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Still Siblings: The Perceived Importance of Sibling Relationships for Foster Children

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STILL SIBLINGS: THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF SIBLING
RELATIONSHIPS FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

by

Jessica A. Church

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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STILL SIBLINGS: THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

Jessica A. Church, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2013

This research was conducted to answer the question “Do children who are perceived to have strong relationships with siblings and more access to their siblings have fewer problems adjusting to their foster care placement as observed by child welfare professionals?” This qualitative research project was completed through semi-structured interviews with professionals who work with children in foster care in a variety of ways (and may have worked with children in more than one way during their career in child welfare), such as foster care workers, counselors, and sibling visitation supervisors. The snowball sampling method was used in this research. These interviews were then transcribed and analyzed to examine the effect of the continuity, change, or loss of sibling bonds on a child’s ability to adjust to life in foster care.

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Jessica A. Church

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INTRODUCTION

Each year over 200,000 children enter foster care in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). There are a variety of foster care arrangements that can be made for children. Some of these arrangements allow for children to be placed in the same foster care placement with all of their siblings. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. There are many situations where siblings groups are placed in separate foster homes. Siblings may be separated due to lack of resources, as is the case when a foster family does not have enough space in their home for an entire sibling group. Siblings may also be separated for safety reasons, such as: one sibling is the victim of abuse perpetrated by another sibling. No matter what the reasons for sibling separation, this loss of relationship likely has some sort of effect on a child. As a researcher, I am interested in learning what differences exist in the lives of children who are placed in these two different types of foster care arrangements.

The goal of this study is to determine the role that sibling bonds are perceived to play in the lives of children who are involved in the foster care system. The main research question of this study was “Do children who are perceived to have strong relationships with siblings and more access to their siblings have fewer problems adjusting to their foster care placement as observed by child welfare professionals?” Other secondary research questions such as: “How many children are placed in a separate foster home from their siblings and why?” “What differences are noticed in the behaviors and psychological wellbeing of children who are placed in separate homes than

their siblings as opposed to children placed with their siblings?” “What differences were noticed in the effects of sibling separations on children based on the characteristics of the children?” and “What efforts are made by the foster care system to maintain sibling relationships?” were examined. These questions were answered by those who work with children in the foster care system.

This study is significant because it focuses on a very important topic that affects the lives of many children in the foster care system. This research examines the topic by drawing on the observations of professionals in a variety of positions in the child welfare system. Their ability to assess the effects on children from being separated from their siblings is valuable in that they are able to explain this experience in a way that children may not be able to at the time that the separation occurs. There is little qualitative research that has been conducted on this topic, and given its complexity, I felt that it is one that would be best researched through a narrative-based methodology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will elaborate several concepts that were used in this research. Child abuse and neglect will be defined, and the different types of agencies that deal with child abuse and neglect will be discussed. A definition of “sibling” will be provided and the effects of trauma (in the form of abuse and neglect) on sibling bonds will be examined. The importance of sibling relationships will be explained as will the effects of sibling separations in foster care.

Defining Child Abuse and Neglect

The Michigan Child Protection Law (MCPL) defines child abuse as:

Harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare that occurs through nonaccidental physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or maltreatment by a parent, legal guardian, or any other person responsible for the child's health or welfare or by a teacher, a teacher's aide, or a member of clergy (2012).

Child abuse, in short, describes a situation in which a person with power over or responsibility of a child causes them some sort of harm.

The MCPL defines child neglect as:

Harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare by a parent, legal guardian, or any other person responsible for the health or welfare that occurs through either of the following: negligent treatment, including failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care, or placing a child at unreasonable risk to the child's health or welfare by failure of the parent, legal guardian, or any other person responsible for the child's health and welfare to intervene or eliminate that risk when that person is able to do so and has, or should have, knowledge of the risk. (2012).

Child neglect involves a person with responsibility of a child not providing for the basic needs of that child. It should be noted that the person responsible must willfully neglect the child by not seeking out needed goods or services to provide for that child in order for it to be considered neglect

Trauma

Several different authors have focused on child abuse and neglect as a source of trauma. The definition of trauma that I will be using refers to the “psychological or emotional injury caused by a deeply disturbing experience” (*The American Heritage Science Dictionary* online, 2002). Cohen, Berliner and Mannarino (2010) indicate that “child abuse, sexual assault,” and “domestic violence” are all sources of possible trauma in children (p. 215). All of these circumstances could indicate that DHS may be involved in a child’s life. The same authors go on to say that nearly half of all children involved in therapy have had contact with DHS or similar departments. Donald Irish (1964) also references a study conducted on the psychological wellbeing of children who are in the process of being adopted. Likewise, Leavitt, Gardner, Gallagher and Schamess (1998) conducted their study of treatment of traumatized children in a “clinic that specializes in work with...families and children who have experiences early failures in the caregiver-child relationship coupled with an array of subsequent traumatic incidents” (p. 57). Families involved with DHS would, in some cases, fit this description. When a parent abuses or neglects a child at an early age, this often interferes with the bonding of the child to that parent.

Similarly, DHS is rarely involved with a family based on just one traumatic event happening to a child. DHS is often involved due to a child suffering several different types of traumatic events or due to the child chronically experiencing the same type of trauma. The aforementioned articles that reference families involved with DHS are relevant to my study because of its specific focus on families with such involvement.

There are several different ways in which siblings can experience trauma. In some cases, siblings suffer the same sort of abuse, and may have similar reactions to it, or their reactions may be completely different. In other instances, siblings may suffer more severe abuse, or different types of abuse than others, which could lead to a different sibling dynamic. In any case, the role of abuse and neglect in the lives of children likely has an impact on their relationships with their siblings. This impact carries through into foster care, and may take on different forms with the changes in placement of the children.

Intervention in Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect

In each state in the United States, there is a government run agency that is responsible for ensuring the wellbeing of children. These agencies go by many names, but in Michigan (where this research occurred) that agency is known as the Department of Human Services (DHS). DHS is responsible for receiving complaints of suspected child abuse or neglect, and investigating them if necessary.

Generally, a segment of DHS known as Children's Protective Services (CPS) handles initial complaints and investigations of abuse and neglect. If the allegations of child abuse or neglect are substantiated, CPS is responsible for taking the appropriate actions to remedy the situation. This can involve opening an ongoing CPS case to provide services to a child and their family while the child is still living in the family home. The purpose of ongoing CPS case monitoring and services is to remedy the problems that were identified during the CPS investigation without having to remove the children from the home. The services provided are intended to mitigate the safety risk to the children,

making the home a safe place for them to remain living while their parents work to correct the problems identified by CPS.

There are other cases in which it is decided that the children are not safe to remain in the care of their parents. The initial findings made by CPS may be so concerning that DHS cannot ensure a child is safe to remain in the home with ongoing CPS monitoring and services. In this case, children are often immediately removed from their parental home. In other cases, families are offered services through an ongoing CPS case, but the family either refuses the services or the services are not solving the problem that CPS identified within the family.

In these cases, DHS generally petitions the local court for removal of the children. This can be done in one of two ways: there can be a formal hearing following the filing of a petition, in which both parents are assigned attorneys (unless they choose to retain an attorney or represent themselves). The child is also assigned an Attorney Guardian Ad Litem (LGAL) to represent them in the court proceedings. This initial hearing, known as a Preliminary Hearing, is the hearing in which the Judge or the Attorney Referee (who is appointed by the Judge) decide whether or not the children are placed at significant risk of harm, and whether or not the court must remove them from the care of their parents.

The other way that children can be removed from the care of their parents is through an Emergency Removal Order. These orders are issued by a judge after normal business hours, when a hearing cannot be held and only in the event that a child is in immediate risk of substantial harm. In the event that an Emergency Removal Order is issued, a Preliminary Hearing must take place as soon as possible to hear all facts on the

case and ensure that the appropriate decision was made (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2012).

Once the child is removed from the home, they may be placed with a non-offending parent (the parent who did not abuse or neglect them and was not found guilty of failing to protect them from being abused or neglected). If this is not possible and the child is placed with a non-parent relative or with a non-relative, the child is technically in foster care. If a child is placed with a non-offending parent but they have half siblings who could not be placed with a parent, the case is considered a foster care case. Because part of the sibling group is technically in foster care, DHS monitors the living situation of all children to ensure that they are being properly cared for. A change in the Friend of the Court order granting the non-offending parent full custody of the child can result in the closure of that child's foster care case.

Defining Siblings

The concept of "sibling" can be defined in several different ways. Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) state that the term "sibling" can include one or more offspring of the same couple, but also consider other close sibling-like bonds, such as foster siblings, half siblings, step siblings, or other non-related children with whom a child is close. In the end, these researchers decide to allow the child to define who their siblings are.

Washington (2007) also outlined ways in which researchers in prior studies have defined siblings. While she did acknowledge that some researchers allow the child to say who their siblings are, other researchers stick to a more strict definition, claiming that only biological siblings are considered "siblings" for their research. For the purpose of this

study, I will ask the child welfare professionals to consider all types of sibling relationships in their discussion of the foster children that they have come into contact with. DHS policy manuals do not provide a clear definition of “sibling” but generally refer to siblings being sisters, brothers and step-sisters, and step-brothers. It also indicates that anyone related biologically, by wedlock or through adoption, are also considered related (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2013). This broad definition of relatedness appears to agree with the definition of “siblings” used by participants in this research.

Reasons for Sibling Separations

In most cases, the child welfare agencies are expected to try to place all siblings in a family in the same foster care placement (Shlonsky, et al., 2008). Caseworkers (who often make placement decisions) tend to want to keep siblings placed together because they want to allow children to maintain family and sibling relationships while they are in foster care, and often because the family wants to see their children remain together throughout foster care (Boer & Spiering, 1991). A review of the literature shows that there are several different reasons why it is not always possible to do this. One possible reason is that some siblings have experienced some form of abuse perpetrated by another sibling, and placing the siblings together puts the victim at risk of being abused again (Whelan, 2003; Leathers, 2005). This abuse would have to be severe in nature to warrant sibling separation, as in sexual abuse or severe physical abuse.

Age appears to be a factor in sibling separations as well. Staff and Fein conducted a study that supported the findings of a previous study by Hegar, that older children are

less likely to be placed with their siblings than younger children. Similar findings on age have been noted in other studies (Linares, et al. 2007; Drapeau, et al. 2000; Shlonsky, et al. 2005). Children who are close in age with their siblings are more likely to be placed with those siblings than siblings who are farther apart in age (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Drapeau et al. 2000; Shlonsky, et al. 2008).

