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Sibling relationships in adoptive and fostering families: A review of the international research literature.

Abstract

This paper presents a review of the international research literature published since 2004 focusing specifically on sibling relationships in fostering and adoptive families. It presents an overview of the current state of knowledge regarding sibling relationships of fostered and adopted children as well as gaps and limitations. The review concludes that while methodological advances are apparent in this body of work siblinghood is poorly conceptualised and there has been inadequate attention to the perspectives of children. The paper goes on to suggest that one possible source of insight comes from recent work undertaken within social anthropology and sociology and the application of this theoretical and methodological approach to the study of siblinghood in out-of-home care is considered.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), around 90,000 children each year are looked-after by the state, often as a result of abuse and neglect. Around three quarters of these children are in foster care. The primary goal of public care is to achieve permanence for children whether through reunion with birth parents or alternative placements such as kinship care, long-term fostering or adoption. Around 4,700 children are adopted from care each year (<http://www.baaf.org.uk/res/stats>). Within contemporary UK policy, the principle has been established that siblings requiring foster-care or adoption should be placed together, where this is in the best interests of the children (Department of Health, 1989; Scottish Government, 2009). However, in practice, sibling separation remains a common experience for children within the UK care system. A recent survey of looked-after children reported that around three in five children had siblings in care and more than 70% of these were separated from siblings (Ofsted, 2012). This is the case despite an established practice literature (Mullender, 1999) and research evidence indicating that co-location of siblings can result in more stable placements and better outcomes for children (Hegar, 2005). Reasons suggested to explain decisions to separate siblings include the incompatibility of siblings' needs; children entering care at different times; a sibling remaining in the birth family; lack of available sibling placements and siblings having never lived together (Kosonen, 1996; Neil, 1999; Rushton and others, 2001). When asked their view, children typically express a desire to stay in contact with brothers and sisters in care (Sinclair and others, 2005). Where children are placed separately from siblings, contact arrangements vary in terms of type, frequency, quality and availability of support (Neil and others, 2011). Sibling contact also tends to become less frequent over time (Cossar & Neil, 2013).

In the period leading up to the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014 there has been increased public and policy attention to the issue of sibling placements and sibling contact. This paper aims both to provide a synthesis of the research evidence concerning siblings in fostering and adoptive families and to inform the future research agenda relating to this social issue.

Methodology

The review followed the methodology described by Green et al (2006) in order to map literature relevant to the topic of sibling relationships in foster care and adoptive families. A narrative review methodology was chosen in order to develop an overview of the scope and characteristics of this body of work and highlight areas where further research is needed. The approach made it possible to include diverse forms of evidence.

The research questions pursued in this review were:

- a) How is siblinghood conceptualised in research of siblings in foster care and adoption?
- b) What is known about the outcomes and experiences of siblings placed in foster care or adoptive families?
- c) What are the opportunities for further development of research in this area?

Searches to identify relevant publications were initially conducted using Searcher, a discovery service that allows concurrent searches across more than 90 databases. A further search was then conducted using Scopus, the biggest abstract and citation database for peer-reviewed literature. Terms searched within titles and abstracts included sibling* combined with the terms foster*, adopt*, looked-after, placement, care and out-of-home. Searches were restricted to English language and peer-reviewed publications from January 2005 to September 2014, when the search was conducted. The 2005 date was chosen in order to build on the widely cited review undertaken by Hegar (2005). In addition, an advanced search of Google Scholar was also undertaken and the reference lists of identified papers were consulted.

A total of 416 papers were identified by Searcher. Duplicates were removed (n=245) and the remaining papers were screened using the title and, where necessary, the abstract. Non-empirical papers, clinical case studies, theses and dissertations, papers solely concerned with kinship care, residential care, health care or parental care were excluded as were papers concerned with international adoption. Papers that reported estranged siblings' reunions in adulthood were also excluded as the focus of this review was on children's relationships. This resulted in 14 papers. Scopus identified 381 papers. Following removal of duplicates and screening, an additional 3 papers were identified that met the inclusion criteria. Google Scholar identified a monograph and a further four papers. These tended to be the most recent papers including those available electronically only. No additional papers were identified from reference lists. A total of 22 items were included in the final review.

