

Foster Children's Sense of Sibling Belonging: The Significance of Biological and Social Ties

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Abstract

This article analyzes children's experiences and their perceived sense of belonging to brothers and sisters to assess the significance of social and biological ties for developing identity. Specifically, this article aims to highlight the significance of siblings for children moving from homes to foster homes and back to their original homes again. Most children participating in this study emphasized the continuity of biological relations with their siblings as important for their identity and sense of belonging. At the same time, social ties to both siblings and foster siblings had significance for their perception of themselves. A sense of belonging and identity are, thus, shown to develop in relation to both biological siblings and foster siblings.

Keywords

foster care, siblings, identity, child development, sense of belonging

Introduction

In Norway, more than 80% of children who are removed from their parental homes are placed in foster homes (Statistics Norway [SSB], 2012). Although kinship placements have become more common in recent years, most of these children live in non-family foster care for a long time: It is estimated that approximately 40% of children in foster care live in foster homes for 4 years or more (Clausen & Kristofersen, 2008). While there are no reliable statistics showing how many foster children are returned to their parents annually, children who remain in long-term foster care are seldom returned to their parents.

Foster care systems and procedures pay little attention to children's perceptions of the mutual significance of biological and foster siblings (Backe-Hansen, Egelund, & Havik, 2010; Lundström & Sallnäs, 2012; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). For children living with their parents and siblings, there is a merging between biological and social relations, which gives reason to presume that biological ties give a sense of belonging and identity (Midjo, 1998). In cases in which there is no such merging, the process of acquiring this sense of belonging and identity is less obvious. Studies based on children's own views about sibling contact and how it affects them are scarce, despite their obvious value (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Based on Norwegian social policy, this article discusses different relations between siblings and elaborates on the significance of biological and social ties to siblings for foster children's sense of belonging.

Up until the 1980s, studies of relations between siblings were uncommon, and sibling relationships were considered

relatively unimportant from a developmental perspective (Boer & Dunn, 1992). Family relationships were considered collectively, as a unit: The family was seen to exert a homogeneous influence on all its members. During the last decade, this traditional view has been challenged (Edwards, Hadfield, & Mauthner, 2005; Mitchell, 2003), and the significance of relations among siblings for developing identity and inner life has been considerably emphasized (Lucey, Mauthner, Edwards, & Hadfield, 2005).

There is now research on how sibling relationships develop throughout life; for example, Victor G. Cicirelli presents the first comprehensive resource on examining the course of a sibling relationship, from its beginnings in childhood to the end of life, and the factors that influence it. This work includes a hermeneutic study of the relationships of a single large family of adult siblings that provides new understandings of how adult sibling relationships are maintained (Cicirelli, 1995). However, we have Rebecca Hagars's reviews of 17 studies from across several countries, addressing definitions and descriptions of sibling groups in care, characteristics of children placed together or separately, and outcomes of sibling placements. Most studies examining outcomes suggest that joint sibling placements are more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings,

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and that children do well or better when placed with siblings (Hegar, 2005a). Cicirelli's and Hagars's studies emphasize the developmental importance siblings have for each other.

A Scottish study explores the ways in which children understand sibling relationships and how the negotiation of sibling roles varies according to birth order, age, and gender (Punch, 2005). This piece of research considers the extent to which children draw on siblings as a source of support—both inside and outside the family. The author has since gone on to investigate the ways in which children consider siblings to be a source of problems (in the forms of rivalry and conflict) and how they negotiate outcomes to such tensions (McIntosh & Punch, 2009).

