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The Child's Subjective Experience in the Foster Care System

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE CHILD'S SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE
IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY

JANE E. SEARS

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I am very fortunate to have people in my life who supported me through the work of this thesis. With their love and support, I was able to preserve my sanity. I would like to especially thank my committee members, Dr. Carol Gibb Harding and Dr. Katherine Tyson, for their unrelenting confidence and guidance. I am also very grateful to receive words of wisdom and helpful criticism from a friend and colleague, Angie Uhlenkamp. I will always be thankful to my parents, Robert and Charleen Sears, and my sister and brother, Jennifer and Adam Sears, for their constant support of my goals.

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Before introducing the thesis, I would like to share my inspiration that continually renewed my strength in this study. The children I worked with during my practicum and the children I work with today are the heart and soul of this study. I am forever inspired to pursue work in the child welfare field every time I look into their eyes and see a glimpse of the pain and suffering they have experienced in their young lives. With permission from the author, Suzanne M. Randolph, I would like to share her poem that expresses much of the passion I feel in this work.

When you Hear the Children Cry

When you hear the children cry
Stop and ask them why
Stop and heed their call
They're crying out to us all
"Please don't let us die."

When you hear the children laugh
Stop along their path
Stop to love and share
To show them that you care
Because we are all they have

When you hear the children speak
Stop to hear them teach
Stop to hear the story they tell
And let them know all is well
And the world's within their reach

When you hear the children playing
Stop to listen to what they're saying
They speak nothing but the truth
And their spirits are the proof
So for them we must keep praying

So, when you hear the children crying
Know that you can stop their dying
Just turn and do your part
Grab hold of each little heart
And promise you'll keep on trying

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What is it like to grow up in a foster home? According to a 1992 statistic, there are 442,000 children in the foster care system (Alderson, 1994). With so many children in foster homes, it is unbelievable that we do not understand what it is like to grow up in a foster home. The research and literature in the field of child welfare has neglected to simply ask the children about their experiences growing up as foster children. Without knowing the subjective experiences of the children in foster homes, we are not able to make the best decisions regarding their placement and treatment. For instance, when a child visits the doctor regarding an illness, the doctor needs to ask the child where it hurts before he can responsibly diagnose and treat the child.

This study will serve to amplify the voices of children in foster care as a central part of the treatment they receive. The perceptions of the children are regarded as valid and indispensable sources of information. Consequently, the data collected consists of thoughts and feelings of the foster children. These invaluable data allow us to understand the subjective experiences of these children, hence giving us a clearer picture of what their needs are and how we can act in their "best interests". In other words, to understand the subjective experiences of children in foster care means to open a window into their world, letting us see their strengths and pain so that we might better help them.

In the next chapter, a literature review presents an overview of the current trends in the system and gives a context to understand the trauma that was present in the children's lives at the time of placement. This gives the study a foundation from which the reader may understand the purpose behind the research. The literature review also examines the

research that has included the children's perspectives and the research that has neglected to include the children's perspectives. From this literature, it is apparent that the need is greatly increasing to include children in research. Finally, the review discusses means to empower children through research and treatment. By presenting several approaches of empowerment, the importance of empowering children is emphasized. In all of the approaches of empowerment, children are encouraged to express their subjective experiences. Through empowerment, children may be given a sense of control, stability, and a sense of hope in their struggle through a very difficult time.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The child welfare system is constantly changing, from day to day and from state to state. The system is at the mercy of social and political forces that are continually adjusting the system to fit the climate of the time. The section that follows examines the focus of the child welfare system at a national and state level. It is important to understand the system in which these children are growing up in order to begin learning about their world. In the second section, the chapter discusses the perspectives of children in research literature that are both respected and questioned. The final section discusses several approaches to empowerment that may be adapted to children. Empowerment can be a powerful tool in working with children who have undergone so much abuse and/or neglect that child welfare became involved.

Child Welfare: The Context for this Study

Presently, the mainstream effort has been to preserve the family by preventing placements and reuniting the families as soon as possible. The motivating force behind this effort is the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272). This legislation is based on a family-centered approach, requiring that "reasonable efforts" be made to preserve the family and provide protection and permanence for the children. Should "reasonable efforts" not be made, the public Child Protective Service agencies may suffer a loss or decrease in federal funding. It should also be noted that in order to receive federal funding eligibility, a court must determine that reasonable efforts have been demonstrated by the agencies (Kopels and Rycraf, 1993). Consequently, public Child Protective Service agencies across the nation have launched new programs to comply with

the act, striving to preserve the families of children at risk.

Recently, the Clinton administration has strongly supported the effort to preserve the family by announcing in May of 1993 that they want to spend \$1.4 billion over the next five years for family preservation. In other words, efforts would be given to avoid placing abused and neglected children in foster care. Instead, the children would be kept in their families of origin. The families and their children would receive services that aim to strengthen the family unit. Preserving the family has definitely become the preferred approach in the field of child welfare (Berliner and Gelles, 1993).

Most family preservation programs have been designed according to the Homebuilders model which was developed in 1974. Not until the 1980's did family preservation programs actually begin to receive attention and gain popularity. Therefore, the programs are relatively new. It should be noted that family preservation programs are not replacements for foster care, but merely an alternative for families that need attention without the removal of their children (Kolb, 1993). Therefore, family preservation programs are not the solution for every family. It is necessary for many children to be removed from their families in order to insure their safety.

The Illinois Child Welfare System has been a strong supporter of family preservation programs. Recently, the social and political forces of the state have caused the tide to change within the system. The child welfare programs are emphasizing a child-centered policy rather than one that is family-centered. The thrust is not to preserve the family but to advocate for the needs of the child (Karwath, 1993). The change in the philosophical focus of Illinois' child welfare policy was initiated by the death of Joseph Wallace on April 19, 1993. Joseph was a three year old boy who was returned home to his biological mother despite her long history of violence and mental illness. Joseph's mother allegedly killed him shortly after his return home. Since the young boy's death, Governor Jim Edgar has taken action by appointing an inspector general to conduct investigations

with DCFS. Along with other changes, the Governor has supported legislation that will institute changes to protect the rights of the children above the rights of the parents (McWhirter & Gottesman, 1993).

There is not solid evidence available to support the family preservation programs as the primary approach in child welfare (Berliner and Gelles, 1993). In fact, research on Intensive Family Preservation Services has reported the efficacy of the programs is ambiguous (Berliner & Gelles, 1993). A study by Bath and Haapala found that heterogeneous samples may be partially responsible for the equivocal results. They found differences between families referred for abuse and those referred for neglect call for differential client selection and intervention emphasis when decisions regarding home-based services are being made (Bath & Haapala, 1993). Therefore, the programs are not designed to help every family. It appears important that the treatment and services given to families and children need to be tailored to fit their infinite number of differences. Further research needs to be done before the nation heralds the family preservation programs as the number one solution for the child welfare system.

There is not one solution that will help each family. At the present time it does not appear that the child welfare system is equipped to target families for specific services according to their needs. In order to reach a point where services are tailored to meet the needs of the families, further research needs to be done. The research that has been done thus far has focused on many facets of the child welfare system, but has failed to account for the perspective of the children. It is a tragedy that this important area of research is missing when crucial decisions are being made regarding the lives of children and their families. In this study, the child's perspective is considered valuable data, as well as important insight into the structure of the family. This research, possibly the first to ever place such high value on the child's perspective, hopefully will set a precedent for future research and intervention with families.

Testimony of the Child: Perspectives on the Credibility of Children's Reports

In our efforts to protect the child, we are hindered if we do not attend to the child's perspective. As adults, we often assume to know what is best for children without taking a minute to listen to them. Our hearts are in the right place and our intentions are pure; but, often we ignore the true needs of children if we assume to know their feelings and needs.

Although researchers and professionals in the field seem to be aware of the struggles a child experiences in the foster care system, few studies consider the child's perspective (Cohen, 1991; Taber & Proch, 1987; Milner, 1987; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984; McCall, Parke, Kavanaugh, 1977). There seems to be a bias against supporting the child as a credible resource. In recent studies, a growing trend has developed that takes research a step further, including the child's perspective as an important aspect to be recognized (Baker-Ward, Gorden, Ornstein, Larus, & Clubb, 1993; Palmer, 1990; Sorensen & Snow, 1991). By taking into account the child's thoughts and feelings we may more accurately assess his/her needs.

The research studies that recognize the importance of the child's perspective give implications for understanding and validating the child's testimony. The work of Sorensen and Snow (1991) examines children's disclosure of sexual abuse. Their study included 116 children whose cases of sexual abuse were confirmed in the courts or by medical evidence. All of the children disclosed the incident of sexual abuse; however, the characteristics of the disclosure varied between children. The act of disclosure is viewed as a process, not as an event. Quite often, children have not been considered credible sources due to their tendency to deny or recant the abuse. By acknowledging the disclosure of sexual abuse as a process, the denial or recanting is interpreted as a phase in the process. Therefore, it is possible that children's testimonies are credible; however, the manner in which they engage in disclosure may be different from adults.

In order to further validate the testimony of children, their ability to encode and retain a pediatric examination has been studied (Baker-Ward et al., 1993). Children, ages 3, 5, and 7, demonstrated the ability to provide an extensive and accurate report of the examination. When confronted with incongruous questions concerning the examination, the children consistently showed a general resistance.

In another study, foster children participated in group treatment that focused on the separation conflicts associated with placement breakdown (Palmer, 1990). The children responded positively to the group treatment by using the opportunity to express their feelings about separation. By listening to the subjective experiences of the children, the study identified needs that had not been recognized by the agency.

Contrary to the previously mentioned studies, much of the research involving children continues to display a bias against recognizing the subjective experience of the child. Many of these studies describe the child's experience by observing their behavior, but seldom account for the child's perspective. One case study found a correlation between a child's disruptive behavior and frequent changes between schools. This is a meaningful connection, but it gives an incomplete explanation. The case study failed to take into account the child's thoughts and feelings and allow him the chance to explain his struggle (Cohen, 1991). Clearly the constant school changes contributed to his disruptive behavior; but, had the boy been allowed to describe his experience, a more complete and accurate explanation may have emerged. For instance, along with the boy's many different schools, he also moved from home to home. It is likely that the trauma of such an unstable home-life also contributed to his disruptive behavior. The child's perception of instability can reveal aspects of his life and behavior which can contribute to our understanding of him.

Another study reviewed a program that was designed to stabilize adolescents in their foster care placements by decreasing the number of moves between foster homes. The program sought to stabilize the placements at a systems level rather than intervening

with the individual cases. Therefore, the program's success was defined by a decrease in the number of unplanned moves, not by feedback from the adolescents. The study reported that frequent moves inhibit the mastery of developmental tasks and the achievement of permanency goals (Taber & Proch, 1987). Stability is not merely a physical state but an emotional one as well. The reason these moves inhibited developmental tasks may be due to the emotional impact; therefore, stability needs to be measured on an emotional level as well. The emotional impact cannot be measured by only counting the number of moves. Furthermore, even with a decrease in moves, the sense of emotional stability may not necessarily be improved. It is important to ask the individual his/her perception of this personal experience; hence, the adolescents should have been considered an important resource to measure stability.

In a third study by Milner, the length of a child's placement in the foster care system was correlated with the frequency and quality of visits with the biological parent. The data for the study consisted of information gathered from the children's case records and interviews with case workers and supervisors responsible for the children's discharge from foster care. The researcher concluded that a child that experiences short-term placement is expected to receive frequent visits from the biological parent. These visits are usually enjoyable for both the parent and child. It was found that the child in long-term care receives irregular visits from the biological parent. These irregular visits do not provide the child with a positive connection to the biological family (Milner, 1987). The long-term care may be understood by examining the quality of the parent-child relationship that existed when placement occurred. For instance, the child may have never developed a positive connection within the biological family. The child's perception of his/her relationship to the parent must be considered in order to fully understand the quality of the parent-child relationship. Therefore, the length of placement in the foster care system may be understood by examining both the frequency and quality of parental visits and the

parent-child relationship as perceived by the child. In order to study the child's perception, the researcher needed to interview the child.