When one child exhibits extreme behaviors, foster families often ask to have that one child removed, but may be willing to keep that child's siblings, resulting in a sibling split (Leathers, 2005, Boer & Spiering, 1991; Shlonsky, et al. 2005). The same is true of children with special needs (Hegar, 2005). Special needs or behavioral problems are also taken into consideration by the caseworker when deciding whether or not to try to place all siblings in the same home (Boer & Spiering, 1991). If a foster home that is able to accommodate all of the children in a sibling group cannot be found, the children may be split into separate foster homes (Leathers, 2005; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Shlonsky, et al. 2005). Likely due to lack of accommodations, siblings who come from larger sibling groups are also more likely to be separated from their siblings (Hegar, 2005; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Drapeau, et al. 2000; Shlonsky, et al., 2008). Caseworkers are charged with finding a permanent placement as soon as possible for all children, which sometimes inhibits their ability to search for placements that can foster an entire sibling group, especially when an emergency placement is required (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Boer & Spiering, 1991; Shlonsky, et al., 2008). The type of placement also appears to have an effect on whether siblings are separated or not. Relatives are more likely to foster an entire sibling group for placement than licensed foster placements or residential foster homes (Shlonsky, et al. 2008.)

There are mixed findings on race and gender in the literature. Staff and Fein found that white children are more likely to be separated from their siblings than non-white children (1992). While Staff and Fein found that girls are more likely to be placed with their siblings than boys are, the authors note that their findings are the opposite of those of Aldridge and Cautley (1976.) Like Aldridge and Cautley, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell also found that boys are more likely to be separated from their siblings than girls are (2005). Other studies report that children are more likely to be placed with siblings of the same gender (Shlonsky, et al. 2008). It should be noted that very few studies considered race and gender when examining siblings in foster care.

Often, siblings who are initially placed together become separated at some point during their stay in foster care. The longer a child remains in foster care, the more likely it becomes that he or she will be separated from siblings (Shlonsky, et al. 2008). Children who are initially placed together when they enter foster care are more likely to remain together (Staff & Fein, 1992). Siblings who enter foster care at the same time are also more likely to be placed with their siblings than children who enter foster care at a different time than their siblings (Hegar, 2005; Boer & Speiring, 1991; Shlonsky, et al. 2008).

There is no real consensus found in the literature in regards to how many children in foster care are separated from their siblings. Results from different studies examining children separated from at least one sibling range from 14% (Linares, et al., 2007), to between 30 and 60% (Shlonsky et al. 2008; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005; Staff & Fein, 1992; Leathers, 2005), up to 80% (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011). This number is constantly changing as children enter care daily, and as children who are already in care change

placements and are separated from siblings with whom they were previously placed.

Linares, Li, Shrout, Brody and Pettit (2007) found that 14% of children were separated from one sibling in the beginning of their study, but only a year later that percentage had increased to 30%.

Importance of Siblings Bonds

The importance of sibling bonds in the lives of children is emphasized in several different articles as well. Irish claims that the strength of the bond between siblings tends to be stronger than the bonds between a child and most other family members, aside from their parents. Furthermore, he stated that the relationships between siblings serves many important functions, including clarifying the role that a child plays within a family, socializing a child, providing a “role model” for a child, and reducing the effects of trauma on a child (pp. 283-285). If sibling bonds serve such important roles in the lives of children, it is logical to study the role that they play in the lives of children placed in the foster care system.

Effects of Sibling Separations

Researchers have mixed opinions in regards to the effects of sibling separations in foster care. Some researchers feel that the separation of siblings can only have negative effects and that it should not take place except for in extreme cases. Other researchers feel that in certain cases, it is in the best interest of the child to be separated from their siblings. There are various reasons for these differing opinions, and certain studies show both positive and negative effects of sibling separation. It has also been noted that there is

limited information on the effects of sibling separations on children, and several researchers call for more studies to be conducted on the topic so that policies can be created with a more clear understanding of the best interest of the child (Shlonsky, et al. 2008).

Arguments for Keeping Siblings Together

The current literature focuses on mental health, emotional well being, and positive relationships as the most important benefits to foster children being placed with their siblings. Children placed with their siblings report that they like where they are living and that they feel closer to their foster parents when they are placed in the same home with at least one sibling (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011; Leathers, 2005). As a result of this elevated feeling of belonging, siblings who are placed together in foster care are less likely to be moved from a stable placement (Leathers, 2005; Staff & Fein, 1992).

Children who are placed with their siblings have more positive relationships with those siblings than those who are separated. Children who are placed together can act as emotional supports for each other in a time of trauma (Drapeau, et al., 2000; Boer & Spiering, 1991; Whelan, 2003). Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell found that girls in particular were much more stable in regards to their mental health when they were placed with siblings (2005). Siblings can make a child feel that they are more connected to their family of origin. This can make reunification with that family easier for a child in the event that reunification happens (Boer & Spiering, 1991). Gnaulti (2002) reports that siblings may benefit from joint counseling to process the trauma that brought them into foster care, indicating that this “might offer avenues for siblings to transcend patterns of

denial, share historical accounts of abuse events, and provide mutual affirmation of each other's suffering" (p. 78). Positive effects in maintaining siblings groups are also noted when children are psychologically tested. For example, children who were placed apart from their siblings show less curiosity. Curiosity, according to Flynn (1994), is a "psychological strength because it enables the child to explore the world, to learn, to succeed in school, and to be in a position to develop mastery" (p. 49). As adults, foster children who had more contact with their siblings report higher feelings of social support, higher self-esteem, stronger relationships with their siblings, and earned higher incomes (McCormick, 2009).

Some behavioral benefits were noted for children placed with siblings as well. More behavioral problems in school are noted for children who are separated from all of their siblings (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011). Other studies have noted that children's behavioral problems increase after being separated from siblings only when children had few behavioral problems before entering foster care (Linares, et al. 2007).

Arguments for Separating Siblings

There appear to be some behavioral benefits for children being separated from their siblings as well. Children who enter foster care with extremely concerning behavioral problems may show a decrease in these behavioral problems if they are separated from their siblings (Linares, et al. 2007).

When children are placed in a foster home, it is important that they bond with the family and feel comfortable in their new home. At times, strong sibling bonds can hinder this process, in that the child may interact more with the sibling that they are placed with,

rather than trying to interact with the foster family. Similarly, children may have learned inappropriate or even abusive patterns of interacting with each other in their previous home. In such cases, it may be more harmful to place these children together because they may continue these inappropriate interactions. It will also be harder to correct these behaviors in the children if they are still practicing them with the other sibling (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Whelan, 2003). These inappropriate forms of interaction will also likely hinder the child's ability to bond with their foster family, because that foster family will not be able to protect the child from their sibling. This logic comes from Attachment Theory, which claims that attachment forms from feelings of protection (Attachment Theory will be discussed in greater detail later) (Whelan, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, it can be hard to find placements that can accommodate an entire sibling group, so finding such a home might require more time, leaving a child lingering without a placement (Boer & Spiering, 1991). Dyer suggests that the main priority for foster children should be permanence, even if providing a permanent home involves not placing children with their siblings. This logic comes from the more child-centered approach related to Attachment Theory (2004). Although many studies claim that siblings can act as emotional supports to children in foster care, Flynn found the opposite in her research: siblings appeared unable to support each other emotionally. Flynn (1984) feels that this may be due to the fact that siblings may not have a "secure attachment" to that sibling (p. 54).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three main theories will be applied in my research: Family Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism. Family Systems theory may apply more to children who are placed in the same foster care placement. Attachment Theory may be more applicable when looking at children who were separated from their siblings in foster care. All three theories look at the importance of relationships. More specifically, I will be utilizing these theories to look at family relationships and their impact on the socialization of children in terms of their ability to form relationships with others outside of their family. These theories can be applied to the changing dynamics that arise when a child is placed in foster care. Family Systems Theory will focus more on the dysfunction that may arise in sibling relationships. Attachment Theory will focus more on the loss of certain relationships and its effect on the formation of new bonds. Symbolic Interactionism will be used to try to explain some of the behaviors that children exhibit when they enter foster care.

Family Systems Theory

Arising from the field of Psychology, Family Systems Theory (sometimes called the Bowen Theory) is useful to the current research because it focuses on “the phenomenon of the infectiousness of anxiety, through which anxiety can spread rapidly though the family” (p. 362) and it describes patterns and relationships that are created within family systems as a result of anxiety (Bowen, 1985). Families involved in the child welfare system likely experienced “anxiety” or some other form of disorder prior to their children entering foster care (based on the assumption that all children enter foster

care due to a true situation of abuse or neglect). Further disorder likely comes to the family as a result of having a child enter foster care and having expectations placed on the parents to get their child out of foster care. Family Systems Theory can help us understand common ways that this disorder is handled in a family.

Brown (1999) uses the theories of Murray Bowen and Walter Toman to explain how Family Systems Theory applies to sibling relationships. In his discussion of Family Systems Theory, Bowen spoke about sibling relationships in families with a certain level of dysfunction. He drew on the theories of Walter Toman, who described several different types of sibling bonds that may form. One of these types of bonds involves one sibling taking on a parent like role, and assuming responsibility for the younger siblings. Other siblings may feel responsible only for themselves, and some siblings may assume both of these extremes at different times. Unlike Toman, Bowen did not think that the ages of the siblings contributed to the role that they assumed. Bowen states that the sibling role a person takes on as a child will influence him or her greatly, and that this must be addressed in therapy.

Bowen also describes a process of forming “triangles” in his theory. When there is discord in a relationship (such as a marriage) Bowen claims that those in the relationship will try to draw in other people to create a triangle or relieve the tension that they are feeling in their relationship (Bowen, 1985, p. 374). They use this third person in a variety of ways. Bowen describes a triangle in which the conflict is between a mother and a father, with the child being the third person added to the triangle, as the most common triangle created within families. When this happens, the child experiences the anxiety that the parent had felt in the dysfunctional relationship. Bowen also stated that

the child will then replicate similar triangulation patterns (Bowen, 1985). This relates to this research, because the child may replicate the triangulation patterns that they were a part of in their relationships with their siblings. This could lead to harmful relationships between siblings, which could ultimately have an effect on the role that the sibling bonds play in foster care.