A proforma was developed to systematically extract and record data from each text within Excel. Features of papers that were charted as part of the review process included details of authorship, date and site of publication, study topic, design and geographical context, the population studied and sampling strategy, definitions and measurements used and theoretical approaches taken as well as key findings.

Findings

The majority of the 22 studies included were conducted in the US. There were four UK studies and one Australian, one Israeli, one Swedish and one Norwegian study. Twelve of the studies were studies of placement, wellbeing or relationship outcomes using cross-sectional, retrospective or prospective designs. One case control study of a specialist sibling service and one randomised controlled trial of a foster care intervention were included. Seven studies reported sibling placement experiences and used a qualitative (n=6) or mixed methods (n=1) approach. One methodological study is also reported. The findings are presented thematically, themes having been developed inductively through the review process.

Conceptualising 'sibling placement' and 'sibling'

Both 'sibling' and 'sibling placement' were variously defined in studies. Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) use two categories of sibling placement, that is, co-resident or separated sibling placements. Co-resident placements were defined as those where a child is residing with at least one full or half biological sibling. They may or may not be residing with a fully intact sibling group. Separated sibling placements were defined as those where a child is separated from all of their full or half

biological siblings, whether these siblings reside with birth parents or in an alternate care placement. Rast and Rast (2014) also refer to two categories of sibling placement, that is, placement with at least one sibling and placement with all siblings. Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) and Albert and King (2008) categorise sibling placements as intact, that is, all looked-after children in the sibling group are placed together in the same home; partially intact, where at least two siblings in care are placed together in the same home, but others are placed elsewhere; and completely separated. Similarly, Hegar and Rosenthal (2011), building on the work of Wedge and Mantle (1991), make the same distinction using slightly different terms, that is, they refer to sibling placements that are together, separated or splintered. Leathers' (2005) definition attempts to account for changes over time and categorises placements on the basis of whether siblings were placed together for an entire foster care episode, for part of the episode, or were never together during an episode of care. Linares et al (2007) similarly focused on stability of placement and compared placements in which siblings are continuously together, apart or disrupted.

The definition of a sibling placement necessarily relies on certain assumptions about what constitutes a sibling. However, in several studies, both qualitative and quantitative, the term sibling was undefined or references were made to full and half siblings without further explanation. Four of the studies relied wholly or partly on administrative data and, therefore, the definition of a sibling was predetermined by the practices surrounding data recording (Albert & King, 2008; Leathers, 2005; Webster and others, 2005; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). This resulted in certain categories of full or half-sibling being more likely to be captured than others, particularly maternal siblings and those with a history of shared residence, whereas, paternal siblings or non-co-resident siblings were often excluded. Other limitations of administrative data highlighted included the tendency for siblings outside of the care system to be excluded (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005) and relationships between children in out-of-home care and those subsequently born into birth families to go unacknowledged (Leathers., 2005). One of the papers reviewed was a methodological paper that examined the consequences of different sibling classification systems in terms of how comprehensively sibling relationships were identified (Lery and others, 2005). The starting point for this study was the California Welfare and Institutions Code definition of sibling, that is, "a child related to another person by blood, adoption, or affinity through a common legal or biological parent" (Lery and others, 2005, p.784). The study compared four methods of identifying siblings, namely, the child method, maternal method, paternal method and removal address method. They found that a more comprehensive range of sibling relationships were identified where multiple strategies were used increasing the possibility for children to be placed with one or more of their siblings.