Child welfare is not the only field of research that holds a bias against children by not recognizing their perspectives. Other areas, such as research concerning the cluster of symptoms commonly called childhood hyperactivity also fails to recognize the importance of the child's personal experience. Most research for the diagnosis and treatment of childhood hyperactivity does not consider the child as an important resource. The child is rarely interviewed, therefore his/her experience is regarded as irrelevant to the condition being diagnosed and treated (Tyson, 1991).

Another area of research in which many fail to recognize the child's perspective is the study of television violence and aggressive behavior of children. Many studies explain the aggression of children as a product of television violence without asking the children about their thoughts and feelings concerning their behavior (Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984; McCall, Parke, & Kavanaugh, 1977; Singer & Singer, 1981). There could be many other variables contributing to their aggressive behavior, such as violence in the family or at school. Another explanation could be that the children are merely expressing anger or fear that they are experiencing from a source other than the television. In other words, television could be one variable causing aggressive behavior in children; however, there could also be a number of other influences that need to be explored by interviewing the children.

Instead of listening to the child, researchers typically rely on adults who have daily contact with the child to provide important information concerning his/her emotional, physical, and behavioral condition. The child is, therefore, discounted as a valid source of information and not allowed to contribute to the understanding of his/her problem. Not only does this undermine the power of the child, but it contributes to a source of misguided information. This is not to say that parents deliberately provide inaccurate information

about their child. Many times parents are unable to recall critical events surrounding their child's condition; or, they may report behaviors of the child that strongly resemble their own behaviors. Furthermore, parents often describe the child's mental status differently than the way in which the child expresses his/her condition (Tyson, 1991).

This point is further illustrated, in the area of child welfare, as one study reveals the difference between adults' perceptions and children's perceptions of the foster care placement. As reported, clinicians treating foster care children are discovering that the placement is perceived by the children as a threat to their survival. In contrast, the child welfare workers, foster parents, and clinicians interpret the placement as the means to survival (Kates, Johnson, Rader, & Strieder, 1991). These evident differences in perceptions may lead to treatment plans that better serve the needs of adults than those of children. Hence, it is in the "best interest" of the children that their thoughts and feelings be considered important resources in research, diagnosis, and treatment.

Empowerment: New Models of Child Treatment

In order to respect and listen to the thoughts and feelings of children, the stark differences between adults and children need to be recognized. A child's perspective comes from a very different world view than that of an adult. A child has many different ways of communicating, socializing, and reasoning. Without sensitivity in these areas, many needs of the child may go unrecognized. Furthermore, without listening to the perspective of the child, a potential bias against children may undermine the relationship between child and adult. The bias against children has been termed adultcentrism. Like racism and sexism, adultcentrism is a set of beliefs and behaviors that raises one group of people above another. In this case, adultcentric bias is created when children are measured by adult standards, when assumptions are placed on children, and when one fails to see the world from the children's point of view. With an adultcentric bias there may be negative consequences that follow, such as: miscommunication with children, inaccurate judgments

about children's intentions and motivations, misuse of power to limit children's self-determination, and undermining children's strengths and competencies (Petr, 1992).

Petr gives three suggestions in which practitioners who work with children may avoid adultcentric views. First and foremost, Petr recommends that practitioners learn and value children as children. In order to do so, they need to observe children in their natural settings, for example, the playground, gym, or shopping mall. Through observation, one may learn many aspects of a child's world that were left uncovered. It is important to submerge oneself in the world of the child in order to gain a sense of their world view. In other words, to truly understand what is important to a child and how they feel, one needs to enter into the world of the child (Petr, 1992).

The second suggestion to overcome adultcentric views as a practitioner involves scheduling individual interviews with children when administering services to the children or their families. By seeing the children individually, their perspectives may be used in the assessments and interventions. During these interviews with the children, Petr notes that the practitioner needs to be aware that children do not communicate in the same way as adults. Children often prefer to communicate through play, metaphor, drawing, and physical activity (Petr, 1992).

The final suggestion for combating adultcentric views dictates that practitioners need to involve children in the decisions made that directly affect their lives. By giving children self-determination, the practitioner is recognizing and respecting the perspectives of the children. Petr states that as with adults, children may be self-determined as long as they do not exceed their capacity and as long as the rights of others are respected (Petr, 1992). Therefore, a practitioner needs to give children the same opportunities as adults, to be included in the decision-making process so that their perspectives are taken into careful consideration (Gibson, 1993; Hegar, 1989).

Including children, within their capacities, in the decisions that will affect their lives is congruent with the empowerment theory. The theory involves the notion that a person is capable of improving his/her life to the extent that he/she is able to control the environment. In other words, empowerment involves giving a person the opportunity to control his/her environment. As a practitioner, one may empower an individual by directing the focus to mastery over the environment, self-determination, and recognition of the social forces that affect his/her life (Gibson, 1993).

Along the same line, a person needs to establish an internal locus of control and an external locus of responsibility (Sue, 1981). Therefore, a person who has an internal locus of control believes in their ability to make changes in their life if given an opportunity. At the same time, this person does not attribute barriers of discrimination and prejudice to their own personal weaknesses, but to external forces that are beyond their control (Sue, 1981). The concept of internal locus of control and external locus of responsibility can be applied to children in the child welfare system. For these children, it is important that they realize that they are not responsible for their situation, accepting that their parents' choices and problems are not their own. It also becomes imperative that the children are given opportunities to establish a sense of control over their lives (Hegar, 1989).

Hegar and Hunzeker apply the concept of empowerment to the field of child welfare in their article entitled "Moving Toward Empowerment-Based Practice in Public Child Welfare" (1988). The paper discusses the issue of empowerment in reference to the child welfare agency, staff, and the parents of children. The authors give minimal attention to practices that empower children due to the lack of literature available in this area. In order to gain an awareness of empowerment practices for children, the authors suggest one acquire an understanding of childhood experiences that enhance feelings of mastery and belonging (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988). With this understanding, one can help children gain a sense of mastery and belonging for themselves. The authors do not include the

importance of the children's subjective experience. Mastery and belonging are important components in the empowerment of children, but children's perspectives need to be considered empowering tools in child welfare practice. Children need to feel that their experiences, thoughts, and feelings are valid, important expressions that merit our time and attention.

Intrapsychic Humanism is a new theory of psychology, developed by Martha Heineman Pieper and Joseph Pieper, that is able to provide further guidance towards the goal of empowering children. The theory suggests that every individual has the potential to develop a stable, conflict-free, autonomous, self-regulatory inner well-being. This inner well-being has the power to withstand losses that are continually a part of interpersonal experiences. The development of such an inner well-being depends on the intrapsychic motive that is inherent in every person at birth. Every child is born with a certain amount of inner well-being also known as intrapsychic motive gratification. With this, the child is able to pursue the pleasurable experience of being able to effectively regulate caregiving. By being able to regulate the caregiving he/she receives, the child is able to regulate his/her own self-esteem. As long as the caregiving is stable and nurturing, the child's inner well-being from birth will develop into an inner esteem that is stable, conflict-free, autonomous, and self-regulatory (Tyson, 1991).

Intrapsychic Humanism works toward empowering the child by emphasizing the quality of a caregiving relationship that will eventually stabilize the child's core self-esteem (Tyson, 1993). It is important to establish a caregiving relationship with a child that gives them the opportunity to express their world view. Within this caring, nurturing relationship, children need to experience their capacity for effective agency. They need the relationship to nurture their motive to acquire a stable capacity for effective agency (Tyson, 1993).

In conclusion of the literature review, it is important to emphasize that through empowering children and listening to their perspectives, children's needs can be recognized and addressed in research and treatment for them. The child welfare system and much of the research involving children needs to be restructured in order for the children's needs to be recognized. Much of the literature available reveals that the child welfare system has not recognized the perspective of the children; consequently, failing to meet the needs of the children.

Without research that examines the perspective of the children, the foster care system has instituted standard treatment plans to serve children and families that enter the system. The current philosophy of the federal child welfare policy supports strong efforts to preserve the families, instead of examining the families closely to assess whether rehabilitation of the families is possible. It appears that the child welfare policy has traditionally supported some sort of system, such as the family preservation program, in order to service children and their families. Rather than relying on one popular program or approach to service children and their families, the treatment needs to be tailored to fit the individualized qualities of each case that enters the child welfare system.

The following chapter will introduce naturalistic research as the proposed approach to studying the subjective experience of children in foster care. The philosophy of naturalistic research will be presented in order to explain the context in which this study was conducted. Finally, the chapter will present the design of the study, including information regarding the subjects and the procedure.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

There are many people in the life of a foster child who are considered his/her family or support network -- a complex group comprised of caretakers and professionals. This large group may include the biological parents, foster parents, biological siblings, foster siblings, case managers, therapists, attorneys, and schools. All of these people interact to create a complex system that is ever-changing. For instance, role boundaries are frequently questioned due to the structure and size of the system (Kates, Johnson, Rader, & Strieder, 1991). Therefore, in a large system with such complexity, it becomes clear that there is not just one simple approach to assessing the dynamics of the system.

Naturalistic Research: Metatheory

I propose naturalistic research, using the postpositivist approach to research termed the heuristic paradigm (Heineman Pieper, 1995; Tyson, 1995), as an effective approach to understanding the interaction of all the variables that may be affecting the child. The naturalistic research process allows one to study the client-counselor relationship without introducing any research constraints into the relationship. To further explain the proposed methodology, I will discuss the concept of the heuristic paradigm, the philosophy of naturalistic research, and the specific methodology for the study.

The heuristic paradigm does not restrict the methodology but allows the researcher to decide how to gather and analyze the data according to the type of problem. In other words, the problem guides the selection of the method instead of methodologically based restrictions guiding the problem to be examined (Pieper, 1993). According to the heuristic paradigm, the researcher is not bound to the experimental method. Should the research

project present the most thorough, conclusive evidence by way of the experimental method and quantified data, then it should be utilized. However, the heuristic paradigm also supports the naturalistic approach as a valid method to conduct research. In other words, there is not just one correct or appropriate methodology. Using the heuristic paradigm, a researcher is encouraged to explore the different types of methodologies in order to select one that is appropriate for his/her research problem (Tyson, in press).

The heuristic paradigm respects the practitioner's judgment, regarding him/her as an important resource when studying the dynamics of practice. The practitioner is able to accurately explain the context of treatment, interpret client's feedback regarding the practitioner's communications, and identify changes that are occurring. Most importantly, the practitioner has developed rapport with the subject so that the subject may feel free to express themselves and behave naturally, allowing for a different type of assessment to be made (Tyson, in press).

The heuristic paradigm regards naturalistic research as a respected approach that may produce the most accurate conclusions depending on the research problem. Naturalistic research involves studying clinical practice systematically, without intentionally altering the practice. The naturalistic researcher is a practitioner who does not require the use of inventories or questionnaires. The treatment process is not shortened or lengthened for research purposes. Electronic recording devices and third party observers are also excluded from the treatment unless they are already used for therapeutic purposes. (Pieper, 1993). Research that includes these methods without a therapeutic rationale is considered to be interventionist research. The subject may be inhibited by such interventions, therefore affecting the quality of the therapeutic relationship and the service being provided. By discouraging any nontherapeutic interventions, naturalistic research protects the therapeutic relationship and the treatment process. Any identifying information referring to

the individual or the case is disguised so that the individual is protected. Therefore, naturalistic research does not raise ethical or privacy issues (Tyson, in press).

