

Adoption and Sibling Closeness

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In the United States 1.4 million school aged children are adopted (Ernst, Horn & Loehlin, 2009). Yet, there is little research done on how these adopted children get along with their siblings within their adopted families. There is a variety of research done on adoption and child-parent relationships, as well as sibling relationships in general, yet none are specifically focused on adoption status and how this affects sibling relationships. By conducting further research on whether or not adopted children feel differently towards their siblings then non-adopted children, we may begin to better understand how adopted children feel within their nuclear family. This study was designed to examine the differences in perceived sibling closeness based on adoption status.

A study by Ernst et al. (2009) examined how emotionally close adopted children (now adults in their 30s and 40s) were to their non-biological parents compared to that of biological children and their. Biological children and their parents were hypothesized to feel closer than non-biological children. Participants included 324 adopted and 124 non-adopted adults and their families, from the Texas Adoption Project. Data was collected through a mail questionnaire. The study found that, on average, parents felt emotionally closer to their biological children. However, the majority of children, regardless of adoption status, reported that they did not feel as close to their parents as their parents felt to them. Ernst et al. stated that the only significant correlation for biological children was that those children who were emotionally close to their mothers had positive educational outcomes.

One factor that contributes to a child's perceived closeness within the family is communication patterns. Samek and Reuter (2011) examined communication patterns and family closeness, specifically between siblings, and whether or not being biologically related plays a

role in closeness. The Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) was used to name communication classes within families. Classes included: consensual, protective, pluralistic and laissez-fair. Consensual families are very open with one another, yet there is still an ultimate decision maker. Protective families all conform to the dominant members' views. Pluralistic families encourage conversation and do not expect members to conform to a single view. Laissez-faire families do not share much and are very individualistic. It was hypothesized that for families where all members were biologically related, the closest family class would be consensual. It was further hypothesized that for families with adopted individuals the closest family class would be pluralistic. Participants included 616 families, including 692 adopted adolescents and 540 non-adopted adolescents. All participants participated in videotaped observations of family interactions and completed self-reported questionnaires. The four constructs measured through observations were: 1) family communication patterns, 2) how effectively families communicated, 3) how well each family member listened to one another, and 4) control levels and if there was a clear family leader. The final construct measured sibling closeness through a questionnaire, using a rating scale of one to five. Results indicated that adolescents in consensual families did report the highest level of closeness; however, contrary to expectation, adopted individuals in consensual families also reported the greatest amount of closeness out of all of the family classes (Samek & Rueter, 2011). In addition to adoption status, sibling closeness is often said to be affected by birth order.

Kruger's book entitled "The Sibling Effect" described birth order, how it affects relationships within the family structure, and its influences on lifelong characteristics (as cited in James, 2011). Kruger indicates that birth order does in fact have an effect on sibling relationships as well as parent child relationships. Kruger states that children tend to display certain

characteristics based on their birth order. For instance, firstborns, as well as only children, often display the highest IQs and earn the most money in their lifetime, whereas the middle child often gets shown less attention from their parents growing up but tends to create better relationships with their peers and have more independence as they get older. Kruger states 99% of parents report they do have a favorite child and this parental preference directly affects the child and their siblings. The favorite child often cannot take criticism and direction well once they reach the outside world and receive more negative feelings from their siblings. This demonstrates how birth order can affect a child's sense of belonging within the nuclear family, and how this can directly affect their experiences with the outside world (James, 2011).

Being adopted poses similar challenges of trying to discover where one belongs within the adopted family itself, as well as in the larger world. Given the prevalence of adoption and the issues that it raises for families, several picture books have been written to address this experience. The literary review by Crawford and Mattix (2011) examined themes presented in children's picture books where the main characters were adopted. One theme was of the precious child, which is the idea that the adopted child often holds a "precious" or "special" status within their nuclear family. The theme is presented by demonstrating that the adopted child enhances and contributes to the family. The theme of searching for identity focuses on the anxieties and confusion that adopted children often experience. The pursuit of adoption theme focuses on the physical act of bringing a child into its new family, because no two adoptions are the same. The last theme focuses on the need to establish a sense of belonging within the family by having a main character accept that they are different, yet still belong. By reading about individuals similar to themselves, adopted children form a sense of belonging and an understanding of how adoption affects relations among family members (Crawford & Matix, 2011). There is limited

research on how adopted children feel towards their siblings, which is key in understanding how children feel in their family as a whole.