The experience of new family arrangements is not exclusive to children in foster homes. Children in stepfamilies also have to deal with new carers' children in some cases. The existing research on stepfamilies documents a wide range of children's experiences in adjusting to the presence of stepsiblings and full brothers and sisters. Many studies have found that stepchildren can define their family very differently than do non-stepchildren, as they incorporate new and old relationships into their new family concept (Berge Fjøsne, 2007; Bray, 1999; Levin, 1994). By contrast, at least in Norwegian research concerning foster care, there has been little focus on existing sibling relationships, despite the fact that the Ministry of Children, Equality, and Social Inclusion introduced the idea that biological siblings should be placed together in foster homes as a main principle (The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion [BFD], 1997). This decision was motivated by the understanding that it would be in the best interest of the children. Anfinnsen (1998) and Gjerdevik (2005) examine foster children's understanding of family, but their discussion of siblings' mutual significance for one another is very limited. Bunkholdt (2004) discusses different challenges and dilemmas concerning placing siblings together. Egelund and Hestbæk's (2003) research survey about the placement of children outside of their homes points out, among other things, the need for knowledge of siblings' significance to be reflected in the foster care procedures themselves.

British research is relatively in agreement that it is best to place siblings together (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Thoburn, 1988). However, doing so incurs certain costs and risks (Rushton, Dance, Quinton, & Mayes, 2001). Sinclair (2005) effectively sums up newer British research by saying that sibling relationships are of great importance for both better and worse. Similarly, Gillian Schofield writes extensively about the lived experience of children in foster care and their sense of identity and belonging (Schofield, 2003). Sibling relations can be harmonious and a source of safety and comfort, but they can also be destructive. There is a chronological component to this matter as well. At one point, relations between siblings can foster a sense of belonging and continuity, while at a later point, they may also prove obstacles for development. Siblings may hold onto old loyalties and

definitions, which, in turn, may bar them from embracing new possibilities for development afforded by the foster home environment.

This article's empirical starting point is the interview material that forms the basis of the research project: *Moving Home After Having Lived in Foster Homes—An Analysis of Children's Self-Perception and Life Stories* (Angel, 2009). The aim of this article is to explore children's sense of belonging to siblings and to discuss the significance of biological and social ties among reunited foster children in the Norwegian family services model. Whom do the children perceive to be siblings, and what does this mean for their identity and sense of belonging? Answers to these questions will be illuminated by discussing three dimensions of sibling relations: (a) a mutual sense of belonging and care, (b) an ambiguous sense of mutuality and care, or (c) no sense of mutuality and care.

Theory

In this article, the concepts "identity," "social ties," and "biological ties" are central. Identity is, in this article, based on Mead's (1913, 1934) perspective, in which the individual's reflexive interpretation of his or her life story is important. Identity is socially constructed, and people can reflect on the social world and their position therein (Jenkins, 2008), similar to the notion of "the social self" (Mead, 1934), which asserts that the self is inseparably attached to society. According to Mead, the self is constructed by two parts: *I* and *Me*. *Me* can be called *the Self's* social role or expectation, while *I* is the spontaneous, creative and acting component. The tension between *Me* and *I* leads people to consciously analyze themselves. *Me* is social and represents knowledge of others' behavioral expectations. In essence, per this view, the self is socially constructed, as it is influenced and developed through interaction with other people (Charon & Cahill, 2004; Mead, 1934). Identity is continually created and sustained. To have a sense of who we are, we must have a notion of where we come from and how we have become what we are (Mead, 1934). Herrick and Piccus (2005) argue that sibling connections are extremely important to children in out-of-home care; children need to know their identity and belonging.

Biological ties are more desirable than social ties. Social ties are acquired through interaction with other people. Biological ties are given social and cultural content, though biological ties are seen as fixed as they are ascribed at birth to children (Schneider, 1984). The various types of families can make it necessary to redefine the sense of family belonging to include family ties acquired and based on social ties, independent of biological origin (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). According to Levin (1994), emotions and intimacy have become more important than ties of kinship and law as foundations for a sense of belonging. Every member of the family can have his or her own perception of who belongs to

the family. Familial belonging is no longer limited in the ways it once was. Identity and sense of belonging are contextual and relational entities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Children in foster homes can establish their identity and sense of belonging both in relation to their biological and foster families, together with biological and social ties (Ostler, 2013).