The status of sibling-like relationships, such as foster siblings and adoptive siblings, was frequently ambiguous in outcomes studies. Where these relationships were referred to explicitly they were typically excluded from definitions of a sibling. Hegar and Rosenthal's (2011) study was unique among outcomes studies in that it relied on children's own definitions of who was or was not a sibling living elsewhere. Children were asked if they have "real siblings who do not live with you?" in the expectation that they would include biological, adoptive, foster siblings and also potentially cousins if the child felt these were "real" sibling-like relationships. Some qualitative studies concerned with experiences of sibling relationships of fostered and adopted children embraced a more inclusive definition of sibship encompassing biologically related and non-biological related siblings, those placed with and outwith the family of origin and those born before or subsequent to a foster or adoptive placement (Angel, 2014; Cossar & Neil, 2013). However, such inclusive definitions were not always built into the study design or sampling strategy and instead were in some cases part of a post hoc analysis (Cossar & Neil, 2013; Hollows & Nelson, 2006). One qualitative study specifically

sampled on the basis of non-biological sibship focussing on adoptive siblings' varying experiences of post adoption contact with birth family members (Berge and others, 2006).

Sibling placement stability

Hegar (2005) concluded that sibling placements are as stable or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings. The evidence published since 2004 broadly supports this conclusion. For example, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) found that children living with at least one of their siblings experienced similar placement stability to children separated from all of their siblings. Leathers (2005) compared siblings placed together for an entire foster care episode, for part of an episode of care, or never placed together during the episode of care and found that sibling group integrity was associated with placement stability. Some notable gender differences have also emerged. For example, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) found that girls' placements in particular, were more stable when in co-resident as opposed to separated placements.

Attention has also been paid to the relationship between child/carer relationships and placement stability and sibling closeness and stability. Tarren-Sweeney and Sweeney (2005) reported that partially intact placements were associated with greater child/carer closeness than split placements. Leathers (2005) also examined factors that could increase the risk of placement disruption for young people in care who experience separations from all of their siblings and found that lack of integration or a sense of belonging within their foster family appeared to be a significant risk factor. This was particularly the case for adolescents who had previously been placed with siblings and later separated. In the same study, behaviour problems did not account for the increased risk of placement disruption. Linares et al (2007) report that intact placements were associated with closer relationships between siblings and mutually supportive roles. Sibling conflict has also been a source of concern as a potential cause of poor placement experiences and potential disruptions (Linares, 2006). However, it appears that this is not an inevitable outcome as it has been demonstrated that carer-led interventions can reduce sibling conflict in foster care (Linares, 2014).

While the evidence supports the conclusion that sibling placements are as stable as, or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings it is important to note that placement moves are a common feature of children's experience. Wulczyn and Zimmerman's (2005) analysis of children's experiences over a four-year period showed some sharp variations in the placement of siblings with around half of siblings completely separated at entry to care being fully reunited in care at a later point. Longer stays in care increased the likelihood of joint placement at some future point. However, reunion was not consistently achieved as 73% of partially intact siblings groups at entry into care remained partially or completely separated at 48 months, and of those completely separated at entry, almost half remained either partially or completely separated. One in five intact placements became partially or fully separated.

Sibling placement and wellbeing or adjustment

Hegar's second major conclusion in 2005 was that children do as well or better when placed with brothers and sisters. Again, this is largely supported by the research that has since been conducted. There is some evidence that co-placement of siblings and positive sibling relationships are protective of mental health and wellbeing (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005; Wojciak and others, 2013). While Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) found that placement status was not associated with behavioural problems as reported by parents or young people, siblings placed together achieved higher academic performance than siblings in split or splintered groups. Those in splintered placements also expressed more positive feelings of closeness to carers and foster family members than those in split placements.

Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) concluded that there were few differences between placement types but where these were found they suggested that placements together or partially together were preferable to split placements. In a study of adoption of large sibling groups, Saunders and Selwyn's (2011) reported that only a small number of families were experiencing major problems. In these instances, placement stress was more closely associated with the number of siblings with difficulties than the severity of a child's difficulties.

