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Parentified then Removed: A teenager's conceptualization of family identity

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Abstract

Family identity construction and the socially accepted definition of family have evolved over time. From the idyllic nuclear family of the 1950s to the contemporary examples that include step parents, grandparents, same sex parents and legal guardians have transformed the way family is conceptualized. The current research is typically concerned with creating an operational definition of family, particularly for divorced families; however, there is a gap in the research focused on how children experience and identify with family identity construction. This is especially consequential for children who have been removed from their family home by child protective services.

This narrative study delves deeply into the story of one child who was removed from her home to gain an understanding of the experience of CPS removal and how this singular exploration represents a larger collective narrative. Grounded by family systems theory and attachment theory, findings will help inform social work practice, research and policy.

Introduction

Family identity construction and the socially accepted definition of family have evolved over time. Family structures have changed from the idyllic nuclear family of the '50s and '60s. Now, a growing number of children no longer live with both of their parents in the home (Anyan & Pryor, 2002). As interest in family structure has developed, there is a voice that still hasn't been heard: children who have been removed from their family homes without the choice, due to child protective services.

Existing research on the phenomenon of child protective services removal has generally focused on the negative outcomes of experiencing neglect. This study aims to capture the experience of removal from the perspective of a teenager using attachment theory and family systems theory.

This qualitative research aims to investigate the way that meaning is created around the concepts of family identity given the experience of being removed from the care of their biological parents.

Question/Objective

What is the lived experience of "family" for a child who has been removed from their family home?

Methods

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was selected as the method of analysis for this study because it allows the researcher and participant to build a story that communicates the participant's concept of family.

Family Systems Theory and Attachment Theory

Participants:

- Two teenagers were identified by school social worker
- One accepted participation
- The participant was between the ages of 14-17 and has experienced removal by Child Protective Services

Themes

Theme One: Separation

"My mom used to give us a kiss goodnight every night. And it stopped happening after we moved."

"When we were first going to Nana's and when I had to talk to that DHHS lady here. And I remember once that meeting was over and that lady left I actually started sobbing. I just missed my mom."

Theme Two: Disclosure and Guilt

"I don't remember exactly what [my mom] said... but she basically she blamed me for us getting taken away. I was like um I wasn't the one who made that decision. And she was like but you were the one who like told nana and stuff like that. It was based on what [my big sister] saw. And what she told [my grandmother]. So what I'm trying to say is that I'm pretty sure mom was under the influence when that happened. So I think I was sad about that. Because I didn't want my mom to be mad at me."

Theme Three: Protectiveness

"And one of the reasons why was that even though I knew I had to tell them about the stuff... I didn't want to... because my parents aren't bad people. ... Its just that when you're with your family you're protective so you don't want to say stuff even though you should. And its hard when you have to."

"I just want to say that just because something happened in the past doesn't mean my parents are bad people."

Theme Four: Parentification

"[I felt responsible] for [my little sister]... Yes. And I did kind of feel responsible for mom too. Like if mom and [my step-dad] got into a fight like I would get like in the middle of it until it stopped."

"One time I told [my little sister] she couldn't go play outside alone. And she got mad at me and was like why cant I go play outside and I'm like because you cant play outside alone because you're like 9. ... My mom was saying it was fine. But it was in the middle of Lewiston and not all of Lewiston is good. Especially where we were."

Theme Five: Blame Shifting and Minimizing

"Yeah but that's probably just because she was under the influence. Like she would never like do that like (stammering) she doesn't do that when she's not like... when she's just mom."

"Well I definitely.. like I wouldn't say that my family has betrayed me. Like I wouldn't say that. But um when I was younger I never thought that bad stuff would happen. Like to the point where... like I wouldn't say that I don't trust my mom or dad. But there are some points where only where they're in a bad spot where I have to be careful with what I do. Because you never know what people under those influences might think."

Results

This research study explored the single-story experience of a teenager who was removed from her home by Child Protective Services.

Previous studies and relevant literature made me aware of the limited qualitative studies on this phenomena coming from the perspective of the child, sparking my interest to conduct my own. The results show one perspective that represents the experience of a collective whole.

The themes identified during analysis included: Separation, Disclosure and Guilt, Protectiveness, Parentification, Blame Shifting and Minimization

Discussion

The process of CPS removal can require a child to disclose experiences that are consistent with abuse and neglect. This puts the child in a position of sharing negative behaviors about their parents, and breaking the trust of their parent. "Its just that when you're with your family you're protective so you don't want to say stuff even though you should. And its hard when you have to."

As some literature has noted, understanding parental loss has typically focused on the loss of a parent through divorce or death, rather than through 'other' types of loss (Schneider & Phares, 2005). 'Other' types of parental loss can include the loss of parental rights due to abuse or neglect (Schneider & Phares, 2005). Children who experience parental loss in this way are often grieving this complex loss of their parents while also experiencing the impermanence of the foster care system. Other children who experience CPS removal may still be connected to their parents through visitation. These types of ambiguous loss can result in confusion and lack of clarity around how the family identity has changed. An example of this is when asked to identify how it feels to be part of a family, the participant replied, "I don't know. Just like a group of friends I guess." The participant responded to similar questions about how their family has changed by replying, "I don't know. I don't know what to think about what happened. Its in the past."

In previous studies concerning children's conceptualization of 'family' it seems consistent that children are generally tolerant and open minded about what family can look like (Ellingsen, Schemmings, & Storksens, 2011). "My family's complicated, like how we're all related. Well it's more like how many people my dad has had kids with But like we grew up all together. So we all think of each other as siblings."

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