“Belonging” describes a sense of “belonging to” or “belonging with” someone. “A sense of belonging” can be understood as an experience of equality and intimacy, and thus, it is closely linked to “social identity.” The concept is often used to indicate belonging to place(s) (e.g., home/foster home), nationality, or culture (Giuliani, 2003). Individuals can, to a certain extent, choose to whom or what they may want to belong. The different relationships people enter can likewise be significant to their sense of belonging (Midjo, 1997). Sense of belonging is developed in different contexts. This situational sense of belonging gives the individual opportunity to enter changing phases of belonging and associated processes. Different forms of belonging may include both biological and social ties. Foster children who have moved homes, for example, may have a sense of belonging to their biological siblings, to their foster siblings, and to other children.

“Sense of belonging” refers to the experience of community and social integration, while “identity” emphasizes individuality (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Both concepts thematize how people find a place in society (Jenkins, 2008). Identity consists of both expressing what is unique for the individual and, at the same time, showing a sense of belonging to a larger social context (Mead, 1913, 1934). Identity refers to how we understand and present ourselves and to how we understand and pass on a sense of belonging. In the same way, foster children’s sense of belonging to siblings is part of the foundation of their identity.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The children participating in this study each experienced the intervention of child welfare services, placement in a foster home, and a subsequent return to their original home at a later date. The sample comprises 10 children, 3 boys and 7 girls, who were taken into custody when they were between the ages of 4 and 12 years old. The children lived outside their homes for periods ranging from 2½ to 12 years. On average, the children lived more than 5 years in the foster home. At the time of the interview, the youngest had just turned 11, while the oldest was 17. All the children lived with foster siblings: 8 children had biological siblings placed in foster care, 5 children had biological siblings remaining with the birth family, and 3 children had biological siblings born into their birth family after entering care. There were 3 sibling groups in the sample. In total, these 10 children had 34

full and half brothers and sisters. During the children’s time in foster homes, they established contact with a total of 28 foster siblings.

The chief reasons for the children’s placement in foster homes related to their parents’ inability to care for them (owing primarily to addictions and mental health problems). The county social welfare boards decided that each of the children should be taken into care and placed in a foster home. Subsequently, these boards prescribed the return of these children to their parents. The children had been moved from their homes against their wishes and those of their parents, and they had moved back home again according to their own and their parents’ wishes.

A half-structured interview guide was used to investigate the research question: *What is the significance of social and biological ties to foster children’s sense of belonging and identity?* The guide contained topics I wished to illuminate, formulated as descriptive questions. The interviews were carried out in the children’s homes with one exception, which was conducted in the corner of a café according to the child’s wishes. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

A study requires the free and informed consent of its informants (Hill, 2005; National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities [NESH], 2006). Ethical matters were considered in the recruitment of participants, as outlined by Alderson (2005), Morrow (2005), and Punch (2002), particularly concerning children’s freedom to consent and confidentiality. The project was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD; 2000). I contacted the children through the Department of Children, Youth, and Family Affairs’ foster home services in six counties (108 municipalities total), in addition to directly contacting the child protection services in 14 of these municipalities. These services sent out the invitation, which also described the nature of the project, to parents whose children had been returned to them from foster care. My address and phone number were included, in addition to a consent form with a stamped return envelope, which parents and children could send me if they wanted to participate in the study. The children expressed interest at the letter stage in participating. At our first meeting, I offered the children further opportunities for information exchange and gained their signed consent to participate. Fluid consent (the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time) was assured during the interview. To protect the anonymity of participants throughout the text, I have excluded the children’s names or other identifiable characteristics.

