

Public Abstract

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This dissertation investigated "alloparenting" - the provision of child care and other supports to children by people other than their parents - in two societies.

The first project involved analyses of Canadian child protection cases. When parents are unable to care for their children, it is now common practice to try to place those children in the care of "kin", but we do not yet know all that we should about which particular relatives take on the onerous task of fostering children with difficult backgrounds, nor about the determinants of how well the children fare. I created a data-base covering all such kin placements over a three-year period under the auspices of one Canadian child protection agency. I was especially interested in which maternal and paternal relatives of the children accepted this role and whether the kin placements were stable, as opposed to "breaking down" with the child having to move to another home. Ninety percent of genetically related kin caregivers were grandparents or other equally close kin. Relatives of the mother provided placements far more often than father's family, a difference that was most striking with single grandmothers. Placements with maternal and paternal kin had similar durations, but those with the mother's family were more likely to end well, with the child returning to a parent or obtaining a permanent family home elsewhere (permanency), whereas placements with father's family more often ended poorly, with a move to another foster home, incarceration, or the child running away (placement breakdown). Placements with father's family were more than twice as likely to break down as placements with mother's family, within a given time frame (when child sex, age, reason for placement and caregiver factors were taken into consideration). It was also found that mother's family were providing care in more difficult circumstances: when they were poor, unemployed, single, relatively uneducated, and suffering from serious health problems.

Most prior research on who helps parents raise their children indicates that mother's kin are more frequent and more beneficial alloparents than father's kin. But would this still be the case in societies in which a woman moves to her husband's family after marriage and engages in purdah (the seclusion of women)? Rural Bangladesh is such a place and was the setting for the second project. When mothers in intact first marriages were asked about their living arrangements and who provided care and assistance to their children, they reported that despite cultural expectations that wives live in the family compound of their in-laws, scarcely more than half actually did so; many instead dwelt with husband and children on their own property, and if the father was an absent migrant laborer (working in the city or overseas), 22% lived with the mother's family. The mother's relatives outnumbered the father's as primary resource providers (beyond the nuclear household) and mother's brothers in particular outnumbered father's brothers by a wide margin. The children in this population are almost all short in stature and underweight in relation to World Health Organization norms, and this is especially so among the poorer families, but in addition to the effects of family income, living in the father's family compound was associated with further height and weight deficits compared to the children of parents living on their own property separate from either extended family. Children were less behind for height and weight the more education their father had, and they were less behind in their education, the more educated their mother was. Residing with mother's family was also associated with better educated children, as was having the mother's mother be the child's secondary caretaker.

In a further set of analyses, I compared the visiting behaviour reported by interviewed Bangladeshi mothers of dependent children in intact two-parent families to the reports of widowed and divorced mothers. Despite the impediments created by the fact that the interviewed women often lived with their in-laws and observed

purdah, they visited their own mothers and brothers (their children's maternal grandmothers and uncles) surprisingly often, and did so significantly more frequently than they visited equivalent in-laws after taking into consideration the required travel time and other variables. In general, children in the care of their mothers almost always had substantial contact with both their maternal and paternal extended families. My third set of analyses of my Bangladesh data involved analysing who helps raise children, both as primary and as secondary caregivers, after parental death or divorce, comparing the findings to those from intact families. Family types differed with respect to where children resided, who served as their primary and secondary caregivers, and who provided material support, but the mother's kin played a major role in all family types, especially as material resource providers. Household income was a strong predictor of child height and weight, which did not vary significantly across family types when income was taken into consideration. Only if their mother had died were children at risk of losing contact with maternal kin (if the father's family retained custody), paternal kin (if the maternal grandmother took the child), or both (in the event that the child was adopted away). The surviving children of deceased mothers moved between successive caregivers especially frequently, were uniquely likely to have no schooling, and were most likely to have a step-mother as a primary caregiver. In general, the data from both sites show that mother's relatives are far more involved in helping with child care and providing material support than might be expected and their participation is apparently beneficial.