SIBLING PLACEMENT IN ADOPTION: THE ADOPTEE PERSPECTIVE

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SIBLING PLACEMENT IN ADOPTION: THE ADOPTEE PERSPECTIVE

by
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This dissertation is the product of not only my hard work and dedication but also those of my family and friends. Their commitment, support, and understanding of my drive to earn this doctorate can never be overstated. To my parents, who love me immensely and have always supported me. To my husband, who has become my shelter from life’s storms. To Eric, who never fails to hear me and to steer me in the right direction. To my children and godchildren, who always encourage me to work hard and reach my goals, as I know they are watching. Always remember, your adoption is your story alone and the product of love from both your parents and your biological family. You are so loved and so very special to me. Forever and ever, no matter what.
Abstract

Almost three-quarters of adoptees have known birth siblings, while a little more than one-quarter have birth siblings adopted by the same family (National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 2009). Many studies have been completed surrounding the issue of sibling placement in adoptions. However, no studies to this date have been published from the perspective of the adoptee. This study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the phenomenon of sibling placements from the perspective of adoptees. Purposive sampling was utilized to select eight participants who met the criteria of being over the age of 18, being a domestic adoptee, and having siblings. In this study, 63% of interviewees experienced private infant adoption, while the other 37% were adopted from foster care. The participants provided their experience with the phenomenon in a semi-structured interview. A total of nine themes emerged across interviews, which included: impacts of sibling separations; adoptee perspectives on sibling placements; connections with biological families; relational patterns; the need for genetic mirroring; ethical issues in sibling placements; outside pressure on adoptees; the impact of knowledge of their own adoption; and changes in insight in adoptees with transition to parenthood. In summation, adoptees felt strongly that siblings should be kept together, if possible, but that careful evaluation of relationships should occur when separating some but not all siblings. Additionally, adoptees felt strongly that adopted children should have open knowledge and conversations regarding their status as adoptees. Finally, adoptees discussed feeling immense pressure from society to be grateful for their experience of adoption and minimize the trauma of separation from their biological parents or siblings. This study presents
information to guide future research in the area of adoption as well as provide insight and
guidance for professionals involved in the adoption community.

**Keywords**: adoption; adoptee; sibling placements; adoptee perspective
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge related to the adoptee perspectives on sibling placements and connections. The research question is: what are adoptees’ perspectives on identified sibling relationships? This chapter provides an overview of the study, which identifies the background and need for this research, provides a summary of the research, and finally presents assumptions and limitations of this type of study.

Introduction to the Problem

According to statistics provided by the Child Information Gateway (2019), almost three quarters of adopted children have known birth siblings. Of these, a little more than one-quarter have birth siblings also adopted by the adoptive parent. This survey revealed that birth rates of siblings adopted into the same family varied across adoption types. Reports showed a higher percentage for foster care adoptions (36%), where there is some guidance and support given for keeping siblings together, compared to 7% for international adoptees. Domestic private adoptions, which have no federal guidance, fell in the middle at 11% (Child Information Gateway, 2019).

It is important to understand that adoption is the termination of the legal birth family relationship (HG Legal Resources, n.d.). Therefore, unless children are adopted together, birth siblings cease to have a legal relationship with each other (HG Legal Resources, n.d.). Many studies regarding adoptions, kinship relationships, and sibling relationships have been completed (Jones, 2016; Farr, 2016; Meakings et al., 2017; Selwyn, 2018; Mason & Tipper, 2008) results vary due to research quality, variables, limitations, etc. Most agree that if the siblings had a stable relationship before the adoption, this relationship should continue (Jones, 2016; Brody,
2004; Nolar, 2005; Farr, 2016; Wojciak et al., 2017). Nevertheless, there are a few studies that demonstrate the need for discontinuance of contact between siblings when the relationship is traumatic or abusive (Moyers et. al., 2006; Meakings et al., 2017; Selwyn, 2018; Mason & Tipper, 2008). The chief problem with the recommendation that siblings remain in contact is that there is currently no federal legal provision for post-adoption contact plans, nor is there continued support to ensure these are followed. Therefore, any further contact between siblings is often at the mercy of informal arrangements between the parties involved (Child Information Gateway, 2019). The developmental, interpersonal, and ethical implications of placing siblings together or apart cannot be underestimated.

While there have been some studies discussing post-adoption contact, most of the studies focused on birth parents and families reunifying with previously adopted adults (O’Neill et al., 2016). Some research targeted open adoptions where maintaining birth family relationships is common (Smith et al., 2020). Few studies directly measure sibling relationships and the maintenance of these after adoption (O’Neill et al., 2018). None thus far have focused on this from the perspective of the adoptees. This lack of knowledge in this area greatly impedes effective social work practice (O’Neill et al., 2014).

A greater understanding of the outcomes and experiences of sibling placements and their impact would have implications for child welfare practices. An extensive literature review found no peer-reviewed published research regarding sibling relationships from the perspective of the adoptee. The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the impacts of sibling placement in adoption through a qualitative phenomenological study of adoptees.

**Background and Context**
Throughout the review of completed studies, it is clear that sibling relationships are impactful (Jones, 2016; Brody, 2004; Nolar, 2005; Farr, 2016; Moyers et al., 2006; Meakings et al., 2017; Selwyn, 2018; Mason & Tipper, 2008; Wojciak et al., 2017). According to manuscripts by Noller (2005), sibling relationships are often the longest-standing relationships. Sibling relationships last longer than parental relationships, spousal relationships, or child relationships. Although this is a commonly known fact, limited effort is put into maintaining, repairing, or researching these relationships regarding adoption (Noller, 2005).

The Child Information Gateway (2019) discussed how difficult defining sibling relationships can be. Currently, the law defining sibling relationships requires children to have one shared biological parent (Expanding Definitions of Family in Federal Laws, 2021). Children and families often have broader definitions of siblings to include stepsiblings, close relatives they may have lived with, cousins, non-relatives they have lived with, foster siblings, and so on. These relationships are known legally as "fictive kin" (Eger, 2022). It's also common for children to have siblings they've never met. Even more difficult, determining siblings’ connections can be hampered by state jurisdiction, an inability to locate siblings, previously terminated parental rights, different timelines in placement and adoption, etc. Some examples of this may be birth parents’ rights being terminated for one child and then later delivering another baby who isn’t removed by the state. These pseudo-sibling relationships may still cause trauma and disruption for children and should be considered (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

In defining siblings, it is also important to consider the changing definition of families. Research by the Pew Research Center discusses the rising complexity and diversity of family units. Their research on families' states that “less than half—46%—of children are living with two parents who are both in their first marriage. This share is down from 73% in 1960” (Pew
Research Center, 2020). This data demonstrates that adoptive families aren’t the only families blending the biological and social natures of families; thus, sibling relationships should not be held to the norm of “intact nuclear families” (Cossar & Neil, 2013, p. 68). In a similar study attempting to define sibling relationships, Edwards et al. (2006) found that children did not believe that siblings needed to live together to have a stable sibling relationship. They did, however, feel that ongoing contact was important.

**Benefits of Together Placement**

Wojciak et al. (2017) reported that positive sibling relationships increased resilience in children who had been exposed to trauma, separation from their birth families, and foster care. Noller (2005) has shown that positive impacts on a person’s emotional, social, and cognitive development are measurable with stable relationships with siblings. When healthy, these relationships continue to provide stability and a sense of connection throughout a lifetime (Noller, 2005).

Farr et al. (2016) wrote that when adoptees become adolescents, contact with siblings helps children have comradery and discussion of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to their adoptive identity and family of origin. Farr’s writings discuss the benefits of this processing in adolescence, showing less emotional distance between the adoptive family and adoptee when this stable contact is provided. This study also identified that, in many cases, positive sibling relationships could lead to better adoptive adjustment even when siblings were separated. Reports of a contagion effect from sibling experiences were also noted here. The writer discussed that if one sibling felt close and had a stable relationship with the adoptive family, the other sibling with whom they had close contact was likely to report the same (Farr et al., 2016).
Wojciak et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of sibling relationships in families with or without prior trauma or separation history. Positive relationships with siblings and frequent contact with children in foster care were shown in studies to reduce the likelihood of internalizing behavior in children. Internalizing behaviors for children in these situations often appear as anxiety, poor self-esteem, or increased emotionality (Wojciak et al., 2013).

Additionally, Affronti et al. (2015) reported that adjustment to a new home (adoption or foster placement) can be hindered by sibling separation. Researchers posited that this is likely due to the children worrying about their siblings in other homes or those remaining with their birth families (Affronti et al., 2015).

Arguments for Sibling Separation

Alternatively, a study by Selwyn (2018) showed that siblings placed together for adoption were more likely to disrupt adoptive placements in comparison to siblings that were adopted separately. This researcher discussed the need for further assessment of sibling relationships and dynamics before determining placement needs. Regarding these results within family systems theory, the likelihood is that children who were exposed to negative family systems tend to act out these dynamics with siblings, destabilizing the relationships. In Selwyn’s study of 41 adoptive families with biological siblings, only 18 parents described “normal” sibling relationships. The other parents described toxic and dysfunctional patterns between siblings (Selwyn, 2018).

Brody (2004) also discussed that negative sibling relationships can significantly contribute to difficulty in familial and future relationships. It is well known that problematic family processes are usually at the center of foster care adoption cases (Whelan, 2003), hence the need for building, maintaining, and supporting positive birth sibling relationships. Some of these
problematic family processes were explored by Meakings et al. (2017). In this study, adoptive parents noted shock at the unexpected level of sibling discord and difficult dynamics between siblings. The following were of particular concern to the parents in the study: extreme jealousy, physical aggression, fierce competition, and conflict. Parents reported siblings’ need for control, their desire for siblings to be moved from the adoptive home, the parentification of older siblings, and anger related to siblings adjusting to the adoptive home more quickly as some of their most common concerns. Researchers in this study suggested these responses were related to previous trauma and unstable biological family relationships in which appropriate modeling of behaviors was nonexistent (Meakings et al., 2017).

Publications from the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2019) discuss that private child welfare agencies highly recommend conducting an assessment of sibling relationships before determining to place children separately. Recommendations state this assessment should include consultation with mental health professionals, foster parents, and the siblings themselves to determine if separation is warranted. In some cases, together placement is still recommended with safety plans in place to manage risks for the siblings. The problem with these suggestions is that there are no specific guidelines in many states for these assessments: who can complete them, when they should be completed, and what type of assessment to use (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Mason and Tipper (2008) addressed another aspect of sibling relationships in their study, showing that time spent together was the most important aspect of relationship development and kinship bonds. They stated that regular, repeated interactions over time solidify family relationships. In the case of separated biological (or non-biological) siblings, they may not have
had time, due to previous separation or other factors, to develop enduring kinship connections. When children were placed in infancy, this regular interaction was especially important.

**When Sibling Separation Occurs**

Based on research, the separation of siblings can have lasting impacts. Studies show poorer mental health, poorer socialization, and a profound sense of loss when siblings are separated. This finding was especially robust in girls (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005). Additionally, children who previously lived with siblings and were adopted into an only child role struggled with loneliness (Meakings et al., 2017).

In order to combat these detriments, the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2019) states that the earlier post-adoption contact and relationship building can occur, the more space children have for working through adoption identity and other issues that might arise. This “space” for processing through issues allows greater stability overall by reducing internalization.

In general, post-adoption contact agreements make provisions to continue contact and/or communication between the adoptive parents, the child, and persons with whom the child has an established relationship (previous foster parents, birth parents, siblings, other members of the child's birth family, etc.). These arrangements range from informal agreements to written, formal contracts discussed at the time of the adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

In today’s changing family dynamics, post-adoption communication has become more common due to many factors. Some of these factors are listed by the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018) as follows: contact being a resource for adoptive parents in information regarding the child's medical, social, and cultural history; having attachments to a greater number of individuals in and outside of the birth family than previously; wider agreement of birth
parents' rights to make choices for birth children; and birth parents deliberately selecting adoptive parents based on their agreement to a child's medical, social, and cultural history.