Data Analysis

The interviews, which are analyzed as life stories (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995), thus have a hermeneutic interpretive character (Ricoeur, 1974; Vattimo, 1997). The material is summarized, so that the meaning of the text is concentrated, and the

original text is shortened (Silverman, 2011). The children's life stories are analyzed to reveal their most important themes. The analysis of qualitative data involves posing questions to the material, as well as organizing the answers in a systematic and relevant way (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The analysis has four developmental stages: (a) forming a general impression, (b) identifying the significant units, (c) abstracting the contents of the different significant units, and (d) extracting the most important elements (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This is a grounded theory approach analyzing informants' stories and perspectives. The transcribed material is divided into categories that made sense when they were taken out of context, and which emerged inductively during analysis. The children each describe their life stories in relation to their siblings and foster siblings with different distance, symmetry, and depth. In the material, we can see two different dimensions. One dimension, called *mutuality*, includes striving for balance. This dimension may include mutuality in *emotions*, such as liking or not liking one another; in *influence*, which is decided upon by both sides; and in *content*, that is, having the same interests, which concerns what James (1993) calls "to be friends with." The other dimension can be called *care*. This dimension ranges from *giving* to *receiving care*. Here, one party in the relationship is dependent on the other. In such relational patterns, what one does together with others is important to create a background of common experience. Based on *mutuality* and *care*, the analysis will thus concentrate on isolating three dimensions: a mutual sense of belonging and care, an ambiguous sense of mutuality and care, or no sense of mutuality and care. We find children who clearly and distinctly fit into the above-identified categories, while there are others who are less easily classified, but who still fit a category type.

Three Dimensions of Mutuality and Care

In a family with more than one child, there are usually three sets of relations: the relationship between the spouses, the relationships between parents and children, and the relationships among the siblings (Jensen, Moen, & Clausen, 1991). Sibling relationships are different from the other types in that they generally last the longest; we often have siblings our whole lives. This is not necessarily true in the case of foster siblings. Who foster children consider to be their siblings depends on various circumstances, such as social ties, living in the same home, intimacy, and meeting regularly. To understand a child's relationship with brothers and sisters, it is therefore necessary to think beyond biology and include the child's experiences (Rushton et al., 2001).

During the time the study participants spent at their original homes, during their time in foster care, and again during the time after their return home, all were involved in different social and communicative processes that contributed to the development of their respective siblings-orientation. When a child is placed in a foster home, it is generally foster family

members who become that child's daily interaction partners, while interactions with biological parents and siblings in that home environment become more (or entirely) limited.

In my conversations with study participants, I asked with whom they lived and asked them to tell me about themselves without defining what was implied. As the children's views on and evaluations of biological siblings and foster siblings are complex, it is not possible to evaluate too precisely whether or not they "liked" their siblings, or whether or not their siblings "meant something" to them. To categorize on a sympathy–antipathy scale would be to use a "still photo" as a starting point, which would give a distorted view of ever-changing relations. For example, one of the children explained that she wanted to move into her first foster home because the foster parents' own daughter was at her same age. They played well together when she stayed only at weekends and before she moved in "for real." As time went by, this child's perception of her relationship with her foster sister changed and became more ambivalent.

Normally, children who are born to the same parents and live together do not problematize whether they are siblings or not. Such a relationship is normally taken for granted and woven into our imagined worlds (Smart & Silva, 1999). What has significance for whether social relations become useful social resources for children has more to do with mutual obligations, expectations, and credibility. Children can do things for other children, whereby trust relations are formed that, in turn, generate expectations and obligations. This type of belonging depends on two factors: On the one hand, credibility to the social surroundings, which means that one keeps one's promises; and on the other hand, the actual scale of the obligations one has.

A Mutual Sense of Belonging and Care

This subgroup includes children who identify with and count as brothers and sisters: (a) their biological siblings who lived at home when they were in foster homes themselves, and/or (b) their foster siblings. One of the children said this about her biological siblings:

My older sister lived with mummy all the time, and then mummy had my younger sister. It was strange that they lived at home while Gro and I lived in a foster home. When we were at home with mummy, we did a lot of girl stuff . . . We have always been a family. It is here I belong.

Interviewer: What do you think about your older and your younger sister?

Child: I love them, and they love me. I know that.

Another child said this about his foster sister:

The [the foster parents'] daughter and I had a really good relationship, and she lives in X-city and I really like to visit her.

