A Method for Predicting Foster Parent Success

Joan G. Gilmore
Wilfrid Laurier University

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A METHOD FOR PREDICTING
FOSTER PARENT SUCCESS

Joan G. Gilmore
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I. Introduction

The criteria used to judge the acceptability of foster parent applicants and the relationship of these criteria to the actual rate of foster parent success are issues of great concern for people working with foster children. The purpose of this study is to test the predictability of a rating scheme in order to one, make effective use of home-study time and two, minimize unsuccessful placements.

Factors important in this analysis are those of age, time and commitment to both client groups involved—potential foster parents and children—as well as the expectations and gratifications of the foster parents. These people are the backbone of a child care agency; in addition, they have a great potential in the areas of public relations and recruitment for their agency. Finally, there is the matter of efficiency: the agency and applicant time spent on the home-study should be as fruitful as possible in terms of mutual assessment of the services to be provided and of suitability for the job. In relation to these assessments, whom do we accept? Whom do we reject? Why?

Two specific areas are explored in this study. First, what are some characteristics of foster parents which might

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1 David Fanshel. Foster Parenthood. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966. Fanshel notes, p. 29, that "two-thirds of the foster families reported knowing at least one other foster family before applying to the agency."
be of predictive value? Second, what procedures might be established to predict foster parent success? To facilitate this analysis, several assumptions are made: one, that prediction is possible in this situation; two, that reliable predictive judgments can be made; three, that predictability of foster parent success would be beneficial to foster parent applicants, to agency planning, and to the children involved; and four, that the predictive data obtained can be used in making decisions about accepting foster parent applicants.

The hypothesis of this exploratory study is that: If a high score is attained on the Predictive Instrument, the rate of placement failures will be reduced. The independent variable is the score attained, and the dependent variable is the rate of placement failures.
II. Survey of the Literature

Foster parents employed by a child care agency today are in a difficult position in relation to that agency for reasons related to their roles. The foster parent deals directly with role expectations from the agency, from the community, from the family, and from the foster children. Though each of these role expectations is important, the focus of this study is on the interaction of agency expectations of the foster parent and the success rate of foster child placements.

One problem with this focus is what the status of the foster parent in the agency structure is not clear. Attempts have been made to clarify the position of foster parent as an extension of the agency.2 Lawder would agree; she views the family relationship as a medium of exchange between the agency and the family, both acting in the best interests of the child.3 Other authors feel that the foster family should be investigated with particular regard to motivation. Why does a family choose to become a foster family? Bohman speaks of the applicant family's wish for an "opportunity for growth," and suggests

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projective tests as one means of investigating the soundness of this motivation. Other authors, among them Nadal, refer to foster parents as clients, emphasizing the caseworker's role as psychotherapist.

It is not surprising, in view of this confusion, that we find increasing interest in the role that foster parents fill and in the kinds of motivations they have. Nadal notes little professional agreement about the role of the foster parent and little agreement on the role between foster parents and agencies.

The second problem is that agencies do not have a clear picture of what foster parents want or what they are like as people. Jean Charnley discussed the attributes of foster parents in her recent book on child placement. Her observations led her to conclude that: foster mothers have little sense of family privacy; they are somewhat impervious to others' judgments; they are good housekeepers; they manage money well; they empathize strongly with foster children; and they are generally the dominant figure in the household.

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6 Ibid.

Tegethoff and Goldstein suggest that foster families should be regarded as being like other families in terms of internal problems and anxieties about child rearing. Lawder and Wagner suggest that the motivations and needs of the family are important because these factors contribute significantly to the interaction between foster parents and foster child.

The third problem is that of communication between agency and foster parent. The organized method of communication must be effective if both worker and foster parent are to deal with their jobs well.

We have examined the areas of foster parent role and confusions of that role in agencies, some attributes assigned to foster parents through observation, and the apparent problem of communication. Each or all of these can contribute to poor placements or poor handling of placements, and each can result in the necessity of moving a child. This constitutes a failure within the context of this study.

The literature studied so far has been observational in nature. More important to this study are the attempts at a more systematic analysis; three studies are of particular significance. The first area of concern is that of the relia-

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8 Nina Tegethoff and Harriet Goldstein. op. cit.
9 Elizabeth Lawder. op. cit.
11 Robert Nadal. op. cit.
bility of judgments made by caseworkers. Hunt, et. al. estab-
lished that such reliability is possible during their develop-
ment of a "Social Movement Scale." In their work with this
scale, it was demonstrated that social workers could develop
standardized judgments to specific informational stimuli, and
that these responses could be reliably generalized to similar
stimuli.