Legal Mandates

As previously discussed, scholars agree that it is in the best interest of the children and adoptive families to maintain sibling relationships if at all possible (Affronti, 2015; Brody, 2004; Farr, 2016; Noller, 2005; Wojciak, 2013). The first federal law to enact these findings was created in 2008 and titled the Fostering Connections Act. In summary, this law emphasizes that states must make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections in order to receive federal funding. In general, if siblings aren't placed in the same home, they should be allowed to ongoing contact, unless this would be bad for their physical or emotional health (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

The National Center for Youth Law (2015) makes strong calls for more action. They discuss that even though there has been increased recognition of the benefits of sibling relationships, these are often made less important as courts and caseworkers try to balance other challenging issues in child welfare and adoption. They write, “If sibling association is to be truly protected and promoted, it must be recognized as a fundamental right, protected by the Constitution” (National Center for Youth Law, 2015, p. 1). These complex legal questions have some basis in the First and Fourteenth Amendments, but to date, the Supreme Court has not provided any guidance or protection for these sibling relationships.

Following the Fostering Connections Act, 37 of our 50 states have passed rulings requiring child welfare agencies to make efforts to place siblings together in foster care. Of these states, 35 have additional mandates requiring ongoing visitation for siblings who may not be
placed together. This indicates the importance of recent findings on the impact of sibling relationships. However, these rulings have no federal standards of practice. The creation of more standardized practices for sibling placement and contact maintenance is suggested to reduce the negative outcomes of placement in care (Wjociak, 2013).

Post-adoption, there is no federal mandate to provide continued sibling visitation or ongoing contact for children who are adopted separately. All 50 states have laws affirming that adoptive parents have the right to decide with whom their child may have contact. Essentially, ways are made for contact agreements to be included, if desired by adoptive parents, but they are neither mandatory nor enforced in any way. This contact can range from informal (cards, letters, photos, etc.) to direct (visits, phone calls, etc.) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

Currently, only 12 states acknowledge the importance of the sibling relationship and allow contact agreements to be written in adoption decrees. These states include: California, Connecticut, Georgia, Louisiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Washington. Courts in these states can establish post-contact plans if all parties agree in writing. If in the future there are disagreements in the completion of post adoption plans, disputes or requests for modifications must also be brought back before the court (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

In addition to the absence of legal mandates regarding post-adoption contact, there is also a deficiency in the training provided to those involved in adoption. Many studies have shown a lack of knowledge regarding sibling relationships in adoptive parents and are related to a similar lack of knowledge in other people working in adoptive settings (Neil, 2007). Recommendations have been given regarding the need for caseworkers, lawyers, judges, adoptive parents, and other child welfare/court professionals to be aware of the importance of sibling relationships (Smith et
al., 2020). However, there is no directive regarding the provision of this education at the federal or state level.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Literature Review

This chapter describes the literature review for the completed study and includes an explanation of the theories that guided the development of this study. The writings below also explore domestic and international adoption research related to sibling issues and trends and discuss the potential effects of sibling placements as published in current works. The goal of this literature review is to identify the current, peer-reviewed research related to sibling placements in adoption. The questions for this review were: 1. What are the known outcomes associated with siblings placed together for adoption? 2. What are the known outcomes associated with siblings separated for adoption? 3. Are there findings from other studies on the adoptee's opinions on sibling placement in adoption?

Methods and Topics of Literature Review

The author conducted an extensive review of the literature using EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Proquest databases to find peer-reviewed articles that investigated the above questions. The inclusion criteria for review articles were (1) articles must be peer reviewed and (2) articles must have been published on or after 2012 with the exception of theory research. Searches used the terms “sibling placement” AND “adoption;” “adoptee opinions,” “sibling placement,” AND “adoption”. Using these criteria yielded a total of nine research studies for appropriate review.

Description and Critique of Scholarly Literature

Cossar & Neil (2013) conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of post-adoption, face-to-face, sibling contact from the perspectives of adoptive parents and birth relatives. This study
included 94 participants. These researchers discussed their findings that family systems post-adoption were complex and not easily defined. Specifically, the writers stated, “once the essential connection between biology and kinship is destabilized [by termination of parental rights and/or adoption], there is more scope for choice about who counts as family” (Cossar & Neil, 2013, p. 69). The analysis found that children were often linked to multiple families in complex ways due to sibling contacts. Analysis also found themes regarding changes in family boundaries and how these are negotiated when assimilating to adoptive family constructs versus maintaining previously developed constructs of what a family is. The second overarching association described by the researchers was related to information flow. Parents and caregivers were often concerned about what information might be shared between the siblings during contacts with their biological families. Other caregivers were supportive of this information flow and felt that it gave their adoptee a grounded view of the biological family and context. Additional discussion was related to children’s understanding of sibling placement and contact. Two scenarios were pertinent to these themes: when some children remained with their birth families while others were adopted, and when children had contact with some siblings but not all. Implications discussed by the researchers included the need for support for sibling contact, helping children understand their unique sibling connections, and increasing oversight and management of sibling contact meetings since post-adoption contact plans are often informal. Cossar and Neil (2013) encouraged future research to include the views and experiences of adoptees.

Farr et al. (2016) completed an analysis of three studies that used longitudinal, mixed-method data to learn more about how adjustment and adoption experiences affected sibling relationship dynamics. Results from the initial study showed that, generally, over time, adopted
siblings have less contact with their siblings and birth families. This phenomenon is hypothesized to be related to processes of emotional distance regulation. Farr et al. (2016) describes emotional distance regulation as the process of the involved parties in the adoption network attempting to manage his or her own emotionality as changes happen in these relationships across time. Specifically processes of expanding, separating, developing, maintaining relationships inside the adoption network. Study 2 revealed significant associations between adoptees' experiences and sibling involvement in birth family contact. Adoptees often report fewer externalizing problems when in contact with their biological siblings and families. Adoptees also reported more positive relationships and contact with their birth mother when this contact included their biological siblings with whom they were adopted. Three adoptees felt more positively about adoption and their own adoption experiences when their adopted siblings had positive perceptions as well. General recommendations from Farr et al. (2016) included that adoptive parents consider open arrangements with biological siblings and support further contact when siblings could not be placed together, specifically noting that biological siblings are a resource for appropriate adjustment and positive outcomes for adoptees. A major limitation in this study was the lack of diversity in the sample.

Frost and Goldberg (2020) completed a study focusing on the experiences of parents who adopt sibling groups. The study aimed to improve adoption professionals' and adoptive parents' overall understanding of the successes and challenges of families who adopt siblings. This study utilized exploratory longitudinal qualitative approaches to describe the difficulties and benefits of sibling group adoptions. Interview data from six parental sets was analyzed at three time points: before adoptions, three months after adoption, and two years post adoption. Participants had adopted two or more siblings at the same time from foster care and were experiencing
parenthood for the first time with these adoptions. Findings from this study included that adoptive parents felt that keeping siblings together was important; adoptive parents often weren’t prepared for the fast-paced adjustment from no children to two or more children; adoptive parents bonded unequally with the siblings; each child adjusted at different paces to the adoption; parents reported a persistent impact of trauma on the siblings; and parents noted that optimism was a large protective factor for the family as a whole. The most consequential limitation for the study is its exploratory nature. Due to its small, non-diverse sample, this study lacks generalizability but does posit more questions for further research.

Greenhow et al. (2017) conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis of adoptive family experiences with e-communication with birth relatives. These researchers conducted interviews with 10 adoptive families that included six interviews with adoptees. The e-communication avenues used by adoptive families included Facebook, texting, video calling, and virtual contact (i.e., following a relative's social media profile and having sporadic exchanges this way over time). The use of such a small sample size impedes generalizability. However, findings from this study found a great number of challenges to virtual contact (6 out of 10 adoptive families). These challenges included risks to emotional well-being due to the unmediated nature of e-communication, inappropriate behavior of birth relatives during contact, fewer restrictions and guidance from professionals, and the risks that occur with unexpected e-communication. The opportunities associated with e-communication included increasing access to adoptees' information about their birth families, increasing the natural development of contact between adoptees and birth relatives, increasing the convenience of birth family contact, and increasing a more personal practice of openness that developed more naturally. Some adoptees disagreed with their parents about the negative impact of electronic communication. According
to Greenhow et al. (2017)'s hypothesis, adoptive parents' sense of purpose and self may feel threatened. Greenhow reviewed instances where this had been discussed in previous literature as well. This study identified the need for professionals to support adoptees' development and maintenance of safe relationships using virtual contact. Additionally, social workers can help support adoptive parents develop understanding and guidelines to decrease inappropriate communication and increase their comfort with this form of communication. In addition to sample size, other limitations included a lack of birth relative views and purposive sampling methods from one adoption agency of adoptive families with known virtual contact.

Luu et al. (2020) conducted case analyses of 117 adopted children in Australia, including 89 sibling sets. The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the nature and complexity of the relationships among siblings adopted from foster care. Findings suggest that when separated from each other, siblings need support to initiate and maintain healthy connections. Nine out of 10 participants had siblings placed elsewhere who were not included in this study. Luu et al. (2020) reported that most siblings were familiar with their maternal siblings but that children often had little to no familiarity with their paternal siblings. Access to external siblings varied in this study but was found to be most consistent when external siblings were also adopted or in a kinship placement. Results showed that children generally indicated enjoyment of post-adoption contact with their siblings and indicated a preference for adoption plans that would allow continued contact supported by their adoptive parents. In summary, Luu et al. (2020) posited that the development of policies and procedures to keep siblings together and support sibling connections when sibling together placement is not possible is imperative.

Meakings et al. (2017) completed a study exploring the way sibling relationships are impacted by adoptions. This study utilized mixed methods to explore the characteristics and
experiences of adopted children as well as interviews with adoptive parents. Quantitative data from this study showed that, during a 13-month period in Wales, only a third of children with siblings were adopted together. These siblings were typically maternal half or full siblings. Qualitatively, adoptive parents reported positive elements of sibling togetherness in adoptions, including companionship, reassurance, and comfort. Conversely, a large number of parents reported an unexpected level of discord and harmful dynamics between adopted sibling sets. A few interviewees made reference to the challenges of parentification of an older sibling in the relationship. During interviews, it was noted that although many adoption plans included contact with birth siblings, these plans weren’t acted upon. Several parents described repeated contacts with social workers to help support these contacts, which were often unsuccessful. Only five percent of children at nine months post-adoption had face-to-face visits with siblings living elsewhere. Meakings et al. (2017), like many other researchers, proposed that adoption professionals increase policies and procedures to assist adoptive parents and adoptees in maintaining sibling relationships with siblings who were not placed together.

Selwyn (2018) explored whether sibling relationships impacted the outcomes of adoptive placements that were disrupted or in crisis. Using secondary analysis of two previously completed interviews, the researchers re-analyzed the data using a mixed method design, focusing on 83 family interviews. The sample from these previously completed interviews consisted of adoptive parents from England and Wales who had experienced a disruption or crisis in placement. This broke down to 41 families who had experienced a disrupted adoption and 42 families who self-described their adoptive placement as being in crisis. The expectations before the analysis were that poor sibling relationships could be the primary reason for disruption. However, only 8 of the 41 disrupted families attributed their disruption to poor
sibling relationships. In fact, the majority of disruptions were related to violence occurring between the siblings. Many of these children had been harmed directly by sibling physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Many more of these children had been witnesses to violent behaviors in their families of origin. Directly related to these exposures and experiences, only 18 of the 83 parents interviewed described normative sibling relationships. The researchers discussed how social work services thus far have focused on the parent-child dyad and often ignored or minimized the impact of these experiences on sibling relationships. Social work services have often seen adoption disruptions as needing to be avoided at all costs, but the interviewees in this study reported these disruptions had to occur to prevent siblings from being harmed further.

Soares et al. (2019) completed one of the first studies from an adopted child’s perspective. In this study with 102 participants, researchers explored gains, losses, and difficulties in adoption. The study employed a mixed-methods design, including a qualitative content analysis following interviews utilizing the Children’s Interview about Adoption. This semi-structured interview was chosen to explore subjective experiences and bring richness to the data and interpretations. Soares et al. explore specific questions, including “What was the best thing that happened to you because you were adopted? ”; “What was the worst thing that happened to you because you were adopted? ”; and ”Tell me three things that have been difficult for you related to your adoption” (Soares et al., 2019, p. 261). Participants in the Soares et al. (2019) study included 102 Portuguese children adopted from state care. This included 59 males and 42 females aged 8–10 years. On average, these participants had lived with adoptive families for 5.51 years, and their average age at adoption was 3.28 years. 36.3% of participants had never lived with their birth parents. Results of the study showed that children identified the benefits of family belongingness, new resources, new social relationships, greater experiences, and the care
given by the new family. Specifically, Soares et al. (2019) posited that these relational and affective changes that were highly valued by adopted children support previous literature finding that adoptive children have a great need for loving and caring attention due to past trauma and the healing impact of a supportive adoptive family environment. More than half of participants could not identify the “worst thing that has happened to you because you were adopted.” Participants who were able to respond to the question and identify adoption-related losses reported birth family loss, experience of adversity, and family and social difficulties. It was shown that those who reported more losses and the increased significance of these had spent more time living with their birth family. Overall recommendations from this study were to increase the social acknowledgment of adoption-related losses and gains, allowing room for and supporting children in their journey of understanding their world as an adoptee.