I meet her now and then, send mail and call, and . . . She is 6 years older than me . . . She is that kind of a sister to me, and she has a boy and a girl that I am kind of an uncle to. I notice that they like me, and I like them, too. We belong to each other.

In his story about himself and his foster siblings, this participant conceives of himself as an acting, experiencing, and analyzing subject. His analyses are complex, as he takes into account others' perspectives, while analyzing his own considerations of himself. He reflects critically over his own way of being, and he has clear perceptions of the social consequences of what he said and did during the time he lived in the foster home. Mead's identity theory (1934) includes a high degree of choice, as identity is based on one's reflexive interpretations with one's biography as a starting point. In this same vein, this boy now calls his foster siblings "his" siblings. They have influenced his identity and his understanding and experience of belonging.

In the following, first, a biological older sister speaks about her biological younger sister, and then this younger sister tells us about her relationship with her older sister:

And I have promised to come and tell it to her class, as she thinks it is so embarrassing talking about it (that she has lived in a foster home). She says it is embarrassing, but I think she is scared of telling, that it is a bit scary . . . she says that it is embarrassing . . . I care for her, and we are connected to each other.

The younger sister talks of telling others how it was for her older sister to be in the foster home.

And then she asked almost every day if I wanted to join her and play with dolls, for she was so alone. She loves me.

These biological sisters, who are only about a year apart in age, had always been together, and they talked about mutual care for each other from early on. The quotes also point out the mutuality the sisters felt. When they talked about important events in the interviews, they used the "we"-form: "*we endured*" and "*we managed*" and "*we stuck together*." Both girls talked about each other with joy—simultaneously as they expressed joy and respect for an older biological sister who had lived at home all the time. This relationship between these sisters was confirmed and strengthened by the time they had together, and their common history and biography strengthened their identity. Their relations evidence balance or *mutuality*, according to the language adopted in this study. This may include the idea that care is shown mutually, and balance is created through both parties presenting themselves as intentional, as shown in the excerpts.

In the transcribed interviews, there are also examples of the other dimension, *care*. The children both looked after and cared for each other in different ways. We saw one variant of this in the example above, a testimony to the girls' mutual

relationship. The care between them was characterized by a deep, symmetrical intimacy. They alternated between giving and receiving care, depending on who needed it. They were there for each other freely without letting it put limitations on their lives.

The children who participated in interviews in this study can be said to have known a "risk situation," as children who enter into custody in our society often show signs of difficulty. In many risk situations, feeling useful, taking responsibility, and experiencing control can be factors that contribute to increased competence and the formation of a positive identity (Grøholt, Sommerschild, & Gjørnum, 1998). In this light, the children's experience of caring may strengthen the relations and sense of belonging among them.

There are also examples in the transcripts of how care took the form of one of the siblings distinctly going in and taking responsibility for the other without it being clear that the other should give anything in return (as we saw in the previous excerpt). Another informant provided an example of how such a relationship can turn out:

I came to the other family [her second foster home] before him. I said that I wanted my brother up there, rather than having him stay with them [the old foster home]. Then he also moved.

This excerpt says much about caring for a younger biological brother and taking responsibility. This subject took responsibility in their changing situations—in her first foster home and in transitioning to a new foster home—by ensuring that her brother stayed with her. In the conversations with her brother, when we touched upon the issue of moving, he said, "She is the one who fixes things." The texts contain a number of themes mentioned by both subjects: visiting with one another when apart, taking responsibility, adjusting, and trusting one another. Another informant, who is also included in this dimension, expresses these notions explicitly when she talks about her biological sister:

She looks up to me so much, only talks about me, like all the time. I know that if I had died, she would never have made it . . . She is so attached to me.

The sister responds,

. . . when she sees that I need something, she helps me. She cares for me.