A second attempt to systematize knowledge, of major im-
portance for this study, is that made by Wolins and documented
in his book, Selecting Foster Parents. This work, sponsored
by the Child Welfare League of America, was directed toward
accurate prediction of social workers' acceptance of foster
parent applicants. Wolins employed statistical measures to
discover what aspects of their personality and situation were
common to those applicants accepted by several agencies. He
established eleven variables that proved to be of predictive
value and he has stated that:

All other things being equal (or irrelevant), the
family with a high chance of being accepted scores
positives on at least six but preferably eight to
ten of the ...variables.13

The third attempt to study systematically the attributes
and motivations of foster parents has been carried out by

12 J. McV. Hunt; Margaret Blankner; and Leonard S. Kogan.
"A Field-Test of the Movement Scale." Social Casework. v. 31.
no. 7. pp. 267-277.

13 Martin Wolins. Selecting Foster Parents. New York:
Fanshel, who studied foster parents from one agency in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Using attitude measures and statistical tests, Fanshel attempted to codify available information about attitudes of foster parents and their implication for the care of foster children. We shall see shortly how some of his findings can be used.

In the three major research-based studies mentioned, we have seen the establishment of the ability of social workers to standardize judgments, the evolution of eleven predictive traits of foster parent selection, and the emergence of several attitudinal characteristics of foster parents that affect their role performance. Now we are in a position to combine these three factors and devise an instrument which should have predictive value in selecting successful foster parents. The studies done by Hunt have demonstrated that these kinds of judgments can be made. Wolins was interested in predicting which applicants would be selected; Fanshel was interested in identifying some personal characteristics of previously selected foster parents. The purpose of this study is to establish and test criteria of selection that will predict foster parent success.

\[^{14}\text{David Fanshel. op. cit.}\]
III. The Predictive Instrument: Background

Essential to this study is a means of predicting foster parent success. Therefore, a predictive measure has been conceptualized to indicate what attributes and attitudes of foster parents might be relevant to successful child care.

The Predictive Instrument (PI) has been conceived for this study. It has three sources: the eleven variables found by Wolins most often in the acceptance of foster parents; the Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI); and the Foster Parent Appraisal Form (FPAF) developed by Fanshel. The predictive criteria indicated in the PI have been selected not only for their indication of a particular attitude, but also because they have been found to correlate significantly with the presence or absence of other attitudes which have been judged important as well. Let us now examine the three sources of the PI.

As was stated earlier, Wolins found in his study of foster parent acceptance that the presence of certain characteristics and attitudes in foster parent applicants made their acceptance more likely. By establishing these, Wolins has provided a reliable answer to some questions about what kinds of people foster parents are. We have a better picture of them. Assuming that acceptance of applicants is a purposeful social work judgment, we will want to include some of these
variables in the PI; let us then examine these variables as they are presented and explained by Wolins:

1. Father is low on Rationalism. He is not too insistent on having a clear idea of goal and means in every situation.

2. Father is average on Nondifferentiation. He usually avoids such statements as "children all go through the same stages" or "all children are pretty much alike."

3. Father has at least high school education.

4. Mother is low on Ambitiousness. She is not the kind of parent who pushes her child ahead or insists that he be "tops" in everything.

5. Mother is low on Rationalism. She, like the father, does not insist on absolute clarity of goals and means.

6. Mother is low on Possessiveness. She is able to let go. She can accept a position that "as a person grows up he may know as much as his parents."

7. Mother is low on Planfulness. In her family life a good plan may not be most important. She does not try to plan carefully things she does with her family.

8. Mother is low on Martyrdom. She is not the one who would say that "a good parent thinks of his child before himself."

9. The family has two or three children.

10. Mother's age is up through 45 years.

11. Mother was reared on a farm. 15

The second source of predictive criteria is the PARI, developed by psychologists Schaefer and Bell, to measure parent attitudes. 16 Implicit in the development of this instrument

15 Martin Wolins. op. cit. p. 138.

is the assumption that parental attitudes affect the psychological development of their children. Some attitudes are assumed to be more likely to result in healthy child development. Those assumed to be more likely to result in unhealthy psychological development are referred to as pathogenic. Pathogenic parental attitudes are those more likely to result in less desirable attitudes or behavior in children.