**Inferences for Forthcoming Study**

The above studies show general support for the placement of siblings together for adoption. Several of these studies call for increased policies and procedures in adoptive practices to support the development and maintenance of birth sibling relationships (Soares, 2019; Meakings, 2017; Cossar & Neil, 2013; Farr, 2016). Few studies directly assessed the maintenance of sibling relationships after adoption. To date, none has focused on this from the adoptees' perspective. This dearth of information in this area hinders social work practice remarkably (O'Neill et al., 2014).

**Theoretical Framework**

Murray Bowen's 1960s work laid the groundwork for Family Systems Theory. Bowen writes that individuals will function at their best if they are able to function effectively both
together and apart from the family of origin. Bowen theorizes that each individual's ability to develop positive and healthy relationships in adulthood is influenced by their experiences in family of origin relationships. These impacts from families of origin may be adopted or biological and include other generations and extended family members. Often in foster and adoption cases, this may include identified family members who share no biological or legally recognized connection. Bowen’s broad definition of family accommodates the complexities that often occur in adoptive settings (Walsh, 2014).

Differentiation of self is another core concept in Bowen’s theory. Fundamentally, this defines a person’s ability to balance their thoughts and feelings, having insight into their own personal reactions and emotional significance of events. Regarding the family specifically, differentiation is the ability to preserve aspects of emotional ties or trauma without being constrained by them. A notable example of the application of this theory is the goal of increasing a person’s ability to analyze highly charged emotional interactions, understand his or her feelings separately from others, and make his or her own decisions about how to respond in these situations. Thus, increasing the family's insight into family inequalities and improving the family’s ability to appropriately share their systemic concerns.

Arguably the most significant concept of Family Systems Theory related to adoption is that of triangulation (Derlaga, 1993). This concept posits that generally all relationships are inherently unstable and require a third party to help ensure stability (Walsh 2014). This conceptual triad in adoption is often represented by the birth family, adoptive family, and adoptee. This adoption triad and dynamics has been discussed in research dating back to 1993 (Derlaga, 1993) and continues to have important research to help increase de-triangularization inside the adoptive family (Brooks, 2017).
Essentially, all family members influence and are influenced by each other. For application in the current study, one might understand the complexity of the family structures, previous and current relationships, trauma (even adoption itself), and sibling bonds (or lack thereof) from a Family Systems view, understanding that each and every one of these factors influences each other and the person as a whole. Specifically for qualitative research, the family assumes an altogether new and more complicated view once the research's attention is diverted from the person to the system, as opposed to what a cause-and-effect linear model may show. Systems thinking helps researchers take into account various factors as well as how they interact with one another.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Although there is a considerable amount of research on the phenomenon of sibling placement in adoption from the perspectives of social workers, lawyers, parents, and other involved parties, there is a deficit of research from the adoptee's perspective. This is the first study that aims to explore the experiences of adoptees in relation to the placement of their siblings. This chapter discusses the qualitative research design and procedures and the proposed data analysis.

Research Design and Rationale

In the field of qualitative research, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is quickly gaining popularity and legitimacy, despite its relatively recent development. IPA specifically examines how subjects make sense of a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon addressed is sibling placement in adoption. As discussed in the introduction and literature review, current studies show significant responses from siblings who are kept together and siblings who are separated. Individuals who experience adoptions with or without their siblings engage in a substantial amount of reflection, thought, and emotion as they consider the significance of this event (Soares, et al., 2019) The objective of IPA is to determine how individuals make sense of their experiences by examining, investigating, and eliciting meaning, as well as by striving to provide detailed descriptions of their perceptions (Houston & Mullen-Jansen, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Traditionally, research using an interpretative phenomenological design utilizes purposive sampling, unstructured or semi-structured interviews, verbatim transcripts, thematic analysis, and finally an attempt to make connections between the identified themes across transcripts. The following design was built utilizing these principles (Houston & Mullan-Jensen, 2011).
Many publications discussing IPA advocate for smaller sample sizes. (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2002). Smaller sample sizes are typically ideal for providing a detailed account of the participant’s experience. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) discussed that, due to the intricacies of most human phenomena, researchers should focus on the quality of data instead of quantity.

When designing a study to examine adoptees’ perspectives of their actual experiences with sibling placement, it quickly became evident that an interpretative phenomenological approach was the only option to collect such a richness of experience. The design, discussed below, was heavily based on evidence-based protocols discussed by Houston & Mullen-Jansen (2011). The purpose of this research study was to respond to the following query: what are adoptees’ perspectives on identified sibling relationships?

Role of the Researcher

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) heavily discuss the importance of the researcher identifying their role and immersing themselves in the data as a key role of the researcher in interpretative phenomenological analyses. With this in mind, the researcher’s intention was to add to the body of information about the placement of siblings. Specifically, from the perspective of the adoptee, relatively few studies have examined this viewpoint. As evidenced throughout this study, sibling relationships are highly nuanced and are influenced by a variety of factors. These factors and viewpoints included things that were both expected and unexpected. Beyond research and academic objectives, the researcher also approached this subject from the perspective of an adoptive mother of two children who are not living with their biological siblings. The researcher was conscious of the possibility that personal experiences would skew the results when starting this investigation. First to combat bias, peer debriefing was utilized.
Peer debriefing assisted this researcher in becoming more aware of personal views regarding the data as well as reviewing over and under emphasized points in the data that could have been skewed by researcher bias. Additionally, to combat bias, a second reviewer was recruited. This reviewer had some inherent bias as well, as an adoptive parent, but hadn’t experienced sibling separation in his adoptions. Information about preparing this second reviewer will be outlined below. Overall, learning about others’ experiences—both similar and dissimilar to those of the researcher's children—helped the researcher better comprehend some parts of the researcher's children's feelings and their path to self-realization.

Participants

The researcher sought out participants who were domestic adoptees, had one or more identified siblings (full or half biological siblings, step-siblings, etc.), and were 18 years of age or older. Prior to recruiting participants, the researcher obtained approval to conduct this study from the University of Memphis Institutional Review Board. Utilizing purposive sampling techniques, participants were recruited via social media, specifically Facebook. Facebook was chosen due to its expansive numbers of users and the creation of support groups inside the platform that create cohorts of individuals to advertise the study to as well. Adoption and adoptee support groups on Facebook were utilized to recruit members. A post regarding the research project was made on the general thread. All members were notified automatically of the new post and could respond directly to the researcher. The post invited interested people to contact the researcher directly for additional information. A copy of this post listing has been included in Appendix D. After the first contact with the interested participant, an email with details regarding the study and a link to the pre-survey screener and consent form was provided. The consent form for this study clearly stated that the study was voluntary and that participants could
withdraw at any time. After inclusion criteria was established, an email was sent to arrange interview dates and times via Zoom with the participants.

Recruitment became the most significant limitation of this investigation. At the conclusion of the research, eight participants were interviewed. The original target for participant recruitment was twenty. Interest in the study was shown via contacts from 39 individuals, 17 pre-screening surveys were completed, eight of these lead to fruition and interview completion. Participants were recruited through Facebook using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Facebook was selected due to its large user base and the development of support groups that generate cohorts of individuals for the advertising study. Adoption and adoptee support communities on Facebook were used specifically to recruit participants for this study. The researcher had to be a member of such groups in order to post advertisements, which was a limitation of this recruitment strategy. Some groups restricted the researcher's access because she is not an adoptee herself. Additional attempts to advertise in groups identifying as "anti-adoption" were met with resistance and hostility due to the researcher's status as an adoptive parent. The consensus of this group was that as an adoptive parent that meant the researcher was biased toward adoption being positive and therefore could not hold a neutral view for interviews of people who believe adoption is inherently wrong. As a result, participants were limited to members of groups that were generally supportive of adoption. Non-users of social media did not have equal access to the research due to the study's reliance on Facebook.

Basic demographic information was gathered from the participants during the pre-screening survey process. Six participants identified their race as white and non-Hispanic. Two participants identified their race as Hispanic. Six participants identified as female, one participant identified as male, and one participant identified as non-binary. The most common age range of
participants was 39-55 years old. Sixty-three percent of participants (n = 5) were domestically adopted as infants under one year of age. Thirty-seven percent of participants (n = 5) were adopted from foster care. The average age at the time of adoption for those adopted from foster care was 6.5 years old. All participants had siblings, this number varied widely and often was uncertain by the participant due to the nature of the adoption. All eight participants stated their biological father may have fathered other siblings they were unaware of. Three participants stated their biological mother may have given birth to other siblings they were unaware of.

**Figure 1**

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency/Range</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27-38 - 2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39-55 - 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55+ - 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>White/ Non Hispanic - 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic - 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female - 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Binary - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Education Attainment</td>
<td>High school diploma/ GED equivalent- 2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some college, no degree - 2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree- 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s degree - 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedures**

**Interview Protocol**

Based primarily in Attachment Theory, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) was developed by George, Kaplan, & Main in 1985. Broadly, the AAI was created to help generate
inferences related to a person’s childhood relationships with their parents using autobiographical
memory and the associated feelings to these. This semi-clinical interview focusing on early
attachment and its impacts was utilized for direction in the creation of the interview in this
specific study. Recent studies have also utilized adaptations of AAI for qualitative studies
(Velotti et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2022).

Though the researcher was not specifically looking at attachment, the researcher chose to
inform the interview questions with the AAI to better understand sibling relationships and how
these relationships impacted the phenomenon of sibling placement in the context of adoption.
The AAI was chosen because its questions ask the interviewee to reflect on relationships from
childhood forward, in this case with their siblings.

Additionally, an alternative questionnaire was utilized, targeting relationships with birth
family upon learning of these family members versus childhood roles. This broader
questionnaire was only utilized for interviews in which the siblings were not kept together past
infancy and had no established relationships in late childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. This
interview used in this study allowed the researcher to obtain a broad view of sibling relationships
across many different situations and circumstances with open-ended questions. This alternative
questionnaire included some of the original questions but also added in direct questions about
sibling relationships, connections with biological family and adoptive family from the time they
took place instead of focused on a childhood purview which they had not experienced. A
secondary review by IRB had to be completed after the development of the alternative interview
questions. The interview questions influenced by the AAI used for this study, as well as the
additional questions, have been attached for review (Appendices B and C). Utilizing self-report
questions help to increase the adoptee's ability to differentiate themselves from the adoption triad per grounding in Family Systems theory.

The purpose of both sets of questions, grounded in Family Systems Theory, was to see the adoptee and the adoptive system as a whole rather than focusing on an individual member. However, the data and interviews needed to be expressed from the adoptee’s perspective which has been minimized in literature thus far. Neither set of interview questions have been tested for validity. Interview questions were read verbatim, and interviewees were invited to expand on and clarify statements made throughout the interview. The interview was transcribed verbatim using the transcription service Otter.ai. Content perspectives were analyzed for patterns and themes across the interviews.

This study also used a pre-screening survey to assist in excluding participants who did not meet criteria and to gain data about the demographics of participants. This pre-screening survey included demographic questions (Appendix G), an informed consent form (Appendix A), and a list of general interview questions (Appendix C).

**Data Collection**

Throughout each phase of data collection, IRB-approved methods were implemented. Upon expressing interest, the researcher received the potential participant's email address and began contact with them by answering any study-related queries. The participant was then emailed a link via Qualtrics to complete the informed consent form, the demographics form, and the pre-screening survey. The "anonymize answers" option was selected to prevent the collection of I.P. addresses. PDF and text versions of the consent form were attached to the Qualtrics
survey for evaluation. As the first question of the survey, participants were required to affirm that they had read all of the consent material.

After completing the aforementioned surveys and forms, every participant who met the inclusion criteria was scheduled for a Zoom interview. The survey was terminated, and participants were thanked if they did not fit the pre-screening requirements (i.e., they were not internationally adopted, did not have siblings, or were not adopted). The researcher emailed participants the interview invitation along with instructions for rescheduling the appointment if necessary. A reminder email was issued to the participant 24 hours prior to the interview.