Hence, this second pattern can be described as asymmetric, in which one of the sisters does tasks that are usually associated with parenthood in our culture. If the act of taking care of another disturbs one's own functioning, this could be a form of the practice that specialists of different disciplines and with different theoretical standings call "parentification" (Haugland, 2006). Normally, the term *parentification* is used in situations when children enter adult roles in relation to their own parents, but it could also include situations when children fulfill clear

adult roles in relation to other family members. In my material, it is children who perform actions or “practices” in which one occupies a care-receiving position and the other a responsible care-giving position in continual care relations. In the type just discussed, there is dominance in the relationship, and one has influence on the other; simultaneously, there can be mutuality in interest. Parentification can be incompatible with the establishment of a healthy feeling of intrinsic value and may prevent positive self-development (Haugland, 2006).

Ambiguous Mutuality and Care

These children were uncertain whether to name their foster siblings among their “siblings.” Here, we also find children who are uncertain of whether their biological siblings—who were born while they lived in foster homes themselves—were their real siblings. An informant told me about his biological sister who was born while he lived in a foster home:

She [the subject’s younger sister] said that it was strange that I came there [home]. It was Me and Me. I was a bit difficult during that period when I came home. I think that I kind of have not got so much attention from my mother, as I have been away so much. And when she [the sister] also demanded attention, I wasn’t very happy with that . . . don’t really know if she really is my sister.

The sense of belonging within a group of children that fosters intimacy depends on both the physical presence of the children and the amount of attention they give each other. Even though children may be physically there for each other, there is a shortage of intimacy between the children if no strong bond exists between them. One of the children expressed her feelings for her sister as follows:

In a way we do not fit together. But at the same time, we belong together. I don’t know what to say.

Kinship ties are no longer necessarily biological. As these ties are no longer taken for granted, they undergo negotiation; by contrast, in previous times, basic trust was taken for granted in family relations. The relation builds on what the partners obtain in their relationship with each other, more than building on forced commitment. Here, it is mutuality and intimacy that count—both of which are missing in the excerpt above.

No Mutuality and Care

The third subgroup embraces two subcategories. The first subcategory is made up of respondents who do not consider their foster siblings as siblings. One of the children in my study expressed it like this:

Their kids, they got a key when they were going home after school, but I waited a couple of hours now and then, to get home and such. That really sucked. We did not care for each other . . .

Note the child called his foster siblings “their kids.” He also used the term *the other non-foster-children*. This was his description of his foster siblings from his first foster home. Concerning the foster siblings in his other foster home, he barely mentioned that the foster parents had some grown-up children. He related to me,

I have never been . . . familiar with them [the foster siblings], they . . . kept . . . to themselves. I can’t say that they are my siblings. Not what I put into it.

Interviewer: When are people siblings of each other then?

The child: It is when you have the same parents and have grown up together, and we care about each other.

In sum, this participant does not consider his foster family’s children as his siblings with significance for his sense of belonging and identity. Another child in my study said,

I felt that the foster parents’ children looked down on me. I didn’t like them either.

When one of the children recounted her life story, she mentioned that her foster parents had a daughter after she had been there for 4 years, and then a son 3 years later. In conversation, we touched upon the contact she had with her previous foster home:

Interviewer: Do you have any contact with your previous foster home today?

Child: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about this contact.

Child: It is like going to people you know from before. But it gets weirder when you go there, and then the little kids are there.

Interviewer: What do you think about the little kids over there, then?

Child: They are much nicer now; they are not so annoying any more. They do not cling onto you all the time. My previous foster parents tell me that they talk about me, like, all the time.

Interviewer: I can imagine that. Do you think they see you as their sibling?

Child: I don’t know.

Interviewer: Do you think of them as your siblings?

Child: No, not at all. We do not have the same parents and we have not grown up together. There is nothing that ties us together.

Thus, in her reflections on her foster home, she did not consider herself as sister to these children because she was not related to them. Nonetheless, she did not reject the possibility that her previous foster siblings might view her as their older sister.

The other subcategory covers those who do not consider their biological siblings as siblings. One informant describes and analyzes her relationship with her biological brother as if there is distance between them:

And then he decided to become a Christian once. And now he goes around and testifies, and that is okay. We never figured it out with each other, we are so different. In fact, I do not think of him as my brother, just that we are so different.