Some important findings relating to gender and mental health were noted by Tarren- Sweeney and Hazell (2005). They report no significant differences in the mental health of boys residing with one or more biological siblings when compared to boys separated from all of their siblings. However, girls separated from all of their siblings had significantly poorer mental health and poorer peer relationships than girls residing with at least one sibling (Tarren- Sweeney and Hazell, 2005). Conversely, girls living with siblings had significantly lower problem scores than separated girls, demonstrated less pseudo-mature interpersonal behaviour and were reported to have better peer relationships. Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) point out that direction of causality cannot be determined, that is, whether poor mental health leads to separation or separation leads to poor mental health and whether good mental health leads to stability of joint placements or vice versa.

Lundstrom and Sallnas (2012) examined the 'psychosomatic status' of children in out-of-home care and separated from siblings and found no evidence that sibling contact impacts either positively or negatively to any significant degree on problems such as headache, stomach pain, sleep problems and stress. They did, however, find that around half of separated siblings desired more contact with each other and make the case for a rights-based approach to decision-making regarding contact which pays attention to children's wishes. Lundstrom and Sallnas (2012) also found that girls were more dissatisfied with contact arrangements than boys with about two-thirds of girls wanting more contact with their siblings in contrast to two-fifths of the boys.

In an adolescent foster care population Wojciak et al (2013) found that positive sibling relationships were protective, mediating the effect of trauma and development of internalizing symptoms such as depression, anxiety and withdrawal. A positive sibling relationship was defined as one where there were positive perceptions of the relationship, a desire for more contact with the sibling and more frequent face-to-face contact with the sibling (Wojciak and others, 2013). This protective effect mirrors that found in studies among the general population of siblings (Soli and others, 2009).

Concerns persist regarding the impact of placement disruption or subsequent separation of siblings on child wellbeing. Linares et al (2007) conclude that where behaviour problems are low and sibling warmth high, disruption is detrimental to wellbeing. Where behaviour problems and sibling conflict are high, disruption can lead to improvements in wellbeing.

Sibling placement and permanence

A small number of studies of outcomes of sibling placements have focused on the likelihood of children achieving permanency following a period of foster care. These studies have suggested that exits to forms of permanency such as adoption and guardianship are more likely where siblings are placed together (Albert & King, 2008; Leathers, 2005). Leathers (2005) found that children consistently placed alone or with a history of placement with siblings followed by a lone placement were significantly less likely to exit to adoption or guardianship.

There is also some evidence that sibling co-residence while in foster care contributes to greater chance of reunification with family of origin (Albert & King, 2008; Webster and others, 2005). Webster et al

(2005) looked specifically at outcomes for children 12 months after first entering care and found a two fold increase in the likelihood of reunification where all siblings were placed initially in the same home and almost one-third greater odds of reunification for children placed with at least one other sibling compared to children not placed with their siblings. They note that the size of the sibling group was not a significant factor. It appears that where an intact placement is not possible, a partially intact placement creates more likelihood of reunification with primary caretakers than total separation of siblings (Albert & King, 2008; Webster and others, 2005). Such outcomes also appear to be time sensitive with reunification more likely prior to the 8th month and after the 12th month in foster care (Albert & King, 2008).

The nature or quality of sibling relationships of children in foster care and adoption

The fluid nature of sibling relationships, that is, the varying significance or meaning of relationships at different points in time and in different contexts was a theme that recurred in studies. Angel's (2014) work suggested that connections to biological siblings can retain significance even when in separate households or where a sibling remains in the birth family but that a 'mutual sense of belonging and care' was not universal across all sibling relationships. This fluidity of the meaning of family relationships was also evident in Berge et al's (2006) study of contact between birth and adoptive families. Berge et al (2006) found that crossover contact, that is, an adoptive sibling being included in the contact arrangement between their adoptive brother or sister and that sibling's biological relative, was common and unproblematic. Where only one sibling had contact the other sibling often looked forward to contact and considered their siblings' birth mother as a friend. Where crossover contact occurred, conversations about adoption were seen as a vehicle to closeness between adopted siblings. One of the studies reviewed focused on sibling closeness in biological compared to adoptive families, relating this to wellbeing (Samek & Rueter, 2011). The study hypothesized that closeness (emotional and behavioural) between siblings would be different in biologically and non-biologically related families. They found no differences in emotional closeness but less behavioural closeness for adoptive siblings. The importance of sibling-like relationships such as relationships between foster siblings was reported in some qualitative studies (Angel, 2014; James and others, 2008) though when measured there was some evidence of less warmth or closeness expressed by birth children of foster carers towards foster children than towards biologically-related siblings (Mosek, 2014).