During the interview, the participant logged onto a Zoom interview using a supplied passcode. Prior to collecting data, the researcher sought verbal consent for audio and video recording. If participants refused audio or verbal consent, the session was terminated because transcripts were required for analysis. The informed consent form was reviewed, and the participant was given the opportunity to ask any remaining questions. The interview commenced at that time and lasted an average of one hour. While the use of Zoom allowed for a more diverse sample of locations, it was not without its drawbacks. Video conferencing frequently experiences latency, which disrupts the flow of conversations. Video conferencing is less personal than face-to-face interviews and can result in the loss of context clues and nonverbal communication patterns that are more easily identified in in-person interviews. A risk-benefit analysis was conducted and acknowledged that the variety able to be gained for utilizing Zoom interviews outweighed the risks of some limitations to the data.

Following the interview, the researcher sent an email thanking the participant for their involvement, providing a list of resources if distress had been encountered during the interview, and reiterating their contact information in case the participant had any questions or concerns.
Post-interview materials were distributed through email. The risk to participants was minimal, but sharing resources served as an added precaution. Aside from responding to participants’ follow-up questions, there was no specific debriefing following the interviews.

**Ethical Considerations**

Before the start of this study, all participants signed consent forms (Appendix A). The informed consent provided documentation of the research's rationale, processes, perceived risks, and perceived benefits of participation. It was explained that participation in this study was completely voluntary and confidential and that participants might withdraw at any moment. Participants' personal information was kept anonymous, and no identifying information was associated with the research outcomes. After obtaining informed consent and completing the initial survey, each participant was allocated a unique identifier that was coordinated with interviews to maintain confidentiality. The participant list was kept private in a protected location apart from the original data. After seven years, the signed consent forms will be shredded and discarded. A password-protected Microsoft Word document was used to save transcripts on a password-protected data storage device. Additionally, these will be destroyed when seven years have passed.

**Data Analysis**

As this study was exploratory, the researcher utilized inductive coding methods to allow the codes to emerge directly from the abundant data (Patton, 2002). In order to increase the rigor and credibility of the analysis, the researcher utilized the six-step analysis method recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). These six steps include: 1. reading and re-reading the data, 2. initial noting, 3. developing emergent themes, 4. searching for connections across
emergent themes, 5. moving to the next interview, and 6. looking for patterns across interviews (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

As interviews were completed and recorded, a confidential transcription service named Otter.ai was utilized to complete transcriptions. Transcriptions were labeled, dated, and coded. These were stored in a password-protected computer file. The transcriptions and recordings were simultaneously evaluated to identify and correct any problems that may have occurred. Each transcript was reviewed numerous times in order to gain an understanding of the interviewee's remarks. Non-verbal communication, such as pauses, emphasis, and intonation, was examined in detail. This process completed step one of reading and re-reading as outlines but Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009). This procedure has the advantage of allowing the researcher to immerse themselves in the original data.

Step two as defined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) is initial noting. The initial researcher reviewed interview transcripts and highlighted meaningful sentences, statements, or quotes that provided the researcher with insight into the participants’ lived experience. The key objects of concern for noting included: relationships, processes, experiences, separations, and perspectives of the interviewee.

Steps three and four involved developing emerging themes and searching for similarities across emerging themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Once statements were identified that spoke to the essence of the phenomena shared by interviewees, they were grouped into themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These themes were then combined into larger clusters of related themes for example in this data: positive interactions with biological families, negative interactions with biological families, positive interactions with adoptive families, and negative interactions with adoptive families were all combined to create one theme - relational patterns.
This process of identifying and naming thematic patterns is called abstraction (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Steps five and six were moving to the next interview, and 6. looking for patterns across interviews (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The data was examined descriptively to identify similarities and differences in the participants' reports. These themes represent common ideas or topics of interest in this study. These themes are described more thoroughly in Chapter IV to provide the reader with the essence of the phenomenon. In this study, nine themes were identified as being important to capturing the experience of adoptees as they relate to sibling placements. These themes and definitions are attached in a codebook (Appendix F).

Rigor

Due to the small sample size, the specificity of the qualitative method, and the sampling technique employed, it was not anticipated that the results of the interviews would be generalizable to any population; however, they do provide useful information for comprehending the phenomenon of sibling placements from adoptees' perspectives.

To decrease any potential bias from the researcher, peer debriefing was initially utilized. Peer debriefing was utilized with a social work colleague and the dissertation committee. Cresswell & Poth (2017) discussed the role of peer debriefing in reducing bias as asking significant questions about the investigation's procedures, meanings, and interpretations. This query not only allows insight from the peers but also allows the researcher to verbalize and process thoughts related to the analysis in a different way. Peer debriefing occurred after every interview as well as after initial review of every transcript.
Additionally, in order to reduce bias and increase rigor, a second analyst was recruited after the primary researcher completed data analysis (Church et al., 2018). The second analyst is a terminally licensed social worker with experience in qualitative data analysis. The second reviewer has extensive knowledge of child welfare practice and history with research regarding adoption.

Initially, the researcher and second reviewer met to discuss the goals and aims of this research and review the approved IRB before proceeding. The initial interview was analyzed a second time together to train the secondary analyst in the researcher's process of coding data. The second analyst also utilized Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s six-step analysis process outlined above (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). After the initial codes of the second analyst, the researcher and second analyst met to review themes and processes to increase interobserver agreement. The second analyst found eleven themes, which were then simplified and combined into nine key themes. The themes that were combined were relational patterns, as the second analyst had split this theme into relational patterns with birth family and relational patterns with adoptive family, and sibling separation, as separation from biological siblings and separation from identified (non-biological) siblings. The chart below displays the themes found by first and second reviewers. Using the first reviewer's themes count of nine and the second reviewers theme count of 11 makes interobserver analysis 81%.

**Figure 2**

*Reviewer Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Reviewer</th>
<th>Second Reviewer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational Patterns</td>
<td>Birth Family Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adoptive Family Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Family Connections</td>
<td>Biological Family Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Placement Perspective</td>
<td>Sibling Placement Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Knowledge of Adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Separation</td>
<td>Separation from Biological Siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separation from Identified Siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
</tr>
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<td>Genetic Mirroring</td>
<td>Genetic Mirroring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changing insight with adoptees parenthood</td>
<td>Changing insight with adoptees parenthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside pressure on adoptees</td>
<td>Outside pressure on adoptees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to examine adoptees’ perspectives on the phenomenon of sibling placement in adoption. Concern was raised throughout the review of existing literature as there were very few studies completed from the perspective of adoptees. A qualitative study was developed using purposive sampling to select prospective participants who met the criteria of being a domestic adoptee with siblings.

Eight adoptees volunteered as participants for the study. The participants provided their experience with sibling adoption in a semi-structured interview. The average age of participants at the time of adoption was 3.25 years. Domestic adoption was the most prevalent at 63% (n = 5 of 8), while three participants were adopted from foster care. The researcher entered and coded the data using Microsoft Excel worksheets to assist with the content analysis. This analysis was guided by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin’s (2009) published six-step process for IPA. This chapter provides a discussion and evaluation of the findings.

Themes

The qualitative data gathered during this research revealed detailed accounts of adoptees’ experiences with sibling placement. The participants expressed, in their own words, their subjective experiences and feelings concerning adoption and sibling placements. The data was explored using interpretative phenomenological analysis, in which many themes were consistent across participants. A total of nine themes emerged across interviews, including: impacts of sibling separations, adoptee perspectives on sibling placements, connections with biological families, relational patterns, the need for genetic mirroring, ethical issues in sibling placements, outside pressure on adoptees, the impact of knowledge of their own adoption, and changes in
insight in adoptees with transition to parenthood. These themes and definitions are attached in a codebook (Appendix F). These themes are explored in detail throughout the rest of this chapter. Each theme is discussed using raw data in the form of direct quotes from the participants’ interviews.

**Theme 1: Impacts of Sibling Separations**

Direct questions were asked of the participant regarding separation from their siblings. This separation varied due to the broad range of adoptive situations discovered during the research. For the purpose of this study, impacts of sibling separation described in participant interviews are defined as emotional and/or physical responses described by participants related to separation from an identified sibling. These identified sibling separations discussed in participant interviews included biological siblings, adoptive siblings, and foster siblings.

A few of the participants (n = 3 of 8) were attached to and aware of their biological siblings before separate adoptive placements. This separation was described as traumatic by all three participants. Participants reported strong feelings such as confusion, anxiety, grief, and shame related to these separations. Many of these feelings were internalized. A participant shared the following quote when discussing the experience of being separated from a foster sibling:

And I remember telling my mom but why didn't they take me? He's so good. You know, is it because they were trying to potty train him and he was having a hard time. Is it because of you know, potty training? That's okay, I'll wash his underwear. I mean, I was like six years old and I was devastated. And they didn't know how to talk to us about it... they just made up things as they went along.
Another adoptee discussed learning about her biological brother's abuse in a separate adoptive home. She identified strong feelings of shame, sadness, and guilt. She discussed:

I'm very disappointed to find out that my brother went through several things very similar to what I went through, especially with his adoptive family. So there's, there's a bit of latent anger there that I was not able to be there for him the way I would have liked to be as an older sibling, but I'm doing the best I can now that we've reconnected.”

Another participant discussed her emotional response to the separation from her siblings:

I remember shutting down. And I remember the comments in my file when I was adopted from that family, talking about how I shut down. I remember crying quite a bit and then just kind of not feeling anything, which I've since gone to therapy for and gotten my issues diagnosed, but my trauma response has almost always been to internally shut down. The best way little me knew how to protect myself after [biological brother] wasn't there with me.

Other participants talked about the emotions of connecting with biological family members for the first time. These feelings ranged from excitement to terror. Many participants report physical responses from this reunion. One participant shared:

I was sick to my stomach. Oh, I was sick, sick. And so, you know, we pulled up in front of her house. Emotions, oh, my God, I'm like, my sister's on the other side of that door. I wanted to throw up, I wanted to throw up. And my husband was like, you have to get out of the car. I'm like, I know. But I'm scared. What if she doesn't like me? What if I don't like her? All the what ifs, you know, what if, you know, we come here, and she just kind of, you know, we can have a conversation. And she denies me. You know, like, that's the
things that go through your head. You know, I put you know, 20 years into looking for her. And I would have been devastated.

Theme 2: Adoptee Perspectives on Sibling Placements

Direct questions were asked of the participants based on their experiences about their view on sibling placement with adoption. The theme of adoptee perspective on sibling placements is defined as the viewpoints shared by adoptees in these interviews regarding how sibling placements should occur in between siblings who are going to be adopted.

Regarding sibling placement perspective most adoptees felt that siblings should remain together, if possible, but special attention should be paid to relationships inside these placements. These participants generally felt that keeping siblings together would help reduce the struggles with identity that they and other adoptees typically face. Based on their lived experiences, participants were asked direct questions about their perspectives. Most adoptees felt strongly that siblings should remain together if at all possible. Many people stated that this was not always an option based on their own experiences.

These adoptees felt special attention should be paid to relationships inside these placements. One adoptee had the experience of being separated from siblings they had very strong relationships with to be placed with siblings they had no connection to and had never met. Another adoptee experienced infant leveraging. This phenomenon occurred when adoptive parents wanted to adopt her infant sibling but were told by foster care or adoption workers that they must take the older sibling as well. The adoptee discussed life-long ostracization and overt comments about her status as an unwanted member of the family.
These adoptees felt that foster and adoption workers were unprepared for analyzing sibling relationships and overwhelmed with the need for homes. Due to this shocking lack of training and resources, one adoptee had this to say about his experience with sibling placement: “we’re sort of thrown in the middle of the table and given to the fastest or highest bidder in a sense.” Another said about current legislation regarding sibling placements, “They really use a blanket rule. No blanket rule is ever going to work well for every child.”

Additionally, adoptees felt that keeping siblings together would help reduce struggles with identity that they and other adoptees typically face, especially in children who have strong relationships. An adoptee shared that the siblings he was aware of and separated from compounded his trauma and caused a struggle with his identity as he was no longer the parentified older sibling. One adoptee was unable to meet her sister until she was an adult but knew about her existence throughout her lifetime. She reports struggling throughout childhood and adolescence with her identity and thoughts such as “how much better my life would be with my sister.”

A participant shared her lived experience of being separated from a sibling she was very connected to and placed with an infant sibling she had no relational connection with:

People are too much of individuals in our situations are too different. Like, if they had placed me with Charlie [pseudonym] I would have understood that, but putting me with a youngest sibling that I had no connection to. And that was me being put into a family that didn't want me just because they wanted to keep us siblings together.

