Sibling Separation and Birth Family Reunion in Adoption: Perspectives of Social Workers and Adoptees

being a Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology in the University of Hull

by

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of the social workers who met with me and allowed me to enter into their world. Without their openness and willingness to take part, this research would not have been possible. Thank you to all the managers too, who were keen to help me throughout the recruitment process and see this research project be a success.

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I’d like to acknowledge my research supervisor, Annette, for their guidance throughout this process. Thank you for helping me to think, and encouraging me to pursue research in something that I believed in. Thank you also to Lesley and Tim for their guidance, advice and prompt responses throughout the course.

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Jim, thank you for being there for me emotionally and practically, particularly during the write up period when you have known what I have needed and done it without me needing to ask.

Thank you to my friends and fellow trainees for sharing the last three years with me. Particularly for motivating me over the last few months, keeping me company during those long days in the library, for keeping me on track and for helping me to see the light at the end of the tunnel!
Overview

This thesis portfolio is comprised of three parts:

Part One – Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review explored adoptees’ experiences of reunions with birth relatives in adulthood. Thirteen studies were identified to be reviewed through a systematic search of electronic databases. A narrative synthesis of the findings related to the types of relationships developed, impact of the reunion and factors that facilitated or hindered this process is provided. A review of methodological quality of the research is also offered. Important clinical implications, including a role for clinical psychologists, and recommendations for future research are identified.

Part Two – Empirical Paper

The empirical paper explored social workers’ experiences of deciding how to place siblings for adoption using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four superordinate and twelve subordinate themes were identified, which describe participants’ experiences of making decisions, and the role of their experiences and beliefs in the decision-making process. The findings are discussed in relation to theory and a decision-making model. Clinical implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Part Three – Appendices

The appendices provide supporting documentation that are important for the systematic literature review and empirical paper, plus a reflective statement and an epistemological statement.

Total Word Count: 34,888 (including abstracts, tables and appendices, excluding references)
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Part One – Systematic Literature Review

This paper is written in the format ready for submission the journal

Clinical Psychology Review.

Please see Appendix C for the submission guidelines.
Post-Adoption Reunion Relationships in Adulthood: A Systematic Literature Review Considering the Development of Reunion Relationships

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Abstract

Post-adoption reunions with birth family are seen as a developmental task for adoptees. However, no systematic review has examined the types of relationships that develop or the factors that facilitate and hinder this process. This systematic literature review aims to understand the impact of reunions, the types of relationships that develop, and the factors that facilitate and hinder this process. Thirteen papers exploring post-adoption reunions with various birth relatives were identified to match the inclusion criteria, and evaluated. The review found that adoptees generally develop friendship-style relationships with birthparents, and that relationships developed with birth siblings are often more personal. Reunions have a considerable impact on adoptees’ sense of identity. The review identified a number of critical factors that play a role in this process. However, the methodological quality of these studies was generally poor and the studies were inconsistent in terms of their design. This review identifies important clinical implications, proposing a role for clinical psychologists in facilitating reunions. However there is also a need for future research to overcome the limitations of the poor methodological quality of the current literature.

Keywords: adoption; reunion; relationship; birth; review
Introduction

Historically adoption was a closed and secret event, characterised by the ‘sealed record’ where details of an individual’s birth family were hidden. In 1975 British adoption legislation changed dramatically following research by Triseliotis (1973) demonstrating that secrecy in adoption is associated with a negative impact on adoptees’ identity, self-worth and mental health (Carp, 2007). This resulted in the creation of Section 26 of the Children Act 1975 (Children Act, 1975), enabling adult adoptees to obtain a copy of their birth certificate and thus search for birth relatives. Today, a number of countries including the United States, Canada and Australia have also allowed adoptees access to their adoption records and have therefore given them the opportunity to search for birth family members (Carp, 2007). This development has presented a new set of challenges for adoptees and professionals working with adoptees.

The desire to search for birth relatives is viewed as a universal experience (Sachdev, 1992) and a normal development task for adoptees (Brodzinsky, 1987). Since the opening up of adoption, it is estimated that around 40 to 55% of British adoptees will initiate a search for birth family at some point in their lives (Carp, 2007; Feast & Howe, 1997), and about half of individuals who search aim to meet birthparents (Muller & Perry, 2001a). There is a substantial literature pool on the reasons why adoptees search. A review by Muller and Perry (2001a) suggested that motives for searching are mostly identity-related, for example to fill a void, to feel complete, or to gain factual or medical information; this reportedly enables adoptees to form a more cohesive identity and allow intergenerational continuity. For adolescents to develop a stable sense of self and identity, they must be able to link their sense of self with their cultural and biological background (Brodzinsky, 1987), explaining why identity formation is a primary motivator for adoptees to search for birth relatives. Other motives for searching
included curiosity, the need to share a period of life lost due to separation, and, less commonly, wanting to build a relationship (Muller and Perry, 2001a). The importance of significant others in aiding the decision-making process has been highlighted (Muller & Perry, 2001a). Therefore adoptees are motivated to search for birth relatives for various reasons, primarily linked to their sense of identity and gaining information that may help this process of identity formation.

Building relationships with birth relatives is a complex process as there are no social guidelines, norms, or models for individuals on which to base the development of their relationship (Modell, 1997; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). By understanding what types of relationships develop in post-adoption reunions, and what helps or hinders this process, professionals can support and guide adoptees in the process.

Research most commonly considers the reunion between adoptees and their birthmothers (Miall & March, 2005). This may be explained in part by adoptees appearing to be primarily interested in reuniting with their birthmothers (Trinder, Feast & Howe, 2004). However, evidence suggests that many adult adoptees are also interested in meeting their birthfathers (e.g. Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1976; Passmore & Feeney, 2009) and siblings (e.g. Mullender & Kearns, 1997). Therefore, this review will include literature that considers reunions with all birth family members.

A previous literature review by Muller and Perry (2001b) has suggested that benefits of contact between adoptees and their birthparents include improved identity and self-esteem, with no negative impact on adoptees’ relationships with their birthparents. Muller and Perry (2001b) also proposed implications for post-adoption counsellors, including preparing adoptive parents for the possibility that their child may wish to
search, and helping adoptees to consider their expectations and feelings about their birthparents (Muller & Perry, 2001b). Although this review was helpful in synthesising related literature, it was not carried out systematically and thus may have missed important articles. In addition, it was carried out over fifteen years ago and the literature base has grown since then. Therefore, the current systematic literature review aims to extend findings by systematically reviewing the literature, and by including research that has been carried out both before and since 2001.

The aim of this review is to explore adult adoptees’ experiences of reuniting with birth relatives in adulthood. The focus of the review will be the adoptees’ experience, as opposed to the experience of other members of the adoption triad (birth family members or adoptive family members). This will help to gain a full understanding of the adoptees’ perspective. It is likely that birthparent and adoptive parent experiences will be different to adoptee experiences, which justifies focusing on the adoptees alone.

Research questions:

1. What types of relationships develop between adult adoptees and their birth relatives following reunion?
2. What impact does adoption reunion have on adult adoptees?
3. What factors facilitate and hinder the reunion process?

Method

Search strategy

This review aims to examine the current literature that explores adoptees’ experiences of reunions with birth relatives in adulthood. Search terms were generated after scoping of the literature. These search terms were divided into four categories:
1. Terms relating to adoption: ‘adoption’ or ‘permanence’

2. Terms relating to birth family members: ‘sibling’ or ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ or ‘parent’ or ‘mother’ or ‘father’ or ‘mum’ or ‘dad’ or ‘family’ or ‘origin’ or ‘biological’ or ‘birth’

3. Terms relating to reunion: ‘reunion’ or ‘reunification’ or ‘post-reunion’ or ‘post-reunification’ or ‘contact’ or ‘post-adoption’

4. Terms relating to adulthood: ‘adult’

Truncations of search terms (e.g. adopt*) were used to broaden the search to include various word endings and spellings, and thus to ensure that all possible articles were identified. The search was completed in January 2017.

Six databases were searched: Medline, CINAHL, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Web of Science, and International Bibliography of the Social Sciences. These databases were chosen in order to identify papers from a range of disciplines within health and social care. Additional articles were found by manually searching the reference lists of identified and included articles.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

The following inclusion criteria were applied:

(i) Focus on the adoptees’ experience, not other members of the adoption triad.

(ii) Focus on adoptees’ experience of the reunion, and on understanding the relationships that develop, impact of the reunion, and factors that facilitate or hinder the reunion process.

(iii) Experience of reunion only, not searching or deciding to search.
(iv) A focus on domestic adoption only as inter-country or interracial adoption brings in further complexities that are beyond the scope of this work (Baden, 2002).

(v) Reunion in adulthood only, not adolescence or childhood.

(vi) Empirical articles only.

(vii) Published in peer-reviewed journals.

(viii) Written in English.

(ix) Qualitative and quantitative articles were included as the literature base in this area is limited and both types of data inform the research question.

Article selection summary

Studies were identified using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009). The initial search conducted in January 2017 resulted in a total of 1,017 studies. The peer-review limiter was then applied, leaving 926 studies remaining. The author then compared databases, identifying 314 duplicates, which left a total of 612 studies. The titles and abstracts of these studies were consequently reviewed to assess applicability to the topic, resulting in 33 eligible studies. The full texts of these studies were examined, applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in a total of 12 studies. Finally, the reference lists were manually searched, identifying 1 study. A total of 13 studies met the criteria and thus were included in this review (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Flowchart showing the study selection process
Data extraction
Key information that was extracted included the following information: aims and research questions; design methodology; sample characteristics (size of sample, gender, age, type of adoption and reunion); measurement tools; and results relating to types of relationships developed, impact on adoptees and facilitating or hindering factors (See Appendix D).

Quality assessment
Methodological quality of the studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Pluye et al., 2011; Appendix E). Due to the variety of methodologies used by the studies this tool was considered appropriate in order to allow qualitative and quantitative studies to be appraised and compared against each other. The MMAT consists of questions that relate to each separate design. Each question has a choice of answers: ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘can’t tell’. A response of ‘yes’ is given a score of 1 and a response of ‘no’ or ‘can’t tell’ is given a score of 0. The scores on the relevant areas were totalled and divided by the number of questions, providing a percentage quality score for each study. For mixed methods studies, the overall quality could not exceed the quality of its weakest component so the overall quality score was the lowest score of the study components. The score could range from 0% (poor quality) to 100% (good quality). Four studies (one high quality, two middle quality, and one low quality) were reviewed by another researcher to assess inter-rater reliability (mean = 87.5%, range = 75-100%). Where discrepancies occurred, these were discussed until a consensus could be reached.

Data analysis
A narrative synthesis method was chosen to analyse the data. Guidance developed by Popay et al. (2006) was consulted to guide this process. After data extraction, textual
descriptions of the results were organised based on whether they described relationships
developed, the impact of reunions, or identified facilitating or hinder factors. This
allowed the studies to be compared against each other, establishing similarities and
differences between the findings. Quality assessment scores were consulted to
contextualise findings.

**Researcher’s Position**

The researcher was aware of their own personal beliefs about the sensationalization of
post-adoption reunions with birth relatives portrayed by the media. This impacted on the
researcher’s expectations of the findings of the review, where they expected to find a
more balanced, or perhaps negative, experience of post-adoption reunions than depicted
in current television programmes. The researcher attempted to step back from these
beliefs and remain neutral during the research process, including data collection and
analysis, by utilising research meetings and research reflective practice groups to reflect
on these beliefs.

**Results**

Table 1 presents a summary of the articles included within the review.

**Methodological Quality**

The studies included in this review achieved scores of 25% (n=4), 50% (n=1), 75%
(n=6) and 100% (n=1) (see Appendix F) so it appears that the quality of the data is
mixed. The main problematic area in qualitative studies was whether appropriate
consideration was given to how findings related to the context in which the data was
collected. Quantitative studies generally omitted details of measurement tools and had
low response rates.
Research Characteristics

Eight studies included in this review used quantitative methods (Campbell et al., 1991; Howe & Feast, 2001; Muller et al., 2003; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1974, 1976). Four studies used qualitative methods (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; O’Neill, McAuley & Loughran, 2014; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Richardson, Davey & Swint, 2013), and one used mixed methods (Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

Countries where the studies originated varied, with seven studies originating in America, one in Ireland (O’Neill, et al., 2014), two in Australia (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009), two in Canada (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Sachdev, 1992), and one in the UK (Howe & Feast, 2001).

Four studies examined adoptees’ reunion with any birth relative (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Muller et al., 2003; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1976), four studies examined the reunion with birthparents (Campbell, et al., 1991; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988), three studies examined the reunion with birthmother only (Howe & Feast, 2001; Richardson et al., 2013; Sorosky et al., 1974), one study examined the reunion with birthfathers only (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009) and one study examined the reunion with birth siblings only (O’Neill et al., 2014).

Descriptions of measurement tools varied. Only one study used standardised measurement tools (Muller et al., 2003). Most studies did not describe their measurement tool, with the exception of two that described their qualitative interview.
schedule (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Richardson et al, 2013); two that described their idiosyncratic questionnaires (Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Sachdev, 1992); and five that described the analysis they employed (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Muller et al., 2003; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Richardson et al., 2013).

Sample Characteristics

Sample sizes varied. For the qualitative studies, they ranged from 9 to 67, for the quantitative studies they ranged from 11 to 124 and the mixed methods study had 18 participants. The majority of participants were female (82% of all participants), with two studies only including female participants (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Richardson et al., 2013).

Five studies used subsamples from larger studies to address their research questions (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Howe & Feast, 2001; Muller et al., 2003; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). One study used snowball sampling (Richardson et al., 2013) and one study used random sampling (Pacheco & Eme, 1993). One study reported response rate (Pacheco & Eme, 1993), and another study acknowledged the importance of response rates but was unable to calculate this due to their sampling strategy (Sachdev, 1992).

Information regarding adoption and reunion characteristics also varied. Seven studies reported the age at which adoptees had been adopted. With the exception of two participants from two separate studies (O’Neill et al., 2014; Sorosky et al., 1974) all adoptees within these studies had been adopted before the age of two years. The remaining six studies did not report this information. Eight studies reported how long prior to the study the reunion had taken place. This varied from a few weeks (Passmore
& Chipuer, 2009) to 34 years (Muller et al., 2003). One study investigated the long-term outcome of reunions so only recruited participants who had experienced a reunion at least eight years prior to the study (Howe & Feast, 2001). Only one study described the number of individuals who were still in contact with their birth relatives (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009). Most studies were not clear about whether participants had experienced reunions with other birth relatives.
### Table 1. Characteristics of included studies with quality rating scores.