Attachment Theory

Another psychological theory, Attachment Theory, also provides an adequate theoretical framework for this study. Attachment theory focuses on the bond between a child and their caretaker, stating that this bond determines what types of relationships that child will have with others in the future. Although a child's bond with their caretaker seems to be the most important in Attachment Theory, it is also indicated that children's early attachments to others close to them, like siblings, can impact their future relationships as well. (Whiteman et al., 2011, pp. 125). Washington (2007) emphasizes the importance of sibling bonds in Attachment Theory, stating that strong sibling bonds help children "understand family dynamics" and that "removal from familiar people to whom the child is 'attached' is necessarily defined as a traumatic event" (p. 427). This explanation of Attachment Theory obviously applies to the current study, as the subjects in this study are children who have, in fact been removed from their family members, and that attachment has been broken. Attachment theory's emphasis on sibling bonds provides support for the idea that sibling bonds are important to children, and therefore they may have an effect on a child's ability to adjust to the change of being placed in foster care.

Siblings do not always have a positive impact on a child's ability to attach in a healthy manner. If siblings have an unhealthy, or "insecure" attachment, this type of relationship will likely continue in foster care. Similarly, if they have a healthy attachment, or a "secure" attachment, that will carry on into foster care and the relationships that they form with others in the future (Whelan, 2003). Whelan (2003) explains that placing siblings who have an insecure attachment together in foster care will inhibit their ability to form secure attachments to their foster parents.

Attachment Theory also contributes to the current research, in that it specifies that attachment styles take shape during early childhood. A child who is placed in foster care at a very young age (from birth, for example) will bond more with their foster parent than with their biological parent or their siblings (if the siblings are not placed together). If that child is removed from their foster home and placed back with their biological family, Dyer (2004) argues that that would be more detrimental to them than remaining in foster care would be. Conversely, if an older child is removed from their parents and placed in foster care, this will likely be more harmful as their stronger attachments will be with their biological family due to the fact that that is who they spent their early years with.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological theory. Drawing on the theories of Mead and Meltzer, Russell (1980) explains that:

The central ideas in Symbolic Interactionism are contained in its title. The first is that human behavior is shaped by the meanings of situations (symbolic). The second is that these symbols or meanings emerge from

and are generated by interaction among individuals (interactionism). (p. 76).

Symbolic Interactionism is useful in the current study because it explains the ways in which children act based on the types of expectations that they feel others have of them. Children in foster care have a unique role that likely involves unique expectations and perceptions of them.

One of the most important concepts in Symbolic Interactionism is the “self.” Not only is our self the image that we present to others in society, the self is an object that we form ideas about. The concept of self is formed in comparison to ideas about the “other,” which would be anyone else that we interact with in any capacity. One’s self is a determinant of their behavior. We “role take” or see ourselves as we think other see us, then act according to what we believe they think about us (Charon, 2007; Stryker, 1959; Musolf, 1996; Russell, 1980). This concept of self is important to this research because a child’s concept of self and the way that she or he interacts based on that concept of self could explain many of the problem behaviors that are noticed once a child enters foster care.

When discussing the “other,” there are opinions of certain others that one sees as most important. These others are called “significant others” (Stryker, 1959; Charon, 2007; Musolf, 1996). When speaking of a child, it is reasonable to assume that their family members represent significant others, given significant others are defined as:

those whom take on importance to the individual, those whom the individual desires to impress; they might be those he or she respects, those

who he or she wants acceptance from, those he or she fears, those with whom he or she identifies (Charon, 2007, pp.75-76).

Our relationships with our significant others impact the way in which we role take (Musolf, 1996). Certain situations limit the choices in roles that one is able to take (Russell, 1980). In other words, the specific roles that children take and the behaviors that they exhibit based on those roles may be forced by the situation in which they find themselves. The determinants of any situation are: the “goals” that the individuals aim to achieve in the situation and the individual’s ideas about what the other person’s “goals” may be. Therefore, individuals feel that they understand a situation they are in the situation and act accordingly (Russell, 1980, p. 85).

Foster children have generally had either abusive or neglectful interactions with adults prior to entering foster care. Therefore, some of the negative behaviors exhibited by children in foster care (who are placed with or without their siblings) mentioned in the literature review may be explained using this theory. Children may feel that any adults’ goal in any situation is to abuse or neglect them. They will likely act accordingly, and be combative towards adults. This could manifest itself in behavioral problems in school or disrespect towards foster parents. These problem behaviors may not be due to placement with or separation from siblings, but may be due to the child’s assumptions based on past experiences. They may also be due to a type of role taking that was formed based on their interactions with their siblings as a significant other.

People tend to give us certain labels based on their perceptions of us. When we are given a certain label, it puts us in a position where we are only able to take certain roles that comply with that label. We may also internalize that label and view our self

according to that label (Russell, 1980; Charon, 2007). One label that a child may be given is “foster child.” Once a child is labeled a foster child, he or she may feel limited in the roles that he or she can assume within a family. He or she will role take, and assume that a foster parent sees him or her as a foster child and wants the child to act a certain way based on that role. As a result, the child may withdraw from the family and not feel comfortable bonding with them. Conversely, they may feel that a biological sibling that is placed with them in foster care is their actual sibling because they have held those labels for a long period of time. They may act accordingly and maintain a stronger relationship. This idea is offered as an explanation to the idea that children who are placed in the same foster home will not bond with their foster family.

These three theories worked well together to provide a unique framework for interpreting the data in my research. While Family Systems Theory and Attachment Theory are more meso-level theories, Symbolic Interactionism is a micro-level theory. Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory will help explain the interactions and relationships within the family. Symbolic Interactionism will be able to explain the internal and psychological aspects of separation from siblings while in foster care.

METHODS

This study was conducted using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews are interviews in which a set of basic questions is created ahead of time by the interviewer, but the interview process is not completely structured around those questions, and other questions can be asked based on the respondent’s answers. This style of interview promoted an exchange between the interviewer and interviewee

that was more open and free flowing than other styles of interviewing. Some structure still existed, in that the general questions asked in the interview are established beforehand (Whiting, 2008). This method was beneficial because it allowed me to gear interview questions towards the very specific population that is being studied. It also allowed the participants to elaborate on any questions, or provide background or details as they saw appropriate.

The interviews were conducted with individuals in Southern Michigan who work directly with children in the foster care system in some capacity. In addition, participants in this study had to be over the age of 18. I interviewed any individual who met these criteria and were willing to be in my study. During the recruitment process, I ensured that all those who were volunteering to participate in my research met all criteria. In all, I interviewed eight people for this study. I asked participants several different questions, including: how often siblings are placed in separate foster care arrangements, what arrangements are made to enable separated children to maintain their relationships with siblings, what effects were noticed in children when they were separated from their siblings, why children are placed in separate foster homes from their siblings, and whether the effects are different based on the type of sibling relationship. All of the interview questions are listed in Appendix I.

Initially, the goal of this study was to conduct the semi-structured interviews with adults who had experienced foster care as children and who had siblings. This first hand experience would have been valuable and would have given former foster youth a chance to share their opinions on sibling relationships in foster care. Unfortunately, I could not

draw an adequate sample of former foster youth, so the research was conducted instead with child welfare professionals.

Sample

These interviews were not conducted directly with the children in foster care for several reasons. The first reason being that these children may have been severely traumatized by the situation that led to their being placed in foster care, by the fact that they are in foster care, or by the loss of their relationship with their siblings. Therefore, there was a great risk of re-traumatizing children by asking them to discuss these concepts. It did not feel it was justifiable to do this for the purpose of this research. Also, some of the children involved in foster care may be too young to express a meaningful description of their relationship with their siblings. Instead, the practitioners in the foster care field were interviewed. Their knowledge of the foster care system and its effect on children and sibling bonds allowed them to provide a more coherent explanation of a child's ability to adjust to life in foster care.

Eight child welfare professionals were interviewed for this study. These interviewees worked in a variety of ways including: working as a foster care case manager, counselor, trauma assessor, or case aid (who supervises sibling visits). Some respondents had held more than one position in the field of child welfare. These child welfare professionals had anywhere between 1 and 30 years of experience in the field. There were two males and six females in the sample. All interviewees had obtained at least a Bachelor's degree (although some had higher levels of education or special certifications). In addition, each child welfare professional had been involved in decisions

on where to place siblings in foster care, sometimes involving sibling separations. A convenience sample was used in this study. As an individual who works in child welfare myself, many of the respondents were individuals with whom I have worked. For more details regarding my personal involvement in the field of child welfare, please see Appendix II.

Before conducting research with DHS employees, I acquired approval from the State of Michigan to conduct interviews with foster care workers, case aids, and foster care supervisors. A copy of the protocol for this approval can be found in Appendix III. Five of the child welfare professionals interviewed worked for DHS. All other interviewees were service providers who did not work for DHS (counselors and a director of a trauma assessment center) who work with children in foster care.

I also received funding through the Kercher Center for Social Research at Western Michigan University for this project. I received \$80 to purchase a \$10 gift card to a local grocery store for each participant. These gift cards were provided to compensate them for their time.

Data Generation Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. This form of interview allowed enough structure to make the research focused on the intended topic, but it also allowed for the free flow of ideas between the interviewer and the interviewee (Rabionet, 2011). The interviewees were able to elaborate more on questions that were asked of them, and the interviewer was free to ask any questions which were not outlined on the initial interview outline, but which arose from the interview process. These interviews

lasted an average of 25 minutes. These interviews were recorded to ensure that each subject's statements were accurately reported. The recordings were later be transcribed and analyzed. A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix I.

The questions that were asked of the child welfare professionals allowed them to reflect on their experiences with foster children, specifically as they related to their siblings relationships. Initial questions provided background information regarding their experience in the field of child welfare, which allowed the interviewer to better understand where their answers were coming from. They were then asked questions about their experience in placing children in foster homes, what considerations were made regarding the placement of siblings in the same or separate foster homes, what measures were taken by them to ensure contact between siblings, and what sort of effect the sibling relationship had on the ability of the child to adjust to life in foster care. These general questions were asked in combination with several sub-questions and any other questions that arose during the process of the interview. In answering these questions, it is hoped that the interviewee were able to fully elaborate on their understanding of the importance of siblings relationships to children in foster care.

I obtained answers to my research questions by interviewing child welfare professionals who work with children in several different capacities. This provided answers to my research questions from a variety of backgrounds, which provided a better understanding. In addition, the validity of the data that I collected was increased.