A recent article stated that the reason why there is little research on adoption and sibling relationships is because most research on blended families has focused primarily on racially mixed families. Nussbaum states that there is a social bias that adopted children are troubled and unable to bond with their siblings based on adopted status (2007). The article reports on two adopted children. One of the children looks very similar to her siblings, yet feels isolated and often runs away to test her parents' love, the other child is ethnically different from her family, yet feels like she was born to be with them. These two profiles of adopted children illustrate how hard it is to clearly define when an adopted child will feel connected to their adopted family and when they will not. Adoption has changed significantly over the years, it is no longer only for those who cannot reproduce. People of means often adopt many children and have their own biological children, such as the celebrity Angelina Jolie. There is no way to directly determine how adopted children will feel in their families, and due to the limited amount of research, it is even harder to determine how children will react to their non-biological siblings (Nussbaum, 2007).

Although many studies have not been conducted to examine overall closeness of adopted siblings, some studies display a general idea of perceived closeness of siblings and include a very small percentage of adopted siblings. In a dissertation by Corti, a study was conducted to examine sibling closeness in the transitional stage into early adulthood (2009). The study examined a variety of areas related to sibling closeness such as: geographic location, patterns of sibling closeness during young adulthood and how this influences relational satisfaction, and important turning points in participants lives related to sibling closeness. Participants were on

average 20.5 years old and their siblings' average age was 23 years old. The majority of the siblings were biological (89%) and only 1% of non-biological siblings were adopted. The key findings indicated that geographic location does not affect sibling closeness and that the most important type of talk in sibling relationships is expression of intimacy and relational satisfaction. This study is important because unlike most studies conducted on sibling closeness, it is specifically focused on closeness in young adulthood, whereas many other studies examined sibling relationships after the individuals were well into middle adulthood.

There are many limitations in recent studies on sibling relationships and adoption status. Little research has been done on these two relationships and whether or not being adopted contributes to sibling emotional closeness and overall satisfaction. The two variables examined for this research study are adoption status and perceived sibling closeness. It is important to conduct further research, focused primarily on sibling relationships between adopted children and their non-adopted siblings, to provide a clearer understanding of whether or not adoption plays a role in sibling closeness, which, in turn, could affect a child's overall sense of belonging within the family. The hypothesis for this study is that non-adopted children are more likely to feel closer to their siblings than adopted children.

Method

Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine adopted children and non-adopted children and their differences in sibling closeness. The study will be experimental and the research design that will be used will be quasi-experimental, due to the fact that the research will be comparing two naturally occurring groups with no randomization. The study will also be cross-sectional, using participants of different ages, all reporting at the same time. The independent variable in this

study will be adoption status, and the dependent variable will be sibling closeness. Both variables will be measured quantitatively. The scores obtained from the parent questionnaire will be provided at the nominal level, whereas the scores obtained from the child questionnaire will be obtained at the ordinal level.

Procedures

In order to collect data for this study permission must first be given by the Institutional Review Board at California State University, Chico. Request to obtain data will be sent to the superintendent of a northern California unified school district, as well as the principals and teachers of participating elementary, middle and high schools. A request will also be sent to a northern California county adoption services to obtain names of parents and children who could be eligible to participate in the survey. A consent letter explaining the goal of the study and the methods used will be mailed to eligible parents, along with a parent questionnaire. Parents can refuse to participate at any point during the study. Children will be given the questionnaire the first 15 minutes of class, after recess. Children will give consent during this time. The researcher will then read from a script notifying the students of their rights as participants. Children will be told that the questionnaire is optional and they are not required to participate. Parents and children will be assured total confidentiality. No information on the school district, nor names of participating schools, will be disclosed. Childrens' and parents' names will also remain confidential. Finished questionnaires will be kept in a locked box for the researcher's use only. A free ice cream coupon will be given to participants.

Participants

Participants will be chosen through a non-probability convenience sample from northern California elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as from northern California adoption

service agencies. This sampling will be used due to the fact that it was the easiest method, given the large sample size needed, and will work the best considering budget constraints. The number of estimated participants will include approximately 150 children ranging from 8-10 years old and their parents, 150 middle school children from 12-14 years old and their parents, and 200 high school students from 15-17 years old and their parents. Of the total sample, 45% of the children will be adopted. The mean ages of the children who are not adopted will be approximately 10, 14 and 16. The mean ages of the adopted children will be approximately 9, 14 and 15. The total sample of children will include 275 females and 225 males, out of this sample 151 females and 124 males will be adopted. Of the total sample 250 children will be Caucasian, 150 will be Hispanic, 75 will be Asian/Pacific Islander, 15 will be Native American, and 10 will be other/multi-racial. Children's demographic information will be obtained through the parent questionnaire.