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<tr>
<th>Author(s) Date</th>
<th>Author(s) Date</th>
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<th>Design</th>
<th>Characteristics of participants</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
<th>Quality rating</th>
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<tr>
<td>Campbell, Silverman &amp; Patti (1991) America</td>
<td>Experienced adoptees who had reunions with their birthparents</td>
<td>Quantitative, descriptive statistics</td>
<td>N = 114 11 Male, 103 Female Mean age at reunion 31.7 years (range 16-54 years) Opportunity sampling</td>
<td>Idiosyncratic questionnaire Precoded and open-ended questions.</td>
<td>Delays in contact attributed to practical reasons (e.g. distance, money, work schedules) or because they needed time. Emotional descriptions of reunion.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gladstone &amp; Westhues (1998) Canada</td>
<td>Understanding the types of relationships that develop between adoptees and birth relatives, and factors that relate to the development of different relationships.</td>
<td>Qualitative, thematic &amp; content analysis</td>
<td>N = 67 13 Male, 54 Female First reunion with birthmother or sibling. All but 3 had reunion at least 3 years before interview. Focus on first reunion. Subsample from larger study</td>
<td>Interviews focusing on relationship with person first reunited with.</td>
<td>Developed 7 categories of reunion relationship (‘close’, ‘close but not too close’, ‘distant’, ‘tense’, ‘ambivalent’, ‘searching’, ‘no contact’), established percentages of respondents that fitted each category and identified frequency of contact/satisfaction with contact. Facilitating factors were split into categories: structural (e.g. distance), interactive (e.g. support from family), motivating (e.g. obligation), and birth family outlook.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Howe &amp; Feast</td>
<td>The long-term outcome of</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>N = 48 18 Male, 30</td>
<td>Idiosyncratic questionnaire</td>
<td>More likely to remain in contact with birthmother if: female [NS]; first contact at</td>
<td>75%</td>
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(2001) UK adopted people who had searched for and had contact with their birthmother. Female Reunion with birthmother was at least 8 years before the study (mean 10.6 years) a younger age [NS]; ‘felt different’ to adoptive family [p<.05]; felt didn’t ‘belong’ in adoptive family [NS]; didn’t love adoptive mother as child [NS], didn’t feel adoptive mother loved them as a child [NS]; didn’t feel happy about being adopted [p=.005]; evaluated experience of adoption with mixed or negative feelings [p=.005]. 84% - reunion helped them answer important questions about themselves and adoption. 54% of those who remained in contact identified similarities with their birth relatives, compared to 33% of those who ceased contact.

Muller, Gibbs & Ariely (2003) America Contact between adoptees and birth relatives, and factors that influence relationship Quantitative, Correlation, ANOVA, Stepwise Regression, MANOVA, Paired Sample T-Tests, Wilcoxon’s Ranks Test, percentages N = 90 22 Male, 67 Female, 1 not stated All had initiated search Questionnaire including IPPA and idiosyncratic measures. Internal consistency assessed for some items. Responses to open-ended questions were classified into pre-developed categories; inter-rater reliability assessed. Reasons for satisfaction with relationship with birthmother included good relationships with birthmother (62%), similarities between themselves and their birthmother (13%). Reasons for not being completely satisfied included lack of interest by birthmother in relationship (43%), lifestyle and value differences (24%) and secrecy (21%). Most rewarding aspects included good relationship with birthmother (40%), finally meeting birthmother (37%), informational needs satisfied (20%), discovering similarities (16%). Stressful aspects of contact 50%
included lifestyle and value differences (18%), secrecy (18%), lack of interest by birthmother (13%). Significantly more satisfied with relationship with sibling than birthmother (p<.01) but very satisfied with both kinds of relationship. More likely to report that relationship with birth siblings became closer over time than with birthmother (p<.05). Closeness to the birthmother contributed significantly to prediction of evaluation of contact experience (β=.58). Correlation between attachment to adoptive mother and closeness to birthmother was weak (r=-.13).

O’Neill, McAuley & Loughran (2014) Ireland Factors that influence quality & maintenance of sibling relationships in post-adoption reunion. Qualitative, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) N = 33 8 Male, 25 Female Reunion with siblings 2 to 8 years prior to study 29 searchers, 1 contacted by sibling, 3 didn’t initiate search. In-depth descriptive interviews Themes: • ‘Adoption reunion with siblings’ • ‘Formation of relationships with birth siblings’ • ‘Factors that facilitated post-reunion relationships’ (Subthemes: ‘Positive personality factors’; ‘Support from family and friends’; ‘Other factors influencing post-reunion sibling relationships’)

Pacheco & Eme (1993) America Outcomes of reunions between adoptees and biological Descriptive and correlation N = 72 13 Male, 59 Female Time since reunion 1-6 years (mean Idiosyncratic questionnaire delivered by telephone, Forced-choice Main reason for positive contact experiences was information needs being satisfied (71%). Correlation between having information needs satisfied and feeling reunion was a positive experience
parents. Trying to replicate previous research. (2.97 years) response: agree, uncertain, disagree (created based on personal conversations with adoptees and previous studies). was modest (.26). Having made contact with biological family regardless of if information needs were satisfied is in itself significant. 32% adoptees felt disappointed by first contact, 11% uncertain about how much disappointment they felt. Main reason for dissatisfaction was unrealistic expectations, which were too high. Several adoptees reported that they began searching for one person and by the end had met many more birth relatives. This became complicated, emotional and stressful. Frequency of contact varied but tended to begin with great intensity then reduce in frequency, 45% monthly/bimonthly or holidays. 51% felt their need for emotional support from birthparents was satisfied. 36% adoptees agreed 25% disagreed that they gained more from meeting siblings than birthparents.

| Passmore & Chipuer (2009) | Australia | Female adoptees’ perceptions of contact with birthfathers and factors associated with satisfaction or dissatisfaction. | Qualitative, Thematic analysis | N = 17 17 females Interview or questionnaire Time since first meeting birthfather ranged from few weeks to 19 years | Semi-structured interview & questionnaire (idiosyncratic) | Four main themes which impacted on adoptees’ satisfaction/dissatisfaction:  
• ‘Birthfather’s attributes and behaviour’ (Subthemes: ‘Personality characteristics’; ‘Similarities and differences’; ‘Behaviour regarding contact with adoptee’; ‘Communication’)  
• ‘Adoptees’ attributes’ (Subthemes: |
Passmore & Feeney (2009) in Australia

Comparing differences in types of relationships formed with birthmothers and birthfathers and factors that facilitate and hinder this process.

**Methodology:** Mixed-methods Descriptive, paired t-tests and thematic analysis.

**Sample:** N = 18
- 3 Male, 15 Female
- Reunion with both birthmother and birthfather.
- 16 still had ongoing contact with birthmothers and 13 with birthfathers

**Data Collection:** Idiosyncratic questionnaire Likert scale (1 to 6) & forced-choice response questions

**Findings:** Generally same types of relationships formed with birthmothers and birthfathers, although if there is a difference, more likely to be a personal relationship with birthmother. No significant differences found for satisfaction with reunions with birthmothers and birthfathers (p > .05) or for closeness to birthmothers and birthfathers (p > .05). Similarities in factors facilitating (e.g. positive parent characteristics, similarities between adoptee and birthmother/birthfather) and hindering factors (e.g. negative parent characteristics, personality differences, barriers to reunion process) the reunion process identified. Differences in factors facilitating (e.g. positive adoptee characteristics only important for reunion with birthmother only) and hindering factors (e.g. inappropriate reunion expectations for
reunion with birthmother only) the reunion process also identified.

| Richardson, Davey & Swint (2013) America | How adult female adoptees manage equity and loyalty, and take care of their own emotional needs when negotiating their two mother-daughter relationships post-reunion. | Qualitative Grounded theory | N = 9
9 Female
Reunion 1 to 34 years prior to research (average 29 years) | Interview (telephone or face-to-face) | 
| Dominant categories: |
| • ‘Negotiating mother-daughter relationships’ (Subthemes: ‘ Managing two mothers’; ‘Motherhood’; ‘Mothers’ relationship’; ‘Sibling relationships’; ‘Relationships with fathers’; ‘Parents’ relationships’)
| • ‘Relating to mothers equitably’ (Subthemes: ‘Relationship with adoptive mother’; ‘Relationship with biological mother’)
| • ‘Loyalty and obligation’
| • ‘Adoptees’ own emotional needs’ (Subthemes: ‘Feelings about adoption’; ‘Self-care’; ‘What would have helped’)
| Non-dominant categories: |
| • ‘Race’
| • ‘Trauma’ |

| Rosenzweig-Smith (1988) America | Factors associated with successful reunions of adult adoptees and birthparents, testing 3 hypotheses. | Quantitative Pearson’s Correlation and T-Test | N = 31
5 Male, 26 Female
No information regarding reunion. | Questionnaire AAISW developed including 3 scaled items to measure ‘successful reunion’ (emotional, social & informational dimensions), 10 Likert scales to measure ‘grief resolution’, background | 
| No significant association between age at initiation of search and success of reunion (r= -.33, p = .044; T= .71; p= .484). No significant association between age at initiation of search grief resolution and success of reunion (r= -.0848, p = .33; T = .74, p= .467). There was a significant negative correlation between attribution of blame to the biological mother and success of the reunion (r= -.423, p= .01; T = 2.82, |
Sachdev (1992) Canada

Experiences of adoptees who had completed reunion with birthmothers and other relatives, including effect of reunion on adoptive relationship

Quantitative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N = 124</th>
<th>15 Male, 109 Female, Reunion 6 months to 4 years prior to study.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Idiosyncratic questionnaires to assess ‘success’ using four measures: frequency of meetings, the nature of the initial relationship and how it changed over time, degree of satisfaction, overall feelings of accomplishment.

Contact influenced by reactions of biological mother’s family, ability to face past and reveal true feelings, compatibility of temperaments, reciprocal expectations, ability to relate to each other, geographical distance, biological mother guilt. Termination influenced by biological mother’s husband’s response. Initial response by biological mother didn’t predict how relationship might continue. Nature of relationships: 47.4% friendship, 30.9% acquaintance/stranger, 17.3% mother-child relationship. 93.3% adoptees were able to connect themselves for the first time with their generational line and share physical resemblances and interests with someone related by blood, contributing to a more cohesive identity. 78.1% met other members of the birth family, mostly a joyful rewarding experience. Often felt closer to half-siblings and biological relatives, and had more satisfying relationships & more intense ties than with the biological mother or father.

$\rho = .009$). Strong positive correlation found between attribution of blame to biological father and satisfaction of reunion with biological mother ($r = .32, p = .04$).
3 Male, 8 Female  
All had had reunions with their birthmother, 2 had also with birthfathers, 8 with other relatives. | Interviews | Most (N=7) did not note similarities with birth relatives. Following reunion, some established a meaningful relationship (N=4), had occasional contact (N=4), had a strained relationship (N=2), or no further contact (N=1). Most reported positive personal benefits from reunion (N=9). | 25% |
9 Male, 41 Female  
33 (66%) reunions with birthmothers, 15 (30%) reunions with both birth parents, 2 (4%) reunions with birthfathers, age range at reunion was 18 to 50 years | Questionnaire (idiosyncratic) | 90% satisfied with outcome of the reunion, reporting a sense of closure, resolution of genealogical concerns, and diminished identity conflicts. 58% found personality similarities & common interests with birth relatives. 50% developed meaningful relationships, 32% satisfied with periodic contact, 8% strained relationship, 6% no further contact. | 25% |

**Notes:**
Table only reports findings included in the analysis (types of relationships developed, impact of reunion, and factors hindering or facilitating the reunion.

The following abbreviations were used for ‘Measures’:
The Adult Adoptee Inventory for Social Workers (AAISW; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988)
The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)
Post-reunion relationships

Seven studies asked adoptees to describe the type of relationship they had developed with their birthparents following reunion; adoptees most commonly described this relationship as analogous to a ‘friendship’ whilst only a few described it as comparable to a ‘parent-child’ relationship (Muller et al., 2003; O’Neill et al., 2014; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1974, 1976).

Sachdev (1992) found that most adoptees described their post-reunion relationship as akin to a ‘friendship’ or ‘acquaintance’ relationship as they felt their birthmothers had not ‘been’ a mother. This study has a poor quality rating as its sample was not representative, measurements were inappropriate, and response rate was unclear thus putting the validity of these results into question. However in support, Passmore and Chipeur (2009) also found that most adoptees stated that their birthfather could not take the place of their adoptive father as they had no history together. This study has a good quality rating, however while it gathered information from both questionnaire and interview participants, only interview participants were asked this question, so it is difficult to know whether participants responding through the questionnaire would have given the same response.

While most relationships developed were analogous to a friendship or general family relationship, Passmore and Feeney (2009) reported that adoptees generally developed more personal relationships with their birthmothers than birthfathers. This could be explained by the overrepresentation of female participants in their study, who might have felt more comfortable building relationships with their birthmothers.
Adoptees appeared to develop closer relationships with birth siblings than birthparents, describing them as akin to a ‘sibling’, ‘cousin’ or ‘friend’ relationship. Although adoptees found post-reunion relationships with their birthparents satisfactory, post-reunion relationships with birth siblings were found to be closer and more satisfying (Muller et al., 2003; Sachdev, 1992). This is possibly due to commonalities with birth siblings, such as being similar ages. These studies were both limited in quality (rating 50% and 25% respectively), with unrepresentative samples and unreported response rates.

Adoptees reported that relationships developed over time (Pacheco & Eme, 1993), even when they had perceived that their birthparents were initially unwelcoming (Campbell et al., 1991). When relationships with birthmothers and birth siblings were compared, adoptees were significantly more likely to report that their relationship with their birth sibling became closer over time than that with their birthmother (Muller et al, 2003).

Impact of reunion on adoptees

Most adoptees reported that they experienced the reunion as positive (Muller et al., 2003; O’Neill et al., 2014; Sorosky et al., 1974, 1976), and that they felt it had been worthwhile, even if they had ceased contact following the initial reunion (Howe & Feast, 2001; Sachdev, 1992), with almost no negative effects reported (Campbell et al., 1991). Seven studies reported benefits relating to gaining information, which helped adoptees resolve identity conflicts and increase their sense of who they were (Howe & Feast, 2001; Muller et al., 2003; O’Neill et al., 2014; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1974, 1976). Adoptees described feeling that they felt ‘whole’ (Sorosky et al., 1974), and that the reunion had answered important questions about themselves (Howe & Feast, 2001). Most adoptees felt that their information needs had
been satisfied, particularly with information that could not be explained by their adoptive family (Muller et al., 2003; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). Adoptees referred to a sense of closure following the reunion (O’Neill et al., 2014; Sorosky et al., 1976). Even if they did not gain information they felt the reunion had meaning and significance (Pacheco & Eme, 1993). Therefore reunions with birth relatives in adulthood allow adoptees to gain crucial information about themselves, helping them to form a cohesive identity.

Other benefits reported included increased self-esteem (Campbell, et al., 1991; Pacheco & Eme, 1993); improved self-concept, emotional outlook, ability to relate to others (Pacheco & Eme, 1993), and personal growth (O’Neill et al., 2014). Most adoptees reported that they would do it again, even with the stresses involved (Campbell et al., 1991; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Sachdev, 1992), and that they would encourage others to have a reunion (O’Neill et al., 2014). Adoptees felt that more openness with their adoptive mother and therapy would have been helpful to aid them in negotiating relationships with their two mothers (Richardson et al., 2013).

Adoptees therefore overwhelmingly found reunions with birth relatives to be a positive experience, with a number of personal benefits.