As discussed previously, there is current legislation, the Fostering Connections Act, that provides financial support for adoption agencies that keep siblings together (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). However, one participant talked about the failings of the current
legislation that supports keeping siblings together versus the cost of having children placed quickly.

I think whatever handles the situation fastest is what is done most of the time, it’s always what is convenient at the time, not always what’s right or what’s in the children's best interest, I think there should be a more thorough system in play that helps with the placement of the sibling group. The tough thing is that there’s typically no one or no party to vouch for the group or seek what’s in their best interest, we’re sort of thrown in the middle of the table and given to the fastest or highest bidder in a sense.

A participant served as a foster parent, which added a unique layer of thought to her personal adoption experience. When sharing a conversation with her foster parent social worker, she stated:

She's like, we can't legally place all eight children in one place. What we're thinking about doing is splitting them, you could take the two youngest, and then we'll place the other six somewhere else. And I remember just being heartbroken in that moment, maybe it’s a little different in my situation, because I wasn't raised with my siblings. And I'm like, this is the only stability these children know is each other.

Conversely, another participant leaned heavily on their opinion that every situation should be analyzed thoroughly, focusing on placing children together who had relationships first:

I think that there's a huge importance placed on biological siblings that I don't think is fair correct I think it's about the children you grow up with, and I think that there should be kind of a you know a destigmatization away from breaking up children.... I think it’s different for everybody.
Theme 3: Connections with Biological Families

Participants were asked about their contact and relationships with biological family members throughout their lifetime. Participants were asked to share their thoughts regarding their biological family pre- and post-connection. If connection had occurred with biological siblings, participants were asked about specific sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their relationships. In this study, connections with biological family are defined as the emotional, physical, or psychological connection reported by the adoptee with their biological family. These connections were not defined by a timeline of when they occurred or developed (i.e., at birth or at a specific age).

All participants interviewed (n = 8 out of 8) have attempted to search for and/or make contact with their biological family as adults to build relationships. When discussing this phenomenon, six participants utilized DNA testing, primarily because original adoption records were not available or had limited information regarding biological families. Interestingly adoptees searching in for family members in the last decade reported better experiences in their search as many states have recently opened adoption records. Adoptees strongly praised the passing of this legislation.

Connections with biological family members have had a variety of responses from all eight participants. Some of these participants have had relationships with their siblings for many years, while others have only had this connection for a small portion of their lives. Most participants (n=6 of 8) reported feelings of joy, connection, and fulfillment related to relationships with siblings, regardless of the length of the relationship. Most of the participants reported that these relationships and connections were almost instantaneous and very strong, even if they had just found out about siblings or just made contact.
Interestingly adoptees searching in for family members in the last decade reported better experiences in their search as many states have recently opened adoption records. Adoptees strongly praised the passing of this legislation.

One adoptee reported having a sense her entire life that she had siblings. She discussed this feeling and then found out, using recently opened adoption records, that her gut feelings were correct:

And I always knew that I had sisters, and not for any other reason, except it was just like this really deep gut feeling that I had sisters, I would speak about it to my friends, I always use the word in a plural way. I always was just very firm. Like, I know, I have sisters out there, I can feel that I have sisters.

Another example of strong feelings was presented by another adoptee when she discussed having physical responses when learning about her biological father's death when her adoption records were opened:

And, and when I found out that my biological father was dead, like, I immediately had a physical response, like really severe, it was just immediate, just like throwing up, like really visceral, to where I was, like, I don't think I can, I don't think I can handle, like picking up the phone and having it be her [biological mom] right now. Like, my body is reacting. So seriously, just to like these little bits of information that I just need, I needed time to process it.

A third participant shared strong feeling during reconnecting with siblings she had not been aware of:
I find that like, with how amazing it is to be reconnected, like be connected with my siblings, my sisters it's, it's kind of this huge long drawn out process of grieving again, like the more I get to know them, the more I know what I missed, and the because of that, and to be the idea of being bonded to a sibling and then being pulled apart from them having separate lived experiences growing up and then you may or may not find each other again, is like, I mean, I can only imagine how complex that would be.

One participant discussed how, over time, her thoughts about reconnecting with her biological family had changed as she moved from adolescence into a more secure sense of self. She stated:

Now it's complete indifference. Okay, I mean I get it for so many years, like it drove me crazy I don't know if y'all remember this movie personally from Britney Spears maybe from like 15 years ago it's called Crossroads, she like found her mother and mother had started a new family, and that was my biggest fear that they [biological family] had just gotten started this new family just forgot about me. And now, as an adult it doesn't play any impact in my life. You know I hope they did I hope my birth mother had a great life or has a great life but you know it's it plays no bearing on my current on my life.

**Theme 4: Relational Patterns**

Relational patterns as defined by this study are: interactions with families (biological or adoptive) including physical and emotional interactions that impacted adoptees views of their families and themselves. Relational patterns varied for each participant. Many participants discussed both healthy and unhealthy patterns of interactions with both biological and adoptive families. These relational patterns tended to be stronger in adoptive families with open
communication about the adoption and biological families. Additionally, any separation from the adoptive family tended to cause distress for the adoptee. Interestingly, most participants reported an ease of building relationships with biological siblings very quickly. Although anxiety provoking, participants discussed immediate connections with most of their biological siblings at reunification or if they had just been made aware these siblings existed.

In discussing struggles with separation from her adoptive family and her sense of self, a participant shared her struggle with feeling secure after enrolling in a boarding school away from her adoptive home as a teenager.

I also worried for very long that you know my birth mother didn't want me: my birth father definitely didn’t want me and then my parents were going to decide I was too much, like getting that whole teenage thing of being like a disappointment already, and then I was like well they're just going to get rid of me or reject me. I think boarding school didn't really help that feeling and I felt like they were getting rid of me.

Another discussed strong attachment with adoptive parents, who had open communication throughout her life about her adoption status, supporting her independence as an adult:

And she always told me, ‘you're so special, I picked you out’. And then she would jokingly say, ‘I had to take Jeff because that's just who I had. But you I got to choose.’ And so, you know, in my mind, I, when I was little, I thought oh, there was all these babies. And out of all the babies I was chosen, you know, they had a pick of all of them.

An additional participant discussed her adoptive families focus on processing her adoption and how this impacted how she shared her adoption status with others:
I said I was adopted. And he said, ‘You're adopted. I didn't know you were adopted’. And we had been friends for a while. And I said, Yeah, I'm adopted and he said ‘Do you have issues?’ And I said, ‘Yes, but not about adoption.’ So yeah, that was never I really think that my mother didn't do a lot of things right but what she did right was saying you're special, you're special. You're special. I've never struggled with confidence issues. You know, somehow because I just felt like, well, I'm special.

Another shared bonding with her adoptive sister related to her search for biological family members and feeling empowered.

“I have a lot of pretty frank conversations with my sister, some of what she just enjoys listening to the drama of the background but has been very supportive. And, you know, thinking about like, Well, what do you want to do? You know, I'll support any decision you make, we've had some conversations about, you know, what my parents should know or not know. And to some extent, I get to hold those keys because it's my information to share.”

Additionally, another discussed how her relationships with adoptive parents impacted her desire to search for biological family members.

And so I think, I think without really realizing it, um, my loyalty to my adoptive parents really kept me from accessing my, my issues of abandonment, and like, a real deep sadness that I had. My parents were very adamant of like, if you ever want to find your biological parents, like we support that we will help you financially, emotionally, whatever it takes to get that like, there was no, there was no intimidation there on their part, or like, you know,
I know that some people do have that experience of like having adoptive parents that have insecurities, or jealousy, or that kind of stuff. That was never projected on me at all.

Sixty-three percent of adoptees interviewed discussed immediate feelings of connection with biological family members (n = 5 out of 8). Conversely, one adoptee shared her struggle with attachment to biological family members that she had known as a child but was separated from:

I'm grateful that I've been able to start finding some of my siblings, again, as an adult. I do find I've been having a hard time emotionally reconnecting with a lot of my siblings, though. Because, you know, a lot of sibling relationships come from growing up together, and all those shared experiences and now we're all adults. And these people are basically strangers to me, strangers, I have some vague memories of when they were little. But these are basically strangers to me. So it's, I'm having a hard time like, forging that sibling bond. Same way. I'm having a hard time forging a parent-child bond with my biological father.

**Theme 5: Need for Genetic Mirroring**

In the field of adoption, genetic mirroring is a common term used by both professionals and laypeople. Genetic mirroring is understudied and lacks a scholarly definition. There is quite a bit of conversation around genetic mirroring on popular adoption blogs, support groups, and internet threads. For the purpose of this study genetic mirroring is defined as a phenomenon in which an adoptee struggles to see relation in themselves (physical and/or personal traits) to adoptive family members (e.g., seeing parents with blue eyes while the adoptee's eyes are brown). The need for genetic mirroring arose frequently during the interview when discussing the participants' efforts to connect with their biological relatives.
Seventy-five percent of participants (n = 6 out of 8) shared that sibling connections at any point in their lives helped to provide genetic mirroring. Participants discussed the need for genetic mirroring within the biological family for both medical knowledge and physical traits as well as mannerisms. Participants who had some knowledge of and contact with siblings also discussed feeling that genetic mirroring helped with adolescent identity development.

Most participants reported that sibling relationships at any point in their lives facilitated genetic mirroring. Participants discussed the necessity of genetic mirroring with biological family in terms of medical knowledge, physical characteristics, and mannerisms. Participants who had some familiarity with and contact with siblings reported that genetic mirroring aided in adolescent identity formation. Many adoptees described their lifelong search for resemblances in appearance, gestures, personality traits, etc., in their adoptive families and their elation upon discovering them during connections with biological siblings and relatives. One adoptee shared, “when you finally see somebody that looks like you, you’re kind of in awe... like we match you know, we’re each other's people”.

Many participants expressed a strong sense of curiosity and attempts to envision what their biological family may look like. A participant discussed her lifelong interest of biological siblings:

And I wanted to see what they look like. Because I hated how everybody would always say my adopted brother looked like my adopted dad. And I just always was like, well, wait a minute, you know, who do I look like? I know now I really look like my younger biological sister.

Another participant discussed finally seeing pictures of biological siblings after years of missing genetic mirroring in her adoptive family:
And I could just hop right on Facebook. And see hundreds of pictures of my mother, hundreds of pictures of my sisters, it was just really emotional. And like looking in a mirror, I needed that. I realized that after learning about my biological father and my biological mother, like, I was nothing like my adoptive parents at all. Like, at all, you know no similarities there. There might be some learned traits there, but the whole nature versus nurture thing has really blown my mind now that I've gone back and learned a lot about my biological family because like 95% of the way that I operate is really very biological.

When discussing an unrelated adoptive sibling, one participant shared struggles of growing up as an artificial twin and the problems with the lack of genetic mirroring a sibling the world viewed as her twin:

Being that close in age was really hard because everybody compared us, I mean I know siblings always get compared, but we not only have different likes and dislikes had different personalities, we are as physically as different as you could get like she is significantly shorter than I am, and I was always tall for my age. My sister actually looks very similar to my parents and like I could pass kind of as my parent's child if my sister wasn't there; it wasn't like you both of us could have looked like one of us could have been their child but not both of us, so there I was not looking like I belong.

After connecting with an unknown sibling at age 52, a participant shared a sense of wonder and need to study her sibling:

And it's funny, because when I go see her, I always catch her looking at me. And I kind of do it too, you know, because I think you're just so amazed. So I think when you finally see somebody that looks like you, you're kind of in awe, you're in awe, you know? And it's, it's
amazing. It's like, oh my god, she looks like me. Yeah, like we match you know, we're each other's people, you know, so it's, it's, it's pretty cool. It's amazing. It's a blessing. It's an absolute blessing.

**Unexpected Themes**

Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) discuss how the distinctive nature of IPA allows for unique and unexpected data to emerge during analysis. Unexpected data in IPA is defined as themes that emerge from the data that were not anticipated or targeted by the researcher's interview process. This exploratory process of studying phenomena often provides rich, unexpected data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this study, four unexpected themes were discovered and are discussed in depth hereafter.

**Theme 6: Ethical Issues in Sibling Placements**

The major theme of ethical issues in sibling placements emerged as participants shared information regarding their family make-up and history as asked in Question 1 of the interview: Could you start by helping me get oriented to your early family situation, and where you lived and so on? Who would you say raised you? If you could tell me where you were born, whether you moved around much, and what your family did at various times for a living, Did you have brothers and sisters living in the house, or anybody besides your parents? Are they living nearby now, or do they live elsewhere? No direct questions about ethical issues were asked of the participants.