The PARI consists of 23 attitudes drawn from an evaluation of many theories of personality development, tested by five statements each. In each question the respondent is asked to agree or disagree, strongly or mildly (A a d D). The scale items are:

1. Encouraging Verbalization
2. Fostering Dependency
3. Seclusion of the Mother
4. Breaking the Will
5. Martyrdom
6. Fear of Harming the Baby
7. Marital Conflict
8. Strictness
9. Irritability
10. Excluding Outside Influences
11. Deification
12. Suppression of Aggression
13. Rejection of Homemaking Role
14. Equalitarianism
15. Approval of Activity
16. Avoidance of Communication
17. Inconsiderateness of Husband
18. Suppression of Sex
19. Ascendance of Mother
20. Intrusiveness
21. Comradeship and Sharing
22. Acceleration of Development
23. Dependency of the Mother. 17

Some of these, indicating pathogenic attitudes, are particularly relevant to this study:

1. Fostering Dependency
2. Seclusion of the Mother
3. Breaking the Will
4. Martyrdom
5. Fear of Harming the Baby
6. Strictness
7. Excluding Outside Influences
8. Suppression of Aggression
9. Avoidance of Communication
10. Suppression of Sex. 18

17 David Fanshel, op. cit. p. 84. A complete PARI is presented by Schaefer and Bell, op. cit., pp. 354-358.

18 Definitions of these and of some of the others, as well as some differences between results reported on natural parents and those found by Fanshel, are reported in David Fanshel, op. cit. pp. 83-88.
The PARI was designed for and tested on natural, not foster, parents. It is assumed that pathogenic attitudes are equally effective in shaping the development of natural and foster children. Thus, it would be desirable to select foster parents who show fewer, rather than more, pathogenic attitudes. The PI has been constructed with this goal in mind.

The third source of the PI is the Foster Parent Appraisal Form. This was developed by Fanshel during the course of his study and it covers eight areas of foster parent functioning:

1. The characteristics of the children placed in the foster home and the performance of the foster parents in supervising their care.

2. The social characteristics of the foster family (e.g., organization of the household, ties with an extended family).

3. The perceived motivations of the foster mothers and foster fathers in assuming the role.

4. The capacities of the foster mother to perform as a cooperating team member (e.g., reporting significant material about the child to the agency, accepting the caseworker's suggestions about child-rearing practices).

5. The tendency of the foster parents to react positively or negatively to such attributes of the child as his sex, age, and personality characteristics.

6. The characteristic manner of disciplining children shown by the foster parents.

7. The suitability of the home for various types of foster children (e.g., physically handicapped, normal newborn infants).

8. The foster parents' characteristic manner of relating to the casework staff.

The key variables presented by Fanshel from this form and used as a partial basis for the PI are:
1. Over-all warmth, affection, and tenderness the child received in the foster home.

2. Degree to which family has a matriarchal organization.

3. Degree to which family tends to place stress upon social conformity (being proper).

4. Degree to which family maintains close ties with extended family members (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.).

5. Extent to which family is the kind neighbors would comfortably turn to when in trouble.

6. Extent to which foster mother appears identified with foster parent role.

7. Extent to which role creates strain for foster mother.

8. Degree of confidence caseworker has in foster mother's capacity to meet the emotional needs of children placed with her.

9. Extent to which the foster mother appears to be identified with the agency (as opposed to excluding the agency).

10. Degree of understanding foster mother shows of child behavior.

11. Motivation of foster mother.

12. Extent to which foster father is identified with role.

13. Foster mother's capacity for reporting significant facts about a child's personality.

14. Foster mother's capacity for accepting and putting into practice suggestions from a caseworker about her child-rearing practices.

15. Foster mother's capacity for showing self-awareness about her own emotional needs in being a foster parent.

16. Foster mother's capacity to separate from a child who has been in her home for about a year.

17. Foster mother's capacity for cooperating with child guidance clinic in psychiatric treatment of disturbed foster child.
18. Foster parents' potential response to a child under 1 year of age.

19. Foster parents' potential response to a child 9 to 12 years of age.

20. As regards use of discipline, foster parents' tendency to accept misbehavior.

21. Foster parents' tendency to withdraw from a child and deny love as a means of discipline.

22. Foster home's suitability for various kinds of foster children.19

These variables have been studied and correlated by factor analysis. Fanshel found that several corresponded to pathogenic measures on the PARI. The difference between the two is that the PARI is completed by the parents themselves, while the FPAF is completed by caseworkers. The PI is also to be completed by caseworkers; thus the correlations between these two measures are of potentially great significance.20

The PI consists of 20 measures, each of which can be rated from 1 to 5. The maximum score is 100; the minimum score is 20. Items would need to be arranged so that in each instance the most desirable attitude is counted as 5, not 1. The source of each measure is indicated, as well as its importance if that has not already been indicated.