Naturalistic research does not require the use of recording devices due to the intrusive effect they may have on the therapy. However, when the use of such devices are part of diagnostic or therapeutic purposes, then naturalistic research would validate the use of data collected by these means. In other words, for research about clinical practice to be naturalistic, the use of recording devices cannot be motivated by the research (Pieper, in press). The research for this study was done in conjunction with a counseling practicum. To fulfill practicum requirements, the sessions had to be recorded in order to review and critique the counseling techniques that were demonstrated. Therefore, the recordings were not motivated for research purposes, but for supervisory purposes. The audio recordings were used to supplement the naturalistic research for the thesis.

Design of Study: Subjects and Procedure

Before conducting the study, important precautions needed to be taken. Consent forms for the recordings were signed by each child's case worker. Permission was also obtained through DCFS to include the children in the research by completing another form for each child. To further insure that the proper measures were taken, the proposal for the study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection for Human Subjects.

Other precautions were taken in order to protect the children in this study. The children's names were not used in the recordings so as to protect the identity of the children. The children's right to confidentiality within the counseling relationship was respected by changing identifying information regarding the children. A short case description of each child is provided in Appendix G to give critical information to the reader, however the children's identities are not disclosed.

The sample group consists of five children who were clients at a private agency that was subcontracted through DCFS. The subjects were children in the foster care system that had been identified with special needs. The children ranged in age from four to twelve years old. They were referred for counseling by a clinical supervisor in the agency. One hour each week of counseling was provided for these children. The theory used to counsel the children was a psychodynamic theory. Empowerment theories, such as the work of Hegar and the Psychology of Intrapyschic Humanism were used to frame the counseling and analyze the data.

The sample does not provide much diversity between subjects due to its small size. With fewer subjects, however, a greater understanding of the children's subjective experiences may be obtained because more knowledge may be learned from each child. Qualitative research emphasizes a smaller sample in order to create a more complete picture of each subject. In reading qualitative research, one may become immersed in the subject's world, discovering many different facets of the person which serves to heighten one's identification with and understanding of the subject (Tyson, in press).

Data collection involved reviewing the audio recordings of counseling sessions, making transcripts of the counseling sessions, and taking detailed case notes of the themes and patterns that were expressed through the children's art and play. The first five to ten sessions were used to develop a coding manual which included the common themes that the children expressed. The themes identified aspects of the children's subjective experiences. Each theme was assigned a numerical code for the data analysis, providing a labeling and retrieval system. The specific definitions of the themes are in the coding manual which is in Appendix F.

Collecting the common themes expressed by the children in order to develop the coding manual involved a process. The first interviews used to develop the coding manual provided a general accounting scheme for codes which was not content-specific. The data

was classified in general domains as it was collected. New codes were inductively developed throughout the data collection process (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Two individuals affiliated through the graduate school assisted with transcribing thirty counseling sessions. The systematic sampling of the sessions consisted of fifteen randomly selected sessions and fifteen hand picked sessions. The sessions were hand picked by the researcher of this study according to those that represented crucial points in the therapeutic process for each child. Three sessions were randomly selected and three sessions were hand picked for each child, totaling six sessions.

The transcripts were divided into chunks which were termed content units. The content units were distinguished by the children's expression of a consistent theme. Therefore, the children dictated the content units through the expression of their subjective experiences. Within the thirty sessions that were coded and analyzed, there were 294 content units.

Once the content units were established, they were coded according to the themes in the coding manual. Many of the content units contained more than one theme consistently expressed; however, there were never more than three themes expressed in a content unit. The themes were coded by the researcher of this study and another graduate student. All of the transcripts were coded by both individuals so that inter-rater reliability was calculated to be 100%. Any disagreements between themes in the coding were discussed until a consensus was reached.

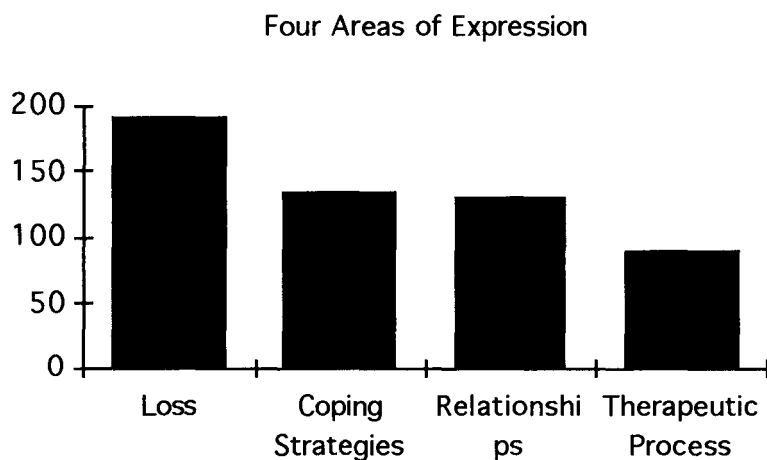
In order to analyze and interpret the data, the clusters of data surrounding each code were examined to explore predominant patterns in the children's subjective experiences. Descriptive statistics were used to delineate the clusters of data surrounding each code. The descriptive statistics served to describe, organize, and summarize the data.

In summary of this chapter, it is important to understand that the naturalistic approach to research, within the context of the heuristic paradigm, was selected in order to study a small number of children; therefore, producing findings that were more wholistic in nature. Since the subjective experiences of the children were studied from a wholistic perspective, the findings could not be hypothesized. Instead, the findings were dictated by the children as the counseling process progressed. The next chapter will present and discuss the findings of the study. One may discover that the findings paint a picture of the experiences of each and every child.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

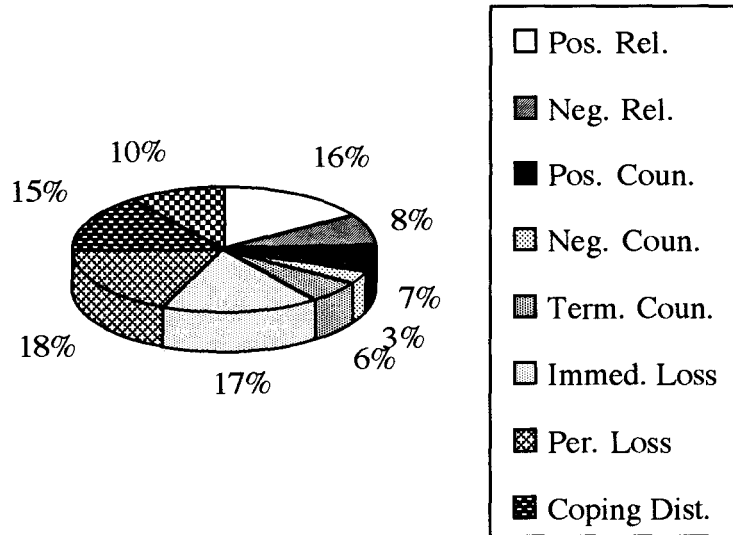
Analysis of the content units revealed four major areas within which the children's expressions could be coded. These four major areas were: expressions of loss, coping strategies, expressions about significant relationships, and expressions about the therapeutic process. The themes expressed by the children during the counseling sessions fell into these four areas as seen in the chart below. There were a total of 545 themes expressed among all of the children. These themes were coded within the content units that divided the counseling transcripts into chunks. There were 294 total content units found among all of the children.



The chart below breaks the four major areas down into separate categories which provides a more detailed understanding of the areas that will be examined. Within the four major areas similarities and differences were found between the themes that the children expressed. Feelings and experiences the children expressed formed patterns

through the similarities; yet, they were distinguished by very unique qualities.

Areas of Expression Divided into Categories



It is expected that some of their feelings and experiences are similar, as they are each coming from a family that could no longer care for them and entering a system that often fails to meet their needs. It is important when working with children in foster care to be aware of these common feelings and experiences they may share, yet remaining alert for ones that may distinguish them from every other child in foster care. To compare the children's expressions of the themes, the reader may refer to the individual charts for each child, found in Appendix A through Appendix E.

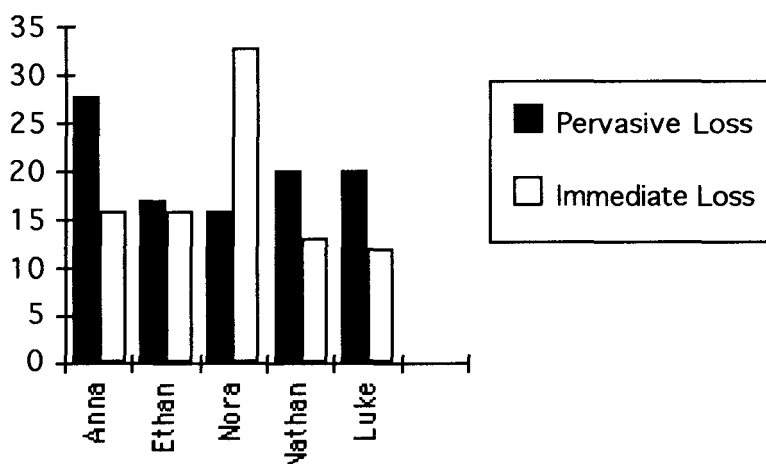
Expressions of Loss

Loss was the theme that was expressed the most throughout the counseling sessions. Examination of data from the children showed that loss was exhibited in 35% of all themes expressed. In order to understand the reason loss dominated the themes,

one needs to understand that the children have experienced an enormous amount of trauma and change. The children were removed from their biological parents due to neglect and abuse in their homes. They were placed in foster care which usually requires a change of schools. Essentially, these children were trying to learn to live with a new family that had its own set of rules and dynamics, forcing the children to adapt and change.

The theme of loss can be divided into two subcategories, immediate loss and pervasive loss. All of the children, except one, expressed more pervasive loss than immediate loss which may be noted in the chart below. The pervasive loss expressed by the children centered around past losses that had not been expressed and resolved. Consequently, the children continued to struggle with losses, experienced years ago that still caused pain for them in the present. Counseling provided the children with an environment that enabled them to feel safe in expressing their losses.

Expressions of Loss



The child who experienced more immediate loss than pervasive loss was confronted with a great deal of immediate loss during the course of her counseling. Nora

was being moved to different foster homes due to inadequate care. These moves separated her from siblings, which affected her traumatically. Therefore, much of her sessions focused on the immediate loss of the moves and adjustments that she needed to make. The immediate loss that Nora was experiencing needed to be addressed before she was able to resolve the pervasive loss.

The children's expressions of pervasive loss formed patterns that they shared. One pattern that all of the children exhibited centered around the separation from their parents and siblings. An example of such a loss is found when listening to Anna speak of her parents.

Anna: Because when I get older, sometimes, I used to forget my parents' names and how old they are.

Counselor: You're afraid you're going to forget their names.

Anna: And I'm going to forget them. I'm hoping that won't happen. That's why I'm hoping in May we'll get to go back to them.

Another child expressed the loss of separation when playing with play dough. Ethan had made the world out of play dough and had covered the world with small beads of play dough to represent significant people he wanted in his world. The session continued as follows.

Ethan: Everyone is leaving my world. They don't want to stay anymore.

Counselor: Everyone is leaving your world?! (He proceeds to rip off the beads which represented the people in his world.)

Ethan: They said it's boring.

Counselor: No one is going to stay?

Ethan: No.

Counselor: Are you going to be on there?

Ethan: Yeah.

Ethan has not only expressed his experience of separation, but he has also conveyed a sense of isolation and abandonment. It appears that a child that is experiencing the loss of separation feels isolated and abandoned from those from whom he/she is separated. Ethan may also have been feeling he was boring, consequently not appealing enough to keep the people in his life interested in him.

The second pattern observed throughout all of the children's expressions of pervasive loss involves the absence of stability and security. In this context stability is referring to physical safety, while security is referring to emotional safety. During Anna's session, loss of stability and security are highlighted.