For the purpose of this study, ethical issues described in participant interviews are defined scenarios adoptees experienced related to decisions made by adoption workers that were incongruent with the professional values and ethics of the field of social work (e.g., valuing human relationships, client self determination). The National Association of Social Workers lists six
values that base their ethical principles in their code of ethics: “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence” (2008).

When considering sibling placement in the context of adoption, one may believe that the ethical value of “importance of human relationships” is the most frequently encountered ethical issue. This was a common conversation related to the need to value standing relationships among siblings who were being adopted. Additionally, throughout this research many other ethical issues were discovered but most notably was the lack of respect and dignity for the adopted person. Many adoptees felt this was due to them being children or adoption agency workers thinking that adoption was wholly better for the children without any reservations. While interviewees did not argue this wasn’t true, they felt transparency- at age-appropriate levels- should have been provided to the children about these ethical issues discussed below.

Eighty-eight percent of participants (n = 7 out of 8) openly discussed ethical issues surrounding their experience with adoption and sibling placements. One participant shared how closed and/or destroyed adoption records, including the destruction of original birth certificates, altered her search for her biological siblings, inherently violating the ethical value of her importance as a person and valuing her human relationships. She states:

And I think I feel like I hate this idea of original birth certificates being destroyed through adoption. Your original birth certificate is your original birth certificate. To me, it is a travesty that they are altered in the theme of adoption. And there should be other ways to recognize adoption. In most states, you just get a new birth certificate. I'm like, that's ridiculous. I was not born of these people. And there should be no shame in that. Yeah. You know, you're erasing somebody's history.
Another participant also shared concerns about similar ethical values being violated when trying to obtain her biological mother’s death certificate: “I am not her biological child anymore since my birth certificate has changed. That’s me. I am not this woman’s child anymore. I have no rights to anything. That’s very disheartening.”

One participant became a “false twin” at her adoption when an agency placed two unrelated infants in the same home less than 4 months apart in age. While there was no research found in a literature review on false twinning (also referred to as “artificial twins”), a review of the policies of adoption agencies showed a general discouragement of false twinning in any form. This view is related to problems that may occur with attachment and differentiation from artificial twinning. (Fairfax, 2022). When seeking to adopt herself, this participant shared:

So my son is adopted too. We went through the process and I ended up walking away from like $12,000 invested into adoption, because they wouldn't guarantee that they wouldn’t false twin us. And we didn't want children that were less than 12 months apart in age after my horrible experience. So like my parents didn't start out the process to get two kids this close named it was literally they actually found my sister, and then they got a call from their lawyer being like we actually have another mother who's you know, going to be giving birth four months before, would you like to take that baby as well and they're like yeah, but I think that it just is horrible; it caused so many issues for us.

Additional ethical issues were raised related to the lack of communication with the adoptee as a child before the separation occurred and the trauma that came from being unprepared for this change. Again, this reflects a violation of an ethical value, specifically the value of integrity.
We were very rarely given any forewarning that we, either of us, were going to be separated. I was very rarely given forewarning that I was going to be moved to a different foster home. When I was generally my caseworker would show up. And then I'd be told, which was not on the caseworker. I really think my foster families were supposed to tell me and just never been. Especially when they knew they were going to move him away from me permanently and me to be adopted without him. They should have talked about that more instead of pretending like it was not happening and letting me process it all on my own.

Another participant discussed the ethical issue of being adopted with an infant sibling by a family that only desired to adopt the infant. Another term not found in literature but regularly used in the adoption community is leveraging. Since such a high value is placed on keeping siblings together, adoption agencies may leverage infants by telling potential adoptive parents they must adopt an older child as well in order to adopt the infant.

It was revealed to me in later years that they very much did not want to adopt me. The state just wasn't willing to separate my younger sister and I, if they wanted her they had to adopt me, too. But I had felt that my whole life.

**Theme 7: Outside Pressure on Adoptees**

Unexpected data presented itself with the theme of outside pressure on adoptees (n = 4 of 8). No direct questions were asked of the participant related to this theme. The researcher felt that due to the significance of the occurrence and the strength of the raw data, this theme should be presented and explored as a part of the phenomenon of adoption and sibling placement. For the purpose of this study, outside pressure on adoptees is defined as non-adoptee's thoughts regarding
how adoptees should feel about their adoption (these thoughts may be directly shared or implied to adoptees). (e.g., someone telling an adoptee how lucky they are that they were adopted).

Participants discussed a shared phenomenon of outside pressure from the world at large to be grateful for their experience of adoption. Additionally participants reported pressures that the adoptee should feel only gratitude to their adoptive parents and not feel the loss of biological family or the potential life they may have experienced with them. This pressure often extended to adoptees feeling like they could not talk about their adoption or biological family members because they were supposed to “pretend like this is my only family” [adoptive family]. Interestingly the two younger participants (less than age 30) reported increased ease in talking about adoption and great hopes that this would continue as awareness and acknowledgement of biological families spread. They discussed hopes for reduction of negative stigmatization of biological families.

A participant stated:

Adoption is, or right relinquishment is like, the only trauma that exists that, that people recognize that society as a whole is in the consensus that you should be grateful for it. That's, um, that is what's projected onto you, like, pretty much your whole life, whether people are doing it intentionally or not, at least from my experience as an adoptee. That is, that is what you have to tell yourself. And that's what everyone brings to the conversation.

Another participant expressed words that others used when she would disclose her adoption status:

I always felt a lot of pressure to just be like, extremely grateful. And just I think from society and from my extended family, like, Oh, you're so lucky. You should be so grateful. This is like the best thing that could have ever happened to you and your parents. You
know, just like, I'm really starting to understand how much about adoption is centered around how it affects everybody else more than it does the actual adoptee in a lot of ways.

A participant stated: “And if at anytime I brought it up [adoption], they would say it was I was bringing it up for attention or to make people feel bad about me. I was supposed to pretend that this was my only family.”

Another participant keenly felt the underrepresentation of adoptee’s perspectives from media and research. She shared:

And, you know, you nobody talks about adopted kids, like you know, we're a secret society that people just ignore. You know, we're not allowed to have voices, we're not allowed to have opinions. And when people find out you're adopted, ‘Oh, how lucky are you?’ Oh, really? Okay. Because you don't know what the garbage that comes with it. Grateful. I hate that word. grateful. You should be so grateful that you were that you were picked. No, I was available because of a trauma.

Theme 8: Impact of Knowledge of Their Own Adoption

Another unexpected theme to emerge is related to adoptees feeling much more secure in their identities when they knew about their own adoption at a young age. The security extended to their relationships with adopted and biological siblings. All participants felt that knowledge of their adoption helped solidify their identity at key points in their development. Additionally, this knowledge has allowed participants to be aware of and explore new relationships with siblings they previously may not have foreseen.

For the purpose of this study, the theme of impact of knowledge of their own adoption in participant interviews is defined as participants reported awareness (or lack of) of the knowledge
that they were adopted. Some adoptees have ongoing, continuous knowledge of their adoptions, some adoptees are never informed that they have been adopted.

Seventy-five percent of adoptees (n = 6 out of 8) always had an awareness of their adoption, which they felt led to better general outcomes for adoptees.

 Adoptees reported feeling much more secure when they were informed of their adoption at a young age. Their relationships with adopted and biological siblings also were statedly more secure when they were aware of their adoptee status. At critical junctures in their development, all participants felt that knowing they were adopted helped solidify their identity. In addition, participants are now aware of and exploring new relationships with siblings that they may not have previously anticipated. Many adoptees felt that hiding this knowledge of adoption would be a betrayal on their adoptive family's part. They discussed feeling as if they couldn’t trust their adoptive parents if these things were kept from them, stating that this would cause them major trauma. One adoptee stated, “secrecy is where all bad things happen.”

These findings are supported by research, however sparse, as this is yet another area of literature that is limited. Brodzinsky (2011) provided pivotal information to adoptive parents and an adoption worker, advising that knowledge of adoption is best shared at an early age. The research also advised that this knowledge should be an ongoing conversation throughout their lifetime at differing levels depending on their adoptees' needs, curiosity, and development. Brodzinsky (2011) described this telling as “a process, not an event” (p. 204) and encouraged parents to “validate and normalize children’s curiosity and feelings about their adoptions” (p. 205).

One adoptee also felt very strongly that adoptive parents have a duty to openly converse with their children about their adoption. This participant shared:
I feel like adoptees should know from the moment that they're born- that it should be part of the language. I hate that there are places where adoptions closed. Like even if the biological family, you know, the first family doesn't want to be in contact. I hate for adoptees when that happens, because that's the adoptee story just as much as it is the first family story. And that secrecy is where all bad things happen.

Another participant stated she would have felt betrayed and experience damage to her relationship with her adoptive parents had she been told later in life:

I absolutely think that parents should be open and honest with children about if they're adopted or not, I can tell you that if I had been lied to about it, there would have been a piece of me that just as an, just with my intuition, I would have felt like something was off my whole life. And then if I had found out later on, I would have felt like, extraordinarily betrayed.”

Twenty-five percent of participants (n = 2 out of 8) had a negative experience with adoptive family members (not adoptive parents) attempting to share their adoption status to harm family dynamics. This sharing was done in such a way as to attempt to exploit shame and stigma.

A participant shared an adoptive sister who was the biological daughter of her adoptive father attempted to incite conflict between her adoptive father and she by disclosing an adoptive status she was already aware of:

She proceeded to think it was her idea to tell me that I was adopted, you know, and she's that kind of person, that very manipulative person. And she resented me a lot, and she knew I was mad at my dad. It didn't bother me because I already knew that, but she says, you
know you're adopted, right? And in my mind, I'm saying, Wow, that's a lot of nerve. That's not your place to tell anybody and I told her so.

Another participant discussed an unrelated party attempting to share family secrets to drive a wedge between daughters and their biological mother about the mother previously placing a child for adoption:

And their father pulled them all aside when they were divorcing and just said, ‘I want to tell you something about your mother. And she put a baby up for adoption long ago’, and they all kind of laughed, why we've known this forever, you know, but he wanted to just expose her deep, dark secret. Like he was weaponizing my adoption.

**Theme 9: Changes in Insight in Adoptees with Transition to Parenthood**

A final unexpected theme was related to changes in insight for participants as they became parents themselves. For the purpose of this study, the theme of changes in insight in adoptees with transition to parenthood is defined as adoptees discussion of adaptations to their viewpoints as they became parents to a child. Parenthood was defined broadly to include biological, adoptive, step, etc.

Many adoptees discussed processing their own experience as an adoptee differently after becoming parents themselves. Essentially, becoming parents themselves made them more keenly aware of what their adoptive parents may have felt and how they would feel if they were separated from their children. Participants who had more than one child discussed fears that arose from their children being separated when finding out about siblings they had been separated from.

One participant discussed that having her own children increased her concern related to siblings being separated as well. She shared:
You talk to kids in the system who, you know, there's 2, 3, 4 of them. And they're all raised in different homes. And I can't think about my two kids now. And I'm like, what if something would happen, and they would end up in the system, even temporarily, like, I can't imagine them not being together.

Another discussed how having her own child made her change her perspective and seek out her biological siblings. She discussed:

I used to say all the time that I'm not going to look for my family for any other reason than just learn medical, is what I wanted to know medical issues, medical things. Right. Until I had my own child. And then I kind of understood the connection between a mother and a child because I didn't really get that with my biological mother so much. But I that then I really kind of understood a little bit about what the sacrifice that she made the place to me for adoption. And then especially when I had my second child, I was like, Oh my gosh, you know, how, bizarre it just got a little bit confusing, man, I think. And I think that's really when I kind of made the switch.

Conversely one participant shared her lifelong struggles with attachment following her own adoption spilled over to her own children at their birth and discussed her process with exploring this. She discussed:

I can honestly say, you know, I don't think I connect with my kids the way I probably should. Because I'm just very, I just don't feel I have that in me, because of this whole situation. You know, I got great kids who are good boys. I love my children. I love my children. I just don't think I have that 100,000,000% connection that you should have with your kids. And I feel like the worst person even saying that I really do.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

The goal of this chapter is to connect the overall dissertation by integrating the results from the above study. Only about one-quarter of adoptees have birth siblings adopted by the same family, while nearly three-quarters of adoptees have known birth siblings (National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 2019). Numerous studies have been conducted on the topic of sibling placement in adoptions. However, few studies from the adoptee's perspective have been published to date. The problem explored in this study stemmed from the lack of adoptees’ perspectives in the literature. This study sought to give voice to this perspective by exploring the phenomenon of sibling placements in adoption.