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19 David Fanshel. op. cit. p. 100. Fanshel notes on page 99 that judgments were made on each family by two caseworkers, with limited reliability. Correlations varied on forty items from $r = .25$ to $r = .81$.

20 David Fanshel. op. cit. pp. 131-134.
IV. The Predictive Instrument: Criteria

Basic Information

1. Mother's age. PARI: correlations of age and pathogenic attitudes
2. Father's age. related to ability to communicate with social worker and to understand
3. Mother's education. correlates of pathogenic attitudes
4. Father's education. related to ability to communicate with social worker and to understand
5. Age of child desired. Fanshel found significant differences between infant and older child foster parents.

Father's Attitudes

6. Rationalism: Wolins
7. Nondifferentiation: Wolins
8. Index of Masculinity: Fanshel. Fathers high on this scale had wives who showed undemocratic and pathogenic attitudes about child-rearing.

Mother's Attitudes

9. Rationalism: Wolins
10. Planfulness: Wolins
11. Martyrdom: Wolins and PARI

Mother's Motivations

12. Ambitiousness: Wolins. Perhaps similar to PARI scales of Intrusiveness and Approval of Activity.
13. Benefactress of Children. This attitude of wanting to help the underprivileged has been shown by Fanshel to be strongly correlated with pathogenic attitudes.

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21 David Fanshel. op. cit. p. 88.
22 Ibid. p. 86.
14. Foster Parent as an Eccentric. Fanshel. This measures the degree of social conformity. It might be noted that Charnley discussed this point (see p.4). This measure correlates strongly with Encouraging Verbalization on the PARI.

15. Index of Stress in Separating from Foster Children. FPAF, PARI.


Marital Relationship

17. Index of Sharing Between Foster Parents. Fanshel. High score correlates with avoidance of pathogenic attitudes. Related to FPAF and to family's sense of privacy noted by Charnley.


Other Attitudes

19. Index of Deprivation In Background. FPAF. Significant negative correlation with Breaking the Will, Excluding Outside Influences, Avoidance of Communication.

20. Use of pacifier. FPAF. Approval meant significant negative correlation with Martyrdom, Irritability, Excluding Outside Influences, Inconsiderateness of Husband, Suppression of Sex.

The purpose of this section is to indicate the questions that would be considered in making up the PI. This instrument would have to be constructed and tested for internal consistency before it could actually be used with confidence.
V. Design

Setting

The proposed study is to be carried out under the auspices of a child care agency, probably a Children's Aid Society. A research coordinator will be required to administer the program, analyze the data, and report the results. Assuming clearance for such a position, which will be part-time, the cost of the program can be absorbed by the agency. If clearance is not granted, then foundation assistance can be sought. In any case, the purposes of the study and the predictive instrument will be presented, explained, and discussed with the agency staff, particularly with the home-finders who will be most directly involved.

Subjects

The population on which the study is based will consist of the first 100 accepted applicant-couples after the study begins. These couples will be referred to as subjects. Applications already in the process of evaluation when the study begins will not be accepted as subjects because of the possible attitudinal change in the home-finders as a result of participation in the study. If such a change did occur in the home-finders, then these couples would have had a different experience with the agency than the subjects, and
there is no way to control the effects of such a change in this study. Applicants judged unacceptable by the home-finders will not be used because there will be no way to measure successful performance if the home is never tried.

It is assumed that after a specified date, all applicants except receiving or group home applicants, whose functions are different from the usual foster home parents, will be considered potential subjects until they are judged unacceptable to the agency. The next step after this decision, presumably made near the completion of the home study, is to score the applicants on the predictive instrument included in this study proposal. While it might be preferable in terms of greater scoring objectivity to have the research administrator, who is not acquainted with the applicants, rate them, this would involve the development of more uniform record-keeping and more uniform standards of home-finding than is likely to exist. Establishment of these might well be the basis of another study. Thus, the research coordinator will only score, not rate, the subjects; the home-finders will rate their applicants.

Procedure

After it is determined that the applicants will be accepted and the predictive instrument is rated, subjects will be scored by the coordinator; this must be done before a child is placed in the home in order to prevent contamination of the
data from later knowledge. To assure uniform treatment of families in all cases, the social workers involved will not be aware of the score earned by the subjects; the home-finders will be instructed not to discuss their ratings with the child care workers, in order to minimize any "halo" effect. Children will be placed in the new foster homes according to established agency procedure.