Data Analysis

All interviews, which I personally conducted, were recorded on a digital recorder. I transcribed all of these interviews as well. In order to ensure confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to any name that was mentioned by an interviewee. After transcription, the digital recording was erased (Rabionet, 2011). Once the interviews were transcribed, I conducted an initial reading of them, and noted common themes that were mentioned by interviewees. I coded these themes, then re-read the transcripts again and continued to code them in their entirety. I re-read and re-coded the transcripts several times until I felt that all themes are appropriately coded. In the interviews, I paid closer attention to several different topics, including the child welfare professionals' discussion of the interactions that they witnessed between children in foster care, their description of interaction with children in foster care when discussing their siblings, their opinion on the effect that being placed either with or without siblings in the same home has on foster children, and the different ways that children adapt to life in foster care based on the amount of access that they have with their siblings, among other things (Wolcott, 2009).

I looked for answers that were commonly given in response to my research questions. This allowed me to notice areas where there was consensus regarding my topic. In addition, I noted answers to my research questions that were very different from the most common answer, or answers to questions for which there did not seem to be consensus. This allowed me to see how opinions differed based on the type of interactions that child welfare professionals had with foster children. This also showed a difference in opinion based on the individual children that the child welfare professional was drawing from. These differences were very important, based on the fact that all

children experience the foster care system in very different ways, and all children's experiences need to be considered in this research.

Because the topic of this research is a sensitive one, any non-verbal or emotional expressions that took place during these interviews were also noted. The only non-verbal cues that were noticed were emphasis on certain words and pauses in speech. These were included in the typed transcripts as field notes. I used them for recollection purposes, thematic development, and to provide greater contextual nuance to the interview excerpts shared below.

FINDINGS

One aspect of my findings that was most notable was the lack of consensus on several of the topics that were discussed in this research. Perhaps this should not be surprising, given that it mirrors the lack of consensus on most aspects of siblings bonds in foster care (most notably, the percent of children separated from siblings, the effects of separation on siblings and the opinions on whether or not children should be separated from their siblings) that was outlined in the literature review. In my explanation of the findings, I will indicate the most popular answers but will also explain any notable dissenting opinions. I will begin this report of my findings by describing the reasons that were given for sibling separations, in the experience of these child welfare professionals. I will next outline the effects of sibling splits on children and any differences that were noticed in those effects based on characteristics or circumstances of the children. I will end by explaining what is being done to improve the situation for separated siblings in foster care and what child welfare professionals feel still needs to be done.

Reasons for Sibling Separations

There was no consensus among those interviewed in regards to how many children in foster care are separated from at least one of their siblings. Three of the child welfare professionals explained that most, if not all, of the children that they work with are placed with their siblings. Three child welfare professionals stated that between 20 and 50% of the children that they work with are placed with their siblings, and one child welfare professional estimated that 75% of the children he or she worked with were separated from their siblings. This lack of consensus could be due to estimation error, as many child welfare professionals may never have thought about the answer to this question before. The difference could also be attributed to the fact that the child welfare professionals were likely thinking of children with whom they have worked directly. There is, most likely, some variation in the number of children separated from their siblings from one caseload to another. Based on their role in the child welfare system, some professionals may have seen more separated siblings than others (for example, maybe counselors see children who are separated from their siblings more often than they see those who are not.)

The most common situation described in which sibling separation was necessary was one in which a sibling is victimizing or harming another sibling in some way. Sexual abuse was the most common form of sibling-on-sibling abuse mentioned. Some of the child welfare professionals explained this form of sibling separation as a way to protect one sibling from another sibling. Dan, a foster care case manager, explains:

I know that if you have a child that is especially aggressive or violent or for example poses a direct threat to another kid's safety, you might have to move that kid to another placement. Unfortunately a lot of times to a residential placement and that's different than a normal foster care placement where they're actually in a placement with staff and other kids in the system as well. I mean, taking into account that a lot of kids might have different behavioral needs, that might tend to pose a threat or safety concern on another child in the house.

Moreover, the child that is separated from another may not always be the victimized child's biological sibling. One child welfare professional noted that foster families have asked to have foster children removed from a home for abusing their own biological children. This also led to a sibling split, as the child's biological siblings were not removed from that home if they were not perpetrating abuse on other children. In other situations, it was noted that it not only benefitted the victimized child to be separated from their sibling, but it also benefitted the sibling who was perpetrating the abuse. Patti, a counselor and former foster care case manager, mentioned that:

I mean that little kid said to me "I know I shouldn't have done it, Patti. I know you worked with me for a long time on it but I was mad at him and I wanted to hurt him and I had the urge and I did it." And so now we have another kid who's been sexually abused who wasn't before and it's his sibling and he has to live with that for the rest of his life, ya know? And so by separating them you would protect both of them.

Other child welfare professionals explained the need for separating abusive siblings in a different way. They noted that siblings tend to abuse *each other*, and that it was more reciprocal rather than a simple abuser and victim situation. Siblings who experienced the same type of abuse were said to act out that trauma on each other. In the therapy process, when one child was improving and another wasn't, they were said to "trigger" each other into acting out the trauma or abuse. The most common example given was a situation in which the children were sexually abused and they continued to engage in inappropriate sexual behavior with each other while in foster care as Merle (director of a trauma assessment center) explained:

But it's really um, given what's happened to them it's really important to look at how each kid, how siblings, they trigger each other, which makes trauma recovery sometimes much more difficult. Especially in sexual abuse where kids reenact. And so one kid may be making progress but the other kid trigger him and then you have that, um, ongoing reenactment.

Later in the interview, Merle clarified that: "So we know when the trigger happened and kids go into fight, flight or reenactment. They're not consciously choosing to reenact, it's how their brain is trying to solve it."

This scenario, explained by Merle, reflects several concepts in Symbolic Interactionism. Children who enter foster care because of sexual abuse were generally either abused by a parent or were abused by a someone other than a parent and the parent knew about the abuse and did not protect the child (if someone other than the parent abused the child and the parent did not know about it, CPS generally does not remove kids unless there are other safety concerns). Given that parents and siblings fit the

definition of a significant other according to Symbolic Interactionism, and remembering that our relationships with significant others determine which roles we will take, it is understandable that sexually abused children may reenact abuse (Charon, 2007; Stryker, 1959; Musolf, 1996). When a child engages in role taking, they are behaving based on others' expectations of them (Charon, 2007; Stryker, 1959; Musolf, 1996; Russell, 1980). Sexually abused children may feel that others expect them to act in a sexualized manner and act accordingly. When two sexually abused children have been conditioned to role take in the same way, they may reenact the sexual behaviors that they learned from their significant others.

Another common reason for sibling separations, which was not found in the literature review, was the fact that many siblings who enter care are half siblings. This confirms that the use of the broad definition of siblings outlined in the literature review is the appropriate definition to use in this research (Rosenthol, 2011; Washington, 2007; Department of Human Services, 2013). Several child welfare professionals described circumstances in which children were all living with the same biological mother, but the children had different biological fathers. When DHS removed the children from their mother, many of them were placed with their father if he was appropriate. If other children could not be placed with their fathers, they were placed with fit and willing relatives, or in foster care. Therefore, the children were obviously separated from their half siblings. There was a general consensus that half siblings and other types of siblings (foster siblings, step siblings, or fictive kin) could share a bond equally as strong as the bond shared by biological siblings. This seemed especially true for non-biological siblings who were living in the same home.

Even when children were placed with family members, it was frequently noted that family members could not always accommodate all of the children. This was especially true for large sibling groups. Kelli, a DHS case manager who works specifically with teenagers aging out of the foster care system, and former case aide, expressed that “In this county at least, we end up placing with grandparents a lot and they can’t really take on more than like one or two kids. So it has a lot to do with how many relatives are available.”

Emotional needs and behavioral concerns were also noted as reasons for sibling separations. It was explained that one family may not be able to care for multiple children with a variety of emotional needs, and that it may benefit these children to be placed in separate homes where they can get the care and attention that they need. Similarly, it may be hard for a family to care for several children with extreme behavioral issues, but it may be more manageable for the family to control one child’s behaviors. Lauren, a counselor, explains a case in which sibling separation was best for one child based on her emotional needs:

Um, in the case where I had the three kids, the one placed with the father was a very timid child. The other two were very aggressive and although we didn’t want to separate the children, it was best for that child to be separated and with the father...Because she wasn’t going to roll with the punches like the other two. And now that the case has been going on so long, even the stronger children are, the boy, who was the strongest one, is affected.

Effects of Sibling Separations

Many of the interviewees explained that they could not absolutely discern effects on children that arose from separation from their siblings and those that arose from other changes that the child experienced upon entering foster care, however most noted that separation from siblings is a type of trauma. Some chose to speak more in general terms and discuss the effects of trauma on children. Others chose to classify separation from siblings as a type of disruption, and explain the way that they have seen this type of disruption impact children. This is consistent with the definition of separation from siblings as a form of trauma that was established in the literature review (Washington, 2007).

Several of the respondents explained that separation from siblings can be a separate form of disturbance added to the that already experienced due to the abuse or neglect that brought them into foster care, or the drastic changes that have taken place in their lives since entering foster care. In Dan's words:

I mean, no matter how bad of a situation they're coming from in the first place, just being removed from the parental or the family home in general is traumatic enough. You're being placed in a whole new and different environment that's completely new to you and I guess, it adds fuel to the fire, taking away a sibling. Taking away that dynamic that you've grown up with and that you already know. That person that you'll be looking toward for comfort. I mean, its just another recurring traumatic event for the child.

Several other child welfare professionals echoed the same idea: that children often look to siblings for support in traumatic circumstances, and that by being separated from their siblings, they lose that source of support. Furthermore, their siblings may be the only person who understands the trauma, given that they shared the experience. This lack of support is concerning considering the child welfare professionals' descriptions of children in foster care as presenting with depression and anxiety, withdrawing emotionally from others, grieving their loss, and experiencing anger. Daily functioning for these children was also affected. Some children were unable to eat upon entering foster care, while others would be preoccupied with thoughts of their circumstances in foster care and would be unable to focus on daily activities. Separation from siblings can also be another issue "piled on the plate" (according to Lauren) that children will have to cope with while they are already trying to cope with the abuse or neglect that brought them into care.

A different sense of loss was noted in sibling groups in which one sibling had assumed a parent-like role, as discussed in Family Systems Theory, (Brown, 1999). This idea was relayed in my conversation with Kelli:

One case in particular that I had, the oldest child was their caretaker for a really long time and splitting them up made it really difficult for her and she kind of regressed in her behaviors and her progress and stuff. And you can definitely know that it's because she's split from them, not her parents. (Q: Like she felt responsibility for her siblings?) Yeah, and she felt responsible for them being split up. She didn't care about being with mom or dad, she cared about being with her brothers and sisters.