Factors affecting post-adoption reunions

The studies reviewed identified a wide range of factors that affected post-adoption reunions, suggesting that these are idiosyncratic and depend on the individual reunion. The factors below are those most commonly identified in the literature as being important in post-adoption reunions.
Similarities and differences

Seven studies reported that identifying similarities and differences between themselves and their birth relatives, for example in personality or physical appearance, impacted on adoptees’ reunion experience and maintenance of contact (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Howe & Feast, 2001; Muller et al., 2003; O’Neill et al., 2014; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Sachdev, 1992). Muller et al. (2003) reported that finding similarities including mannerisms, behaviours, common values in life, social class origins and interests, facilitated relationships between adoptees and birth siblings. Two studies reported that finding similarities with birth relatives helped adoptees make sense of traits that could not be explained through comparisons with their adoptive family (Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Therefore it appears that finding similarities with birth relatives aided the reunion as it helped adoptees resolve identity issues and offered an increased sense of belonging.

Wider network

Five studies described the impact of the adoptees’ and their birth relatives’ social network on the maintenance and satisfaction of the post-reunion relationship (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; O’Neill et al., 2014; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Richardson et al., 2013). Having a supportive wider network was seen as positive for the reunion process whilst a lack of support was negative (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; O’Neill et al., 2014; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Support from family and friends was considered the most influential factor in whether or not a relationship was maintained between adoptees and their birth siblings (O’Neill et al., 2014), highlighting the profound impact that the wider network has on post-reunion relationships.
Other peoples’ behaviour and responses to the reunion also had an impact on the reunion process. Positive behaviour included accepting the adoptee and aiding contact with other family members, while negative behaviour included disowning the adoptee or obstructing contact (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Hindering the reunion by being obstructive and refusing to provide information, or being disruptive in the initial reunion appeared to be specific to birthmothers (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009); however it should be noted that these two papers have a common author. It is unclear what data set they used so there is the potential that these overlapped, possibly explaining why similar results were found.

Although acceptance by the wider network was important for adoptees, they also reported mixed feelings about becoming a part of their birth relatives’ family and friend network. Adoptees found this welcoming but also experienced being introduced as uncomfortable, complicated, emotional, and stressful (O’Neill et al., 2014; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). However, whilst most adoptees had first reunited with a birthparent, they stated that they gained more from meeting their birth siblings than birthparents (Pacheco & Eme, 1993).

Adoptees’ relationships with their adoptive parents, and relationships between adoptive parents and birthparents also had an impact on reunions (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Richardson et al., 2013). For example, Richardson et al. (2013) found that the quality of the relationship between adoptive and birthmothers impacted on how adoptees managed their relationships. Relationships between the two mothers were categorised as ‘close’, ‘distant’ or having ‘no contact.’ Adoptees appeared to find the reunion process harder if their mothers had a ‘distant’ relationship or no contact, suggesting that the closer that the mothers were with each other, the easier adoptees found the reunion process.
Therefore, having a supportive wider network, including adoptive and birth family members, and friends is important for experiencing a positive reunion with birth relatives. However, some adoptees can find being welcomed by birth family overwhelming and difficult.

*Expectations towards reunion*

Five studies reported that adoptees’ and birth relatives’ expectations and attitudes towards the reunion impacted on the success and satisfaction of the reunion. Adoptees having neutral attitudes and low expectations were positive for the reunion as there was no disappointment if adoptees did not get on well with their birth relatives. Unrealistic, high expectations, or different expectations between adoptees and their birth relatives reportedly hindered reunions (Campbell et al., 1993; Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Sachdev, 1992). For example, birthparents’ expectations outweighing adoptees’ expectations (e.g. the birthparent wanting a parent-child relationship and the adoptee wanting a friendship) seemed to result in adoptees having less contact (Sachdev, 1992) and less close relationships with their birth relatives (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998) than if their expectations were more equal.

*Time and geographical distance*

Four studies described the impact of time and geographical distance on the reunion process, where greater geographical distance between the adoptee and their birth relative, and having less time available, negatively impacted the reunion (Campbell et al., 1991; Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Sachdev, 1992). Increased distance and less time reduced the amount of contact that adoptees had with
their birth relatives; the impact of this depended on what type of relationship had developed (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998).

*Birth relative personality characteristics*

Four studies discussed the positive and negative effect of the personality of the birth relative on satisfaction of the reunion and maintenance of the relationship. Positive personality characteristics included being loving, open, committed, genuine and honest. Negative characteristics included being secretive, dishonest, and unwilling to share information (Muller et al., 2003; O’Neill et al., 2014; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Secrecy appeared to be particularly important to adoptees with all four studies mentioning the negative impact of secrecy, either of the adoption or in terms of sharing information with the adoptee, on satisfaction of the reunion.

*Adoptee characteristics*

Three studies identified certain demographic characteristics of adoptees, such as age and gender that were related with reunion outcomes (Howe & Feast, 2001; Richardson et al., 2013; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988). However, these were not found to be significant or have large effect sizes. Younger age at initiation of search or first contact was shown to be related to increased satisfaction and maintenance of contact (Howe & Feast, 2001; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988). Women were more likely to remain in contact with their biological mothers than men (Howe & Feast, 2001). Being a mother also appeared to impact how adoptees negotiated relationships with their birthmothers post-reunion. The study was not clear about how motherhood impacted adoptees approach to these relationships; however, it seemed to be because motherhood enabled adoptees to understand what being a mother meant so perhaps were more sympathetic towards their birthmothers (Richardson et al., 2013).
Gaining information

Gaining information from birth relatives was found to impact on the reunion in three studies (Muller et al., 2003; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Pacheco and Eme (1993) described how gaining information about genetics, heritage, quirks and interests, and feeling that the “puzzle is solved” was the main reason for adoptees describing their initial reunion experience as positive. However, the correlation between gaining information and experiencing the reunion positively was modest, suggesting that this is not the only factor leading to positive reunion experiences. It appears that gaining information allowed adoptees to understand more about their histories. As was important in finding similarities with birth relatives, it is likely that gaining information allowed adoptees to resolve issues of identity.

Circumstances of relinquishment

Four studies discussed the impact of circumstances of the adoptees’ relinquishment, including who adoptees attributed blame to, treatment of their birthmother by their birthfather, and their birthfather’s reaction, on their reunion with birth relatives (O’Neill et al., 2016; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988). Rosenzweig-Smith (1988) found that the more the adoptee blamed their birthmother for their relinquishment, the less satisfied they felt with the reunion with their birthmother; however if adoptees blamed their birthfather, they felt more satisfied with their reunion with their birthmother.

Whilst all of the above factors influenced the post-adoption reunion, the majority of adoptees reported that having a good relationship with their birthmother was the most satisfying element of the reunion (Muller et al., 2003). Similarly in the Pacheco and
Eme (1993) study, adoptees reported that making contact with their birth family, regardless of whether informational needs were satisfied, was in itself significant.

**Discussion**

This review aimed to understand adoptees’ experiences of reunions with birth relatives in adulthood, focusing on the types of relationships that develop, the impact of the reunion on adoptees, and factors that facilitate or hinder the reunion process.

Adult adoptees developed more personal relationships with birth siblings than birthparents. This may be because adoptees are closer in age to birth siblings so have more in common generationally. Friendships with people of a similar age have been shown to be less superficial and more reciprocal than intergenerational friendships (Bettini & Norton, 1991) so it may be that relationships with birth siblings develop more easily. Also, post-reunion relationships between adoptees and birthparents miss the usual elements of a parent-child relationship, such as a shared history (Affleck & Steed, 2001) and the secure base that often characterises parent-child relationships (Bowlby, 1958). Thus with no map to use, adoptees and their birthparents develop relationships based on other reliable relationship models they know, such as friendships. It may be that these models are more applicable to sibling relationships than parent-child relationships (Modell, 1997). Attribution of blame towards birthparents for their relinquishment may also interfere with the relationships developed (Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988), as adoptees may have fantasised about the circumstances regarding their relinquishment as they grew up, leading to feelings of anger or resentment as they reflect on the reasons and potential alternative solutions (Brodzinsky, 1987). This would not be a hindering factor in reunions with birth siblings and may in fact enable a closer relationship. Adoptive parents reportedly experience reunions with birthparents as
threatening as they test the concept that every child should have one set of parents (Modell, 1997) so it is possible that adoptive parents find the sibling reunion less threatening than reunions with birthparents and thus are more supportive of it. As a supportive network helps facilitate reunions, this would be advantageous in the relationships developed between adoptees and their birth siblings. Nonetheless, the positive impact of reunions on adoptees was evident, regardless of whether they maintained contact with birth relatives.

The literature revealed a number of factors that facilitate and hinder the reunion process. The factor described by most studies was identifying similarities and differences with birth relatives, which appeared to help adoptees resolve identity issues and gain a greater sense of belonging. According to Maslow (1943) belonging is a basic need, explaining why adoptees experience reunions in a positive light. Establishing a cohesive identity was the biggest benefit to adoptees, with increased self-esteem also important. Erikson’s psychosocial development model (1968) suggests that identity is developed in adolescence. Brodzinsky (1987) claims that the current sense of self is linked with previous perceptions of the self and biological or cultural heritage. He proposed an adaptation of Erikson’s model, suggesting that adoptees find it difficult to develop a secure and complete identity, as they do not have information about their biological heritage to incorporate with their current sense of self. Sants (1964) referred to this as ‘genealogical bewilderment’ where adoptees are uncertain about their origins so grieve the loss of birth parents and the self. Brodzinsky (1987) suggests that some adoptees struggle to develop a secure identity without the necessary information to resolve their identity issues. Extending this model, it has been proposed that identity development does not stop in adolescence so this model is as important for adult adoptees as it is for adolescents (Levy-Shiff, 2001). Meeting birth relatives, establishing similarities, and
gaining information may therefore enable adult adoptees to develop a complete and stable sense of self. This may explain why adoptees reported increased self-esteem as a result of reunions with birth relatives, as development of identity is crucial for self-esteem (Jones, 1997).

It had previously been reported that adoptees initiate searches for their birth relatives in order to fill a void, feel complete, gain information, and thus develop a more cohesive identity (Muller & Perry, 2001a). The results from this review are consistent with this, as adoptees reported resolution of identity conflicts, and that gaining information facilitated the reunion process. Muller and Perry (2001a) also reported that adoptees were not commonly searching to establish a relationship with their birth relatives; this was also consistent with the review’s findings, where most adoptees established a friendship-style relationship with their birthparents. This review has extended these findings by suggesting that relationships developed with birth siblings become more personal than those developed with birthparents, and some theoretical basis is offered for this difference. Finally, Muller and Perry (2001a) described the value of significant others in aiding the decision making process to search; the findings from this review were consistent with the value of significant others.

**Methodological Quality**

The quality of the studies varied, with most being either ‘poor’ or ‘good’ quality, so it is important that the results from this review are interpreted carefully as better quality research may result in different findings. Quantitative studies tended to rely on descriptive statistics to present their findings. Whilst this is easy to consume as a reader, it is harder to interpret, as the reader is unable to establish effect sizes or significance. Therefore future research would benefit from using more complex statistical analysis.
This is likely to be a difficult area of research for which to recruit participants, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficult emotions that it may evoke in participants. This process may be even more difficult if the adoptee regrets the reunion, for example if it is unsatisfactory or leads to difficult relationships with the adoptive family. As researchers are required to obtain participants through opportunity sampling, participants will be individuals who wish to volunteer to participate. Volunteers are likely to be motivated to participate and so the sample may be biased towards those who experienced positive outcomes or had a reason to want to share their experiences. This will lead to samples that are not representative and thus results that cannot be generalised to the wider population. Therefore it may be that the positive outcome of the reunions is exaggerated in this review, due to the potentially biased responses of participants. It would be helpful if more systematic sampling could be carried out to see whether similar outcomes emerge.

This review is also limited by the inconsistencies in terms of sample characteristics and methodology used by the studies. As the studies reviewed focused on reunions with different birth relatives, this limits the robustness of the results, as there are insufficient numbers of studies exploring reunions with each type of birth relative. Across the research, there was a wide range of time since the first reunion, ranging from a few weeks to over thirty years. Strong conclusions are therefore impossible to draw, as it is likely that time since first reunion will impact on the relationship developed. The research frequently did not describe how many people were having on-going contact with birth relatives, further impacting on the usefulness of the results. A number of studies used samples that were subsamples from larger studies so the demographics of the study being reviewed were frequently omitted. This makes it difficult to conclude
who the results were referring to, again limiting the validity of the results. It was often unclear how the data was gathered and analysed, further impacting the validity and reliability of the results.

Regardless of these weaknesses, the studies that investigated the types of relationships that develop and the outcomes of the reunions appeared to replicate each others’ findings, suggesting that despite the weaknesses, the results are replicable to an extent. This was also true of the studies that investigated factors that hinder and facilitate the reunion.

Objective measurement of adoption reunion outcomes is limited and therefore the research relies on self-report and idiosyncratic questionnaires developed by the authors. The majority of these studies did not include measures for internal consistency, limiting the reliability of these questionnaires.

Sampling strategy, data analysis, and measurement tools will all impact on the quality of research. It is important that future research rectifies these weaknesses in order to enable the literature pool to grow in a helpful way. It is possible that these weaknesses reflect the nature of this area of research, where there are limited appropriate measurement tools that can be applied.

**Clinical Implications**

Adoptees reported feeling that therapy at the time of the reunion would be advantageous, to help them negotiate their relationships with adoptive and birth family members. This should be considered for adoptees experiencing a reunion with birth family. Therapy in the UK tends not to be offered for people negotiating life changes
such as post-adoption reunions. This could be an area that could be developed between adoption agencies and psychologists, in order to support adoptees negotiate their reunions and developing relationships.

By being aware of the factors that facilitate and hinder reunions with birthparents, clinicians can prepare adoptees for their reunion, to give them the best chances of having a positive reunion experience. Clinicians could clarify with adoptees what they expect to get out of the reunion. By establishing this, and potentially managing expectations if they appear too high, adoptees have a better chance of finding the reunion to be a satisfying process. Clinicians could also attempt to match adoptee and birth parent expectations prior to the reunion, so that these are similar, as this has also been found to result in more satisfying reunion experiences. Ascertaining whether adoptees have a supportive wider network, including adoptive family and friend network may also be helpful, as this has been found to increase satisfaction of the reunion.

It may also be helpful for clinicians to help adoptees to clarify boundaries with birth relatives relating to how much involvement they wish to have in each other’s lives. Unclear boundaries resulted in feeling smothered and even allowed for sexual advances by birth relatives (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998). Incest was also raised as a possible post-reunion outcome by Greenberg and Littlewood (1995). As adoptees and birthparents don’t have a model on which to base their relationship, they may also choose to base it on romantic relationships as this is another reliable reciprocal relationship that they know (Modell, 1997). This potential unforeseen danger and taboo needs to be considered before and during reunions.
As reunions appear to be vital for helping adoptees create a more stable sense of self, reunions should be encouraged. Being more open with adoptees about their biological history earlier may help them to develop a stable identity and have greater self-worth in adolescence when identity develops.