Anna: I was in my first foster home.

Counselor: Oh, that is a picture of you when you were in your first foster home.

Anna: I've had lots of them.

Counselor: Really, how many have you had?

Anna: Four.

Counselor: Four--so you haven't been in just one home. What is the longest time you have spent in a foster home?

Anna: One year is the longest.

In the same session Anna continued to describe her experience of moving to different homes.

Anna: ...I don't really understand.

Counselor: What is it that you don't understand?

Anna: Why I'm moving around, I don't know what's going on...but it's hard on my brothers and sisters as well. ...We'd cry from like eight or nine o'clock at night to five o'clock in the morning. We didn't want to go to sleep.

During this session, the counselor asked Anna about her changes in schools. She stated, "My teacher says that I shouldn't be doing that, 'cause that's how I don't learn, like

that." Anna is expressing a loss of stability and security that she experiences as she changes homes and schools. She is acutely aware of the physical and emotional loss she is experiencing as she moves from school to school and from home to home. Anna was pleading for the moving to end, expressing the pain and confusion that is accompanied by the moves.

Ethan also expressed loss of security as he discussed his biological parents during a session. The discussion was spoken in reference to a previous session, during which Ethan pretended to speak to his parents regarding their drug habit.

Counselor: What were you mad about?

Ethan: My parents won't stop drugs.

(Counselor continues further into the discussion.)

Counselor: You said during that other session, "If you really loved your kids you would get off drugs!"

Ethan: True.

Counselor: So you believe that if your parents keep doing drugs they must not love you.

Ethan: Yes. (softly)

(Moments later Ethan slightly altered his belief regarding his parents' love for him.)

Counselor: So you really believe in your heart that your parents must not love you because they're still on drugs.

Ethan: It's not that, it's that I feel like they don't love me because they are all on drugs and it's like--uh--they don't care about us. They could do anything they want -- they want to do drugs.

Ethan questioned his parents' love for him because they continued to take drugs. From Ethan's perspective, his parents would merely have to decide not to take drugs and he could return home. Consequently, his parents must not want him home and they must not care about him. Ethan expressed a tremendous amount of pain he endured as he

continued to question his parents' love. As the session on his parents' love ended, the counselor stated, "It must hurt you." Ethan responded, "Believe it, it does!"

The third pattern in the expressions of pervasive loss involved the lack of caretaking. Luke described a loss of caretaking during one of his sessions. He stated that everyone had forgotten his birthday, including his biological mother and his foster mother. He believed himself to be a year older than the age that everyone else believed him to be. Luke reported that the forgotten birthday took place during the time when he was removed from his home and placed in a temporary foster home.

Most of the children expressed the loss of caretaking that they experienced in their home with their biological parents. They seemed to have realized and accepted that their parents were unable to care for them. Anna spoke of the day she and her siblings were removed from their home. She stated, "Well, I was a little bit upset but not that much because my mom was doing drugs and she was smoking and all that." Luke also made reference to his mother's inability to care for him.

Luke: Could a parent take care of six kids? ...cause my mom, my mom couldn't take six kids.

Counselor: ...take care of six kids?

Luke: Yeah...so that's why they took me away.

The final pattern observed in the expressions of pervasive loss involves the child's sense of self. Ethan described himself as being divided into a "new me" and an "old me". The "old me" was described as being nice, while the "new me" was mean, angry, and alone. He stated that there was a lot of hurting underneath the meanness and anger. Ethan was not able to recognize what the hurting was; but, he knew that he was experiencing different kinds of hurting.

Ethan's division of his sense of self illustrates his struggle to accept himself as he experienced emotions that were disturbing and painful. His strong emotions were being

expressed outside of the counseling session in uncontrollable outbursts. They appeared to be angry outbursts that caused disruption and confusion for Ethan, as well as those around him. Therefore, it may be that Ethan wanted to disassociate himself from the anger that was within him. Ethan verbally expressed that he did not like his new behaviors. By dividing his sense of self into two parts, Ethan may have been trying to separate the painful part of his self from the other parts of his self.

There were other expressions of pervasive loss that were not found to be expressed in every child's subjective experience. These unique expressions of loss were just as powerful as the ones that were found to be common among all the children. Anna expressed loss of hope during a session. Anna's main coping strategy involved expressing only positive thoughts and emotions so that her life appeared fine. During this session, Anna was able to let go of her coping strategy in order to express that her life was very hard.

Counselor: That's the first time you've told me things are bad.

Anna: They are bad. Especially now that the world is finishing.

Counselor: The world is finishing? What do you mean?

Anna: In the year 2000 the world is going to finish. And every year things get worse.

Counselor: Are you afraid of the year 2000?

Anna: In a way I'm scared and in a way I'm not. In the way I'm scared is that the world's going to finish and in a way I'm not scared is that the sooner or later I'm going to die so...

Counselor: So it might as well finish.

Anna: Hm-mm (yes)

Listening to Anna, it seemed that she had given up on the world. Through her eyes, the world was getting worse so that eventually it was just going to end. Anna's view of the world was stained by the incredible losses she had experienced. Anna had experienced so much loss that she was not able to see that a person could live without the

tremendous loss she had experienced

A second unique expression of pervasive loss was observed in a session with Luke. During this session, Luke expressed the loss of his father. Among the rest of the children, this was not a common pervasive loss; however, this may be a loss that is shared with many other children in foster care.

Counselor: You were six years old when the case worker came to take you away from your mom, away from your dad...

Luke: I've never seen my dad.

Counselor: You didn't see your dad?

Luke: I don't care. I didn't have one.

Luke actually lived with his mom and dad until he was about five years old. He had not been able to see his dad since that time. It seemed that his father's absence had been such a difficult loss for Luke that he was unable to believe that his father exists without being a part of his life.

The patterns observed in the expressions of immediate loss were closely associated with the pervasive loss with one crucial difference. The pervasive loss had been experienced long ago but remained as painful and upsetting as it did upon occurrence; in contrast, the immediate loss was one that was being experienced presently or may have been recently experienced.

One of the patterns observed in the area of immediate loss surrounds the children's emotional security. For instance, the counseling session was interrupted occasionally without notice. At these times the children may or may not have been communicating a sensitive emotion or experience. If the children were trying to convey something that was sensitive, they may have felt vulnerable, violated, or simply neglected. At these times the experience of loss was usually expressed by the children's sudden change in

their focus of play or conversation. This example of the immediate loss of emotional security may have also been experienced as a loss involving the counseling environment, which was another pattern of loss expressed by the children. During counseling, it was hoped that the children were able to feel emotionally secure; however, this security may have been sacrificed when the session was interrupted.

Another example of a child's immediate loss involving counseling was observed in the beginning of one of Ethan's sessions. During this session, he expressed a loss experienced when counseling was canceled.

Counselor: Were you looking forward to counseling last week?

Ethan: Yeah, I was already dressed.

Counselor: Oh, no!

Ethan: That's when I heard you weren't going to come.

Counselor: So did your caseworker call you?

Ethan: Yeah. My brother was going to come so that they could pick us up together, that way we could come, but...

Counselor: Yeah, I was disappointed too. Is there something you wanted to talk about that happened last week?

Ethan: Oh no, I just thought counseling was fun.

Counselor: Well, I'm glad that you like it.

A second pattern found in the expressions of immediate loss was separation. In these cases, the immediate loss of separation had just been experienced or was taking place at that time. Ethan expressed the loss of separation when his parents missed their visit. Ethan angrily stated, "I know they love me and everything, it's just that they--they just make me mad sometimes. They say they're going to have a visit with us and they never did." Anna also expressed a loss involving separation from her sister when she said, "...Susan's always with me. We were going to go to a different classroom for our

court thing. When we weren't going to go back to the house together, well, Susan, she started crying so much that she started bleeding...and she had a fever and she had a little bit of a high blood pressure--her pressure was up a little bit." It is apparent from both of these children's accounts of immediate loss that it is extremely difficult to be separated from parents and siblings whom they love. These experiences of immediate loss most likely will remain unresolved for the children and be added to the pervasive loss that they carry with them.

The children also experienced a threat of loss which was the final pattern observed in the area of immediate loss. The threat of loss was usually experienced when the children did not understand the constant changes in their lives. It seemed that plans and goals for the children were ever changing with many adults involved in the decisions for these changes. Quite often, the children were not informed of the decisions promptly and usually without an explanation. Significant people in their lives were also frequently replaced by other people to fill roles in the children's lives, such as case-worker, foster parent, and attorney. With so many changes in the children's lives, they seemed to try to predict changes or merely worry about possible changes. Consequently, the children were anxious and concerned about losing something or someone they relied on.

Luke experienced a threat of loss when his foster mother informed him that she did not think that he would be returned to his biological mother. Unfortunately, he did not realize that his foster mother was merely expressing an opinion which was not based on any information from the caseworker or the court. Luke trusted her and needed to believe her in order to prepare himself for the chance that she may be right.

Luke: Carol's (foster mother) cousin and husband--because I'm not going back with my mom--are going to be my godmother and godfather.

Counselor: Oh, wow this is big news! So Carol said that you are not going back to your mom ever.

Luke: Because it's been three years and if I stay with Carol this year it will be four years.

Counselor: So gosh, Luke, how do you feel about that?

Luke: (incoherent statement)

Counselor: You used to really think that you were going to get to go back home--last time I talked to you. What changed?

Luke: (pause)

As with the pervasive loss, there were accounts of immediate loss that not all of the children expressed. The unique expressions of loss serve as a constant reminder that these children are very different even though they share emotions and experiences in common. Hence, it is extremely important to remain aware of situations that one child may find disturbing, while another may be unaffected. For instance, Luke was the only child who expressed an immediate loss when he was not permitted to speak in court.

Counselor: Have you ever seen the judge?

Luke: In court only my mom could go in, but kids have to stay out.

Counselor: How does that make you feel?

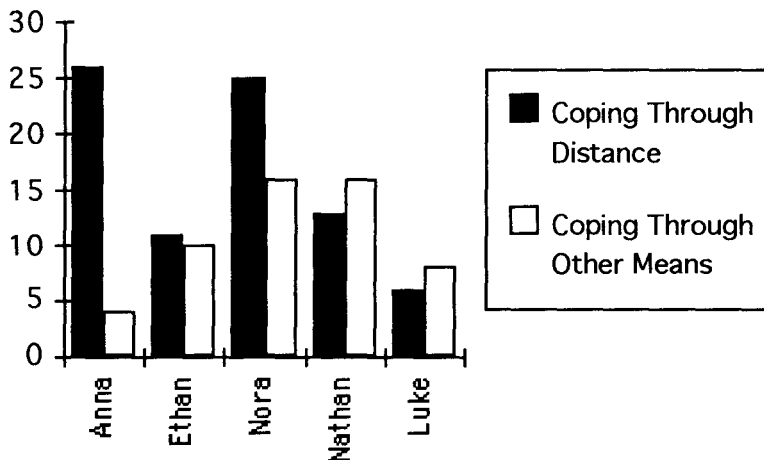
Luke: Angry.

It seemed that Luke felt a loss because he was not allowed to enter the courtroom when his case was being discussed. He may have felt angry because decisions were being made without him being present to express himself. Children are not permitted in the courtroom during proceedings in order to protect their identities. An attorney is assigned to the children so that their interests are presented and protected during the hearing. For many children in foster care, being unable to express themselves in court may not be experienced as a loss. Unfortunately, Luke felt a loss when he was unable to stand up for himself in court when decisions were being made.