Merle noted that placing siblings together can lead to placement instability:

That's one factor to say "Yeah, you're with your siblings but now you've had 10 placements." All right. And so recognizing that the loss of the siblings versus the loss of long term placement stability, in weighing those out, um, this is, I think much more damaging.

This is in stark contrast to the research of Leathers (2005) and Staff and Fein (1992) who concluded that siblings placed in the same foster home would have increased placement stability.

Another commonly mentioned effect of sibling separations was competition or discord between siblings. This seemed to occur for several different reasons. One reason that was mentioned was that when one sibling is abused alone or is abused differently than other siblings. The child welfare professionals noted that the abused child may feel alienated because she/he was abused and the other siblings were not, or may resent the other siblings because they were not abused. In other situations, the non-abused siblings may come to resent the abused sibling. Kelli explains this dynamic in her description of a family in which one of the children was sexually abused by a parent:

It was three siblings and only one of the kids had disclosed abuse, um so she was placed in another home, um and the parent was removed from the home with the other two children. So when like, sibling visits were conducted or there was interaction between the siblings, the younger two siblings would pretty much yell at their older sibling saying she's the one that did this, she ruined their life, um, that she's a liar. And it really effected this, their older sibling because was trying to...she would tell

them you know “I’m doing what I can to protect you. When you’re older you’ll understand.” So I saw a lot of you know, psychological damage. She really wanted to just stop it all and go home and forget it happened because of how her sisters were treating her and how they made her feel and it was a really hard time for her but she was strong and stuck through it but it definitely effected her.

So in this situation, siblings were separated because only one sibling had alleged abuse. However, the other siblings were still not allowed to live with their parent based on these allegations. In this way, the sibling split appeared to damage their sibling bond beyond repair according to their caseworker. Some situations also appeared to create competitiveness between siblings, as Michaela, a foster care case manager and former Children’s Protective Services worker, explained. The following scenario involves siblings who were placed into two separate relative foster placements.

Yeah, um, being placed in a house that’s really nice versus a house that’s cruddy and can’t afford anything, there’s a huge difference...that I experienced firsthand placing four kids. Two of them went to a really nice house and two of them went to a not very nice house and unfortunately, the two kids saw the nice house before they went to their really cruddy house. Which sucked (Q: So did that, kind of like make it hard for the siblings and their relationship?) Oh yeah, oh yeah. It was resentment.

A final major effect that was noticed was difficulty in school. Children were said to be more aggressive and disruptive during school after being separated from their siblings. Lauren explains that she worked with a child who experienced this:

Really with this child, this boy that I worked with, one problem was that he'd gone from going to school and doing very well and liking school to just, his behavior just deteriorated and he started to just have attitude towards his teachers, toward children, he would tell me things like "I don't have friends. I don't have friends in school." Within a year he was getting suspended from school, he was acting out, he was throwing things in the classroom, and we really didn't know what to do but this foster care case had gone on for so long. I believe it was just, it was too much for him to be isolated and separated from everyone. So I don't know if he's going to...I think it's going to affect him for a long time.

While Lauren and other child welfare professionals noted that the children that they worked with saw a decrease in academic performance, there was not a consensus on this topic. When children did better in school, however, it was reportedly because their new caregivers ensured that they received the educational help that they needed, and because they were no longer in an abusive or neglectful home and could focus on schoolwork.

Differences in Effects of Sibling Separations Based on Child Characteristics

Regardless of the reasons for sibling separations, the effects seemed to vary based on the circumstances or characteristics of the specific child. While age was frequently cited as a reason for separating siblings in the literature (Staff & Fein, 1992; Hegar, 2005; Linares et al., 2007; Drapeau et al., 2011; Shlonsky et al, 2005, Boer & Spiering, 1991), age was mentioned more in terms of the differences it created in the effects of sibling

separations for children in these interviews. While one of the research questions directly asked the respondents to reflect on the difference in effects based on age, many respondents mentioned age without prompting in their response to more general questions about the effects of sibling separations. All of the child welfare professionals mentioned that there was a notable difference in the way that younger and older children react to sibling separations.

Kelli indicated that it may be easier for older children to understand what is happening when they are removed from their parents and separated from their siblings:

One of my teenagers was split from, I think she had three siblings? And she doesn't see them anymore. They got adopted, she didn't. But she's happy for them. She said it's comforting knowing that they have a family. So it's easier to understand when you're older but that doesn't make it easier, I guess.

As the end of this quote from Kelli reflects, almost all of the child welfare professionals noted that along with this increased understanding comes increased attachment to their siblings and parents. This can make separation from siblings much harder for children in foster care. Not only have they lost a person who could provide support to them while coping with the trauma of separation from parents, as Caitlyn, a foster care caseworker, noted: "They're older and closer and just providing that support for each other."

Several child welfare professionals explained that younger children will not have memories of their parents or their siblings, and that they will attach to their foster family,

particularly to their foster parents. Older children tend to remain bonded with their family of origin, as Lauren explains:

I believe it's age related because to be placed in care you have these bonding issues, the attachment issues. A young child is going to attach to the foster parent and no matter how much we try to you know, um, foster that attachment to the parent, the attachment is going to be with the foster parent, to that caregiver. And that poses a lot of potential long-term problems when we separate that child from the caregiver and place them back with the biological parent. Because the older kids usually are bonded to their parent, um, on some level. Whether it be a healthy or an unhealthy bond. But they seem to, um, there's a little more security there for lack of a better word.

This type of response draws heavily on Attachment Theory, and the notion that the most important relationship for a young child or infant is the one with his or her caregiver (Whiteman et al., 2011; Dyer, 2004). Following this logic, Patti saw placing siblings together as potentially problematic when there is a big age difference, because the older siblings will hinder the younger siblings' ability to bond with the foster family:

Some of the older kids have a lot more memories than the babies that are coming in and what we've found with older kids is that they just want to get back to mom and dad whereas the little ones, they have no memory of mom and dad. But the older ones are going to sort of constantly remind them that they're adopted and that there is a mom and dad. So sometimes, it's not too bad to take the older ones and separate them from the smaller

ones because then the smaller ones are going to have a better chance of attaching and bonding with their family instead of always waiting until they're 18 to find a family.

Some effects of sibling separation were said to impact younger children more than older ones. These effects included confusion and feeling as though they did something wrong to have their siblings removed. Meghan, a foster care case manager, describes this confusion as she witnessed it in one of her cases:

I think it has a huge effect on them, um, the two little ones get confused. Um, sometimes people ask them about their older siblings and they won't remember their names or won't remember who they are. Um, because they don't get to see them as often so I think that it's a little bit more detrimental for the younger ones. A lot of confusion.

And Kelli describes that the feelings of guilt tend to arise from this confusion:

“Yeah, I mean you see a lot of acting out with the younger kids when they're split with their siblings. They don't have a good understanding of why, they felt like it's their fault or something.”

Many child welfare professionals also noted that the effects of sibling splits were not as traumatic for children who were placed with family members as opposed to those placed in non-relative foster homes. This appears to be the case because children feel more secure in more familiar surroundings with familiar people, as Meghan explains:

I think that the kids feel safer generally with relatives, um if they know them. So when you're moving a child and you're placing them in a home where they're comfortable I think it makes it a little bit easier. And in a lot

of cases with relative caregivers I've found that children were already living there and have spent a lot of their life there so it's not as hard.

Whereas with the licensed home it's like they're uprooted from everything they know and then sometimes they're separated from their siblings and they don't know where they're at and they get, you know, confused and they don't feel safe. But then I guess that can be a bad thing too because if the relative caregiver is too close to the parents sometimes they can't put up the appropriate boundaries and then that affects the children.

This idea that relative homes may not be the safest place for children was also expressed frequently. Some relatives may not be willing to prevent the parents from having unauthorized access to the children, while other family members may have some of the same problems, including abusive or neglectful behaviors, that brought the children into care. Caitlyn, a foster care case manager and former Children's Protective Services caseworker, expressed concern about this situation:

Sometimes the children, if they're placed with relatives, um, it can either go two ways I guess. If their family has a lot of the same problems or kind of the same lifestyle of abuse that brought them into care it would be a bad thing, you know, because they're not really going to get away from that.

Or it could be that they're safe and they feel better because they know the family and they're not going to some stranger's home.

In addition, if family members are unable to have all of the children live with them, the ones who they are unable to care for may feel left out or wonder why that relative did not accept them. Kelli experienced this with a sibling group on her caseload:

I think I've seen it cause some rivalry between siblings? Or like, say you know, we place this kid with a relative in a nice home and this kid gets placed with, you know, a stranger and the home isn't as nice, it almost causes tension between that. And then the kids that aren't...that couldn't be placed with relatives, um, can experience that they were left out or that they weren't loved the same or you know, it all falls back on them feeling like they did something wrong.

Aside from age, it appeared that most other factors did not directly impact a child's ability to cope with separation from siblings. When asked if children suffered more or less trauma as a result of being separated from the siblings based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, type of sibling relationship (biological, half, step, etc.) or type of abuse or neglect experienced, many reported that they did not think that these had an effect. Instead, it was explained that the strength of the relationship between the siblings was the most important factor. This idea is expressed in the following quote from Patti: "Well again it goes back to the significance of the relationship, which is determined by age, role, um, how they managed to survive in the home."

The effects that were noticed appeared to relate more to a child's sense of belonging or sense of normalcy. For example, Meghan described situations in which children from low-income families were placed with more wealthy foster parents. These situations led to the children feeling disconnected from their families and possibly their siblings.

Because the one case where they were from a poor rural town... I mean their...it was like a one bedroom apartment, the floors were basically dirt

floors. It was migrant housing, just not good. Black mold in there. And then the kids had went from that to like these big nice houses where they have all this clean, you know, this and that and they felt safe. And so I think that did have an effect and I think it also made the ...the kids were a little more, I think they're used to that now and so, so now they, especially the older ones, they know what is out there, like what they could have and they don't have. So I think it's strained their relationship with mom on "Well why were we living like this?" and "Why did you put us in these situations?" and "Why did you do this to us when this is what a family does and this is, we could be doing all these fun things and going places and have a decent house" and that kind of stuff so...

Similarly, Merle explained a situation in which two African American children were placed in a home in a predominantly white city, leading them to feel disconnected from the place that they were living: "And there's a huge prejudice. And because of that, I mean that's exacerbated, again 'Nobody wants me. I don't belong here.' Kicked up their aggression, I mean all of those things contributed."