Some studies have emphasized the trauma experienced by siblings who become looked-after and enter foster care and/or adoption. Adopting a psychotherapeutic perspective, Hindle (2007) describes children's experiences of fear and loss in relation to sibling relationships and concluded that adults can under-estimate the meaning attached to sibling relationships by children when making placement decisions. Cossar and Neil (2013) also stress the need to address children's feelings of loss when separated from siblings.

The quality of formal contact arrangements between siblings has also been the focus of some research. Cossar and Neil (2013) have described the complexity of sibling networks for many children who are fostered or adopted from care in terms of the number of connections, range of ages, placements and geographical locations of siblings, and the range of contact arrangements that may be in place. They identify the negotiation of family boundaries as a key task for family members where there is sibling contact that brings together adoptive and birth families and identify priorities for professionals including paying attention to 'how' contact is done, planning contact, supporting open communication and understanding children's perspectives. James et al (2008) identified a number of conditions that appear to influence the development and maintenance of contact between siblings

including children's current living situations, placement histories and caregivers' experiences and perceptions of the feasibility and desirability of sibling contact and the sibling relationship. Children's desire for more sibling contact is also reported (Lundstrom and Sallnas, 2012).

The adequacy of professional practices and carer support

Some concerns regarding the ability of professional practices to adequately address issues related to sibling relationships and placement decisions were evident (Hindle, 2007; James and others, 2008). Hollows & Nelson's (2006) study of professional judgement making in relation to the placement of large sibling groups (four children or more), concluded that there needs to be a move away from the application of universal answers applied to sibling placement decisions in the name of equality and based on an ideal of the 'least detrimental alternative'. Instead they suggest that deeper consideration needs to be given to the needs of both individuals and the group led by an ideal of equity or moral justice. A controlled trial of a specialist sibling foster care service in the US reported that siblings receiving the service were more likely to be placed within county, to have fewer placement moves and to achieve permanence more quickly than children receiving a standard foster care service. The specialist service was also shown to be more cost-effective than the standard service (Rast & Rast, 2014). The importance of support for carers has also been highlighted. Carers' belief in the desirability of contact has been identified as a key contributor to contact success (James and others, 2008) and placement success is influenced by adopters' tenacity, confidence, single-mindedness, optimism and resilience (Saunders & Selwyn, 2011).

Discussion

The evidence presented supports the importance of continued efforts by policy makers and practitioners to develop and maintain sibling placements and nurture positive sibling relationships where these are in the best interests of children. There is less certainty regarding how this should be achieved in the face of significant challenges. In order to address this agenda some future directions for research are suggested.

The publications reviewed provide evidence of some methodological advancement within this body of work over the last ten years including the use of more sophisticated statistical analyses such as logistic regression, survival analysis and generalised estimating equations (Albert & King, 2008; Webster and others, 2005; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). The use of controlled trials (Rast & Rast 2014) and RCTs (Linares et al, 2014) are also innovative given the methodological and ethical challenges associated with such designs. There has been some movement away, within outcome studies, from snapshot to longitudinal designs (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005) and from retrospective to prospective designs (Albert & King, 2008; Leathers, 2005; Linares and others, 2007; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell 2005). That said, some limitations must also be noted. The focus of this body of research has been predominantly on associations between placement status and child or placement outcomes with less attention given to associations between the quality of sibling relationships and child outcomes. This suggests a system-centric rather than child-centric research agenda. Qualitative studies uncover to some degree the complexity of children's family relationships and family lives. However, the body of work is small and limited in range and so does not fully convey a sense of the temporal and contextual aspects of siblinghood. There is also a notable lack of inductive theory building from these qualitative studies. The lack of attention to the child's perspective across study designs is a concern, particularly given the widespread adoption of the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child across jurisdictions in which these studies were conducted.

