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

Katherine Bernard Melcher

University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters/129

This Poster Session is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thinking Matters Symposium by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.
Parentified then Removed: A teenager’s conceptualization of family identity
Kate Bernard Melcher, University of Southern Maine. Mentor: Professor Gerstenblatt of University of Southern Maine

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 (Anany & Pryor, 2002). As interest in social 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 without the choice, due to child protective services. 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 perspective.

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
"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 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 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 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: Protective Tension
"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.”

Theme Four: Parentification
"I feel 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.”

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, Protective Tension, Parentification, Blame Shifting and Minimizing.

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. “It’s 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, Schermings, & Storksen, 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.”

References
Storksen, V. (2011). ‘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, Schermings, & Storksen, 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.”

Acknowledgements
I would like to acknowledge my faculty mentor, Paula Gerstenblatt, for guiding me through the process of conducting a research project. I would also like to thank the Collaborative School for supporting this research and the participant, for providing their time, and responding thoughtfully to interview questions.