Coping Strategies

The second area that will be discussed is coping strategies. Coping strategies are behaviors that the children used in order to help them deal with experiences that caused pain and suffering. The coping strategies have been divided into two subcategories: those that distanced the child from a painful issue or people in his/her life and those that involved a behavior other than distancing. Twenty-five percent of the total number of themes expressed by the children included coping strategies. Fifteen percent of the total themes consisted of behaviors that served to distance the child from the issue and/or people in his/her life. Meanwhile, 10 % of the total number of themes were coping strategies that utilized other behaviors which did not serve to distance the child.

Coping Strategies



It seemed very difficult for the children to confront their emotions and work through them. The children may not have had anyone to help them with this frightening task or they may have never had alternative means of coping modeled for them. Therefore, distancing may have been their only mode of coping with their most painful experiences.

The children were able to distance themselves from the counselor by abruptly ending or switching their play, making it difficult to follow the theme being communicated through the play. The children would also create distance by remaining silent when the counselor asked a question. It was clear during these times that the child was extremely sensitive to the subject introduced. At these sensitive moments, the children would typically change the subject by commenting on something unrelated or by asking the counselor a question that was also unrelated to the sensitive area. Nora, however, would occasionally be very direct in her need to change the focus of discussion.

Counselor: You felt very angry. What did you do?

Nora: I'll tell you later.

Counselor: Okay.

Nora: On Thursday, anytime you want me to.

During another session, Nora distances herself from the sensitive experience that occurred in court. During the visit to court, the decision was made that the foster home in which Nora and her siblings were staying was not providing proper care for the children. This court visit took place during the course of counseling.

Nora: Me and Daniel were screaming and crying because we wanted to go with our mom and the judge said no.

Counselor: That was a real hard time. How were you feeling when you were screaming and crying with Daniel at court?

Nora: It has to feel sad.

Counselor: You have to feel sad?

Nora: No, it has to feel sad.

Counselor: What are you talking about when you say it has to feel sad?

Nora: It has to be sad.

By changing the subject and referring to her emotion as an entity outside of herself, Nora tries to separate herself from the pain that is too much for her to bear. This coping strategy may be better understood by comparing it to a child who has learned to pull his/her hand away from a fire after learning that the flame causes extreme pain. Similarly, Nora is afraid of the extreme pain of experiencing these sensitive issues; consequently, she has learned to pull herself away from experiencing them.

Another behavior the children used when distancing themselves involved denying their emotion. Nora demonstrated her denial of emotion during one of her sessions.

Counselor: You sound kind of mad.

Nora: I'm not mad.

Counselor: It's okay to be mad...

Nora: I'm over it.

Counselor: What do you mean, over?

Nora: Why would I be mad when it's over?

It was clear, by the tone of her voice, that Nora did not want to discuss her anger that was detected by the counselor. Therefore, by stating that the upsetting situation is over, she indicates that she is not angry and has no need to discuss it further.

The children also used fantasy as a coping behavior that served to distance them from experiencing the pain of loss. Nathan used a fantasy to cope with the separation from his father.

Counselor: Your father was born in Canada.

Nathan: Canada?

Counselor: Yes.

Nathan: That's where I was born!

Counselor: Well, this piece of paper says that you were born in Indiana.

Nathan: I was born in Canada.

Counselor: You were born in Canada?

Nathan: Uh huh.

Counselor: Do you like to think of yourself as close to your dad--where your dad was born?

Nathan: Yes.

The fantasy of being born in the same place as his father helped Nathan feel closer to his father. Therefore, the fantasy may have served to alleviate a small portion of the pain caused by the separation from his father. It should be noted that the counselor, upon discovering the fantasy and its function, left the fantasy in tact. The fantasy and other coping strategies are important survival tools for the children and should not be taken from them. The children will let go of them once they are ready to cope with the emotions directly.

The children utilized coping strategies that involved behaviors other than distancing far less frequently. During counseling the children were introduced to other means to express their emotions. The counselor and child would find things that were enjoyable to the child that could be used as tools of expression, such as play dough, crayons, and wooden blocks. Using toys as a means of releasing their emotions seemed to be foreign to the children. Sessions focused on releasing emotions were filled with questions and wonderment, as seen in a session with Nora.

Counselor: There are a lot of things we can do if we're real angry.

Nora: What?

Counselor: We can do all sorts of things with play dough.

Nora: Or you could do a crazy sound on your drum.

Counselor: You could do crazy sound on your drum! Or you can pound a pillow. Have you ever pounded a pillow?

(Nora pounds the drum very loud.)

Counselor: Oh, very loud. I like that. Or you can scribble, scribble, scribble. Have you ever scribbled when you're angry?

Nora: I know how to scribble.

The children began to learn that toys that they had played with many times could become tools to help them express their emotion in a safe way. Play is a very natural means of expression for children; therefore, it easily may become a coping strategy that they would be able to use in a controllable manner.

At times, the children were able to use both play and verbal communication to express their emotions. This is demonstrated in a session with Nathan.

Nathan: I feel sad first and then I feel mad.

Counselor: What are you mad about?

Nathan: Um, going home.

Counselor: That you're not going home with your dad?

Nathan: Ya, that's it!

Counselor: You feel angry! Can you pound your fists?

Nathan: Yes! (Both Counselor and Nathan pound their fists on the table.)

Counselor: What else do you do when you feel angry?

Nathan: I don't know.

Counselor: Sometimes people yell when they feel angry.

Nathan: I wish I could write something.

Nathan proceeded to write on a piece of paper with markers. Since Nathan did not know how to write much more than the alphabet, his note appeared to be a colorful collage of letters. Even though Nathan was not able to tell the counselor what he wrote, the activity of writing seemed to be filled with nonverbal expressions that strengthened him.

Another coping behavior utilized by the children involved taking action in a situation, enabling them to establish control. This coping behavior was observed in

excerpts from counseling sessions of both Nathan and Nora. At the end of the following session with Nathan, he gave the counselor two pictures that he made during the session.

Nathan: I'll take this one home. You take this one.

Counselor: Do I get this one too? (Nathan had already given the counselor another picture.)

Nathan: It's up to you.

Counselor: I'd like to have it.

Nathan: Wait! Let me write my name on this one.

Counselor: Okay.

Nathan: So you don't forget my name.

Counselor: Oh, you know what Nathan? I don't think I could ever forget your name.

You are a very special boy.

Nathan was afraid that the counselor would forget him. By insisting that he put his name on the picture he gave to the counselor, he was able to actively confront his fear and possibly diffuse some of the fear. Nathan also responded actively to his fear by sharing, with the counselor, his reasons for wanting to sign the picture. Consequently, the counselor was able to help Nathan address his fear through the reassurance she gave him.

During many of Nora's counseling sessions she was very concerned with the amount of time remaining in the session because she did not want it to end.

Nora: Where's your watch?

Counselor: What?

Nora: Your watch. How many more minutes?

Counselor: Five.

Nora: And then we're going to have four.

Counselor: Four, then three, two...

Nora: One, zero.

Counselor: Right! You are counting backwards.

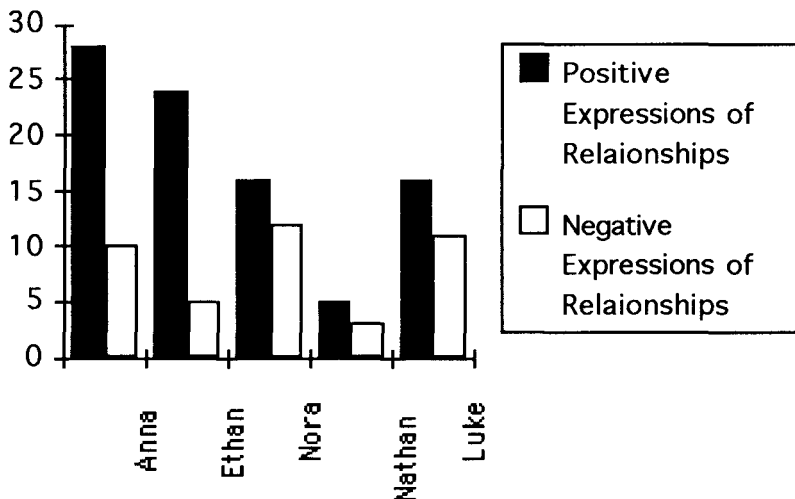
Nora: Sometimes it goes so fast.

Nora directly confronted her fear of the session ending by imagining the time running out as she counted backwards. Instead of waiting for the end of the session to arrive, Nora began to prepare herself for the end by imagining it. This seemed to help her cope with the end of the session by allowing her to experience it through her imagination with the counselor.

Expressions About Significant Relationships

The third area to be discussed includes the children's experiences with significant people in their lives. The children's expressions of their relationships with their biological and foster parents, biological and foster siblings, caseworkers, and attorneys were examined. The children were able to reflect their perspectives regarding these significant relationships. The data revealed that the children expressed thoughts and feelings about significant relationships during 24 % of the total number of themes expressed.

Expressions About Significant Relationships



The most striking pattern observed among these expressions of significant relationships is that the positive expressions of the relationships greatly outnumbered the negative expressions of the relationships. In fact, 16% of the total number of themes were positive expressions of the relationships, while only 8% of the total number of themes were negative expressions of relationships. Among the positive expressions, most were in reference to the relationships with the biological parents and siblings. It may seem unusual to observe this pattern since the home in which these relationships were established was the setting for many traumatic experiences. It should be noted that no matter how traumatic and abusive the home may have been, it was "their" home in which "their" family lived. These children clung to the image of "their" family no matter how much pain they endured when they lived with their biological parents.

The children's strong ties of loyalty to their biological parents are in place to fulfill a need. It may be that the ties of loyalty supply a sense of security to the children. In order to understand how parents who have failed the children could provide a sense of security, it is important to understand the instability that is a part of their lives.

Quite often children in the foster care system are moved from home to home. This prevents them from establishing stable relationships and a sense of family. One must understand that this type of moving can be very traumatic for children. It is not as though the children are merely moving to a different house, while remaining with the same parents and with the same family dynamics. Therefore, children in the foster care system who are experiencing frequent moves, are floating, unable to feel stable and secure. The protected image of their biological parents may give them a sense of security in knowing that they do have a family. With such a belief, they may feel more anchored, no matter how frequently their foster placement changes.

One child's expressions of significant relationships did not coincide with the pattern established by the other children. Nathan expressed little regarding significant

relationships in his life. He had been removed from his biological parents only a few months prior to counseling. In fact, at the beginning of counseling, Nathan had not yet been placed in a long term foster home. In other words, he was still placed in a temporary home, waiting to be moved. Perhaps the recent trauma of the removal from home, the loss of separation from his parents, and the instability of the placement caused him to withdraw from others. He may have been experiencing so much pain from the relationships in his life that he needed to pull away from others in order to feel safe and secure.

Expressions About the Therapeutic Process

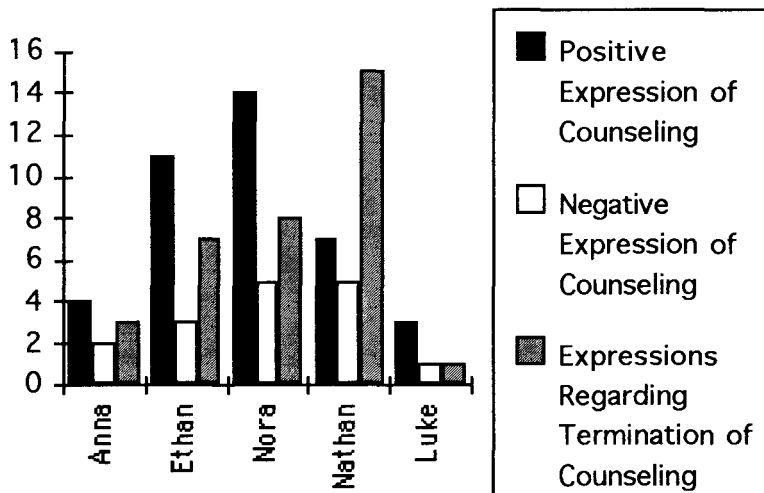
In the beginning of counseling, it was very difficult for the children to understand why they needed to attend. If asked, they would contend that their lives were just as "normal" as any other child their age, not lives filled with loss and pain. From the children's perspectives, this belief is not entirely false. Since they have experienced abuse and neglect throughout most of their young lives, an extreme level of distress, pain, and loss becomes normalized. The children grow up believing that their painful experiences at home were ones that every child acquired. In other words, the children do not believe that they need counseling, since their lives are just like any other child's life. Consequently, most of the children began counseling wondering, "Why do I need to see a counselor?"