Limitations of the review

Of the thirteen papers that were reviewed only one was from Britain. Due to the varied nature of adoption and reunion across the globe, it would be good to have more research based in Britain as it could be that British adoptees experience the adoption reunion in a different light to adoptees from other countries. All studies were carried out in Western individualist countries; culture impacts on beliefs about family and so the results of this review cannot be generalised to other cultures (Yaman, Mesman, Jzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg & Lintig, 2010). In addition, the studies focused on reunions of adoptees that had been relinquished by their birthparents, rather than adoptees that were removed from their birthparents’ care. While it is possible that some of the results may generalize adoptees that were not relinquished, it is also possible that their experiences of reunion will be different due to the added trauma of being neglected or abused before being adopted. There is currently no literature exploring these types of reunions and so it would be helpful for this to be followed up.

Whilst the researcher has attempted to stay as close to the meaning of the data as possible, due to the qualitative nature of some of the research, it is possible that the researcher’s own biases have entered interpretation of the data as the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants’ sense of the world; the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2015).
Future research

This review only explores one aspect of the reunion relationship. It would be helpful to examine the same questions from birth relatives’ and adoptive family members’ perspectives in order to obtain a fuller picture of the reunion process, and to enable clinicians to support the system in change. Due to the limited quality of the studies, such research should feature larger sample sizes, standardized measures, greater internal validity, and more replicable studies. As most children adopted today have been removed from their parents’ care due to neglect or abuse (62% in 2015; Zayed & Harker, 2015), future research should aim to investigate reunions under these circumstances, to establish whether they have the same positive impact and what factors may need to be considered to allow a satisfying reunion to occur in these circumstances.

Conclusion

This systematic review adds to the literature by highlighting the positive experiences of adoptees experiencing reunions with birth relatives in adulthood, uncovering the types of relationships that most commonly develop, and revealing a number of factors that facilitate and hinder the reunion process. However, the literature in this area is of mixed quality, mostly due to small sample sizes, opportunity sampling, and a proliferation of unstandardized measures. Nonetheless, it describes useful clinical implications for clinicians supporting adoptees through the reunion process and highlights the need for future research.
References

*Indicates studies reviewed.


*Passmore, N.L., & Feeney, J.A. (2009). Reunions of adoptees who have met both birth parents: Post-reunion relationships and factors that facilitate and hinder the reunion process. Adoption Quarterly, 12(2), 100-119.


Part Two – Empirical Paper

This paper is written in the format ready for submission the journal

Adoption & Fostering

Please see Appendix G for the submission guidelines.
Placing siblings for adoption: social workers’ experiences

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Abstract

Legal guidance states that siblings should be placed together for adoption, wherever possible; however, a large proportion of children are not placed for adoption with their siblings. Social workers (SWs) are required to make these complex decisions without tools to guide this process. However, no study has explored social workers’ real-life experiences of placing siblings for adoption. This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore social workers’ experiences of placing siblings for adoption. Eleven social workers were recruited from two Local Authorities in the UK. The analysis identified four superordinate themes and thirteen subordinate themes. The Information Processing Approach, heuristics, self-efficacy and locus of control can be applied to social workers’ decisions. While SWs feel that their emotions should not be part of the decision, these are personal decisions which evoke a lot of emotion and thus perhaps emotions should be considered more frequently within the decision-making process. Finally, while legal guidance states that siblings should be placed together, SWs often find that this is not possible due to factors outside of their control. The study proposes areas for future research and clinical implications of the findings.

Keywords: decision-making; sibling; adoption; social worker; influence
Introduction

Around half of children waiting to be placed for adoption or fostering in England in 2015 were part of a sibling group (CoramBAAF, 2015; Adoption Register for England, 2015). Most of these were then placed separately from their siblings (81%; Morgan, 2012). Legal guidance, such as the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (Department for Education, 2008), states that siblings must be placed together wherever reasonably possible. According to The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Guidance and Regulations 2010 sibling placements are an important protective factor for looked after children, providing support throughout the lifespan, which is particularly valuable during changes in a person’s life (Department for Education, 2010). Most children would prefer to live with their siblings when they are adopted to maintain the sibling bond, as they believe it helps to keep their personal identity. They reportedly feel that they would prefer to maintain the sibling relationship over receiving permanence, either through not being adopted or delaying adoption in order to stay together (Ofsted, 2009; Morgan, 2012). Therefore, while around half of looked after children have a sibling and they appear to value this relationship, the majority of children are not placed together.

The sibling relationship is often the most long lasting (Burnell, Castell & Cousins, 2009) and significant of all family relationships (Conger, Stocker & McGuire, 2009). Siblings play a significant role in each other’s development (Wojciak, McWey & Helfrich, 2013) as they act as role models and social partners for each other (McHale, Updegraff & Whiteman, 2012). Emotional support from siblings has been shown to be invaluable for children experiencing stressful or traumatic life events (Gass, Jenkins & Dunn, 2007) as siblings can help each other to adapt to new and frightening situations (Hegar, 2005). Positive sibling relationships also mediate the association between trauma and internalising problems, such as depression and somatic complaints (Wojciak
et al., 2013). Therefore they are especially important for children who have experienced trauma or a number of stressful life events, such as those in care.

Attachment theory states that children require a secure base with their primary caregiver to protect them from harm, help them survive, and aid their development (Bowlby, 1958). As siblings have shared experiences that are unique to them, such as the same parenting style, it has been argued that sibling relationships should be included within attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Siblings can provide each other with comfort and security, having an ameliorating effect when there is a loss of the primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1973). In the absence of a parent figure siblings can take on the role of a caregiver, promoting either a secure caregiving environment or perpetuating an insecure environment (Teti & Ablard, 1989). This highlights the importance of assessing sibling attachment styles before making placement decisions. Alternatively if the carer is unable to offer an environment that protects siblings from abuse or risk from each other, secure attachments may not develop (Whelan, 2003). Separation might provide better opportunities for healthy interactions with caregivers, thus allowing secure attachment relationships (Ward, 1984). Therefore decisions about placing sibling groups are highly complex; attachment theory could provide professionals with a useful understanding of sibling relationships, to inform placement decisions (Whelan, 2003).

Social workers (SWs) need to recommend whether or not siblings should live together when placed for adoption (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2010). Although legal guidance suggests that siblings should be placed together unless it would be in their best interests to be separated, in a Government consultation response document, 15% of SWs highlighted the complexity of assessing sibling relationships (Department for Education, 2014). This suggests that despite the wealth of legal guidance, SWs feel that
this remains a complex area where there is insufficient guidance or support to help them make this decision.

SWs routinely make decisions that have significant impact on the lives of others. They often use checklists to aid them; however, there is a paucity of research on how they make sense of the information gathered (Howe, Dooley & Hinings, 2000). Research into decision-making in social work is limited. In a qualitative study O’Connor and Leonard (2013) found that emotions, professional experience, and perceived powerlessness impacted on SWs’ decision-making processes. Kirkman and Melrose (2014) identified four factors that complicated SWs’ decision-making: time and workload pressures, behaviour biases affecting their ability to make objective judgments, decision fatigue, and relatively low quality information impacting on the time SWs had for analysis. This meant that SWs were more likely to make decisions based on intuition or heuristics. When required to make decisions quickly, under pressure, and with limited information, SWs have also been shown to rely on prior experience (Hackett & Taylor, 2013). However these studies have not focused on making decisions about placement for adoption so the results may not be generalizable to decisions regarding sibling placement for adoption. Sharpe (2014) found that social workers consider each individual child’s needs, the potentially detrimental effects of separating siblings and the positive and negative aspects of the sibling relationship. They reportedly felt constrained by their previous experiences as a social worker, personal experiences of sibling relationships and associated personal values, personal emotions, and systemic issues.

The Information-Processing Approach has previously been used to understand SW decision-making (Sharpe, 2014). This is a predominantly cognitive model, which
acknowledges that personal characteristics can influence decision-making. It suggests that decision making is affected by limitations of the mind (e.g. memory) and environment (e.g. influence of others), meaning that individuals have to be selective over the information they attend to and often use mental shortcuts, heuristics, to aid them in making quick and easy decisions (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Heuristics that may be used include affect, familiarity, recognition and simulation (Sharpe, 2014).

This study is the first to explore social workers’ experiences of deciding whether or not to separate sibling groups when placing them for adoption, with a focus on influencing factors including their past experiences, values and emotions. This study has considerable clinical relevance as social workers make difficult and life-impacting decisions on a daily basis. Personal experiences have been shown to impact people’s actions, outside of their conscious awareness (Dietrich, 2010). It is therefore important for social workers to be consciously aware of the impact that various factors may play on their decisions and to know whether these are useful or hinder.

This study aimed to explore the following questions:

1. What are social workers’ experiences of deciding whether or not to separate sibling groups when placing children for adoption?
2. How do social workers make sense of their past experiences, values and beliefs when making decisions?
3. How do social workers’ past experiences, values and beliefs influence the decisions that they make?
**Method**

**Design**

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore social workers’ experiences of making decisions about placing sibling groups for adoption. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to inform the design of the interview schedule and data analysis. IPA aims to explore how individuals make sense of their life experiences. It allows the experience to be understood through the individual’s own terms as opposed to through a set of predefined codes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

**Participants**

Twelve social workers (SW) were recruited from two Local Authorities in England using opportunity sampling. Three SWs were recruited from a Local Authority in the North of England and nine were recruited from a Local Authority in the South of England. The Local Authority in the South of England was comprised of several adoption teams so five SWs were recruited from one team, and four SWs were recruited from another team.

To be eligible to take part, participants needed to be qualified SWs currently working with looked after children, with experience of placing siblings for adoption, and having had the experience of deciding whether or not to separate siblings on at least one occasion. SWs were excluded if they were in training, no longer worked directly in adoption, worked in foster care, or had not been directly involved in making the decision regarding placement of a sibling group. One SW had not been directly involved in making the decision regarding placement of a sibling group so their data was not included in the analysis. This left a total sample of eleven social workers.
All SWs identified as white British. Ten SWs were female, and one was male. Participants’ ages ranged from 29 to 52 years (average = 43.9 years), and they had between 1.5 and 20 years of experience working as a social worker (average = 11.5 years). Nine SWs had children, and ten had siblings. One SW reported that they had been adopted themselves. As data was collected from a limited pool of professionals in only two Local Authorities, and there was only one male participant, participants’ identities needed protecting. Therefore a demographics table has not been included to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants and their results.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by a local Research Ethics Committee (Appendix H).

Managers of the relevant adoption teams were contacted and asked to circulate information regarding the research to relevant SWs within the team (Appendix I), who were then asked to contact either the manager or researcher in order to express an interest in participating. The researcher also attended one Local Authority’s team meeting in order to share information regarding the research with SWs directly.

The researcher visited the offices of the SWs to complete the interviews at a mutually agreed time, with the exception of one SW who completed the interview at the University of Hull. Prior to the interview participants were given an opportunity to discuss the project with the researcher, and ask any questions. Information was provided regarding confidentiality and anonymity, and participants were asked to complete a written consent form (Appendix J) and demographic information questionnaire (Appendix K). These forms were stored separately to participant data.
All interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 51 minutes 57 seconds and 1 hour 24 minutes 13 seconds (mean = 1:03:24). The interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix L). The interview schedule had previously been discussed with two SWs not taking part in the research to check the content was appropriate and that there were no omissions. It subsequently evolved and developed through the interview process. In accordance with IPA procedure participants were asked to discuss a specific sibling group they had needed to decide how to place. To help participants choose, it was suggested that they think about a case that they had found difficult. It was highlighted to participants that the focus of the research was the decision-making process as opposed to the outcome of the decision.

**Analysis**

To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned a letter and any potentially identifying information such as dates of birth, place names and peoples’ names were removed at the point of transcription. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The text was then analysed in the iterative and inductive method described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). The researcher began by reading and re-reading the transcript while listening to the recording to familiarise and immerse themselves in the data and ensure that the participant became the focus of analysis. The transcripts were then examined closely, with descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments noted (see Appendix M for example). Emergent themes were then identified across each transcript and these were compared across transcripts, in order to search for connections across the emergent themes.
Credibility

The second author followed progression throughout the analysis process, starting with transcript analysis and ending with theme development across transcripts. Where uncertainty arose about themes, this was discussed between authors and resolved by revisiting interview transcripts. Whilst the analysis of data was interpretative, on-going comparison against the participants’ original verbatim interviews ensured validity of the final themes. The results identify the themes which reflected most participants’ experiences.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the results can be transferred to other contexts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009); therefore it is important to report the context of the current study. The participants in this study were employed by one of two Local Authorities in Britain. These Local Authorities differed in location (one in the North of England, one in the South); size (the large Local Authority is made up of multiple adoption teams, the small Local Authority is made up of a single team); Ofsted ratings (one received ‘inadequate’ or ‘adequate’ ratings, one received ‘outstanding’ ratings). There was consistency between participants’ accounts of their experiences across the two Local Authorities.

Researcher’s Position

The researcher was aware of their own personal beliefs about the value of the sibling relationship, based on experiences of their relationship with their sister. While the researcher attempted to remain neutral during the research process, it is possible that this guided the researcher’s interpretation of the results. The results of the current study thus may have been different without this personal viewpoint.
Results

Four superordinate and thirteen subordinate themes emerged from analysis of the data. There was consistency in the themes across the three teams interviewed, suggesting that these are relevant to all social workers making decisions about placing siblings for adoption.

Balancing subjectivity and objectivity

This superordinate theme refers to the conflict that participants experienced between subjective, emotive, and sometimes idealised decision-making as opposed to stepping back from these influences and remaining objective in their decision-making. For some participants, the subjective element of their decision-making appeared to be implicit in how they spoke about the decision, as they felt that the decisions should be objective. Five subordinate themes were identified.

Personal beliefs about siblings

Beliefs about the importance of the sibling relationship were clear across participants’ accounts. There was a sense that the sibling relationship was intrinsically special.

‘Um sibling relationship. Oh my god... it's that real tie’ (H)

Shared experiences that are unique to siblings were regarded as vital as siblings would be able to help each other make sense of these experiences in the future.

‘You've had very similar experiences...that kind of unites you...so yeah for me it’s important relationship’ (K).
Participants’ beliefs about the sibling relationship impacted on their feelings about the decision, particularly when it was to separate siblings. A number of participants expressed regret as they valued the sibling relationship and felt guilty that they had prevented the children from having the opportunity to continue this relationship.

‘Cos nobody enjoys separating siblings um you value those relationships and think about the separation and loss they’ve already had.’ (C)

Thus it appears that participants hold predominantly positive and idealised beliefs about the sibling relationship, which may not be grounded in reality and so prevent participants from seeing the whole picture in the decision-making process.

Wanting to keep siblings together

Most participants referred to a desire to place siblings together. One participant believed that children deserved to be together as they had been ‘born into a sibling group’ (E), suggesting there is an innate quality to sibling relationships that social workers felt uncomfortable breaking up. Other participants identified placing siblings together as a personal value so found the idea of separation difficult as this challenged their values, particularly when they felt there was not sufficient reason for siblings to be separated.

‘I didn’t like the idea that they would have to be separated at such a young age with such a good relationship…. it was quite difficult to hear that…I guess coming back to my values.’ (G)
However one participant felt that the belief that siblings should stay together could prevent social workers from identifying individual needs that would mean separate placements could be more advantageous.