Materials

To assess siblings closeness the measure entitled "Relational Closeness Scale" by Buchana, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) will be adapted. Sample questions of the measure include "How openly do you talk with your sibling?" and "How often does your sibling express affection or liking for you?". These are included in a set of ten questions measured on a fixed format of a 5-point likert-type scale. The response format will be fixed and the scores will be scored as followed: 1= not at all, 3= somewhat, and 5= very much. The individual scores will be summed, with a high score representing a high degree of sibling closeness, and a low score representing a low degree of sibling closeness. Higher scores on this measure will represent a high level of relational closeness for participants and his/her siblings, which will provide quantitative data. Parents will complete an open-ended questionnaire asking demographic

questions in regards to the overall family and the child who will participate in the survey. Parents who will be located through the adoption services will be asked adoption specific questions about their child. Attached to the parent questionnaire will be a consent form.

Data Analysis Plan

The researcher has hypothesized that biological children will have closer sibling relationships than adopted children. An independent t-test will be used to measure whether or not adoption status affects sibling relationships. The independent t-test will determine whether the two groups are significantly different from each other or not, in terms of perceived sibling closeness.

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Study of Sibling Relationships

Researcher: Katie Bilsky
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April 29, 2013

Dear Parent,

The purpose of this study is to examine the quality of relationships among siblings. The reason for conducting this study is to gain a better understanding of sibling relationships. Attached to this letter is a questionnaire that will take approximately 10 minutes. You will be asked questions concerning your family, such as: how many children are in your family, and age and gender of your children. The children's questionnaire will take approximately 10/15 minutes. Children will complete a questionnaire about how close the child feels to his or her sibling/s. Children will either answer the questionnaire after recess during the first 15 minutes of class, or will be mailed home the questionnaire. The exact time and date of the study will be given at a later date.

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. You or your child may choose to skip some questions or stop your involvement in the study at any time, without penalty. There may not be any direct benefit to you or your child for participating in this study; however, we hope that by obtaining this data we will be able to understand/demonstrate key factors related to sibling closeness. All information, such as participant's names and name of school district, will not be disclosed at any time. Questionnaires will be kept in a locked box, only accessible by the researcher. If there are any questions or concerns related to the research being conducted, please contact the researcher at the above phone number and/or email address. The Institutional Review Board at the California State University, Chico has approved this study. If there are any further questions regarding your rights as a participant, or if any concerns arise in regards to the researcher please contact the Review Board at (801) 898-5700.

Participating in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to sign the below consent form. Participants may stop participation at any point throughout the study without penalty, and can skip any questions they wish not to answer. This is a voluntary study. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

First and last name of your child (please print): _____

First and last name of participant (please print): _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Katie Bilsky April 29, 2013

Parent Questionnaire

Please complete the following questionnaire in regards to your child. Either write in or select the right answer for each question.

1. Childs name _____

2. Age of your child _____

3. Gender of your child

☐ Female

☐ Male

4. Ethnicity of your child

☐ Asian/Pacific Islander

☐ Black/African-American

☐ Caucasian

☐ Hispanic

☐ Native American/Alaska Native

☐ Other/Multi-Racial

☐ Decline to Respond

5. Your ethnicity

☐ Asian/Pacific Islander

☐ Black/African-American

☐ Caucasian

☐ Hispanic

☐ Native American/Alaska Native

☐ Other/Multi-Racial

☐ Decline to Respond

6. Are any of your children adopted?

(If yes please answer the following questions

If no skip to question 10)

☐ Yes

☐ No

7. Age of child when adopted _____

8. Name of adopted child _____

9. Number of non-adopted children in the family _____

10. Total number of children in the family _____

Thank you for your participation in this survey!

Sibling Relationship Survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This survey examines the degree of closeness, among sibling relationships.

SPECIAL NOTE: If you have more than one sibling, please select only one of your siblings and complete this survey with that sibling in mind. Please select a sibling who's birthday month is closest to yours. In addition, please follow the directions highlighted in bold. There are no right or wrong answers, and your responses will be kept strictly anonymous and confidential. ***The following questions will help us define your sibling relationship. Please indicate your response by circling the appropriate answer or entering the desired information.*** ***The following questions measure your level of closeness over the past month with your sibling by circling the appropriate number on a 1-to-5 scale. 1 indicating not at all, 3 somewhat, and 5 very much.***

- 1) How openly do you talk with your sibling?
1 2 3 4 5
- 2) How careful do you feel you have to be about what you say to your sibling?
1 2 3 4 5
- 3) How comfortable do you feel admitting doubts and fears to your sibling?
1 2 3 4 5
- 4) How interested is your sibling in talking to you when you want to talk?
1 2 3 4 5
- 5) How often does your sibling express affection or liking for you?
1 2 3 4 5
- 6) How well does your sibling know what you are really like?
1 2 3 4 5
- 7) How close do you feel to your sibling?
1 2 3 4 5
- 8) How confident are you that your sibling would help you if you had a problem?
1 2 3 4 5
- 9) If you needed money, how comfortable would you be asking your sibling for it?
1 2 3 4 5
- 10) How interested is your sibling in the things you do?
1 2 3 4 5