According to Symbolic Interactionism, the situation in which a child finds himself or herself often dictates the roles that that child is able to take (Russell, 1980). Because there was a prejudice in the community, they may have felt that other members of the community had certain expectations of them, or may have been labeled by the community members (Charon, 2007; Russell, 1980; Stryker, 1959; Musolf, 1996). As a result, the African American children whom Merle describes in the above passage may

have felt limited by their surroundings and may have felt that they were not able to act as a member of that foster family or that community.

Attempts to Improve Life for Siblings in Foster Care

Regardless of individual characteristics or circumstances, it appears that one factor plays a large role in the ability of children to adjust to sibling separation and life in foster care: the amount of access they have to their siblings. Merle explains it this way: “It’s tremendously important. It’s the most important relationship, outside the caregiver one, that we should preserve. Um, and if they’re not together then we should preserve that in the context of contact.”

Merle’s ideas on the importance of sibling relationships mirror the emphasis on sibling bonds expressed in Attachment Theory (Whiteman, 2011; Washington, 2007). Several efforts have been made by DHS and similar agencies to ensure that sibling bonds between foster children are maintained.

The one measure that was most consistently mentioned for maintaining sibling bonds was sibling visitation. In fact, it is DHS policy that siblings must have sibling visitation at least monthly unless there is a compelling reason not to conduct visits (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2013). It was also mentioned that there were frequently problems in scheduling these visits. One of the problems mentioned was the unwillingness of foster parents to help facilitate sibling visits, as Meghan explained:

We have to do sibling visits once a month, um, I would say that the issues with that though, that we run into with that a lot is that the foster parents

don't want to do those, um, so I as a worker try to um, I try to do visitation together with mom.

Meghan also explained specific reasons that foster parents gave for not wanting sibling visits to take place:

Um, the one, the four year old would, she was like she was hitting and biting. Her temper, like extreme temper tantrums um, the nine year old was like trying to destroy things you know, get nail polish out write on it, um, the foster parents....I think that's normal and typical for kids. They're going to act out and they're going to have issues and that a lot of times, those issues were more prevalent after a visitation when the kids were together, which was a reason that the foster parents didn't want them to have visitation together so...

Most of the child welfare professionals noted that the foster care case managers tend to take up the responsibility of facilitating sibling visits when foster parents are unwilling to, but Michaela also noted problems with this:

Honestly I think it depends on the worker and their caseload. Because, I mean, if we have time to get the kids together and who they're placed with, if they have people willing to do transportation. Because transportation is huge. Especially sibling visits when all of the kids are in school during the day. And then really, then their visits have to be after school which is after work hours usually.

DHS has also created new policies, as of 2011, which decreased the number of cases that an individual caseworker can have in an attempt to decrease the problems, such as this

problem, that come with carrying high caseloads (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2013).

Other measures, such as phone calls and letters, were also noted for maintaining sibling relationships. As Caitlyn explains:

Maintain that phone contact, maybe writing letters, um, you know, just talking to the siblings about their siblings still when you're talking to them. Asking them, you know, telling them as much as you can about how their siblings are doing.

In spite of all the efforts being made to maintain sibling relationships for children in foster care, it seemed that most caseworkers felt that more needed to be done. Dan expressed this idea by saying:

I know, I guess you could say that...efforts that are being taken to maintain and ensure that relationship with the kids um, but, no matter what if the kids are going to be split up it's going to be hard regardless and um, there's nothing you can really do to ensure that you can make up for that split I guess you could say.

Kelli also explained that:

At least once a month they'd have a visit. I don't think there's another policy. Do I think there should be? Because I know speaking from my experience I've had, I've had you know, my foster kids literally telling me that they want to see them more and high caseloads, all that makes it more difficult and it doesn't become a priority for the caseworker to provide those. Because the court, DHS, focuses so much on the kids seeing the

parents versus all the kids seeing each other without them there or whatever.

When asked if she has ever conducted sibling counseling for separated siblings, Patti answered:

When they're all in the same home I have. Um, when they're separated we do some family counseling when they're trying to be reunited. But once they've been separated there's not a whole lot of sibling counseling that goes on. And that probably is an area that could be improved upon because a lot of these kids have experienced the same trauma or victimized each other so there could be a lot of healing there but that's probably overlooked a lot.

Sadly, even though measures are taken to ensure that sibling bonds are maintained while children are in foster care, these measures do not continue once foster care ends. In the event that parental rights are terminated and permanency is established for the children in separate homes (usually in the form of adoption) there are no policies in place which state that the children must continue to see their siblings. As Merle describes:

The best we can do is court orders. But when they're adopted then there are no court orders. And so I think it's essential that siblings have contact with each other and sometimes it has to be supervised but the problem or challenge is that adoptive families sometimes want to cut off that connection. For fear that it's going to trigger the kid or, you know, that they're going to be more challenging.

On the other hand, there were several situations in which the child welfare professionals felt that certain parties went out of their way to ensure that children were able to maintain a bond with their siblings. Dan, who has not had to separate siblings on his caseload yet in his career, attributes this fact to the efforts of the DHS licensing department (which is responsible for finding and licensing foster homes), stating that “they find a lot of good families that are willing to take kids, even if their needs are different, and um, work with them no matter what and give effort not to split them up and cause further trauma for them.” Meghan also explains a situation in which the licensing workers as well as the foster care workers in two separate states collaborated to act in the best interest of a sibling group:

There were five kids from Texas um, so the kids were all in a shelter down there and their grandparents are up here. So I know that they had to try to speed it along so that the kids could be together because, since they were at the shelter they were separated there. Um, and I know they had to kind of like, go above and beyond for them because it was five kids and it’s harder to license a family for five kids, but they were able to get everything for them and license them and get the kids there. I would say that’s really the only one that they had difficulty getting them all together, just because it was so many kids. (Q: Yeah? And it involved a lot of parties? So like, the interstate worker, and licensing...?) Licensing worker and I think their licensing as well and um, our interstate as well...

Patti also credits foster care caseworkers with keeping siblings in the same placement even when this is difficult to arrange:

Well I just think there's times when we don't have any foster homes and people just continuing to work extra hard to find that home, to beg that family to take the whole group so that we don't have to separate. You know, so I think that a lot of caseworkers have to plead on emotion to some of the foster families to take the larger sibling groups or take the ages that they didn't want to take. So I think that there are extra efforts that way. Um, relative placements, same thing. Trying to encourage relative placements to take the full siblings. Sometimes relatives have favorites and they'll want to take one versus the other and not the other and that's real hard so I think the caseworkers have to really work hard at getting people to see "What's that going to do to the one you don't take?"

Merle feels that the foster parents are often the ones putting forth the effort to maintain siblings in the same home:

I mean I can think of a lot of cases where you know, people really went out of their way, where people try to keep this even though, you know, we might have kids that maybe have difficult behaviors. And I've seen some really amazing ones work well and mainly, it's been because of the foster parents' support to them um...so that they're not alone.

Regardless of the attempts that are currently being made to improve life for siblings in foster care, it has been made clear by all interviewees that more changes need to be made. These suggested changes will be explored in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Summary of the Findings

This research provided support for much of the existing literature on the topic of sibling placements for children in foster care, including arguments both for and against separating siblings in foster care. Existing literature argues that if children come into care with their siblings, with whom they are bonded, they may find it more difficult to bond with their foster family (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Whelan, 2003). Similar sentiments were noted by Patti when she expressed that older siblings will often remind younger siblings that the foster family is not their real family, meaning that it may be easier for children to bond to their foster family if that older sibling was not in the home. Dyer (2004) also expressed that having children in a permanent placement with the fewest number of placement changes or disruptions was more important to a child's wellbeing than placement with their siblings. Merle expressed the same ideas when he compared the "loss of siblings versus the loss of long term placement stability" and concluded that the loss of siblings was damaging, but less damaging than the loss of placement stability.

Support was also given to current research that encourages the placement of siblings in the same home. Many of the child welfare professionals indicated ways in which siblings can support each other emotionally in foster care. This is consistent with the ideas expressed on this topic in the literature review (Drapeau, et al., 2000; Boer & Spiering, 1991; Whelan, 2003.) Several child welfare professionals also noted behavioral issues, particularly in school, with children who were separated from their siblings. These behaviors included bullying and being disruptive. The literature review also described

this as a possible consequence of a children being separated from their siblings (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011).

All of the research questions posed were answered by these findings. The main research question “Do children who are perceived to have strong relationships with siblings and more access to their siblings have fewer problems adjusting to their foster care placement as observed by child welfare professionals?” was addressed by several respondents. Merle spoke of the importance of children having access to and contact with their siblings in order to help them cope with the changes that come with entering foster care.

The question “ How many children are placed in a separate foster home from their siblings and why?” was also answered. Similar to what was found in the literature review, there was no consensus on how many children are placed in separate foster homes from their siblings. The reasons for separation, however, were clear. Children with behavioral or emotional needs and older children were more likely to be separated from their siblings. It was also explained that siblings may be separated because a foster care placement does not have the ability to accommodate all of the children. Finally, a unique finding in this study was that siblings who enter the foster care system are often half siblings. In this case, children are separated from their siblings because they are placed in the care of their respective fathers.

Problematic behaviors in school, trauma, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and discord between siblings were described as some of the effects of separating children from siblings. There was not consensus on all noted effects, for example, some child welfare professionals noted improving grades in children who were separated from their

siblings. Children who were not separated from their siblings were said to experience placement instability. These responses answered the question “What differences are noticed in the behaviors and psychological wellbeing of children who are placed in separate homes than their siblings as opposed to children placed with their siblings?”

When answering the question “What differences were noticed in the effects of sibling separations on children based on the characteristics of the children?” most respondents noted that the relationship between the siblings was the most important factor. Regardless of child characteristics or circumstances, the child’s bond with their sibling made it more or less difficult for them to be separated from that sibling. Some factors did seem to have a small effect. Children placed with family members appeared to adjust to sibling separation more easily. Older children had a harder time adjusting to foster care due to their stronger bonds with their biological parents.

The final question “What efforts are made by the foster care system to maintain sibling relationships?” was also addressed. Several efforts were mentioned, including facilitating sibling visitation, talking to children about their siblings, working with other states to license homes to allow siblings to be together, and recruiting foster homes that will take large groups of children. It should also be noted that these extra efforts came not only from DHS, but also from foster parents and other parties in the foster care system. The answers to these research questions appear to suggest that changes in policy may be beneficial.