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to investigate the phenomenon of sibling placements from the adoptees' perspective. Eight participants who met the criteria of being over the age of 18, domestically adopted, and having siblings were selected using purposive sampling. Sixty-three percent of interviewees had been adopted through a private infant adoption, while 37% were adopted through foster care. In a semi-structured interview, the participants shared their experiences. The results of this study confirm that adoptees have strong opinions about their experiences and that these opinions have had limited exploration in current literature. By exploring adoptees' perspectives, the field of adoption can increase its knowledge of how best to support adoptees, their siblings, and both birth and adoptive families. This exploration can improve adoptive family systems as a whole. As one of the first studies to focus on the adoptee perspective, this study has advanced the knowledge base for the field of social work.

The results of this study were separated into two categories: expected themes, those viewpoints that were explored by direct questions, and unexpected themes, which occurred
naturally during the interview process. These expected themes included: the impacts of sibling separations; adoptee perspectives on sibling placements; connections with biological families; relational patterns; and the need for genetic mirroring. Unexpected themes included ethical issues in sibling placements, outside pressure on adoptees, the impact of knowledge of their own adoption, and changes in insight in adoptees with the transition to parenthood. The most common themes in this research were adoptee perspectives on sibling placements, knowledge of adoption, and the need for genetic mirroring.

Adoptees felt strongly that siblings should be kept together whenever possible. Adoptees acknowledged that together placement was not a viable option in all situations. However, they discussed that if separation had to occur for some siblings, a careful evaluation of their relationships would be required in determining which siblings should be kept together. Cases for sibling together placement have been made (Wjociak, 2017; Noller, 2005; Farr, 2016; Affronti, 2015), but none of these studies discussed the need for nor outlined an assessment of sibling relationships before deciding placements. Grounding in Family Systems Theory this assessment should focus on ways individuals focus inside the system. Whether placement together would help or hinder appropriate development inside the system.

In addition, adoptees strongly believed that adopted children should have open knowledge and conversations about their adoption status. Adoption disclosure has been researched extensively in several studies. One recent impactful study by Baden et al. (2019) discussed that children should be informed of their adoption before the age of three. As discussed by several participants, feelings of betrayal would have occurred between adoptees and adoptive parents had they not been informed of their adoptive status at a young age. These feelings of
betrayal can lead to increased anxiety and triangulation within the adoption triad, as previously outlined in the Family System Theory review.

Adoptees reported feeling social pressure to be grateful for their adoption experience and to minimize the trauma of being separated from their biological parents or children. While many books, blogs, discussion boards, and websites have reported this phenomenon (Tucker, 2023; Tao, 2019, and Riben, 2022), there have yet to be any studies regarding the pressure felt or expressed by society. Adoptees reported often feeling uncomfortable talking to others outside of adoption communities about their adoptive status, as it was often met with pressure or misconstrued as others being uncomfortable talking about adoption. This pressure can lead to struggles with differentiation of self, in the review of Family Systems Theory (Walsh, 2014). Future research in this area would be prudent for the field.

The adoptees named numerous ethical issues throughout these interviews. The most common ethical issue discussed was the destruction of original birth certificates after adoption and sealed adoption records. The loss of or barriers to these records hampered adoptees' searches for biological family in many situations. Adoptees who have been searching in the last 15 years reported easier access to records as states acknowledge the importance of this information and have begun opening sealed records. Adoptees of younger generations interviewed report seeing a lessening in stigma as more conversation around adoption is happening around the world. Much support in these areas is still needed.

The results of this study illustrate that family systems inside adoption are often complicated and ignored after adoption takes place. Adoption impacts both adoptive and biological family systems throughout a person's lifetime and is a very complicated process.
Support is needed for the entire adoption triad: the adoptee, adoptive family, and biological family.

This study sought to fill the gap in existing research and give a voice to adoptees. Additionally, this study sheds light on the adoption system. This study also provides information to guide future research in the field of adoption as well as insight and direction for the community of adoption professionals.

Limitations

The current study had numerous limitations. The data collection process of semi-structured interviews itself is a limitation of this study. The information and its validity are dependent on the participants’ willingness to share. The nature of the information is limited by the participants' perspectives and lived experiences as adoptees. While the small sample size (n = 8) is normative in interpretative phenomenological analysis, this limits the transferability and generalizability of this study. This study was also limited by the sample's demographics. The participants identified as white or Hispanic. This limited variation is not representative of the population at large. Taking precautions against biases through peer debriefing and the use of a second analyst was beneficial. The processing of interviews helped uncover errors and detect biases in the meanings taken from the participants' words. Despite protections being made to prevent bias, qualitative studies are generally at higher risk for bias to impact the analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Recruitment for this study became the most significant limitation. At its conclusion, eight participants were interviewed. The original goal for recruitment was twenty participants. Participants were attained via Facebook, using purposive and snowball sampling strategies.
Facebook was chosen because of its large user base and the development of support groups that produce cohorts of people for the study's advertising. Facebook adoption and adoptee support groups were specifically used to draw participants for this study. The limitations of using this recruitment strategy were that the researcher had to attain membership in these groups in order to advertise. Some groups restricted the researcher's access because the researcher herself is not an adoptee. Additional attempts to advertise in groups identifying as "anti-adoption" were met with resistance and hostility due to the researcher’s status as an adoptive parent; this limited participants to members of those groups who were generally supportive of adoption. The use of Facebook was also a limitation, as it did not provide equity of access to the study to non-users of social media.
CHAPTER VI. IMPLICATIONS

As discussed in the introduction, very few studies have evaluated sibling relationships following adoption. A comprehensive review of the literature found no peer-reviewed research published on adoptee perspectives of sibling placement and very little at all from the adoptee's perspective. This lack of information in this area hinders social work practice. A greater understanding of the experience of adoptees would have implications for child welfare practices.

The research presented in this dissertation offers new information to inform policy and practice related to the adoption of siblings. This chapter aims to highlight interventions that might strengthen the practice. Additionally, this chapter will identify the need for further exploration of the topic to strengthen our working knowledge.

Implications for Social Work Practice

There is a lack of training for those involved in adoption work. Numerous studies have demonstrated that adoption professionals and adoptive parents are ignorant of the significance of sibling relationships (Neil, 2007). Caseworkers, attorneys, judges, adoptive parents, etc. have been advised to recognize the significance of sibling relationships (Smith et al., 2020). However, as discussed in the introduction, there is no federal or state directive regarding the provision of this education. The results from this study show a great need to train social workers in adoption on how to assess sibling relationships, seeing the family as a whole per grounding in Family Systems Theory. Adoptees felt strongly that all efforts should be made to keep siblings together, and if separation had to occur for various reasons, a strong assessment of these sibling relationships should occur and help determine placement. Training in sibling assessments could help the worker identify if positive relationships are present between the siblings that would
promote a healthy environment or if, conversely, the paired placement would provide a barrier to appropriate relationships and connections. Examples of this were found during the study when one sibling was adopted by a family that didn’t want her in order to adopt her infant sister. This interviewee was separated from a sibling with whom she had a strong relationship in order to be adopted with the infant sibling she did not know. Adoption workers in this case prioritized keeping the two sisters together, but at the expense of strong relationships with another sibling. Adoption workers could be more proactive in the prevention of placement disruption if they used appropriate assessment of these relationships, as previous research has shown that positive placements with siblings reduce internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Whelan, 2003). This training would be beneficial for adoption workers (caseworkers, attorneys, judges, adoptive parents, court-appointed advocates, clinicians serving adoptees and their families, etc.) in both the private and public sectors and should include information about the impacts of sibling placements, assessments regarding sibling relationships, and ways to support together placed and/or separated siblings. Federal mandates and regulation of these trainings and assessments could help make the impact consistent and broad.

In addition to training related to the assessment of relationships, this research highlighted a clear need for post-adoption services. Historically, a large amount of funding has supported the placement and adoption of children, with limited resources designated to post-adoption services (Burke et al., 2018). Post-adoption services typically consist of family education, family and community supports, psychosocial services, support for biological family reunions and record inquiries, service coordination, and referral services (Sánchez-Sandoval et al., 2020). Post-adoption services could assist the adoptee, adoptive family, birth family, and siblings with many issues and transitions that arise throughout the lifetime of adoption. Specifically, post-adoption
services could help support adoptive parents in their continued conversations with the adoptees about their adoption status, as discussed in the theme knowledge of adoption," help support the adoptee’s connection with their biological families, and provide education and a safe space for processing outside pressures the adoptees reported feeling in this research. Additionally, post-adoption services may lend themselves to reducing triangulation between the adoption triad.

Post-adoption services are not currently widely used in this manner. Expansions and education regarding the above-outlined benefits for both public and private adoption workers (caseworkers, attorneys, judges, adoptive parents, court-appointed advocates, clinicians serving adoptees and their families, etc.) could have a beneficial impact on adoptees and their families. Increasing post-adoption services is in line with the data obtained from this research and would impact the themes of impacts of sibling separations, connections with biological families, relational patterns, the need for genetic mirroring, ethical issues in sibling placements, outside pressure on adoptees, the impact of knowledge of their own adoption, and changes in insight in adoptees with the transition to parenthood by supporting adoptees and their families with these experiences. There are several recent studies that outline successful post-adoption programming, including Burke et al. (2018), Sánchez-Sandoval et al. (2020), Hartinger-Saunders et al. (2015), and Burke et al. (2015).

Implications for Future Research

As discussed in the introduction, there have been some studies discussing post-adoption contact, most of the studies focused on birth parents and families reunifying with previously adopted adults (O’Neill et al., 2016). Some research targeted open adoptions where maintaining birth family relationships is common (Smith et al., 2020). Few studies directly measure sibling relationships and the maintenance of these after adoption (O’Neill et al., 2018). Even fewer so
A greater understanding of the outcomes and experiences of sibling placements and their impact would have implications for child welfare practices. Following a thorough review of the literature, it appears that this is the first study of sibling relationships from the perspective of the adoptee. This shows a large gap and the need for further research. Specific research should focus on determining interventions and supports in place for adoptees and their siblings throughout their life span. Many of the interviewees saw adoption as a lifelong process and talked about changing viewpoints and needs throughout their lifetimes instead of just in the younger years when attachments are formed. Adoptees felt strongly that their opinions and experiences were often overlooked in current research on major issues that are at the forefront of discussion in the adoption community. The great need for further research on adoptees' experiences cannot be overstated.

Future research needs were also discovered in commonly discussed adoption terminology that arose during the above interviews: infant leveraging, genetic mirroring, and false or artificial twinning. These terms are commonly found on adoption blogs, adoption agency websites, and support groups. It was discovered during this research that scholarly definitions and peer-reviewed studies related to these were sparse to non-existent. Further understanding of these phenomena that impact adoptees, adoptive families, and biological families could have a great impact on future research and practice.

**Conclusion**
Given the complexities inherent in adoption, it is perhaps understandable that sibling relationships are often overlooked. However, the findings of this study indicate that more should be done to promote together placement or sibling connection among adoptees throughout their lives. In general, adoptees want to see more research, funding, and training related to sibling relationships, as well as individual evaluations of these relationships before children are separated and continued contact and/or discussion between siblings and adoptive parents when children are separated. Additionally, adoptees voiced their wish for more research, funding, and training to assist adoptive parents and adoption workers in learning how to appropriately and persistently address this issue with their adopted children throughout their lifetimes. In general, adoptees want to see more research, funding, and training related to sibling relationships, as well as individual evaluations of these relationships before children are separated and continued contact and/or discussion between siblings and adoptive parents when children are separated.
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https://doi.org/10.1037/033413


APPENDIX

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Consent for Research Participation

Title
Together or Apart?: The Impact of Sibling Placement in Adoption

Researchers
Kristen R. Phillips, LCSW, University of Memphis

Researchers Contact Information
krjnes16@memphis.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 25 people to do so.

Key Information for You to Consider

**Voluntary Consent:** You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to increase knowledge related to the impacts of sibling placement in adoption.

**Duration:** It is expected that your participation will last up to 2 hours.

**Procedures and Activities:** You will be asked to complete this consent form and a demographic pre-screening survey through Qualtrics. Upon completion of these tasks, you will be contacted by a researcher to schedule an interview via Zoom. On the day of the interview, log onto the Zoom meeting. Upon completion of the interview, you may receive a follow-up e-mail to clarify statements made during the interview.