In her elaboration, she said that there had always been a certain distance between her and her biological brother. When she lived in the foster home, they lived there together, but they never had a very close relationship with each other. To a query about understanding her relationship with her brother, she says in response that she has never thought much about him, even when young. He found his place in the foster home, while she longed to get back home to her mother. According to the informant, the foster home favored her brother. She thinks that the difference in treatment that took place in the foster home contributed to maintaining the distance or at least prevented them from becoming closer to each other. After she moved back home, things did not improve; rather the opposite occurred. She presumed that there was a sense of *mutuality* in how her biological brother would describe the relationship between them.

This section has shown three dimensions of mutuality and care as reflected in the informants' life stories. In the next section, I summarize and conclude the article's key points.

Discussion and Summary

The starting point of this study is children's understandings of their own situation, as well as the significance of social and biological ties to the development of a sense of belonging and identity. Responding to calls from scholars such as Herrick and Piccus (2005), among others, this study attempts to address the lack of research examining children's understanding of themselves—in this case, specifically regarding sibling relations and their significance to children.

This article has focused on a particular aspect of sibling relations: an exploration of the significance of biological and social ties among reunited foster children and what can be described as the creation of sibling relationships. All children need a sense of belonging and identity, a sense which is derived according to both biological and social ties. This is also true for children who have lived in foster homes, though such children may have more complex patterns of biological and social ties owing to their experiences in different home environments. The authority of the child welfare system can have the effect of giving sibling relations a high degree of intensity and density, but diversity and distance may also result.

The study shows that foster children may have biological siblings with whom they live in the same foster home, who are in different foster homes or with whom they live after

they have moved back home again. Furthermore, the study shows that more foster children from different families may live in the same foster home, and the foster family may have their own biological children. The children participating in the study revealed different types of relations to their biological and foster siblings. One group experienced a mutual sense of belonging and care, another group experienced ambivalent mutuality and care, and a third group experienced no mutuality and care at all. Because children are active agents in their own lives (Angel, 2010), they use the significance of their relationships with biological and foster siblings to negotiate their understandings of themselves. In this context, siblings' reciprocal relation to each other establishes a sense of belonging and care. In turn, belonging and care are ambivalent or absent when children define their relational experiences in other ways.

The majority of the children in this study feel a sense of belonging to their biological family. To have a comprehensible identity and a consistent biography, these children chose to distance themselves from their foster siblings. Those who were placed in foster homes together chose each other, while those who were placed alone chose siblings who lived with their mother. There were also children who were closely attached to their foster siblings and to their foster families as if these ties would last. There were even children who did not claim any relation to their biological siblings and did not experience any sense of belonging to them. Clearly, both biological and foster siblings can be important for a child's development, identity, and sense of belonging. The strict definition of "sibling" can vary according to a child's experience. My summarizing conclusion is that, for the children in the study, biological siblings are the most important sibling relation. At the same time, the study shows that, for some children, the sibling relation to other children is more important than the relation to the biological siblings. There is nothing in the children's lives that immediately and objectively indicates which sibling relation is most meaningful to them; this can only be understood through conversations with each individual child.

The majority of the children in the study tended to display an either-or sense of belonging vis-à-vis their siblings. Sibling relationships vary according to whom they live with and how they perceive their social interactions, echoing Mead's theory of the social self (Mead, 1934). Biological and social ties which can be re-created and maintained socially become significant for sibling relations. For some children in the study, relations to other children could be characterized as "pure relations" (Giddens, 1992), in which the children choose which relations they call siblings. For some children in the study, social relations have precedence, while for others, biological ties are more significant. According to Mead's theory, to have a sense of who we are, we must have a notion of where we come from and how we have become who we are (Mead, 1934). This is the case for the children in my study.

Changes in environment, caregivers, and siblings show that children's positions in relation to each other are not "static." This observation agrees with the changing positions that Mauthner (2002) describes in his research on sistering, wherein role reversals take place between the "big sister" role of caregiver and "little sister" position of receiving care. Changes in sibling status may reflect strategic interaction, as McIntosh and Punch (2009) have noted.