Children that have normalized experiences of pain and abuse see the world through very different eyes. They see a world that is cruel and unjust. With such a belief system, children expect to experience further disappointment and pain from people they encounter in their schools, churches, and neighborhoods. Ethan revealed his view of the world during a session spent playing with play dough. He had just finished making a globe of the earth when he remarked, "The world is tough." Ethan expressed this belief in a very matter-of-fact tone, as if everyone knew it to be true. This is a startling remark

to hear from a young boy, especially since most children his age still have an innocent sense of trust in the world.

The children expressed thoughts and feelings regarding the counseling relationship and the counseling process during 16% of the total number of themes expressed. There did not seem to be a striking pattern in the expressions of the counseling relationship. As demonstrated in the chart below, the children had varying expressions regarding the counseling they received.

Expressions About the Therapeutic Process



Three of the children, Nora, Ethan, and Luke, expressed a significant amount of positive feelings regarding the counseling relationship and the counseling they were receiving. Luke expressed positive feelings toward the counselor through his artwork. During a session, Luke did not have time to complete a picture of the counselor.

Counselor: What would you like me to be doing if you had time to finish the picture?

Luke: Helping!

In this one word statement, Luke expressed that he saw the counselor as one that helps. It may also be that he felt the counselor had helped him during the session, providing a

relationship in which he felt safe to discuss sensitive issues. During that session, Luke had discussed being removed from his home.

Anna's expression of the counseling relationship was minimal. This is not surprising considering her defense strategy had been to convince herself and everyone around her that everything was fine. In fact, Anna always tried to express positive feelings in order to protect herself from the pain with which her life was saturated. Hence, Anna could not engage in a open relationship in which she would have had to express emotions regarding the counselor and sensitive issues in her life. If she had engaged in a counseling relationship in which she could express herself openly, she would have felt vulnerable since she would have been without her defense.

Nathan, as mentioned earlier, was removed from his home less than a year before counseling began. Unlike the other children, Nathan did not express many feelings regarding any of his relationships. He seemed to be withdrawing from relationships. This withdrawal may have been due to his pain that hindered his sense of trust. Throughout most of the sessions, the counselor noted that the counseling relationship seemed to be developing very slowly. In fact, at the time termination was introduced, the counselor felt that the counseling relationship was under developed considering the amount of time spent together. During the process of termination, which lasted approximately six weeks, a drastic change took place in the counseling relationship. Nathan began expressing a lot of positive feelings toward the counselor which was contrary to his level of minimal expression. The following is an excerpt from a session with Nathan in which termination was discussed.

Counselor: How do you feel about saying good-bye? Draw me a face showing how you feel about saying good-bye.

Nathan: Watch this. This is how I feel: two eyes, nose, and a sad face.

(A few minutes later Nathan continues.)

Nathan: This is how I feel when you're here. When you're here--watch this.

Counselor: Oh, a nice big, happy smile. You know how I feel when I have to say good-bye to you?

Nathan: What? Oh, I know how! Sad. (He begins to draw again.) Watch this.

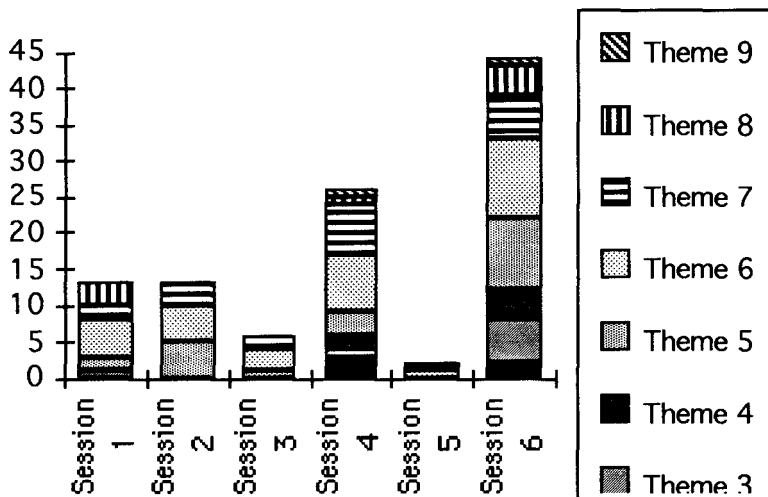
Counselor: What are those?

Nathan: Tears.

Counselor: A sad face. You are right, I'll be sad.

The counseling sessions in which the children could express feelings regarding relationships and experiences varied tremendously. During one session, a child may express a spectrum of emotions in regards to several issues. However, during another session, the same child may not express any feelings; while, still another session may be dominated by only one emotion. The variance in the level of expression illustrates that the children dictated the pace of the sessions, customizing them to meet their needs of emotional security. To further explain the differences in the sessions, several of Ethan's sessions have been divided according to the amount of each theme expressed.

Themes Expressed in Sessions



Examining several of the sessions, it becomes apparent that the number of themes expressed during each session varied considerably. Ethan expressed the themes that he needed to at those times. During some of the sessions Ethan remained focused on only a few themes; while, during other sessions he jumped from one theme to another rather quickly. The counselor allowed the sessions to be dictated by the children to promote a sense of security and empowerment in the children during the counseling sessions.

In this chapter, the results were presented within four major areas: expressions of loss, coping strategies, reflections about significant relationships, and expressions about the therapeutic process. The subjective experiences of the children were revealed in the themes expressed in these four areas. It is important to emphasize that the children were able to communicate clearly their thoughts, feelings, and needs which allowed one to better understand their subjective experiences.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research demonstrates the importance of the child's subjective experience. Through the literature review, it is apparent that researchers and clinicians need to listen carefully to the children so that they are better able to meet the children's needs. In order to understand the subjective experiences of the children, naturalistic research was conducted, using the heuristic paradigm. The chosen methodology allowed for the study of the client-counselor relationship without the interference of research constraints that may have hindered the relationship.

The results demonstrated similarities and differences between the children within four major areas: expressions of loss, coping strategies, expressions about significant relationships, and expressions about the therapeutic process. The similarities are emphasized throughout this study for the purpose of revealing the experiences that children in the foster care system share. However, it is extremely important to remain sensitive and accepting of differences that are invariably part of every child's experience. The expressions of the children, whether similar or different, provide evidence that the children's subjective experiences are rich in information that would indeed be valuable for clinicians and researchers that are working with children in the foster care system.

In review of the study, two implications become apparent. The first implication involves the alarming amount of loss that the children expressed. By attention being given to the loss, this study is not advocating that children should remain in their homes to avoid any further loss that may be experienced when removed from the home. In contrast, some of the loss is inevitable in order for the children to be protected. In other

words, many children need to be removed from a home that is neglectful and harmful so that they may be protected. The removal from the home will most likely result in a loss caused by separation . In order to truly help these children, clinicians need to be aware and prepared to attend to the children's powerful sense of loss.

The second implication discourages an approach and treatment plan used to service every child entering foster care. The number of children that need direct, intensive services everyday through foster care is astounding. It is difficult to service all of these children on a daily basis. Consequently, the child welfare system has adopted a strategy that allows for a great number of children to be serviced in an efficient, productive manner by utilizing a standard approach and treatment plan. As a result, the individual needs of the children are frequently lost. There is not just one treatment plan that would be appropriate for every child. In other words, the children should not be treated as if they are moving down an assembly line. As helpers in the field of child welfare, we need to stop and listen to what the children are feeling and experiencing in order to assess their needs and develop a treatment plan based on those needs.

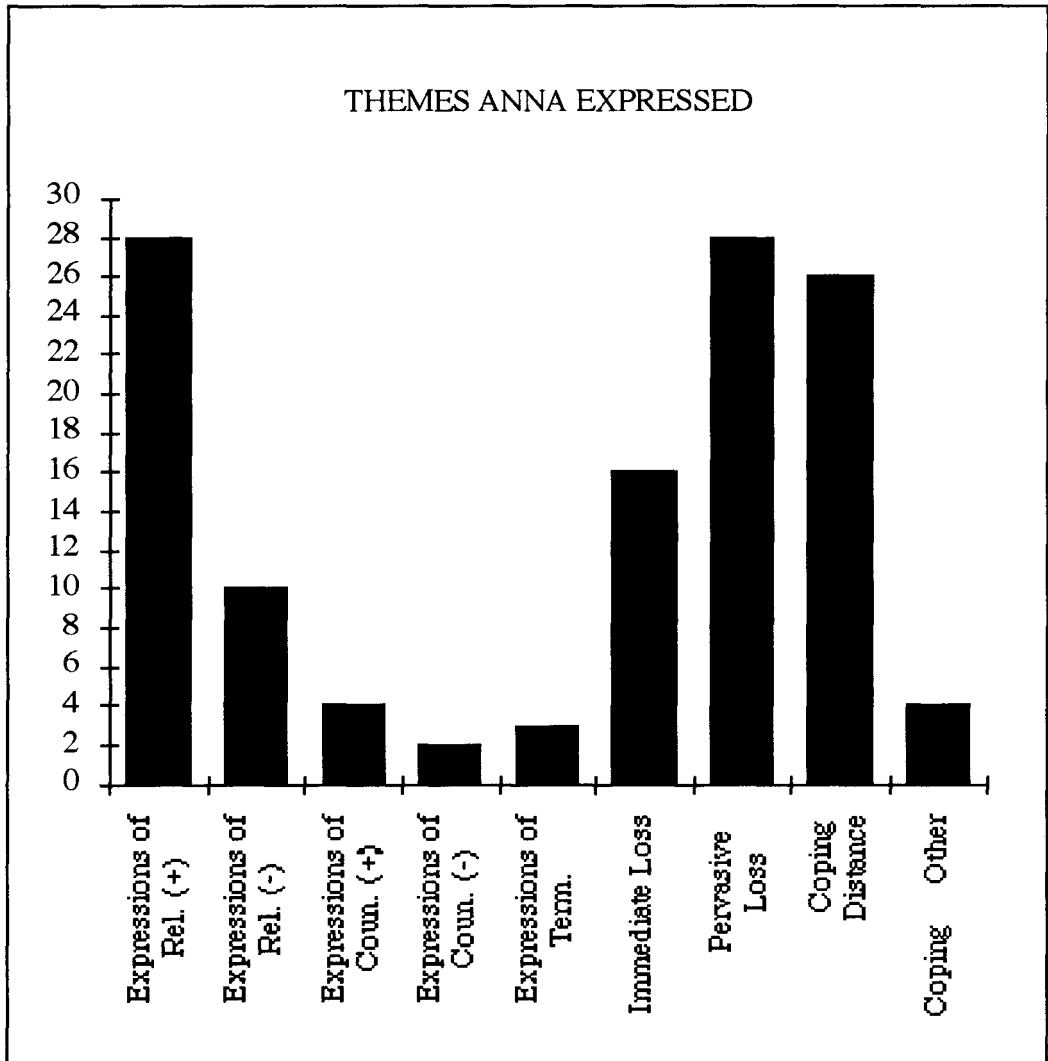
Developing individualized treatment plans for every child and family that enters the child welfare system may seem to be an impossible task with the great numbers of children and families entering the system daily. It does not seem that a solution is clear. The question remains, how does such an immense system begin to service children and families on an individualized basis? The answer is likely to surface with more research that examines the experiences of children and families within the system, allowing for adjustments and alterations to be made in their treatment plans. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the children's subjective experiences in the foster care system, as this area of research has been sorely neglected.