‘Some people...base on the fact that they’re siblings, why wouldn’t you place them together? Rather than looking at their individual needs’ (B)

Despite this belief, participants appeared to be cynical about being able to place siblings together due to the lack of available adopters, so they began by thinking about separating them. Participants may not have tried as hard to find a joint placement as a result of this.

‘It is something that we do look at as soon as you get a referral for higher sibling groups. There are some adopters out there that will take sibling groups of three but they’re few and far between’ (C)

Participants’ ideas of belonging and family appear to be idealised, suggesting that they may miss considering the children’s individual needs in the decision-making process, as highlighted by one participant.

Personal experience

Personal experiences and relationships seemed to enable participants to be more sensitive with regard to their decisions. Some spoke about considering the decision from the perspective of their different roles to check whether they felt comfortable with it. Others described putting themselves ‘into the shoes’ of the children or parents to imagine what it might be like to be in that situation.
'It felt right to me as a professional, as a sibling, and as a mother, I suppose.' (D)

‘There is a level of personal involvement in that... I guess if I put myself in that situation and I had to be removed from my birth family would I want to be with my siblings? Yes.’ (G)

Participants’ own relationships allowed them to identify with the child and understand the importance of the sibling relationship on a personal level, making the decision to separate them harder.

‘You know, I think for any of us, it’s something that if you’re a sibling yourself, as well... that you understand. You know, on a deeper level.’ (B)

Many participants discussed cases similar to their own families. This appeared to make the decision harder as they could identify more closely with the situation. It is possible that these cases resonated more strongly with the participants. Some were consciously aware of this and acknowledged this, while for others this was more implicit. It seemed that personal experiences had impacted on the development of participants’ beliefs about sibling groups, which possibly informed their decision-making.

‘What personally made it difficult for me was that they were very similar in age to my sons and I couldn’t imagine separating them. My boys fight like cat and dog but they cannot be without each other, they are absolute companions and will be till they die.’ (I)
It seems that participants’ personal experiences were vital to the decision-making process. This is possibly because they don’t feel qualified enough to just make the decision using their social work knowledge so feel more confident considering the decision from different views, or because the decisions feel too personal to completely separate out their personal perspective.

Feelings

Decisions appeared to be guided by participants’ feelings and emotive reasoning as opposed to objective evidence, possibly because they did not always have sufficient evidence available to them, or because the ‘right’ option did not exist.

‘If we placed them all in foster placement and they were all together in long-term, I felt sure it would breakdown too’ (D)

‘I was thinking oh I don’t wanna do this decision…So I had a real, I, didn’t feel right, I didn’t wanna do this. (K)

Some felt that gut instinct was helpful to draw their attention to something they may have otherwise missed, which could aid them in decision-making.

‘I think…sometimes gut instinct…is telling you isn’t it? People tell you gut instinct but I think it’s your inner conscience that’s telling you to go down this way for a reason until you explore it a little bit more you know um and then make that decision’ (B)

Participants also discussed the emotive nature of their decision-making, particularly if they were separating siblings. They described predominantly negative emotions
including anxiety, guilt, and regret; at times the emotional toll of the work appeared to be difficult for participants to manage. The emotions also appeared to continue after the decision had been made, suggesting some participants found it hard to process the difficult emotions they experienced.

‘And that made me feel, I mean, you know, devastated ...It wasn’t just hers. The grandparents were in bits because they couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t let them have direct contact. And erm tut erm for months I carried everyone’s emotions and it was a it was very difficult for me.’ (I)

It seems that participants found their emotions helpful as they helped guide their decision-making, but also difficult as negative emotions stuck with participants after they had made the decision.

Staying objective
Stepping back from their beliefs, relationships, experiences, values, and emotions appeared to be important, allowing participants to ensure the decision was focused on the children and not let these ‘cloud your judgement’ (E). Being able to pull back from emotive decision-making to more objective reasoning was prevalent across participants’ accounts. Reflecting on why they felt a certain way enabled participants to consider what was influencing their decision.

‘Sometimes you have to take a step back and really think why you’re feeling like it and it probably is associated with things that have happened in my own life but I think as long as you’re kind of emotionally aware yourself that’s helpful’ (H)
Identifying differences between their own relationships and the children’s relationships allowed participants to focus on the needs of the children they were working with, rather than what they would want for their own families.

‘Although you can identify with your own situation… it is looking at the circumstances are completely different… their needs are very very different.’ (D)

One participant found that putting themselves in the children’s shoes was a way of stepping back and not allowing their personal values to come into the process, as it put the children at the forefront of their decision.

‘So I detach myself just by putting this is all about the children and just, that’s how I manage it. Just always put myself in the children’s shoes. (F)

While participants attempted to step back from subjective decision-making there was a sense that they could not or should not be completely objective as they found the subjective elements of the process helpful.

**Weight of responsibility**

Key across participants’ accounts was a sense of responsibility and feeling under pressure in making these key decisions about whether to separate siblings or place them together. This encompassed how hard, impactful, and uncertain they experienced the decision-making process to be, sharing responsibility to help them manage this sense of pressure.
A hard decision

All participants spoke about how big and hard the decisions were; this appeared to weigh on participants’ minds as it was repeated throughout the interviews. Some emphasised the enormity of the decision by using emotive language.

‘I concurred with her decision that they needed to be separated. And it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life.’ (I)

Participants discussed how siblings made the decision harder and more overwhelming; the older the siblings were the harder the decision was.

‘It’s been easier when you’ve got say a two and a half year old and then a new-born because you think mmm okay but these were siblings that were 5, 6, and 8 and that made it all so much harder.’ (D)

Participants appeared to want to make it clear how hard the decision was by using emotive language, repetition, and emphasising this point.

The impact of the decision

Participants spoke about their decisions being life changing and life-long for the children, increasing their sense of responsibility and causing them to feel anxious. This was magnified when making decisions about a larger sibling group.

‘When it’s a big sibling group like this, you-you it-it’s hard because that decision will impact all of their lives.’ (H)
Knowing that their decisions would impact whether siblings had the potential for a relationship into the future further increased participants’ responsibility. For some this was an after-thought of the decision, making them feel more responsible and guilty following the decision while for others the thought came before they made a decision, allowing them to take it into consideration.

‘That was one of the key things that came to me thinking if I separate these children, they may never ever have a relationship again, ever….and that was hard to think that this could be severed forever.’ (D)

Participants appeared to feel weighed down by the impact their decisions would have, emphasising this again through use of emotive or strong language and repetition.

**Uncertain decisions**

Participants spoke about the ambiguity and subjective nature of the decision, reflecting that it depended on who was making it and how they interpreted a given situation. This appeared to make participants feel anxious, as they were aware that their decision wasn’t the only possible decision that could be made.

‘They’re all so subjective decisions...so it depends who they have on the day as to who decides what happens in their lives’ (K)

Not knowing how children will perceive the decision in the future also appeared to be anxiety provoking as participants felt they would be responsible if children were to evaluate the decision negatively. This appeared to have a direct impact on the way that participants approached their decisions.
‘Some people say it’s really positive but some say that they were separated from siblings and they really questioned why...so...that also influences my decision because I just think ‘oh my god they should just be together then’” (H)

Participants were aware that the decision they made could lead to adoption breakdown; this appeared to guide their decision-making about placing siblings in some cases. This was an emotive topic for some participants.

‘You kind of go for what will make a safe adoptive placement, how can we reduce breakdown?’ (A)

‘But it was still scary because there was no guarantee that it would actually work...because that’s a really awful thing...an adoption placement breakdown is...pretty awful.’ (K)

For the most part participants appeared to experience the decision-making process as uncertain and thus scary as there was not a right decision to make, they were aware another SW may make a different decision, that the children may experience it as negative, and that adoption breakdown could occur. This sometimes led participants to make safe decisions, suggesting that this constrained their decision-making.

Sharing responsibility

Some appeared to manage the pressure and responsibility by distancing themselves, predominantly by emphasising the impact of others on the decision.
'And you’re acting on behalf of the local authority, you’re not acting on behalf of yourself. And that’s what you’ve always got to remember...there’s so many people that are responsible as well’ (F)

Participants’ language suggested how comfortable they felt about taking responsibility for their decision. They appeared to swap between using first person pronouns when they felt comfortable with the process or decision, and second or third person pronouns or determiners, such as ‘the,’ when they wanted to distance themselves from the responsibility. This participant appeared uncomfortable with the decision so shared the responsibility with unknown others:

‘I separate, we separated the older child from the two younger ones’ (E)

Taking responsibility for the decision appeared to be difficult for some participants so sharing it with others helped them manage the emotive nature of the decision-making process. This was evident through their implicit and explicit language.

**Professional Status**

This superordinate theme refers to SWs’ perception of the status and power that they felt that they held. It encompassed ideas relating to their status compared to other professionals, and how much power they felt they had over the decision.

**Lacking a voice**

Despite feeling responsible for the decisions, most participants described feeling powerless and spoke about the decision being taken out of their hands or being
overruled by someone with power. Powerful others included Government, court, management and CAMHS.

‘Ultimately the decision isn’t in my hands...if you’re told to do something, you do it...and if you’re told that management decision is the final decision’ (A)

They also spoke about feeling undermined or not valued by other professionals. They appeared to feel that other professionals held more status than they did so their views were listened to more. They described an expectation that they should know everything and be able to do everything, regardless of whether they had experience in placing siblings for adoption. This led to participants feeling deskillled, demoralised and lacking confidence in their abilities, and professional status.

‘Cos the judge wanted to see what a a qualified psychotherapist would say, as opposed to me...So the judge and the guardian did make me feel quite undermined.’ (H)

When participants felt heard by another professional who they deemed to have more power or status than themselves, they described a sense of relief and appeared to use this to justify their decision.

‘And he agreed, but he came to see me afterwards and said it wasn’t an easy decision and you know, and, erm, and I said no, you know, for all of us it’s been really difficult’ (B)

It appears that participants felt that while they had responsibility for the decisions they made, they lacked a voice during the decision-making process and felt that they made
the decision that they were told to. More powerful professionals agreeing with their
decision appeared to give participants confidence in their decisions, perhaps because
they expected them to not agree.

Reliance on adopters
Adopters’ willingness to adopt sibling groups often appeared to determine decisions,
rather than the sibling group’s or children’s needs. Participants appeared to feel
uncomfortable about this as they valued the sibling relationship.

‘We’ve failed because we don’t have adopters. It’s very limited amount of adopters that
will take on sibling groups…it’s not fair’ (A).

However some participants did acknowledge that it was important to know that adopters
would have the skill to adopt sibling groups so sometimes it was right that adopters only
wanted to adopt single children.

‘That amount of children, really those adopters probably haven’t had children
themselves. Um so it’s looking at can they do it?’ (H)

It appears that participants felt uncomfortable about not being able to place children
based on legal guidance or what they felt was best, as they were limited by availability
of adopters. They appeared to manage this tension by telling themselves that the
adopters would not be skilled enough to adopt siblings.
The power of relationships

This superordinate theme refers to the value that participants placed on developing relationships, specifically with the children they were working with and colleagues.

Relationships with the children

Participants discussed the importance of the relationships that they built with the children, which seemed to go beyond professional relationships. These relationships drove participants to do their job, even when it felt tough, as they cared about the children and wanted to achieve the best outcome for them.

‘There is that maternal…you think I need to make sure that that i-child has everything that it possibly can and that it’s looked after and nurtured and cared for.’ (J)

‘That gets me to the end of each day. Because I know I’m trying to do the best for the child.’ (F)

The process of getting to know the children helped participants feel clearer about their decision and made them feel that they were in the best place to make the decision when compared to other professionals. Knowing the children allowed participants to advocate for a child if they felt they were being scapegoated.

‘Once I started to get to know the children that’s when I thought I know this is not gonna work them all to be together.’ (D)
‘I sought the guardian’s views as well for the proceedings…but the person who was seeing the children the most and had the relationship with them was me.’

(G)

‘But I-I felt very strongly that…a lot of the older child’s behaviour was about his the parenting he’s experienced with his birth family but also within foster care’ (E)

Some participants were aware, however, that having a bond with the children had disadvantages as they could ‘get too involved’ (D) and care too much about getting the right outcome for the child.

‘You can get frustrated’…because you’re so invested in those children getting the right outcome.’ (H)

Others were aware of the loss that they would feel when the children were adopted, describing mixed emotions.

‘Saying goodbye to him…I mean that will be a real problem for me…it’ll be sad for me, happy as well…’ (I)

While participants viewed their relationship with the children as important bigger sibling groups seemed to make it harder to keep all of the children in focus, or to have an equal relationship with all of them. Participants often focused on one child within the sibling group.
'I kind of think cos I was focusing on those two that the other sibling kind of got left out a bit’ (A)

Participants appeared to develop extremely close relationships, which were often personal in nature, with the children they were working with. They predominantly perceived these to be positive and helpful but were aware that these could get too close and this could be unhelpful.

Relationships with colleagues

Relationships with colleagues were important. They were seen as valuable for advice, to learn from their previous experiences, to make participants feel better about making difficult decisions to separate siblings, and for emotional support.

‘Talking to colleagues on what their experiences have been, and how they’ve managed it previously, and having that support, and knowing that others have kind of done it before, and you’re not the first….as a team we are very close and supportive of each other.’ (C)

On the whole participants found supervision to be a useful space to reflect, gain advice, consider alternative perspectives, step back from their own experiences or feelings, and process difficult emotions related to these decisions. Supervisors were seen to be emotionally removed from the case so could help participants think more objectively about their decisions, avoiding personally motivated decisions.

‘The supervisor always says kind of what’s your personal feelings and if there’s anything there you can…really process your feelings’ (H)
'I was being challenged around why I was forming those views. Erm, by my manager, you know what where is this coming from, what have you done?’ (G)

However some participants spoke about feeling let down by supervisors or not receiving sufficient support. Social work supervisors have a dual role, where they also act as manager for the participants. This was an issue for one participant as they felt that the supervisor (as manager) could put more pressure to make a quick decision, rather than to support them with the decision making process.

‘I’ve taken it forward in supervision but you are still met with that this needs to happen’

(A)

Relationships with colleagues appeared to be important, for advice and peer support; however managers, who provided supervision, were sometimes seen as unhelpful as they pushed for decisions to be made. Participants appeared to want more support from supervisors, to help them manage these difficult decisions.
Balancing subjectivity and objectivity
- Personal beliefs about siblings (10)
- Wanting to keep siblings together (10)
  - Personal experience (10)
  - Feelings (11)
  - Staying objective (10)

Weight of responsibility
- A hard decision (11)
- The impact of the decision (10)
  - Uncertain decisions (11)
  - Sharing responsibility (4)

The power of relationships
- Relationships with the children (10)
- Relationships with colleagues (11)

Professional Status
- Lacking a voice (11)
- Reliance on adopters (10)

Figure 1. A diagrammatic representation of the connection between the superordinate themes
A connection between the themes

While the superordinate themes were distinct, a connection was identified between them, suggesting that they are not completely discrete and that they interact with each other to influence how SWs experience the decision-making process. This is demonstrated in Figure 1. ‘Balancing subjectivity and objectivity’ was found to have a reciprocal link with ‘Weight of responsibility’ and ‘Relationships.’ ‘Relationships’ appeared to connect to ‘Weight of responsibility.’ Professional status’ was found to connect to ‘Weight of responsibility’ and have a reciprocal connection with ‘Relationships’. All superordinate themes influenced the decision that participants made, and how they felt about this decision.

