected to challenge social injustice. This requires combining elements of all three mentioned paradigms. Advocating for change aligns naturally with critical theory; however, to best advocate for change, hard facts from positivist studies are needed as well as the ability to see multiple perspectives that would be revealed in a constructionist study. Thus, limiting one's research to one narrowly defined paradigm restricts the results and implications of the research studies, which will restrict knowledge and practice. This is particular true in fields like social work where researchers and practitioners are challenged to address complex issues like reunification.

## Conclusion

The child welfare system balances its responsibility to keep children safe with the belief that families should remain intact. As a result, when children are removed from parents, the child welfare system strives to reunify the family in a timely manner. There are a variety of reasons families must go through this reunification process and there are many services and approaches to aid in this process, but the system and its participants have flaws. The literature

highlights this fact but also showcases encouraging and emerging practices, interventions, and services. In reviewing the literature, it is clear that the paradigms of positivism, constructionism, and critical theory have noticeably shaped this research and will continue to do so. While they may continue to compete for dominance, the issues that make up reunification research will be better served by a more holistic approach to understanding. Thus, researchers are called to incorporate different paradigms into their research in order to deepen the understanding and impact of reunification; this approach has the ability and opportunity to improve both research and practice.

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Matthew A. Walsh, MSW, LSW is a doctoral student and research assistant at the Indiana University School of Social Work. He is also currently serving as project coordinator for a HRSA Grant focused on training and educating MSW students to improve practice skills with transitional age youth in mental health and addiction settings. He has previously worked as a home-based therapist for families involved in the child welfare system, with which he conducted individual, couples and family therapy. His research interests include child welfare service providers, multidisciplinary teams; and interprofessional development, education, and collaboration.