**Risk:** Some of the foreseeable risk or discomforts of your participation may include mild psychological/emotional distress related to the sensitive nature of sibling separation, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study.

**Benefits:** Participating has no known direct benefits to you. We do believe that this study will help increase understanding of the impact of sibling placement with adoption. This information
Who is conducting this research?
Kristen Phillips, LCSW of the University of Memphis, Department of Social Work is in charge of the study. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Susan Elswick. There may be other research team members assisting during the study.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose is to increase knowledge related to the impacts of sibling placement in adoption.

You are being invited to participate because you are over age 18, are a domestic adoptee, and have siblings. International adoptees or adoptees without siblings are excluded from this study.

How long will I be in this research?
The research will be conducted via web conference (Zoom) and via survey (Qualtrics). It should take up to 2 hours of your time. You will first be asked to complete a pre-screening survey online and then may proceed to a recorded interview via Zoom with a researcher.

What are the risks if I participate in this research?
The risk or discomforts of participating in this research may include mild psychological/emotional distress related to the sensitive nature of sibling separation, inconscience, and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?
If you agree, you will be asked to respond to all correspondence from the researcher. You will be asked to complete this consent form and a pre-screening survey. You will then collaborate with the researcher to schedule a date and time to complete the interview. Thirdly, participate in an interview via Zoom that will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes. You may decline to answer any question for any reason, request a break, and terminate an interview at any time. The researcher will tell you about any new information that may affect your willingness to participate in the research. Lastly, you may be asked to participate in a follow-up session if clarification is required from statements made during the interview.

What happens to the information collected for this research?
Information collected for this Research will be used for a doctoral research dissertation, publication in a social work journal, and conference presentations. Although the results will be published and presented, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise. Measures we will take include:

- The "anonymize responses" setting will be used in Qualtrics so that I.P. addresses and GPS coordinates are not collected. Only the researcher will have access to the participant's information in Qualtrics.

- Participants’ demographics, interview transcripts, and interview recordings will be stored separately in passcode-secured electronic folders. The password will be changed periodically. A coding system will be utilized so that only the researcher can match a participant’s demographics to their interview data.

- Pseudonyms will be used for any names mentioned in interviews.

- The researcher will destroy the video/audio recording data once the researcher has approval from his dissertation committee that all dissertation requirements have been met for the doctorate of social work degree. The researcher may need to refer to individual interviews throughout the dissertation process if questions need to be addressed, so retaining the video/audio is imperative.

- The transcript and demographic data will be kept for 7 years and then destroyed. The data will be kept this long due to the possibility of additional future research regarding the impacts of sibling placement with adoption. An example might be isolating interviewees who were separated from their siblings for an individual study versus interviewees who were not separated from their siblings.

Individuals and organizations that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information and interview transcripts. These individual and organization include:

- Institutional Review Board

- Researcher’s Dissertation Chair, Dr. Susan Elswick

Research team members are required to report the following if a team member suspects child abuse
or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion be reported. In such case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

What other choices do I have beside participating in this research?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis. If participants should wish to withdraw they need only to say so during the interview and the session will be terminated.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

Will I receive any compensation or reward for participating in this research?

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my question about this research?

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Kristen Phillips, LCSW at krines16@memphis.edu or Dr. Susan Elswick at selswick@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

As described above, you will be Audio/video recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio/video recording will be used for transcription of interview for research purposes only. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio/video recording as described.

[ ] I agree to the use of audio/video recording

Name of Adult Participant ____________________________ Signature of Adult Participant ____________________________ Date ____________

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

Name of Research Team Member ____________________________ Signature of Research Team Member ____________________________ Date ____________
Appendix B: Interview Questions Informed by -AAI

Interview Questions Informed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) by George et al. (1985)

1. Could you start by helping me get oriented to your early family situation, and where you lived and so on? Who would you say raised you? If you could tell me where you were born, whether you moved around much, what your family did at various times for a living? Did you have brothers and sisters living in the house, or anybody besides your parents? Are they living nearby now or do they live elsewhere?

2. I’d like you to try to describe your relationships with your siblings as a young child if you can start from as far back as you can remember?

3. Now I’d like you to choose from five adjectives that reflect your relationships with your siblings starting from as far back as you can remember in early childhood- as early as you can go, but say, age 5 to 12 is fine. I know this may take a bit of time, so go ahead and think for a minute… then I’d like to as you why you chose them.
   a. Okay, now let me go through some more questions about your description of your childhood relationship with your sibling(s). You say your relationships with him/her was (you used the phrase) Are there any memories or incidents that come to mind with respect to (word)?

4. Now I wonder if you could tell me the sibling you were closest to and why? Why isn’t there this feeling with other siblings?

5. When you were upset as a child, what would you do?
a. When you were upset emotionally when you were little, what would you do? Can you think of a specific time that happened?

b. Can you remember what would happen when you were hurt physically? Again, do any specific incidents come to mind?

c. I am just wondering, do you remember going to your sibling for comfort at any of these times when you were upset or hurt or ill?

6. What is the first time you remember being separated from your siblings? How did you respond? Do you remember how your siblings responded? Are there any other separations that stand out in your mind?

7. Did you ever feel rejected as a young child?

a. How old were you when you first felt this way, and what did you do? Did you ever feel pushed away or ignored? Were you ever frightened or worried as a child?

8. Were your siblings ever threatening with you in any way?

a. Do you feel this experience affects you now as an adult?

9. In general, how do you think your overall experiences with your siblings have affected your adult personality?

10. Are there any other aspects of your early experiences that you think might have held your development back or had a negative effect on the way you turned out?

11. Why do you think your siblings behaved as they did during your childhood?

12. Were there any other children with whom you were close, thought of like siblings, as a child?

13. Did you experience the loss/separation of a parent or other close loved one while you were a young child— for example, a sibling, or close family member?
a. Could you tell me about the circumstances, and how old you were at the time?

b. How did you respond at the time?

c. Was this sudden or expected?

d. Can you recall your feelings at that time?

e. Have your feelings regarding this situation changed much over time?

f. Would you say these experiences have had an effect on you as an adult?

14. Have you lost any other close persons in your adult years?

15. Other than any difficult experiences you’ve already described, have you had any other experiences which you regard as potentially traumatic?

16. Were there many changes in your relationship with your siblings after childhood? We will get to the present in a moment, but—I mean changes occurring roughly between your childhood and your adulthood?

17. What is your relationship with your siblings like for you now as an adult?

   a. Do you have any contact with your siblings at present?

   b. What would you say the relationship with your siblings is like currently?

   c. Can you tell me about any sources of dissatisfaction in your current relationship with your siblings?

   d. Any sources of satisfaction?

18. Is there any particular thing which you feel you learned above all from your own childhood experiences?

19. We’ve been focusing a lot on the past in this interview, but I’d like to end up looking into the future. I’d like to end by asking you what you hope your relationships with your siblings are like in the next 5 years?
Reference:


https://doi.org/10.1037/t02879-000
Appendix C: Generalized Questions

Generalized Interview Questions:

1. Could you start by helping me get oriented to your early family situation, and where you lived and so on? Who would you say raised you? If you could tell me where you were born, whether you moved around much, what your family did at various times for a living? Did you have brothers and sisters living in the house, or anybody besides your parents? Are they living nearby now or do they live elsewhere?

2. How did you find out you were adopted? And when?

3. What was the level of openness with your adoptive family in discussing your adoption and/or your birth family?

4. What was your contact with your biological family as a child?

5. Have you ever made any efforts to reach out to your biological family as an adult?

6. What is your relationship with your siblings like for you now as an adult?
   a. Do you have any contact with your siblings at present?
   b. What would you say the relationship with your siblings is like currently?
   c. Can you tell me about any sources of dissatisfaction in your current relationship with your siblings?
   d. Any sources of satisfaction?

7. What things have impacted this relationship with your siblings- either positive or negative?
8. In general, how do you think your overall experiences with your siblings have affected your adult personality?

9. Did you experience the loss/separation of a parent or other close loved one while you were a young child— for example, a sibling, or close family member?
   a. Could you tell me about the circumstances, and how old you were at the time?
   b. How did you respond at the time?
   c. Was this sudden or expected?
   d. Can you recall your feelings at that time?
   e. Have your feelings regarding this situation changed much over time?
   f. Would you say these experiences have had an effect on you as an adult?

10. Did you ever feel rejected as a young child?
    a. How old were you when you first felt this way, and what did you do? Did you ever feel pushed away or ignored? Were you ever frightened or worried as a child?

11. Is there any particular thing which you feel you learned above all from your own childhood experiences?

12. Relating to your experiences what are your thoughts on sibling placements with adoption?
Appendix D: Social Media Posting

Hi all! My name is Kristen Phillips, LCSW and I am a Doctor of Social Work Student at the University of Memphis. I am currently recruiting participants for a research study that will increase knowledge related to the impacts of sibling placement in adoption. Participants will be asked to complete a pre-screening survey and then participate in an interview via video conference (e.g., Zoom) that will take approximately an hour. Eligibility includes adults, age 18+, who are domestic adoptees with at least 1 sibling (half, step, full, etc). All genders, ethnicities, and health statuses will be welcomed. The outcome of this study will help increase the understanding of the impact of sibling placement with adoption. This information may be used to help shape future policies and proceedings.

If you or someone you know is interested, please feel free to contact me at krunes16@memphis.edu
Appendix E: Emailed Resources to Participants

American Adoptions:
https://www.americanadoptions.com/adoption/adopted

Adult Adoptee Support:
http://adultadopteesupport.org/index.html

Adoptees Connect:
https://adopteestconnect.com/

Adoption Network:

National Alliance on Mental Illness:
www.nami.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Appendix F: Code Book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational Patterns</td>
<td>patterns of interactions with families (biological or adoptive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Family Connections</td>
<td>emotional, physical, or psychological connection reported by the adoptee with their biological family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Placement Perspective</td>
<td>viewpoints shared by adoptees in these interviews regarding how sibling placements should occur in between siblings who are going to be adopted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Adoption</td>
<td>participants reported awareness (or lack of) of the knowledge that they were adopted. Some adoptees have ongoing, continuous knowledge of their adoptions, some adoptees are never informed that they have been adopted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Separation</td>
<td>emotional and/or physical responses described by participants related to separation from an identified sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
<td>scenarios adoptees experienced related to decisions made by adoption workers that were incongruent with the professional values and ethics of the field of social work (e.g., valuing human relationships, client self determination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic Mirroring</td>
<td>a phenomenon in which an adoptee struggles to see relation in themselves (physical and/or personal traits) to adoptive family members (e.g., seeing parents with blue eyes while the adoptee's eyes are brown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing insight with adoptees parenthood</td>
<td>adoptees discussion of adaptations to their viewpoints as they became parents to a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside pressure on adoptees</td>
<td>non-adoptee’s thoughts regarding how adoptees should feel about their adoption (these thoughts may be directly shared or implied to adoptees). (e.g. someone telling an adoptee how lucky they are that they were adopted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Pre-screening Survey

What is your age?
- Under 18
- 18-26
- 27-38
- 39-55
- 55+

What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Non-binary

How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply
- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
- Less than a high school diploma
- High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)
- Bachelor’s degree (e.g., BA, BS)
- Master’s degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)

What is your marital status?
- Single (never married)
- Married, or in a domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

What is your current employment status?
- Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)
- Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)
- Unemployed and currently looking for work
- Unemployed not currently looking for work
- Student
• Retired
• Homemaker
• Self-employed
• Unable to work/disabled

**Adoption and Sibling Information**

What was your age at time of adoption?
• Under 1 year old
• 1-3 years old
• 4-6 years old
• 7-9 years old
• 10-12 years old
• 13-15 years old
• 16-18 years old
• 18+ years old
• I was not adopted

Were you ever separated from your siblings?
• Yes
• No

How were you separated from your siblings?
• Different Adoptive Placements
• Different Foster Care Placements
• Living with different biological relatives
• Living with different non-related adults
• Unknown

What was the total amount of time you were separated from your siblings?

Were you able to have contact with your siblings while separated?
• Yes, by phone only
• Yes, by visitation only
• Yes, by phone and visitation
• Rarely
• No contact at all

How many biological siblings do you have on your father's side?
• 0
• 1-2
• 3-5
• 6-8
• 8+
Is it possible that your father had more children that you do not know about?
  • Yes
  • No

How many biological siblings do you have on your mother’s side?
  • 0
  • 1-2
  • 3-5
  • 6-8
  • 8+

Is it possible that your mother had more children that you do not know about?
  • Yes
  • No