The next step in research may be to listen to children within different areas of the foster care system, such as specialized, treatment, and relative foster care. Such research

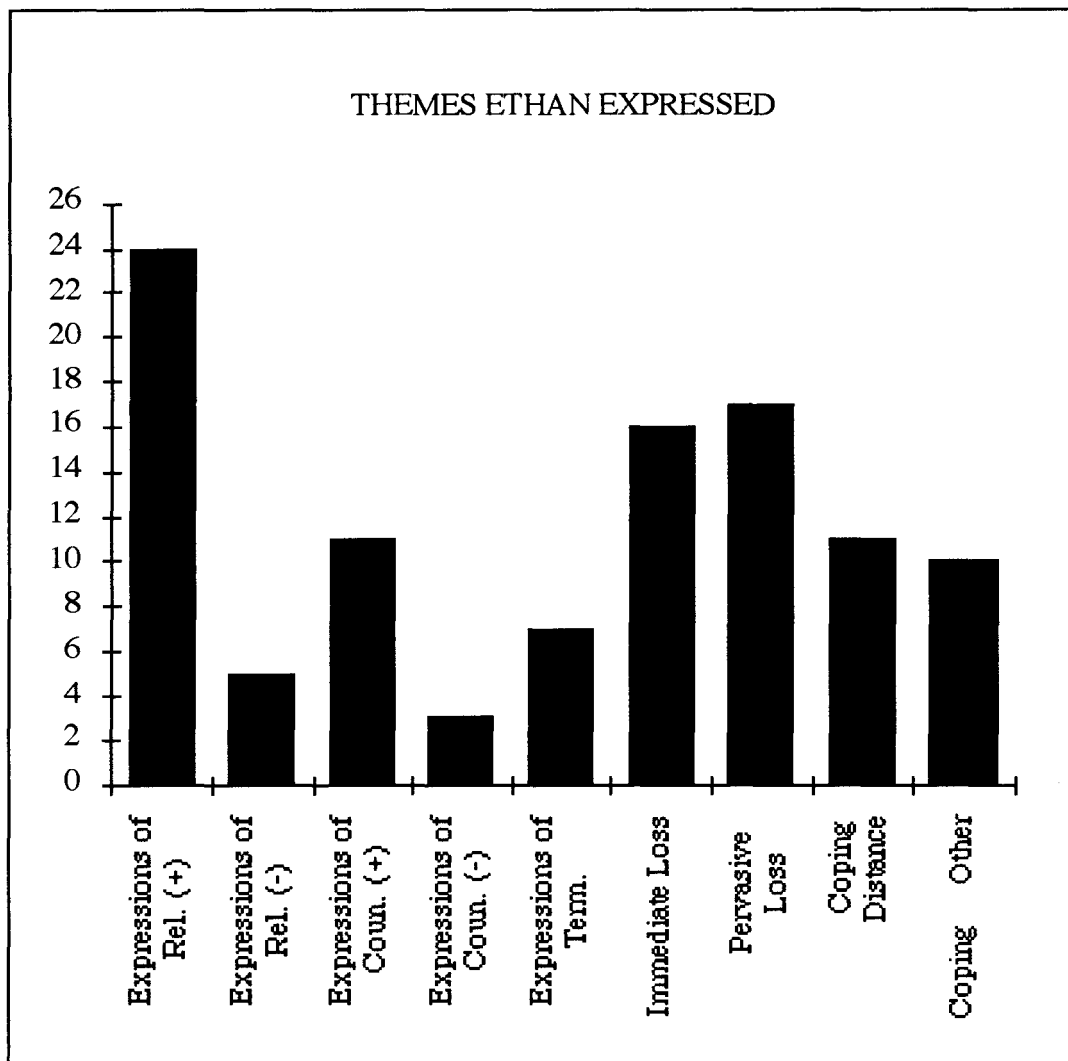
would provide the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the differences in the children's subjective experiences that are influenced by race, gender, age, and culture. The findings from such research could be used to aid in the development of treatment plans that are more sensitive to the children's individual experiences during a traumatic time in their young lives.

In conclusion, the value of the children's subjective experiences needs to be recognized and used in the research and treatment of children in foster care. By listening to the subjective experiences of the children, one is given a window into their world. Without knowledge of a child's world, including his/her emotional and physical experiences, it is impossible to meet the child's needs.