Discussion

This study used IPA to explore the lived experience of social workers making decisions about how to place sibling groups for adoption. Social workers’ experiences were encapsulated in four themes: ‘Balancing objectivity and subjectivity’; ‘Weight of responsibility’; ‘Professional status’; and ‘Relationships’. A model describes the relationship between these themes (Figure 1).

Participants recognised the influence of their experiences, beliefs, and values on the decision-making process. They believed that these had some benefit as they enabled them to empathise with the children and their experiences, helping them to make sensitive decisions. The belief that personal experiences inform practice and facilitates practice has previously been found in student SWs and nurses (Gilbert & Stickley, 2012). Consistent with Sharpe (2014), participants acknowledged that these influences could be constraining, as they complicated the decision-making process. Decisions seemed to be particularly difficult for participants when they could identify similarities
between the children and their own relationships, possibly as this resonated more strongly with them. It therefore appeared that SW’s own attachments play out in decision-making. Participants discussed distancing themselves from their own experiences to make decisions based on the children’s needs, rather than their own wishes. This is consistent with the Code of Ethics for Social Work, which states that SWs need to be aware of the impact of their own values, prejudices and conflicts of interest (British Association of Social Workers, 2012b).

SWs described a huge sense of responsibility for their decisions. This appeared to increase with more children in the sibling group. In some cases the weight of responsibility hindered SWs’ decision-making as they felt negative emotions, such as anxiety or regret, about the uncertain and risky nature of the decisions. Sharing responsibility with other people appeared to help social workers cope with this. These influences do not seem to have been identified previously in the social work literature. However they are consistent with research into parental decision-making, which identified the influence of feelings of responsibility on their decision-making processes in case harm occurred to their child as a result of the decision (Beresford & Sloper, 2008), suggesting that parents were influenced by the responsibility of the decisions but also the uncertainty over whether they would cause harm to their children. As the local authority has parental capacity whilst children are in care, it might be helpful to study parental decision-making models with reference to SWs in the future.

Participants’ professional status appeared to constrain the decision-making process. This echoes previous research, which found that lack of voice and feeling less powerful than other professionals impacted on SW decision-making (O’Connor & Leonard, 2013). Due to their perceived powerlessness, SWs appeared to feel demoralised,
deskilled and lacking in confidence. Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief about their ability to complete a task, impacting on how individuals behave, feel, and think (Bandura, 1994). SWs are likely to have a low sense of self-efficacy. Due to feeling they do not have the power to make the decisions, they are also likely to have an external locus of control, believing that they have less control over a situation (Rotter, 1966). In nursing, a significant relationship has been found between an internal locus of control and independent decision-making (Neaves, 1989), suggesting that individuals with an external locus of control may not feel as accountable in their decision-making. Therefore perceived powerlessness is likely to reduce participants’ belief in their abilities to make the decision and feelings of accountability regarding the decision.

SWs predominantly felt that relationships with colleagues and management were helpful. However they stated that every case was different so it was hard to generalise between them. Participants’ sense of powerlessness appeared to impact on their confidence about the decisions they were making, possibly increasing their reliance on colleagues or management to support their decision-making. This is consistent with O’Connor and Leonard (2013)’s findings that some SWs felt they needed support from management as they did not have enough power. SWs need to have more confidence in their own abilities to assess a sibling group and make decisions so can feel they can make decisions on their own without relying on others, or evidence from previous cases, to make decisions.

SWs valued the relationships that they built with the children, feeling that they were in the best place to make decisions for them so although they felt disempowered, they appeared to feel they should have more power. SWs’ relationships with the children appeared to be beneficial, although made decisions more emotive. More children in the
sibling group meant more responsibility, stress and anxiety, making it harder to keep all of the children in focus and potentially making a decision to separate larger sibling groups even harder. This has not been found previously in the literature.

The negative emotions experienced by participants throughout the decision-making process may impact on their decisions. According to Zajonc (1980), it is not possible to be truly rational and objective in decision-making, with emotions guiding our judgments and perceptions. Additionally, Damasio (1990) found that feelings are necessary to make decisions that are in an individual’s best interests as analytic reasoning is not sufficient. As SWs are required to make decisions that are in the children’s best interests it seems key that SWs pay attention to their feelings regarding a decision. Anxiety has been shown to impact on individuals’ decision-making (Miu, Heilman & Houser, 2008) and cognitive abilities (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos & Calvo, 2007). Finally, research has demonstrated that individuals make decisions to avoid negative emotions (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo & Kassam, 2015). Therefore, if separating siblings evokes negative emotions in SWs they may choose to keep siblings together in order to avoid these feelings, possibly choosing to keep them in long-term foster care rather than adoption if this is the only option available. Emotions were prevalent throughout participants’ accounts of their experiences, highlighting the emotive nature of decision-making. Research suggests that emotions may be helpful and necessary for decision-making so shouldn’t be ignored or pushed aside but should be explored by SWs.

The Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) can be applied to SWs’ experiences of decision-making. This model states that decision-making is constrained by limitations of the mind so individuals are unable to attend to all relevant information
and thus have to be selective regarding the information they attend to. Constraints of the mind appear to include participants’ sense of responsibility as this may distract them from focusing on all relevant information. Another appears to be participants’ tendency to focus on one child within the sibling group as too many children may be too difficult to keep in focus. Thus SWs may be unconsciously selective about the children they attend to when making decisions as they do not have the capacity to keep all of them in the focus of their attention. Finally participants’ sense of powerlessness and low self-efficacy could be a constraint of the mind, as they may focus on their inability to make decisions rather than the task at hand.

The model also highlights the negative impact of environmental constraints on decision-making. Findings regarding lack of willing adopters for sibling groups and perceived lack of control or power over decision-making are consistent with this. Some social workers also reported stress related to high caseloads and large quantities of paperwork, which fits with previous reports by social workers that high caseloads and associated paperwork prevents SW’s from working to the best of their abilities (The British Association of Social Workers, 2012a). Thus environmental limitations may prevent SWs from making decisions to the best of their abilities.

The model has been adapted to include the emotional impact on decision-making (Beresford & Sloper, 2008). Negative emotions relating to participants’ sense of responsibility and their personal emotions regarding the decision can also be understood within this model. Separating siblings may evoke negative emotions in SWs, which they may attempt to avoid by placing siblings together (Lerner et al., 2015). As noted above, negative emotions may hinder SWs’ cognitive abilities (Eysenck, et al., 2007) so they are less able to attend to all of the relevant information required to make a decision.
Participants appeared to be constrained by the discourse around siblings and adoption, believing that people do not want to adopt siblings. Thus SWs did not appear to expect to be able to place them together. This has not been found previously in the literature. It was expected that attachment theory would be more frequently discussed by SWs as it appears to be key for assessing sibling relationships (Whelan, 2003). While some SWs superficially discussed the use of attachment theory, this was not prevalent across interviews. A few SWs reported their lack of confidence in using attachment theory effectively. Therefore it appears that SWs require support in increasing their knowledge and confidence in this area. However, some SWs did appear to be using attachment theory without conscious awareness, by providing a safe base for the children they were working with in the absence of a consistent caregiver.

The Information Processing Approach suggests that due to limitations of the mind and environment, individuals use heuristics to aid their decision-making. Participants appeared to find decisions harder when they could identify similarities between the children and their own relationships, possibly as this resonated more strongly with them. This is consistent with the familiarity heuristic, where past behaviour tells us how to act in familiar settings, removing the need to figure out what is appropriate every time. However, when the setting is familiar but an element has changed, this heuristic can become troublesome (McCammon, 2004). SWs may therefore find it harder to make decisions regarding cases that are comparable to their own relationships as they want to place the siblings in a familiar way, possibly preventing SWs from acknowledging all the relevant information. Relying on colleagues and management to aid the decision-making process may also be unhelpful as they may use the familiarity heuristic, supporting SWs to make decisions based on decisions made for previous
similar sibling groups. If there are subtle differences between the sibling groups this may hinder the decision-making process.

Participants tended to focus on one child in the sibling group; this may have a similar effect to relying on heuristics, where SWs hope that if they make the decision based on one child’s needs it will be in the interests of the other children too.

Negative emotions were discussed throughout the interviews, with regard to relationships built with the children, the impact of the responsibility SWs felt, their perceived powerlessness, and emotions related to the decision itself. This fits with the affect heuristic, which refers to making decisions based on feelings about a decision. Slovic, Finucane, Peters and MacGregor (2007) argue that whilst analysis is important in decision-making, using emotions is often quicker, easier and more efficient when faced with complex and uncertain decisions. Additionally Zajonc (1980) suggests that affective reactions often come first during decision-making tasks, guiding information processing and judgment, suggesting that when the mind is constrained emotive reasoning may be more accessible than objective reasoning.

**Clinical Implications**

This research shows that SWs experience decision-making about placing siblings to be emotive, resulting in feelings including stress, anxiety, guilt, responsibility and regret. It is likely that the emotive nature of the work constrains the decisions made. While some SWs report that supervision is helpful for processing emotions, others reported that it was focused on case management, or continued to report high levels of emotion, suggesting they had not fully processed this. For some SWs, there was a just get on with it attitude, where they spoke about needing to move on following a decision, as they
would have another case to pick up. However research has suggested that emotions may be necessary to make decisions that are in an individual’s best interests (Damasio et al, 1990). Supervision in social work crosses boundaries, as it is both managerial and clinical so dealing with emotions may not always be a priority. It appears that SWs could benefit from support in exploring their emotive responses to their decisions. This could be a role for Clinical Psychologists to take, either in supporting supervisors to take this role, or in facilitating reflective practice groups to aid this process.

Transference also appeared to be prevalent across SWs accounts, where they attempted to but didn’t always manage to separate their own relationships and experiences from the children. This is likely to constrain participants’ decision-making as they find it difficult to imagine making a decision that they can relate to. SWs report having high caseloads and little space for reflection so they may find it even harder to separate their own experiences from the decision. Thus input from Clinical Psychologists may also help social workers to reflect on these issues of transference, to make more objective decisions.

Finally SWs report feeling powerless, deskilled, undermined and lacking in confidence compared to other professionals. Increasing their confidence in their decision-making abilities would help SWs to make their own decisions without feeling they need additional support. Discussion around the use of attachment theory within the decision-making process was limited, with a few SWs reporting anxiety about their abilities to use attachment theory compared to other professionals such as psychologists. Use of attachment theory is key for decision-making in these situations and therefore training from psychologists to improve SWs confidence and ability may also be helpful. Clinical Psychologists could also provide consultation to SWs when they are finding a decision
difficult, either to validate their decision and thus increase their confidence, or provide them with support around using attachment theory.

Limitations

All participants described themselves as ‘White British’; however 15.6% of SWs across Britain describe themselves as an ethnicity other than ‘White British’. (Department for Education, 2016). Participant accounts may vary depending on their ethnicity as culture impacts on beliefs about siblings and family (Yaman, Mesman, Jzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenbug & Lintig, 2010). As British culture is traditionally individualistic; it may be that individuals from more collective cultures may view the sibling relationship as even more important and thus find these decisions even more difficult (Whiteman, McHale & Soli, 2011). As the present study has shown that personal beliefs and values impact on decision-making regarding sibling placements in adoption, it may be that cultural beliefs also impact on these decisions. Due to the lack of ethnic diversity in the present study, it was not impossible to explore the effect of cultural beliefs on decision-making.

This research did not explore participants’ reasons for becoming SWs. Previous research has suggested that social work students were more likely to report childhood experiences of difficulties including alcoholism and mental health problems and attribute these experiences to their choice of career than non-social work students (Rompf & Royse, 1994). It may be that these experiences not only impact on SWs’ choice of career but also how they approach their work and thus these reasons for entering into social work may impact on their decision-making processes.

The recruitment method is likely to have resulted in bias as it relied on volunteers to participate in the research. Participants may have been motivated to participate for a
particular reason. Some cited reasons such as still feeling that the decision was uncomfortable, emotional or raw so it may be that the sense of responsibility and emotive nature of the decisions was more pronounced in these participants. Should other participants have volunteered the results may have had a different balance. As managers helped the researcher recruit participants, it is possible that SWs felt they had to volunteer to participate, particularly given their sense of powerlessness.

Finally, due to the interpretative nature of IPA the researcher takes an active role in the development of themes, where they try to make sense of participants’ attempts to understand their world. This is called the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2007). As a result of their own experiences of being a sibling, the researcher has their own beliefs about the importance of the sibling relationship. Another researcher with a different set of beliefs may have approached the analysis and subsequent interpretation in a different way.

**Future research**

Future research should explore the impact of experiences and beliefs that have not been explored in the current study, for example the role of cultural beliefs and reasons for entering into social work. As cultural beliefs regarding families and siblings differ, it is possible that SWs may make different decisions regarding sibling placement depending on the cultural background of the sibling group. For example, they may believe that it is more important to keep children from collectivist cultures together. This needs to be explored in more detail. Future research should also investigate whether children’s characteristics either implicitly or explicitly impact on SWs’ decision-making.
There is no current social work specific decision-making model. The findings of this study suggest that decision-making theory and models can be applied to this area of social work. While statutory guidance is provided, social workers are still troubled by the enormity of decisions they face. Future research should take into account this personal effect on professionals making such profound decisions. This could be integrated into a decision-making model specific to social workers when placing siblings for adoption. More research is required to clarify this complex area.

SWs rely on tools to guide their decision-making (Howe, Dooley & Hinings, 2000). This is likely to be due to a combination of factors including lack of confidence and sense of powerlessness regarding their abilities. As these tools aren’t available this is likely to cause them stress. Therefore future research should focus on developing a tool for SWs to use when assessing and making decisions concerning placements for sibling groups.

**Conclusion**

This study explores SWs’ decision-making process when placing sibling groups for adoption. SWs were found to feel extremely responsible for their decisions but also powerless within the decision-making process. They identified and acknowledged the role of their experiences, beliefs and emotions on their decisions, although attempted to step back from these to focus on the children. Their relationships with the children could make this harder, but relationships with colleagues aided the process. A relationship was identified between the SWs’ experiences, which is illustrated in Figure 1. It appears that SWs find their experiences and beliefs beneficial but constraining. The Information Processing Approach and concept of heuristics can be applied to SWs’ decision-making process. Participants’ experience of feeling powerless can be
understood in the context of self-efficacy and locus of control. While SWs feel that their emotions should not be part of the decision, these are personal decisions which evoke a lot of emotion and thus perhaps emotions should be considered more frequently within the decision-making process. Finally, while legal guidance states that siblings should be placed together, SWs often find that this is not possible due to factors outside of their control. The study proposes areas for future research.
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Part Three - Appendices
Appendix A: Reflective Statement
Empirical Project

On commencing my clinical training I was sure that I wanted to work with children. as this was where I had most of my experience and interest prior to the course. When the concept of research was brought to our attention it therefore seemed obvious to me that I needed to focus my attention for my research on something to do with children. For me, the department research conference was overwhelming. I hadn’t yet worked clinically and so felt underprepared to make a decision that would guide my next three years. So I was relieved when my conversation with Annette sparked off a number of interesting ideas for potential research projects, all centred around working with children.