One notable feature of some, though not all, of the research reviewed is the lack of explicit reference to theory. Instead this is implied through the use of particular concepts or certain methodological

decisions. For example, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) compared stability of co-resident and separated sibling placements, the former being those where a child is residing with *at least one* full or half biological sibling but may or may not be residing with all siblings. Separated sibling placements were defined as those where a child is separated from *all* of their full or half biological siblings. In contrast, Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) used the categories together, separated or splintered. Each of these definitions makes assumptions about the nature of sibling relationships yet no reference is made to current theoretical understandings of sibship. The importance of sibling-like relationships is widely acknowledged in several studies and inattention to such relationships is often raised as a limitation of current research. However, the theoretical underpinnings for such a position go unexplored and instead the default theory privileges genetic relatedness.

Recent theoretical and methodological developments within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology could potentially provide opportunities to better understand the sibling relationships of children in foster care and adoptive placements bringing both an etic orientation and conceptual innovation. Thelen et al (2013) explore the varying significance of sibling relationships differentiating sibship through shared parentage, sibship through shared experience and sibship through exchange and care. They move away from simple binary definitions of sibling relationships as protective or risky and emphasise the significance of both the unifying and differentiating aspects of the sibling experience (Thelen and others, 2013). Carsten (2013) also describes sibling relationships as simultaneously close/distant, similar/distinct, equal/hierarchical, reciprocal/competitive and highlights the importance of memory, continuity and intergenerational obligation in shaping sibling relationships. Edwards et al's (2005) study of sibling relationships brings to the fore childhood agency. Emphasis is given to the range of resources or capital that flows between siblings and the ability of children to resist and subvert social expectations associated with sibling age and birth order. The changing nature of care provided and how it is perceived across time and place is also foregrounded. Such conceptualisations have yet to be explored within the context of sibling relationships of children in foster care and adoptive families. Given that children in foster care or adoptive placements will have had very particular experiences of family relationships it cannot be assumed that these theories will have explanatory power within this context. For example, the majority of children in foster care and many of the children who go on to be adopted will have experienced abuse or neglect within their birth family. In some cases the source of abuse or exploitation may have been a sibling. These children will also have experienced the interventions of statutory child protection services in family life and this may influence how family relationships are constructed and practiced. Infant adoption is also still a common practice in the US and this may again provide a particular context for family relationships that requires particular theoretical attention. Despite or perhaps because of such complexities, these concepts offer a rich, and as yet largely untapped, resource for the analysis of sibling relationships of children who have experienced foster care or adoption following maltreatment. This sociological/anthropological approach has been applied fruitfully to the study of adoptive kinship (Jones & Hackett, 2011).

Conclusions and implications for future research

This narrative review has led to a number of new insights, particularly in relation to the ways in which sibling relationships and placements are conceptualised. Such a review method is, by necessity, broad and a more systematic interrogation of specific research questions relating to particular substantive topics would be valuable. The search and selection process for this review revealed a number of topics that could be the focus of such reviews. For example, publications focussing on placement disruption and post-placement contact, while not focusing primarily on siblings, often make reference to sibling issues. A separate review of this evidence would, therefore, be valuable. Although the focus of this

review was on domestic adoption and non-kin foster care, several papers focused additionally on kinship care. Where this was the case, interesting differences often arose between kin and non-kin foster-care suggesting better outcomes for children in kinship care. A review of this literature in relation to sibling placements and sibling relationships would also be of value.

Given that research on siblings in adoption and fostering since 2004 broadly confirms Hegar's conclusion that co-placement of siblings appears to be protective in terms of placement stability, achieving permanence and child wellbeing and yet the ubiquity of sibling separation, some uncomfortable questions remain regarding the inability of the current system of out-of-home care to respond to the needs of children. In pursuing these questions, greater attention must be given to developing a knowledge-base around supporting sibling relationships regardless of placement type.

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