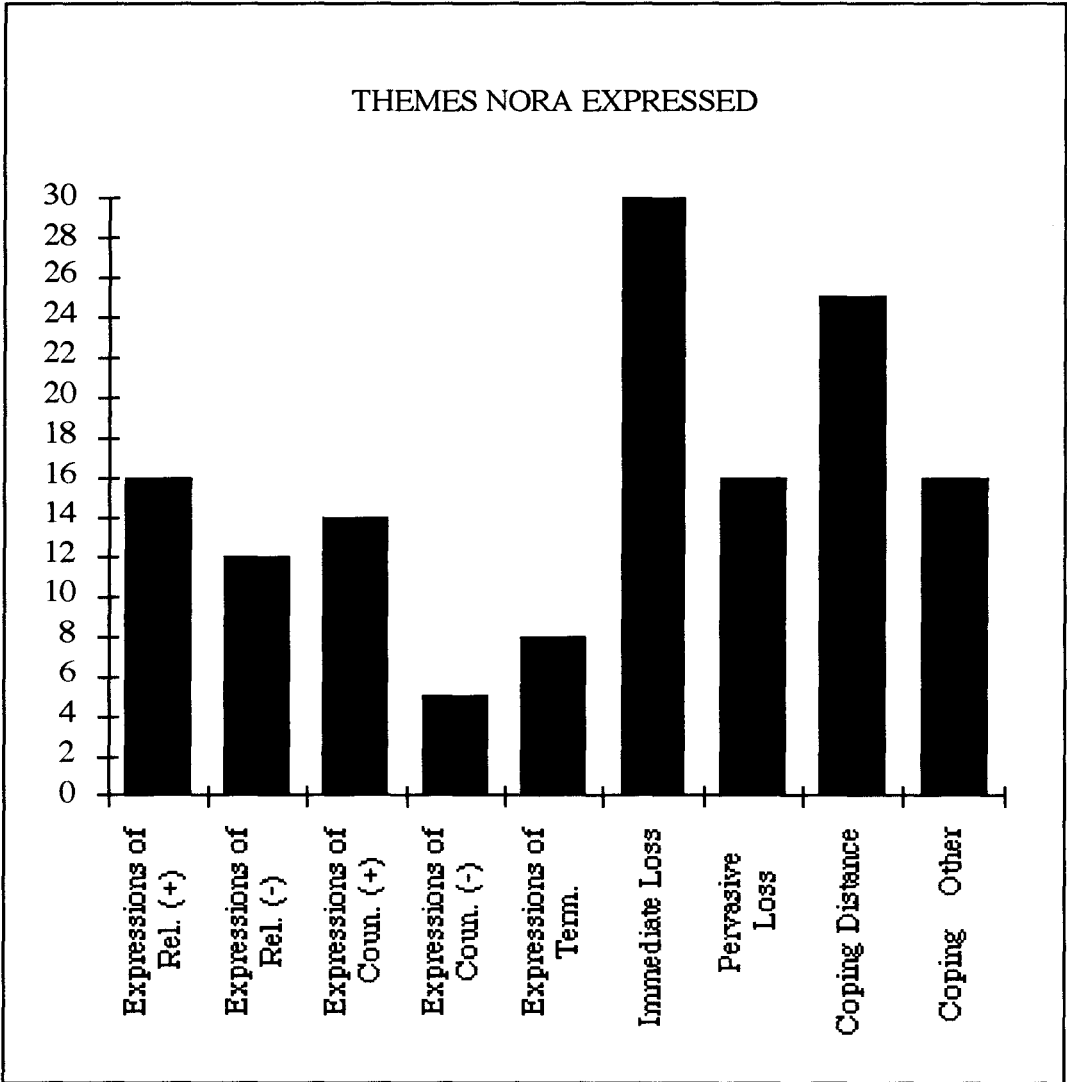
Appendix A



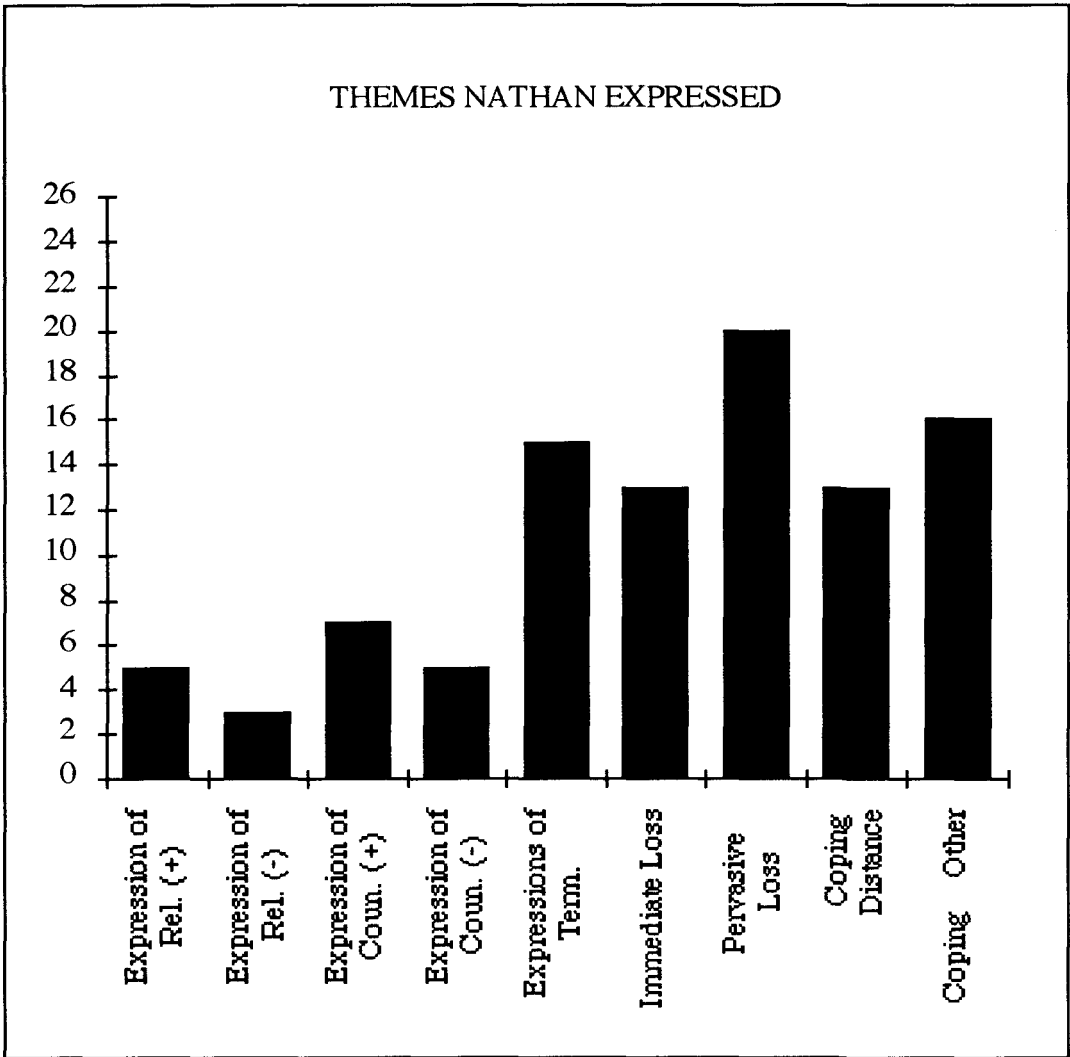
Appendix B



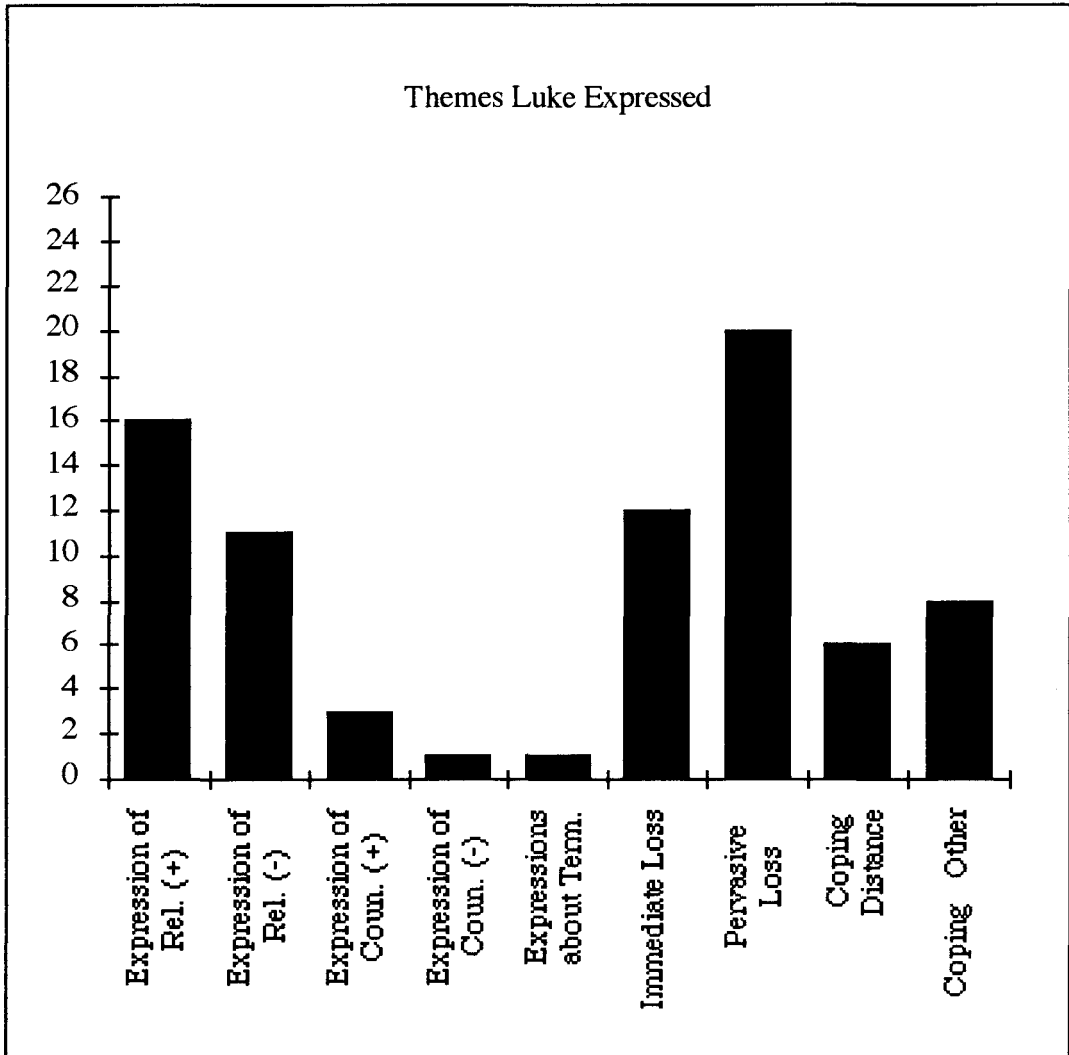
Appendix C



Appendix D



Appendix E



Appendix F

CODING MANUAL

Below I have briefly defined some of the common themes that surfaced in the counseling sessions with the children. There are eight themes in total. Each theme represents an area of the child's life in which he/she may have strong feelings. For the first five themes examples have been given of both positive and negative ways in which they may be expressed. When available, the data needs to be coded in these negative and positive sub-categories.

1. Relationship with case worker and GAL

The case worker includes the person at the Association House and the person in the Department of Children and Family Services that manages the child's case. Therefore, each child at the Association House has two case managers. The case manager that works for the Association House has more direct contact with the child than the case manager from DCFS. The GAL is the Guardian Adlietum; in other words, he/she is the child's attorney.

-Negative Feelings--The child may feel anger toward the case worker for not keeping a promise. The child may blame the case worker or the GAL for reduction of parent/child visits. The child may also feel unsafe and mistrustful when in the care of the case worker and/or the GAL.

-Positive Feelings--The child may have feelings of security when with the case worker and/or GAL. These people may bring hope and empowerment to the child when they spend time with him/her.

2. Feelings regarding testimony

The children speak to the GAL prior to the time their case is called before the judge. The children are not permitted in the court room in order to protect them. The GAL needs to review any changes that have occurred in their case with the children and confirm any information they have received from the foster parents, biological parents, and the case worker.

-Negative Feelings--The child may feel that their testimony was responsible for the separation of their family. He/She may also blame themselves for any pain their parents encounter due to their testimony.

-Positive Feelings--The child may feel proud of their testimony; fore, it may have saved them from anymore pain experienced while with the biological parents. They may also feel that they simply did the right thing.

3. Relationship with biological parents

This theme refers to the relationship the child has with their biological parents, including one or both of the parents.

-Negative Feelings--The child may have feelings of resentment and/or anger stemmed from promises left broken and visits forgotten.

-Positive Feelings--The child may speak only of love for their parents regardless of abuse or neglect. The child may also be sad because he/she misses the parents and longs to be with them.

4. Relationship with foster parents

This theme refers to the relationship the child has with his/her foster parents. The foster parents are often referred to by the child as mom and dad just as their biological parents are.

-Negative Feelings--The child may communicate feelings of anger towards the foster parent or he/she may have only ambivalent feelings regarding the foster parents.

-Positive Feelings--The child may feel love and happiness towards the foster parents. The child may feel very grateful for the care given to them in the foster home. These positive feelings may be so strong that the child may have temporarily replaced their biological parents with their foster parents.

5. Relationship with counselor

Feelings that the child may have for the counselor may be expressed in very subtle ways or they may be shared in a direct and open manner.

-Negative Feelings--The child may not want to share his/her feelings, denying that anything is bothering them while sulking in the playroom. (lack of trust)

-Positive Feelings--The child may express their affection towards the counselor by giving her a treasured artwork. Trust in the counselor may be seen in the openness of sensitive issues. Other positive feelings may be expressed by a longing for the session to continue after the hour is over or by a disappointed reaction to vacation the counselor has planned for the holidays.

-5T--This category involves feelings the child has toward the counselor during termination. In other words, the feelings the child experiences during termination may be seen as reflections of the child's feelings for the counselor and the counseling process. Termination of counseling is most often felt as a loss. The loss of termination was not included in the theme referring to loss since it seems to be entangled in the child's feelings toward the counselor and the counseling process. Therefore, the experience of loss during termination may be better distinguished and understood when it is examined in conjunction with the child's feelings toward the counselor and the counseling process.

6. Response to loss

This may be the largest theme, covering many feelings expressed in the counseling session. A sense of loss is probably felt by these children most of the time; fore, they are in foster care because they have lost their family. A feeling of loss may also be caused by a disruption in the counseling session. Loss may be felt when their biological parents do not attend a visit or a case worker does not pick them up for counseling. Some of the feelings of loss may be fear, anger, sadness, loneliness, and aggression. This is such a large theme since each child's response to loss may be different. Therefore, I am not dividing the theme into many different responses that may be exhibited; rather, I am including different types of losses that the children experienced. The children's responses will be discussed at a later time.

- a. response to immediate experience of loss or a threat of loss
- b. behavior expresses more pervasive feelings of loss

7. Coping strategies that help the children endure loss

The child may build up defenses in the face of great loss. In other words, the child may have adopted behaviors that help them deal with the loss in their lives. This is not a theme that may be divided into positive and negative subcategories. Regardless of the behavior the child engages in to withstand the loss, he/she is coping with a tremendous amount of loss which is positive in and of itself.

Examples of coping behavior that a child may demonstrate may be to always interpret situations as having a good outcome no matter how disappointed he/she is. Such a behavior involves the child's ability to immediately change their expectations and justify the behavior of others in order to insure that the outcome is good. Another example of coping behavior is the refusal to speak during a session. At this time the child may want to continue playing with the counselor, but may not want to speak. By refusing

to communicate verbally the client may be creating a sense of security for themselves. In other words, the behavior may be increasing their sense of security until the child feels safe during the counseling session to speak.

- a. coping strategies that serve to distance the child from issues of pain and loss
- b. other coping strategies that do not serve to distance the child

8. Relationship with biological siblings

The child's siblings are not always placed in the same home. The child may see their siblings during visitation meetings. The siblings may be seen more often at school or church depending on the placement. The relationship to the siblings may often be felt as a strong connection to the biological family. Consequently, the relationship to a sibling may be very important to the child's security in the biological family. A child may express their feelings toward siblings verbally or through acts, such as giving a drawing to a brother or sister. A child may also become extremely protective of his/her siblings.

-Negative Feelings--The child may express conflict with siblings. Although this may be an expected part of a sibling relationship, these children normally avoid such conflicts or the conflicts are quickly resolved. It may be that the connection to the biological family is too precious to risk losing through conflict with siblings.

-Positive Feelings--Positive feelings may be seen through praise of a sibling, or a visit that is being anticipated. These feelings may also be expressed through a longing or sadness that is felt due to the separation between placements.

9. Relationship with foster siblings

This theme refers to the feelings the child may have towards the foster parents natural children. Quite often these other children become foster siblings to the child. In other words, the child thinks of the other children as brothers and sisters.

-Negative Feelings

-Positive Feelings

Appendix G

CASE DESCRIPTION

Anna

Age: 12

Race: Hispanic

Date of Removal From Home: 1991

Reason for Removal: neglect and risk of
harm

Number of Placements: 3

Separated From Siblings: yes

Ethan

Age: 9

Race: Hispanic

Date of Removal : 1991

Reason for Removal: neglect

Number of Placements: 3

Separated from Siblings: yes

Nora

Age: 6

Race: Hispanic

Date of Removal: 1991

Reason for Removal: neglect

Number of Placements: 4

Separated from Siblings: yes

Nathan

Age: 6

Race: Hispanic

Date of Removal: 1993

Reason for Removal: neglect and risk of
harm

Number of Placements: 2

Separated from Siblings: no

Luke

Age: 8

Race: Hispanic

Date of Removal: 1992

Reason of Removal: neglect and risk of
harm

Number of Placements: 2

Separated from Siblings: all but 1

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VITA

The author, Jane E. Sears, was born on October 14, 1969 in Pana, Illinois. Her family settled in Canton, Ohio where she spent most of her childhood.

In September of 1988, Ms. Sears entered Wittenberg University, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in June, 1992. Her experience during the four years at Wittenberg included: an internship with the Child and Adolescent Family Center, an internship with the Drop-Out Prevention Program, presentation of a paper at the 1992 Midwestern Region Psi Chi Conference, and volunteer work on a suicide prevention hotline.

In September, 1992, Ms. Sears entered Loyola University Chicago in the community counseling program. Her practicum experience consisted of a year of individual and group counseling with children in the foster care system. While attending Loyola, she worked on a research team, studying media's effect on the body image of women. Ms. Sears is a Master of Arts candidate for graduation in January of 1995.

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and the thesis is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

12/2/94

Date

Carol Harding

Director's Signature