To this point in the study, the agency practice has not been in any way changed or disrupted except for filling out the predictive instrument by the home-finder and scoring it by the research coordinator. This is desirable because the research is designed to test prediction, not the effects of performance; as such, it depends on relatively consistent performance to assure the potency of the predictive measure rather than the influences of change. To ensure this consistency of practice, the home-finding and child care departments should not change their programs during the study.

During the two years of the study, a record will be kept for each subject indicating the reason for termination of each foster child placement. Reasons will include the child’s return to his natural parents, adoption placement, illness of the foster parents, institutionalization of the foster child, etc. Failures are defined as requests from the subjects that the foster child be removed or removal of a child by the agency because of inadequate or inappropriate behavior on the part of the subjects. These operational definitions of failure
may seem to be overly hard on the subjects; actually, the agency must ultimately bear the responsibility for misplacing children.

There are two potential sources of inaccuracy in this design. First, some unsuccessful placements will not be counted as failures because termination of wardship, thus of the placement, will be requested by the parents or ordered by the court, the child may be institutionalized, etc. Second, cases may seem successful by the criteria used for this study, merely because there are no obvious difficulties. It is assumed that these inaccuracies will occur with equal frequency and will cancel each other out in statistical calculations.
VI. Findings

The findings to be derived from this study concern the relationship between the number of failures of foster placements and the score earned by the subject. It is expected, on the basis of the hypothesis, that an inverse relationship will exist between the score and the failure rate; that is, the higher the score, the fewer the failures. A significant difference in failure rate is expected between the highest scorers and the lowest scorers on the PI.

In compiling the findings, then, the number of failures in relation to the number of placements will be examined in relation to the scores received on the PI. The results could be presented accordingly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score on PI</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Projected Results**

Ratio $F/P$
VII. Implications

Theoretical

The theoretical implications of this study relate to the selection criteria used in the predictive instrument and to the methodology employed in this study. The reason for this limitation of implications is that this kind of study has apparently not been done before. Until the predictive criteria are known to be valid indicators of performance, the implications of the study are seriously limited.

The predictive instrument, designed for this study, is in need of testing for internal consistency. If, at the completion of the study, it is found that the hypothesized relationship between score on PI and failure rate does not occur, then the theories underlying the hypothesis must be re-examined. The validity of the PI is also called into question, however. In re-examining the PI, the major evaluation would be required of the criteria used. Another potential influence on the findings is that of attitude change; this study has assumed that significant attitude change will not occur within the agency (at least in relation to home-finding and child care practices) or in the subjects themselves in relation to their performance. If attitude change seems in fact to have been a factor, the reason must be investigated because it may affect the study itself as it relates to subject performance.
There are three possibilities for the relationship between the score and failure rates. The relationship can be direct—low scores have low failure rates; inverse—predicted; or non-existent—no relationship between score and failure rates. If the relationship is either direct or non-existent, then there is a serious defect in the assumptions underlying either the study or the predictive instrument, or both.

**Practice**

If results are in the hypothesized direction, then a basis has been established for making work with foster parents more efficient and presumably more effective. We would then have some basis for refining selection procedures. In addition, we could then examine more closely our practices dealing with foster placements on the basis of our knowledge of criteria associated with success in foster parenting. Some of the guesswork associated with home-studies would be removed, namely which attitudes are important and how to measure them.

**Research**

One study suggested by this project could be carried out by administering the PI to all foster home applicants before they have been accepted or rejected. The home study would continue with the acceptance decision being made without knowledge of the score on the PI. The scores of the two groups of applicants could then be compared. This would provide some objective data about the factors which influence the
home-finders' decisions and might suggest the use of the PI as an additional tool for the decision-making process.

A second use of the PI would be in the area of adoption home-studies. Assuming that attitudes relevant to successful care of foster children are similar to those necessary for successful care of own children or adopted children, it might be useful to administer the PI to adoptive applicants and compare the scores with adoption breakdowns. This might be particularly useful in adoptions of older children, situations in which many complex factors are relevant and measurement of variables with any objectivity is difficult.
VIII. Conclusion

This exploratory study has been designed to test the hypothesis that scores earned by foster parent applicants on a predictive instrument will be inversely related to failure rates in practice. The subject population is made up of 100 successful foster parent applicant couples in a child care agency. A predictive instrument has been devised; testing on this instrument is made prior to placement of the first foster child. The study is to take two years to complete. At that time, the score on the predictive instrument is compared with the failure rate. It is expected that findings in the hypothesized direction will have both theoretical and practical implications, as well as implications for future research.
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