One of my favourite books as a child was The Story of Tracey Beaker, a story of a child who grows up in a children’s home and finally gets adopted. Adoption was something that had always fascinated me but was completely alien to me as well. To this day I struggle to understand the concept of adoption, where children are expected to move from their birthparents to another set of parents, something that I can’t identify with or even begin to imagine. Although I had always been interested in the concept of adoption, it wasn’t until I began interviewing participants and hearing their stories that the reality of adoption hit me. The task that we are asking children to do is massive.

Discovering the idea that attachment theory could be applied to sibling relationships drew my attention. It was something that I could identify with based on my own relationship with my sister; we have always provided each other with a sense of security and comfort, the foundations for a secure base. I couldn’t imagine someone else making the decision that my sister and I would be separated forever. So I decided this was an area I would like to know more about.
My initial idea was to talk to the children who were adopted and separated from their siblings to give them a voice, something that they don’t have in their lives. I wanted to know what that felt like and how they made sense of this experience of being separated. However I was also driven by a desire to want to conduct some research that had the potential to make a difference. For me, this meant going one step further and talking to the people who make the decisions for these children; working with the people with power to make a difference for the powerless. This decision was cemented when a Clinical Psychologist emphasised to me the difficulty I would face trying to recruit children in this position. I was aware that while this was a piece of research I was also limited by the timescales of the course and so had to find something that would satisfy both of these requirements.

I began my recruitment with a single contact in a very small Local Authority. Having met with the team, I had identified three individuals that met my inclusion criteria and were keen to take part. I then felt stuck – there were no more potential participants to recruit from this Local Authority and I didn’t know where to go next. I tried other Local Authorities in the area with little luck (in fact to this day I haven’t heard back from them). Having got off to a successful start I suddenly started to feel lost. Where were my other participants going to come from? My luck changed when I told a friend about my research and she mentioned to me that her mum worked in a Local Authority. She offered to tell her mum about my research to see whether she could help. I was extremely grateful for this, but didn’t expect anything to happen so I was more than just a little shocked when, a couple of months later, I received a call from my friend to tell me that her mum had had agreement from the director of the Local Authority for me to recruit! I gathered that the senior management were extremely keen for the research to
happen and this helped me massively as they were behind me all the way, helping me to get team managers on board to share my information and help me recruit. So I owe a massive thanks to my friend and her mum, who has never met me, but had enough faith to push for management to agree to my research going ahead. If I was only allowed to give one bit of advice it would be to talk to everyone about your research, because you never know who might know someone that might be able to help you.

In total my research journey took me over 1,101 miles around Britain. Although I wished at times that I had conducted some of my interviews by telephone, I am now pleased that I made the decision to meet all of my participants face-to-face. I am not sure that I would have gathered such rich data through telephone interviews. Meeting my participants also gave me the opportunity to put a face to the voice and the words; I believe that this enabled me to be more sensitive in my analysis.

Throughout the interviews I was struck by how honest my participants were with me. They shared intimate and personal details about their professional work and personal life, something that we are so often guarded against. I was shocked by the level of emotion in the room during the interviews, the relationships that the social workers built with the children they worked with, and how personal the decisions appeared to feel to them. I was also surprised by how powerless my participants felt. But above all, I couldn’t imagine being in their shoes and having to make such massive decisions about children’s lives. This gave me all the more reason to want to do my research well, I wanted to do their accounts of their experiences justice.

The analysis was very new to me and I found it hard. My undergraduate course was predominantly focused on quantitative analysis so qualitative was a new concept to me.
Added to my lack of experience in the field, I had interviewed eleven participants who all provided me with rich data, meaning that I had a lot of codes and a lot of information to make sense of. Wanting to do the participants justice, I felt overwhelmed by the task ahead of me, unsure how I was ever going to pull their experiences together into a succinct research project. On reflection, this was a parallel process with my participants, where I felt just as overwhelmed and wanted to get it just as right as they did. I didn’t want to miss anything, much the same as they probably feel.

The process of listening back to transcripts allowed me to understand and hear participants’ stories in a different way to how I had interpreted them and remembered them at the time. I was particularly struck by one participant’s interview. At the time of the interview I felt incredibly uncomfortable and on edge, feeling that she was defensive and at points attacking towards me. Listening back on the interview, with a bit of space, I heard her speaking in a completely different way. What I had interpreted as attacking towards me I now interpreted as her frustration at the system. I wondered if she felt so powerless that part of her wasn’t sure what the point of the research was as there was so many fundamental things that she felt needed to be fixed and I wasn’t going to do that for her. This cemented for me the value in listening back to interviews, not just transcribing them and then reading the transcripts as I don’t think I’d have ever re-interpreted her interview in that way otherwise.

It has been important for me throughout this process to reflect on my beliefs about the sibling relationship. My relationship with my sister is extremely important to me and, as I have mentioned previously, I could never imagine being separated from her. I was therefore aware that I was entering into this research process with predefined views about the sibling relationship, and difficulty coming to terms with the fact that siblings
placed for adoption could be separated from each other. It’s also been important for me to reflect on my beliefs about adoption. Whilst I appreciate the need for adoption in our society, I struggle to get my head round the concept that children go from having one set of parents to another set of parents almost from one day to the next. For me it challenges everything that I know about family and attachment. While some participants spoke about finding the concept of adoption difficult, I was surprised that only one participant explicitly acknowledged the enormity of the task for the children. On reflection I wondered whether this was because they were too overwhelmed by the weight of the responsibility that they felt to be able to consider this, or because they had become desensitized to this, due to the number of adoptions that they had been part of.

I have also been extremely aware of my role as a researcher, and the intrinsic power that can bring. This awareness heightened as my interviews progressed and I became aware of how powerless some of my participants felt compared to other professionals. I was acutely aware of my role as a Clinical Psychologist and how they might interpret this. On the flip side of this, my role as a researcher allowed me to listen to them and give them a voice, something that they so often felt other professionals did not give them. So in fact the thing that I thought would get in our way possibly facilitated my interviews.

Throughout the process of my research I have gone from feeling excited and proud, to doubting the value and worth of my research, and back to excited again. I have felt hopeless, overwhelmed and exhausted. But ultimately what has kept me going has been my participants. Meeting them face-to-face has allowed me to have a connection with each of them.
Systematic Literature Review

For me, the SLR was the hardest part of the thesis. I struggled to find a related topic that had enough literature to form a review. I had many moments where I thought I was never going to find a topic as the research was just too sparse. By the time I found my review, I felt that I hadn’t left a single stone unturned and was relieved when I discovered enough literature that explored adoptees’ experiences of reunion with birth family in adulthood. This was something that was interesting to me not just on a clinical level, but also on a personal level. While the lack of literature was originally frustrating, it also drove me to complete the review as I felt it was important that more attention was brought to this area. Equally, whilst the quality of the literature was relatively poor, my review has been able to bring attention to this, with the hope that this will prompt further, better quality, research into this massively important topic.

Both my empirical project and SLR have suggested useful and interesting avenues for Clinical Psychologists to pursue in supporting the process of adoption. This was something that was important to me throughout my research following my experience of working in a Child and Adolescent service, where I felt that support for adoptees and their families was missing from the service. I believe that this is such a big event for children and Social Workers, and Clinical Psychologists should have a more active and supportive role.
Appendix B: Epistemological Statement

Epistemology refers to ‘the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired’ (Snape & Spencer, 2003 P1). It determines the methodology that is chosen and justifies the knowledge produced by research (Carter & Little, 2007). Each epistemological stance has its own set of assumptions about knowledge and knowing (Willig, 2013). Therefore the epistemological stance of a researcher impacts on the way that research is carried out (Snape & Spencer, 2003). This statement seeks to describe the researcher’s epistemological stance.

Epistemological stances available to qualitative researchers sit on a continuum, with ‘realism’ at one end and ‘social constructionism’ at the other end. ‘Realism’ suggests that knowledge is objective, and that there is a ‘truth’, which exists independently of both the researcher’s and participants’ experiences (Willig, 2013). Social constructionism, at the other end of the continuum, believes that knowledge is constructed through language, and that there are multiple ‘knowledges’. Researchers from this epistemology focus on how individuals talk about their world and experiences (Willig, 2013). Phenomenology sits in the middle of these stances, aiming to identify knowledge about participants’ subjective experience rather than an objective truth (Willig, 2013).

My approach to understanding knowledge has developed from the point of conceptualising my research to the final empirical project that is part of this portfolio thesis. I began understanding knowledge from a ‘realist’ stance where I believed that there was an objective ‘truth’ to the decisions that social workers make about placing sibling groups. Thus I began by wanting to determine the best way to make decisions about placing sibling groups. I aimed to create an assessment tool through the use of the
Delphi method, which sits within the realist epistemology, using systematic method and a panel of experts to reach a truth (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Hanafin, 2004). However through my experiences as a trainee Clinical Psychologist I began to understand knowledge of the world as being constructed based on our previous experiences. I now believe our experiences are intrinsically part of who we are and guide how we experience events, meaning that no two individuals will experience an event in the same way. This led me to begin to understand knowledge as something that is created and negotiated. I therefore decided to use a qualitative methodology to explore how social workers experience making incredibly difficult decisions about placing sibling groups for adoption. As I believe that we understand the world through the lens of our experiences, and that we cannot separate ourselves from our experiences, I was particularly interested in how social workers understand the role of their beliefs, experiences and values.

Due to my evolving understanding of knowledge, I do not believe that it is possible for decisions to be truly objective. I therefore believe that personal experiences could play a role in social workers’ decision-making process. Suggesting that personal experiences and values may impact on the decision-making process of social workers proposes that there is a truth to social workers’ experiences. Therefore this research fits more with a phenomenological epistemology than a social constructionist epistemology as the research was less focused on how knowledge was constructed, but on understanding social workers’ experiences of this phenomenology.

Phenomenological research can be descriptive or interpretative. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an interpretative methodology that seeks to understand participants’ lived experience; although it is acknowledged that this cannot
be direct accessed (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Willig, 2013). It is underpinned by
the methodological assumptions of phenomenology (lived experience), hermeneutics
(interpretation) and idiography, so fits with understanding subjective experience not
objective truths or reality (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA fits with my beliefs
that our understanding of the world is mediated by our previous experiences, as it
assumes that people perceive the world subjectively and can experience the ‘same’
objective conditions in different ways depending on their thoughts, beliefs, expectations
and judgements. Due to the predominantly unconscious nature of these experiences an
interpretative methodology seemed more appropriate to explore social workers’
experiences of decision-making, and the role of their personal experiences. IPA aims to
understand the meaning of experience by reflecting on the quality and texture of the
experience as well as the meaning within the relevant social and cultural context, thus
involving interpretation. (Willig, 2013).

An alternative approach could have been thematic analysis (Willig, 2013). This could
have been used to answer my research question, however due to its’ descriptive nature it
may have missed the potentially unconscious influence of participants’ personal
experiences and beliefs. Grounded theory was not chosen to answer this research
question, as this research is exploratory and was not seeking to develop a theory.
Previous research into social workers’ decision-making has tended to focus on child
protection, which is a different type of decision to decisions about placing for adoption.
Grounded theory also may have missed the idiosyncratic nature of people’s experiences.
Narrative analysis was also considered but not chosen as the aim of the research was not
to gather participants’ stories of their experiences of decision-making.
I believe that we cannot separate ourselves from our experiences and beliefs. An interpretative phenomenological stance suggests that the researcher takes an active role in the research process, and that understanding can only be gained through the researcher’s interpretation of the participant’s account so is implicated in the analysis (Willig, 2013). This infers that the researcher’s values and beliefs influence the research process. It is therefore likely that my beliefs about the importance of the sibling relationship and my own experiences of being a sibling will have entered into the research process, impacting on the types of questions that I asked, things I followed up on, and how I approached the data. While I was consciously aware of this throughout the process it is likely that some of this will have happened beyond my conscious awareness. In addition, my research project that explored social workers’ experiences of making decisions about placing siblings for adoption had a focus on the role of their experiences and beliefs on this process. As I believe that our experiences are intrinsically part of us, this belief is also likely to have impacted on my approach to the research.

Reflexivity is essential throughout the research process to be aware of these potential influences. The researcher used introspection through the use of a research diary and a reflective practice group to consider their own beliefs regarding the sibling relationship and the influence of our experiences on our decisions.

References


Appendix C: Author Guidelines for Clinical Psychology Review (Systematic Literature Review)

Submission checklist

You can use this list to carry out a final check of your submission before you send it to the journal for review. Please check the relevant section in this Guide for Authors for more details.

Ensure that the following items are present:

One author has been designated as the corresponding author with contact details:
• E-mail address
• Full postal address

All necessary files have been uploaded:
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• Include keywords
• All figures (include relevant captions)
• All tables (including titles, description, footnotes)
• Ensure all figure and table citations in the text match the files provided
• Indicate clearly if color should be used for any figures in print
Graphical Abstracts / Highlights files (where applicable)
Supplemental files (where applicable)

Further considerations
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• Permission has been obtained for use of copyrighted material from other sources (including the Internet)
• Relevant declarations of interest have been made
• Journal policies detailed in this guide have been reviewed
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All authors must disclose any financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence (bias) their work. Examples of potential conflicts of interest include employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, paid expert testimony, patent applications/registrations, and grants or other funding. If there are no conflicts of interest then please state this: 'Conflicts of interest: none'. More information.
Submission declaration and verification

Submission of an article implies that the work described has not been published previously (except in the form of an abstract or as part of a published lecture or academic thesis or as an electronic preprint, see ‘Multiple, redundant or concurrent publication’ section of our ethics policy for more information), that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, that its publication is approved by all authors and tacitly or explicitly by the responsible authorities where the work was carried out, and that, if accepted, it will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically without the written consent of the copyright-holder. To verify originality, your article may be checked by the originality detection service CrossCheck.

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The four statements of the author disclosure document are described below. Statements should not be numbered. Headings (i.e., Role of Funding Sources, Contributors, Conflict of Interest, Acknowledgements) should be in bold with no white space between the heading and the text. Font size should be the same as that used for references.

Statement 1: Role of Funding Sources

Authors must identify who provided financial support for the conduct of the research and/or preparation of the manuscript and to briefly describe the role (if any) of the funding sponsor in study design, collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, writing the manuscript, and the decision to submit the manuscript for publication. If the funding source had no such involvement, the authors should so state.

Example: Funding for this study was provided by NIAAA Grant R01-AA123456. NIAAA had no role in the study design, collection, analysis or interpretation of the data, writing the manuscript, or the decision to submit the paper for publication.

Statement 2: Contributors

Authors must declare their individual contributions to the manuscript. All authors must
have materially participated in the research and/or the manuscript preparation. Roles for each author should be described. The disclosure must also clearly state and verify that all authors have approved the final manuscript.