Policy Implications

As mentioned previously, there was a general consensus that, even if children cannot be placed in the same home, they need to have the ability to have contact with their siblings. This topic seemed to be very important to the child welfare professionals that were interviewed. Nearly all of them noted that they felt that changes needed to be made in the foster care system in regards to sibling separations. Perhaps the most telling expression of this sentiment came from a child welfare professional who had also experienced foster care as a child. When asked why she chooses to continue to work in the field of child welfare, Caitlyn explained: “Well I just think a lot of, I guess changes need to happen and things in the system that happened when I was a kid I want to make, you know, better for other kids.” It does appear that there were some problems related to maintaining sibling relationships.

Piccus and Herrick (who self-disclose that they spent time in foster care as children in their research) point out that “the practical difficulties to maintaining sibling connections must not discourage child welfare workers from this essential assignment” and suggest that “if the maintenance of sibling relationships is important to child welfare professionals, greater effort needs to be focused on determining the nature of children’s relationships with their siblings, the benefit or harm in maintaining these relationships, and where it is in the children’s best interest, maintaining the links between brothers and sisters” (2005, p. 854). This idea that child welfare workers need to closely assess the needs of each child coming into care, and create a case plan (including a plan for possible siblings visitation) based on that child and their needs, was expressed by several child

welfare professionals during this research. However, many also noted that this was made difficult by high caseloads and an inability to coordinate with foster parents.

It is important to note that DHS was sued by a children's rights advocacy group, Children's Rights Inc., in 2006 due to the group's concerns that DHS was not adequately protecting children. The State of Michigan drafted a Modified Settlement Agreement with this group and has been implementing parts of the agreement since 2011. The terms of this agreement include several policy changes that will have implications for sibling visitations. It is now mandated by DHS policy that children have at least monthly visitation with their siblings. DHS also hired a multitude of new caseworkers in an attempt to decrease caseloads for foster care workers. It is hoped that these policy changes will assist child welfare professionals in ensuring that sibling bonds are maintained for children in foster care through sibling visits.

Child welfare professionals also described other forms of contact that could be beneficial for siblings. Patti explained that she felt that sibling counseling may be helpful, although it is not commonly practiced, which was also an idea found in the existing literature (Gnaulti, 2002). In addition to child centered case planning and increased efforts to maintain sibling visits, it appears that involving siblings in the same services (such as counseling, play therapy, daycare, school, or other services) may help to increase their contact with one another and strengthen their relationships.

It is hoped that the policy changes that have been implemented as part of the Modified Settlement Agreement will make it easier for children to maintain sibling relationships. It may also be beneficial for DHS to look at implementing other policy changes regarding sibling participation in services, to help strengthen the sibling bond. It

should be noted that other policy implications may exist that were not brought up due to the limitations of this study.

Limitations

There were limitations associated with my use of semi-structured interviews as a research method. Because interviews tend to be time consuming to conduct, transcribe and analyze, the sample size was much smaller than it may have been if other methods were employed. Because a convenience sample was used, it is possible that the results of my research are not representative of the opinions or experiences of the larger population of child welfare professionals. Another limit to this research method is that I only got information second hand from those who work with children in foster care, so some details of the child's experience may have been distorted, exaggerated, or left out completely.

Suggestions for Future Research

Much of the existing research on this topic is quantitative in nature. It is important that more qualitative research be completed on this topic. Because it is a complex and emotional topic, it is important that those participating in research are given the chance to share details of their experience and opinions on the questions asked of them. In addition, it would be beneficial if future research projects on this topic sought to interview those who have experienced foster care directly. While there is concern that talking to children in foster care may be emotionally upsetting to them, it is possible that it may be done in a way that is sensitive to their needs but also allows them to share their experiences. Adults

who experienced foster care as children would also provide important information on this topic. Interviewing individuals who experienced foster care personally would not only benefit the current body of research, but may also benefit those being interviewed in that it would allow them to share their experiences and opinions on a topic that has likely impacted them greatly.

I was unable to find information on one major aspect of this my findings in the literature I reviewed. The fact that children with different fathers often lived together with their mothers at the time of removal and were placed with their respective fathers when removal occurred was absent from the existing literature. This issue and the policies surrounding it may require further research.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have important theoretical implications. Several principles of Attachment Theory were supported in the findings. Most respondents spoke of attachment in terms of age. They noted that older children entering foster care (who were raised predominantly by their biological parents) are more bonded with their biological parents, while younger children tend to bond more with their foster parents. This is consistent with existing literature, in that the literature points out that early bonds with a child's caregiver are the most important bonds to that child (Whiteman, 2011; Dyer, 2004). In addition, most respondents were in agreement that, if children could not be placed with their siblings, they needed to have as much contact with their siblings as possible. This highlights the fact that sibling bonds are crucial to children, a sentiment

that was expressed in the literature on Attachment Theory (Whiteman, 2011; Washington, 2007).

According to Family Systems Theory, one would expect to find specific types of bonds forming between children in order to cope with their abusive or neglectful environment (Bowen, 1985). In fact, several child welfare professionals described situations in which one child assumes caregiving responsibilities for their siblings. This type of parentified relationship is described in Family Systems Theory (Brown, 1999).

Finally, several aspects of Symbolic Interactionism were supported in the results of this research. Many of the interviewees explained situations in which a child's relationships with their significant others (their family), determined the type of self that they formed and the types of role taking that they engaged in based on that self (Charon, 2007; Stryker, 1959; Musolf, 1996; Russell, 1980). Therefore, some of the children may have engaged in behaviors in foster care (many of which could be seen as problematic, such as reenacting sexual abuse) based on the self that was formed prior to entering foster care. Child welfare professionals also described that many children felt limited in the roles that they were able to take in certain situations based on labels that may have been placed on them in their experience in foster care. Some children felt that they had to behave a certain way based on those labels, which hindered their ability to integrate into their foster family and their community (Charon, 2007; Russell, 1980; Stryker, 1959; Musolf, 1996).

Contributions

This study is significant because it collected insight from child welfare professionals who work with children in foster care in several different capacities. These professionals elaborated on the importance of a bond that most people assume is innately important to children. Their direct contact with children in foster care enabled them to describe the ways in which these bonds are different for this subpopulation. In addition, this study may influence foster parents, social workers, therapists, or other child welfare professionals in choosing the best form of placement and visitation for a child who has experienced trauma.

Original findings also came out of this research. Those interviewed for this research articulated a reason for separation of siblings that was not found in the existing literature: that children may have different fathers but the same mother, and are removed from their mother when DHS intervenes and placed with their respective fathers. One can assume that the same separation could occur if children were placed with their father but had different mothers.

This research may further influence the field of child welfare, and agencies such as the Department of Human Services, by providing a clear picture of the influence of sibling bonds on recovering from traumatic experiences. This could eventually influence policy regarding the most appropriate placement for children if they are placed in out-of-home care. This research may also shed light on the importance of sibling bonds in a sociological sense by emphasizing the importance of these bonds to a subpopulation where the bonds are sometimes put into jeopardy. It could allow sociologists to better

understand the early socialization process in children and the role that their brothers and sisters play in that process.

Appendix A

Interview Questions For Child Welfare Professionals

- What sort of experience or involvement do you have with the foster care system?
 - What was your job title?
 - How many years have you been working in this field?
 - Have you ever held any other positions working in the field of Child Welfare?
 - What is your education background?
 - Why did you choose to work in this field?
 - What keeps you motivated to continue working in this field?

- Out of every 10 children placed in foster care, how many were placed in separate placements than their siblings, based on your experience?
 - How many foster care placement decisions have you been involved in?
 - How many ended up with children being placed in separate homes from their siblings?
 - What considerations are made regarding siblings when placement arrangements are being made?
 - What situations lead to siblings being placed in separate foster homes?

- What types of situations make it necessary for children to be placed in separate foster home?

- What sort of effect do you think that being placed in separate foster homes has on children?
 - Is there a difference in the effect based on the...
 - Age of the child?
 - Gender of the child?
 - Whether the child was placed with a relative caregiver or not?
 - The type of abuse or neglect that the child experienced?
 - The physical distance between the child and their siblings?
 - The physical distance between the child and the place they were removed?
 - Race or ethnicity of the child?
 - Socio-economic status of the child?

- What measures are taken to ensure that children are able to maintain relationships with their siblings in the event that they are placed in separate foster homes?
 - Can you give a specific example of measures that have been taken?
 - Do you recall a particular example of a situation where a child was placed with their siblings, even though it was difficult to arrange such a placement?

-What effect does a child's disrupted relationship with their siblings have on their ability to cope with the changes that come from being placed in foster care?

What physical effects are noticed?

What psychological effects are noticed?

What cognitive effects are noticed?

How is social behavior effected?

How is schoolwork effected?

Are there any other major effects?

How does it effect a child's ability to address, come to terms with, and heal from their abuse or neglect?

How does it effect the functions of their daily lives while they are living in their foster care placement?

-When siblings experience the same form of abuse, do they always react to it in the same way? When one sibling is abused alone, or abused in a different way than the other siblings, what sort of effect does it have on the relationships between/among siblings?

Appendix B

Personal Statement

In the same spring that I graduated with my Bachelors degree in Sociology from Western Michigan University, I accepted a job working as a Children's Protective Services Specialist. The following fall, I began taking classes to earn my Masters degree in Sociology from the same institution. I have since accepted a position as a Children's Foster Care Specialist in a separate county from the county in which my research took place. Initially, I saw my professional career and my academic career as two separate aspects of my life, and my research interests were completely unrelated to the topic of child welfare. However, as I grew more knowledgeable of both separate realms, I realized the extent to which they could both benefit from each other. I saw that child welfare is not studied in a sociological sense as often as I thought that it would have been. I also saw aspects of the field of child welfare that could be improved or better understood if looked at through a sociological lens. On a more personal level, I began to care deeply for the children I work with and I began to see opportunities to use my skills as a researcher to understand, describe, and possibly propose solutions to some of the problems that children involved with DHS experience. Therefore, the same field in which I am employed is the field in which I choose to conduct research.

Interviewing people with whom I had worked was beneficial in many ways. I found that participants were very willing to help with my research project, so subject recruitment was very easy. In addition, I understood most of the slang, jargon and acronyms that the respondents used. There were some ways in which it also complicated

my research. Because the interviewees were my colleagues, and they knew that I was experienced in some of the same subject matter that they were, they did not elaborate on certain concepts that they discussed in their responses to my questions. Therefore, I may have missed out on some details that another researcher may have been able to obtain.