The study shows that sibling relations play a significant role in children's developmental situations, particularly regarding how they take responsibility for and care for each other, and how they perceive and understand themselves. Having to move back and forth between parents' homes and foster homes precipitates a perceptual shift in which the affected children can no longer take common family relationships for granted, and in turn become more conscious about themselves and their siblings. We have also seen that some foster children attach themselves to foster siblings in a positive way, and that this relation significantly affects their self-perception. Others, however, maintain distance from their foster siblings to clearly establish that they belong to another family. The study by Cicirelli (1995), as well as newer studies by Hegar (2005a) and Lucey et al. (2005), confirms these findings about the construction of meaning in sibling relationships. Hegar (2005b) further shows that sibling placements are more stable than situations where children are placed separately. Although my study did not specifically focus on this distinction, it does show how important the biological sibling relationship may be for children.

To have continuity in one's own story—and to be able to interpret this story—is important for everyone. This identity depends on the biography as the individual reflexively understands it (Mead, 1934). The stories and perceptions revealed by the children in my study confirm this theory. Another finding from the interviews was that most children do not talk much about their foster siblings and their relations with them in positive terms. Furthermore, the study shows that the foster children negotiate the siblings' roles in relation to siblings who live back home, siblings who are born while they themselves live in foster homes, and the foster parents' own children. This builds on Punch's (2005) finding that siblings' roles vary in relation to the children's gender, age, and position in the sibling group. Caring about biological siblings, rivalry and conflict with biological siblings, or having to compare oneself with the foster parents' own children strengthens the children's perception of themselves and their identity, and a sense of belonging becomes a central feature. Similarly, in line with McIntosh and Punch's (2009) finding that children may view their siblings as a source of rivalry and conflicts, the children in my study define their sibling relations from biology, relations, intimacy, and whether or not they have cohabitated. These findings confirm and build upon findings from prior research on siblings and stepfamilies (Berge Fjøsne, 2007; Bray, 1999; Cicirelli, 1995;

Edwards et al., 2005; Hegar, 2005a; Levin, 1994; Mitchell, 2003).

These findings highlight a number of challenges in placing siblings in the same foster home. Many child welfare services in Norway are experiencing a growing housing crisis, as they struggle to place children in a time of financial retrenchment, staff turnover, and other procedural difficulties. Similar challenges have been reported both in the United States (Schorr, 2000) and Great Britain (Randall, Cowley, & Tomlinson, 2000). Despite these trying circumstances, expectations dictate that siblings should be placed together. Many foster children had siblings, or half-siblings who may not have shared a home, prior to their removal by the social welfare services. The diverse situations of children in the public child welfare system make it very challenging to place children with their siblings (Hegar, 2005b). They often come into care at different times, and sometimes social welfare services may not have a complete picture of the children's relationships. Members of several sibling groups have individual needs that may require different levels of care. Some are part of large sibling groups with wide age spans, which poses a challenge to placing them all in a single home. Despite these challenges, it is encouraging that sibling placements have become a priority for child welfare services in Norway.

Some of the limitations of the present study include the self-recruitment of the informants and their relatively small number. Furthermore, the age range of informants is relatively large. Although it is widely understood that siblings will fare the best by being placed together, lack of foster homes can lead to placement in separate homes. Despite this, my findings have several practical implications. Child welfare services should acknowledge the importance of getting to know each individual child and his or her sibling relationship(s), of learning what they represent for each child, and of considering each child's point of view. Children's relationships with siblings must be addressed, both before and during the process of choosing foster homes. Furthermore, this perspective must be maintained throughout the entire foster care period. Children's relationships with siblings—biological as well as foster siblings—seem to be important to them. While we still do not know enough about the significance of contact with siblings during stays in foster homes, my study shows that children develop their identity and sense of belonging through ties with both biological siblings and foster siblings.

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