It was also difficult for me to include some of the more sad details provided by child welfare professionals in writing this paper on my research. In my personal life, I do not generally talk about the more difficult and depressing aspects of my work with children in foster care. One reason that I do not discuss the sadder stories is that it may breach the confidentiality of my clients. When I do speak about my job in more general terms, I find it easier to explain the good things that I am able to do, like obtain counseling and other needed services for children in foster care, than it is to explain the more painful parts of my job, such as removing children from an unfit foster home. I do this to keep conversation light and to spare the person who I am talking to from feeling sad or helpless, as I often feel when I hear sad stories about things that I am unable to change. In writing this paper, I initially left out some of the saddest stories told by the child welfare professionals to spare my reader from these same feelings. After much consideration, I realized that these sad details were likely some of the most honest details shared, and that it was important for me to include them in my paper.

Appendix C

Department of Human Services Request & Review Procedures for RESEARCH, SURVEYS & QUESTIONNAIRES

The Data Analysis and Information Management Unit coordinates the review process for requests from students* and outside agencies or individuals who want to do research, conduct surveys and administer questionnaires that require Department of Human Services (DHS) participation (i.e., access to DHS staff, access to DHS clients*, and/or access to DHS data/information).

These procedures do not apply to non-research requests for data.

*NOTES

1. “*Students*” are individuals (including DHS employees) conducting research for the purpose of fulfilling academic requirements.
2. Throughout this document, the term “*client*” or “clients” refers to applicants, recipients or former recipients of financial or social services provided by DHS.

RESEARCH

- A. The request must be in writing and include at a minimum all of the following information that pertains:
 1. Name of the research project
 2. Purpose of the research - The purpose of the research should be clearly stated. Include a description of the research problem as well as the specific information to be obtained. The goals and objectives of the study should be clearly stated. Include how the information will be used.
 3. Fund source - State how the research will be funded and include the fund sources. Include if, and to what extent, the researcher is able to cover any of the DHS’ costs directly resulting from participation in the research.
 4. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval – If IRB approval is required, indicate if it has been requested and granted. If granted, include a copy of the approval.

5. Methodology – Include a discussion of the research design, study questions, use of control/experimental groups, data collection, and sample selection and sample size.

If the research includes a survey or questionnaire being administered, include a copy of the survey and/or questionnaire with the request.

6. Program area and/or target population – Indicate which programs will be involved and which staff will be required to participate, i.e., central office, local office/county or district office management, caseworkers, clients, etc.

- The researcher must agree in writing to maintain client or employee confidentiality. (See page 4, Attachment 1, Confidentiality Agreement.)
- There must be no detrimental impact on the client either in terms of physical well being and/or access to services.
- If clients are directly involved in the research, each client's written informed consent must be obtained. Include proposed consent forms with the proposal. A parent must provide written approval for a child's participation. For children under DHS supervision, the appropriate authority must approve the child(ren)'s participation in writing. (See page 5, Attachment 2, Authorizing Party for Study Participation.) Child(ren) must also agree to participate in the research.

7. Expectations of DHS - Specify in detail the extent of staff involvement. Indicate individual tasks and approximately how much time will be needed to complete each task.

8. Local (county) office participation - If data are to be obtained at the local office level, indicate which counties are to participate. If specific counties have not been selected, indicate the number of counties that will be needed for the study.

9. Client involvement - If the research requires client involvement, how will they participate (i.e., access to client records, face-to-face interviews, survey completion, testing, etc.). If clients are to be interviewed, provide a sample copy of a consent form. Describe the procedures for obtaining the client's informed consent. Include procedures for minors, if applicable.

10. Client confidentiality - State the procedures that will be used to ensure that individual clients will not be identified, and that information

obtained from clients or case records will be kept confidential. Sign Attachment 1, Confidentiality Agreement (see page 4).

11. Project timetable - Specify the begin and end dates of the project. Include major project activities and milestones. State when DHS staff and/or client involvement will occur.
 12. Benefit to DHS - Explain how the information obtained from the project can be used by DHS. What is the benefit of the research to DHS? How will this research help DHS administer, manage or evaluate our programs? How will this research have impact on policy or program direction? Will it give DHS a better understanding of our clients and suggest ways to more effectively provide services to clients?
 13. Products - List report(s) the project will produce, who the reports will be intended for, and if you intend to publish the information.
 14. Additional Information – The researcher should submit any additional information that would be helpful in reviewing the research proposal.
- B. The Data Analysis and Information Management Unit (DAIMU) staff do an initial review of the request to determine the amount of client and/or staff involvement, if the methodology is sound, if client confidentiality is safeguarded and whether the information obtained will be useful and of benefit to the DHS.
- C. Following DAIMU review, the directors of the administrations and offices, and/or the local DHS directors involved in the research or impacted by the research will review the request. The impacted offices will complete a cost/benefit analysis. If Department of Technology, Management, and Budget (DTMB) resources will be needed to conduct the research, (e.g., data retrieval), DTMB will also review the request and their costs will be also be included in the cost/benefit analysis.

Research requests that have no or minimal benefit or relevance to DHS or the costs (staff time and resources) to DHS of participating in the research are not equal to the benefit to DHS, the research might not be approved.

- D. Please allow six to eight weeks for the review process. DAIMU will notify the requester of the DHS' decision.

SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

Any surveys or questionnaires that are not part of an approved research project and that exceed information that is routinely provided to the public should be submitted to DAIMU for review, cost/benefit analysis and disposition. At their

discretion, DHS offices may respond to routine surveys and questionnaires that request readily available data and information.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Research proposals, surveys and questionnaires should be submitted to:

Diane Owens
Data Analysis and Information Management Unit
Michigan Department of Human Services
235 South Grand Ave.
P.O. Box 30037, Suite 1406
Lansing, MI 48909

Phone: 517-335-3941
Fax: 517-241-8390
Email: OwensD@michigan.gov

ATTACHMENT 1

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT
with the Michigan Department of Human Services

I will not release or divulge at any time confidential information, including names, addresses, applicant/recipient identifications, and social security numbers, or any information about Department of Human Services former or present recipients which may identify them directly or indirectly, if this information was obtained during the course of my research or project. In addition, this confidential information may only be shared with appropriate Department of Human Services employees, staff or agents. Further, this information may be shared only with project staff who have signed a similar confidentiality statement.

The research project covered by this agreement is the following: *[Include name of the project and description.]*

I am aware of the confidentiality provisions of the Social Welfare Act, at MCL 400.35 and MCL 400.64, and the Child Protection Law at MCL 722.621 et seq, and other various state and federal statutes and regulations that protect the confidentiality of the identity and information about former or present applicants or recipients. I am aware that anyone who violates this statement may be guilty of a misdemeanor depending on the information released, and may be civilly liable to the department and the former or present applicant or recipient for damages due to the release.

 Signature of Researcher

Date

 Print Name of Researcher

1. Signature of Witness _____

Date :-

Name of Witness _____

2. Signature of Witness _____

Date:

Name of Witness _____

ATTACHMENT 2

**Authorizing Party for Study Participation
Youth Under Department of Human Services Supervision**

Department of Human Services (DHS)-supervised youth will only be allowed to participate in a research study if the appropriate authorizing party has determined that the study is in the best interest of the child/youth.

Even with the consent of the appropriate authority, the child/youth always has the right to decline to participate in the study. Participation might include completing a survey or being interviewed.

Purchase of service agencies and foster parents never have the right to decide if a child/youth can participate in a study.

The following information summarizes the legal status and the authorizing party for approval to participate in a research study:

| Type of Care/Legal Status | Authorizing Party for Study Participation |
|--|--|
| Temporary Court Ward | Court/Judge and parent or legal guardian or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| Permanent Court Ward | Court/Judge or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| State Ward (Act 220) | MCI Superintendent or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| Delinquent State Ward (Act 150) | DHS Director or designee or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| Voluntary Release Ward (Act 296) Released to DHS | MCI Superintendent or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| Dual Wards – MCI and Act 150 & 296 or 220 | DHS Director or designee and the MCI Superintendent, or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| Emergency/Volunteer Foster Care Ward | Parent or legal guardian or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| MCI-O Ward | MCI Superintendent or youth if age 18 or over unless youth has been determined incompetent |
| Pending Adoption (during supervisory period before finalization) | Court/Judge |

| | |
|---|--|
| Disrupted or Dissolved Adoption – recommitted to MCI | MCI Superintendent |
| Disrupted or Dissolved Adoption – Permanent Court Ward | Court/Judge |
| OTI/Interstate Compact Youth | Sending state authority/court |
| Michigan child placed out of state | Refer to the child’s legal status for the appropriate authorizing party |

Attachment 2 Research/Authorizing Party for DHS Youth Rev. 6 15 06



RICK SNYDER
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

MAURA D. CORRIGAN
DIRECTOR

November 1, 2012

Jessica Church
515 S. Westnedge Ave. Apt. 1
Kalamazoo, MI 49007.

Dear Ms. Church:

**RE: Still Siblings: The Perceived Importance of Sibling Relationships for Foster Children
Research Request #368**

The Data Analysis and Information Management Unit (DAIMU) have completed the review of your request for DHS participation in the research project, *Still Sibling: The Perceived Importance of Sibling Relationships for Foster Children*. Based upon our review it has been decided that DHS will participate in this research project.

This approval is also contingent on the following conditions:

1. Any changes in the project design must be submitted to DAIMU for review.
2. A copy of the final report of the research results must be submitted to DAIMU.

Written confirmation that you accept these approval conditions must be received by DAIMU before you can proceed with the study. Please mail or fax the written confirmation to Diane Owens, Michigan Department of Human Services, Data Analysis & Information Management Unit, Grand Tower Suite 1406, P.O. Box 30037, Lansing, MI 48909. Diane's fax number is 517-241-8390.

If you have any questions regarding this approval or the conditions of the approval, please contact Diane Owens at (517) 335-3941 or me at (517) 335-7756.

Sincerely,

George Noonan, Manager
Data Analysis & Information Management Unit

cc: Andrew Zylstra
Jennifer Boutell
Diane Owens

Appendix D

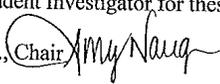
HSIRB Approval Letter

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: February 18, 2013

To: Angie Moe, Principal Investigator
Jessica Church, Student Investigator for thesisFrom: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-09-42

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Still Siblings: The Perceived Importance of Sibling Relationships for Foster Children" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., *you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study."*) Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: February 18, 2014

Walwood Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456
PHONE: (269) 387-8293 FAX: (269) 387-8276

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