Example: Authors A and B designed the study and wrote the protocol. Author C conducted literature searches and provided summaries of previous research studies. Author D conducted the statistical analysis. Author B wrote the first draft of the manuscript and all authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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<tr>
<th>Author(s) &amp; year</th>
<th>Title of study</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Research aims</th>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Design methodology</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<th>Limitations</th>
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### Appendix E: Quality Assessment Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of mixed methods study components or primary studies</th>
<th>Methodological quality criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Screening questions (for all types)</td>
<td>Are there clear qualitative and quantitative research questions (or objectives*), or a clear mixed methods question (or objective*)?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do the collected data allow address the research question (objective)? E.g., consider whether the follow-up period is long enough for the outcome to occur (for longitudinal studies or study components).</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Further appraisal may be not feasible or appropriate when the answer is ‘No’ or ‘Can’t tell’ to one or both screening questions.</em></td>
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1. Qualitative

1.1. Are the sources of qualitative data (archives, documents, informants, observations) relevant to address the research question (objective)?

1.2. Is the process for analyzing qualitative data relevant to address the research question (objective)?

1.3. Is appropriate consideration given to how findings relate to the context, e.g., the setting, in which the data were collected?

1.4. Is appropriate consideration given to how findings relate to researchers’ influence,
2. **Quantitative randomized controlled (trials)**

   2.1. Is there a clear description of the randomization (or an appropriate sequence generation)?

   2.2. Is there a clear description of the allocation concealment (or blinding when applicable)?

   2.3. Are there complete outcome data (80% or above)?

   2.4. Is there low withdrawal/drop-out (below 20%)?

3. **Quantitative non-randomized**

   3.1. Are participants (organizations) recruited in a way that minimizes selection bias?

   3.2. Are measurements appropriate (clear origin, or validity known, or standard instrument; and absence of contamination between groups when appropriate) regarding the exposure/intervention and outcomes?

   3.3. In the groups being compared (exposed vs. non-exposed; with intervention vs. without; cases vs. controls), are the participants comparable, or do researchers take into account (control for) the difference between these groups?

   3.4. Are there complete outcome data (80% or above), and, when applicable, an acceptable response rate (60% or above), or an acceptable follow-up rate for cohort studies (depending on the duration of follow-up)?

4. **Quantitative**

   4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the quantitative research question (quantitative aspect of the mixed methods question)?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>descriptive</strong></th>
<th>4.2. Is the sample representative of the population under study?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3. Are measurements appropriate (clear origin, or validity known, or standard instrument)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4. Is there an acceptable response rate (60% or above)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Mixed methods</strong></td>
<td>5.1. Is the mixed methods research design relevant to address the qualitative and quantitative research questions (or objectives), or the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the mixed methods question (or objective)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2. Is the integration of qualitative and quantitative data (or results*) relevant to address the research question (objective)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3. Is appropriate consideration given to the limitations associated with this integration, e.g., the divergence of qualitative and quantitative data (or results*) in a triangulation design?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Criteria for the qualitative component (1.1 to 1.4), and appropriate criteria for the quantitative component (2.1 to 2.4, or 3.1 to 3.4, or 4.1 to 4.4), must be also applied.*
**Appendix F: Table of Quality Assessment Scores** (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Qualitative RCT</th>
<th>Quantitative non-randomised</th>
<th>Quantitative descriptive</th>
<th>Mixed Methods</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<td></td>
<td>1.1 1.2 1.3 1.4 2.1 2.2 2.3 2.4 3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campbell, Silverman &amp; Patti</td>
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<td>(1991)</td>
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<td>Gladstone &amp; WestMAC (1998)</td>
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<td>Howe &amp; Feast (2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muller, Gibbs &amp; Ariel (2003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>O’Neill, McAuley &amp; Loughran (2014)</td>
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<td>Pacheco &amp; Emc (1993)</td>
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<td>Passmore &amp; Chimera (2009)</td>
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<td>Passmore &amp; Feeney (2009)</td>
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<td>Richardson, Davey &amp; Swint (2013)</td>
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<td>Sorosky, Baran &amp; Pannor (1974)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sorosky, Baran &amp; Pannor (1976)</td>
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<td>Total (%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88 75 38 38 100 100 0 -</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G – Submission guidelines for Adoption & Fostering

Adoption & Fostering is the only quarterly UK peer reviewed journal dedicated to adoption and fostering issues. It also focuses on wider developments in childcare practice and research, providing an international, inter-disciplinary forum for academics and practitioners in social work, psychology, law, medicine, education, training and caring for children and young children.

1. Peer review policy

Adoption & Fostering operates a strictly anonymous peer review process in which the reviewer’s name is withheld from the author and the author’s name from the reviewer. The reviewer may at their own discretion opt to reveal their name to the author in their review but our standard policy practice is for both identities to remain concealed. Each manuscript is reviewed by at least two referees. All manuscripts are reviewed as rapidly as possible, and an editorial decision is generally reached within 6-8 weeks of submission.

2. Article types

Articles may cover any of the following: analyses of policies or the law; accounts of practice innovations and developments; findings of research and evaluations; discussions of issues relevant to fostering and adoption; critical reviews of relevant literature, theories or concepts; case studies.

All research-based articles should include brief accounts of the design, sample characteristics and data-gathering methods. Any article should clearly identify its sources and refer to previous writings where relevant. The preferred length of articles is 5,000-7,000 words excluding references.

Contributions should be both authoritative and readable. Please avoid excessive use of technical terms and explain any key words that may not be familiar to most readers.

Letters to the Editor. Readers' letters should address issues raised by published articles or should report significant new findings that merit rapid dissemination. The decision to publish is made by the Editor, in order to ensure a timely appearance in print.

Book Reviews. A list of up-to-date books for review is available from the journal's Managing Editor.

3. How to submit your manuscript

Manuscripts should be submitted to the editor by e-mail attachment to:
Miranda Davies
CoramBAAF Adoption & Fostering Academy
41 Brunswick Square
London
WC1N 1AZ
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7520 0300
Email: miranda.davies@corambaaf.org.uk

4. Journal contributor’s publishing agreement

Before publication SAGE requires the author as the rights holder to sign a Journal Contributor’s Publishing Agreement. For more information please visit our Frequently Asked Questions on the SAGE Journal Author Gateway.

Adoption & Fostering and SAGE take issues of copyright infringement, plagiarism or other breaches of best practice in publication very seriously. We seek to protect the rights of our authors and we always investigate claims of plagiarism or misuse of articles published in the journal. Equally, we seek to protect the reputation of the journal.
against malpractice. Submitted articles may be checked using duplication-checking software. Where an article is found to have plagiarised other work or included third-party copyright material without permission or with insufficient acknowledgement, or where authorship of the article is contested, we reserve the right to take action including, but not limited to: publishing an erratum or corrigendum (correction); retracting the article (removing it from the journal); taking up the matter with the head of department or dean of the author’s institution and/or relevant academic bodies or societies; banning the author from publication in the journal or all SAGE journals, or appropriate legal action.

4.1 SAGE Choice and Open Access
If you or your funder wish your article to be freely available online to non subscribers immediately upon publication (gold open access), you can opt for it to be included in SAGE Choice, subject to payment of a publication fee. The manuscript submission and peer review procedure is unchanged. On acceptance of your article, you will be asked to let SAGE know directly if you are choosing SAGE Choice. To check journal eligibility and the publication fee, please visit SAGE Choice. For more information on open access options and compliance at SAGE, including self author archiving deposits (green open access) visit SAGE Publishing Policies on our Journal Author Gateway.

5. Declaration of conflicting interests
Within your Journal Contributor’s Publishing Agreement you will be required to make a certification with respect to a declaration of conflicting interests. Adoption & Fostering does not require a declaration of conflicting interests but recommends you review the good practice guidelines on the SAGE Journal Author Gateway. For more information please visit the SAGE Journal Author Gateway.

6. Other conventions
None applicable.

7. Acknowledgements
Any acknowledgements should appear first at the end of your article prior to your Declaration of Conflicting Interests (if applicable), any notes and your References. All contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed in an ‘Acknowledgements’ section. Examples of those who might be acknowledged include a person who provided purely technical help, writing assistance, or a department chair who provided only general support. Authors should disclose whether they had any writing assistance and identify the entity that paid for this assistance.

7.1 Funding Acknowledgement
To comply with the guidance for Research Funders, Authors and Publishers issued by the Research Information Network (RIN), Adoption & Fostering additionally requires all Authors to acknowledge their funding in a consistent fashion under a separate heading. Please visit Funding Acknowledgement on the SAGE Journal Author Gateway for funding acknowledgement guidelines.

8. Permissions
Authors are responsible for obtaining permission from copyright holders for reproducing any illustrations, tables, figures or lengthy quotations previously published elsewhere. For further information including guidance on fair dealing for criticism and review, please visit our Frequently Asked Questions on the SAGE Journal Author Gateway.

9. Manuscript style
9.1 File types
Only electronic files conforming to the journal's guidelines will be accepted. The preferred format for the text and tables of your manuscript are Word DOC, RTF, XLS. Please also refer to additional guidelines on submitting artwork [and supplemental files] below.

9.2 Journal Style
Adoption & Fostering conforms to the SAGE house style. Click here to review guidelines on SAGE UK House Style

9.3 Reference Style
Adoption & Fostering adheres to the SAGE Harvard reference style. Click here to review the guidelines on SAGE Harvard to ensure your manuscript conforms to this reference style.

If you use EndNote to manage references, download the SAGE Harvard output style by following this link and save to the appropriate folder (normally for Windows C:\Program Files\EndNote\Styles and for Mac OS X Harddrive:Applications:EndNote:Styles). Once you’ve done this, open EndNote and choose “Select Another Style...” from the dropdown menu in the menu bar; locate and choose this new style from the following screen.

9.4 Manuscript Preparation
The text should be double-spaced throughout and with a minimum of 3cm for left and right hand margins and 5cm at head and foot. Text should be standard 10 or 12 point.

9.4.1 Keywords and Abstracts: Helping readers find your article online
The title, keywords and abstract are key to ensuring readers find your article online through online search engines such as Google. Please refer to the information and guidance on how best to title your article, write your abstract and select your keywords by visiting SAGE’s Journal Author Gateway Guidelines on How to Help Readers Find Your Article Online.

9.4.2 Corresponding Author Contact details
Provide full contact details for the corresponding author including email, mailing address and telephone numbers. Academic affiliations are required for all co-authors. These details should be presented separately to the main text of the article to facilitate anonymous peer review.

9.4.3 Guidelines for submitting artwork, figures and other graphics
For guidance on the preparation of illustrations, pictures and graphs in electronic format, please visit SAGE’s Manuscript Submission Guidelines. Figures supplied in colour will appear in colour online regardless of whether or not these illustrations are reproduced in colour in the printed version. For specifically requested colour reproduction in print, you will receive information regarding the costs from SAGE after receipt of your accepted article.

Avoid confusion between ambiguous characters and take care to ensure that subscripts and superscripts are clear. Numbers below 11 should be written out in the text unless used in conjunction with units (e.g. three apples, 4 kg). Full points (not commas) should be used for decimals. For numbers less than one, a nought should be inserted before the decimal point. Use commas within numbers (e.g. 10,000).

9.4.4 Guidelines for submitting supplemental files
Adoption & Fostering does not currently accept supplemental files.

9.4.5 English Language Editing services
Non-English speaking authors who would like to refine their use of language in their manuscripts might consider using a professional editing service. Visit English Language Editing Services for further information.

10. After acceptance
10.1 Proofs
We will email a PDF of the proofs to the corresponding author.

10.2 E-Prints
SAGE provides authors with access to a PDF of their final article. For further information please visit http://www.sagepub.co.uk/authors/journal/reprint.sp.

10.3 SAGE Production
At SAGE we place an extremely strong emphasis on the highest production standards possible. We attach high importance to our quality service levels in copy-editing, typesetting, printing, and online publication (http://online.sagepub.com/). We also seek to uphold excellent author relations throughout the publication process.
We value your feedback to ensure we continue to improve our author service levels. On publication all corresponding authors will receive a brief survey questionnaire on your experience of publishing in Adoption & Fostering with SAGE.

11. Further information
Any correspondence, queries or additional requests for information on the manuscript submission process should be sent to the Managing Editor, Miranda Davies, at miranda.davies@corambaaf.org.uk.
Appendix H – Ethical Approval Letter

Removed for hard binding.
Appendix I – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Title of the study: Understanding the decisions made by social workers when placing siblings for adoption

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study, which is looking at social workers’ experiences of placing sibling groups for adoption. Before you decide if you want to participate I would like you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve for you if you decide to participate. You can talk to others if you would like and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have before you decide if you want to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?
Government policy states that siblings should be kept together wherever possible and that there should be a clear decision making process that enables social workers to decide early what is in the children’s best interests. However, there is no recommended tool to help social workers make this decision. Evidence has shown that social worker decision making processes can be impacted on by past experience, emotions, and values; however there is currently no research specific to adoption. This study therefore aims to investigate what influences social workers’ decisions when making recommendations regarding adoption placements for children. By clarifying and reflecting on these influences, it is hoped that the results will inform future social work practice. It is also hoped that the results of this study could be incorporated into, or inform future good practice guidance on assessing the placement of siblings.

Why have I been invited?
You have been invited to participate as you are a qualified social worker who currently works with looked after children, has experience of placing siblings for adoption, and have decided whether to separate siblings on at least one occasion.

Do I have to take part?
No, participation is voluntary. If you decide that you would like to take part you will be given a consent form to sign to indicate that you agree to take part. You are free to withdraw from the study up to the point where your interview is transcribed. You do not have to give a reason for this. Your decision will not affect your legal rights.

What will happen if I decide to take part?
If you agree to take part please contact myself, the lead researcher (Lorna Fallon), using the contact details at the bottom of this information sheet (L.Fallon@2014.hull.ac.uk). I will then contact you within 48 hours to check your eligibility for the study by asking you a few short questions. At this time, you will also be given the opportunity to ask me any questions before agreeing to take part.

If you agree to take part, I will arrange a meeting at a convenient place and time. You will be asked to complete a quick form with questions about yourself, such as your gender and age. You will then have a conversation with me that will last between 60 and 90 minutes. During this, I will ask you some questions about your experience of placing sibling groups for adoption. This will be audio recorded. There are no right or wrong answers and I am only
interested in your experiences and beliefs around placing sibling groups for adoption. I will not be judging you for the decision that you made.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
To participate in this study you will be required to take part in an interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes; this may be inconvenient for you. During the interview, you will be asked to reflect on a case where you have had to make a decision about whether or not to separate a sibling group. As these decisions can be incredibly difficult, this may cause emotional distress to some people as they feel judged or regret over the decision that they made. You may also choose to reflect on personal experiences and how these may have influenced your decision. This could also cause emotional distress as everyone has had positive and negative past personal experiences. There will be no expectation that you should talk about anything that you find difficult, or do not wish to discuss, and I will not pass judgement over any decision that has been made. If you do become distressed during the interview, I will support you and guide you to a named individual within your organisation. Although unlikely, it is possible that a disclosure of bad practice may occur. If this were to happen, I would discuss this with you before referring it onwards to the team manager, safeguarding, or whistle blowing individual within your organisation.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
It is not possible to promise that you will gain any direct benefits from taking part in this research. However, it is hoped that the interview will allow you to think about a professional decision that you may have found difficult at the time, or since you have reflected on it more recently. It is reported that social workers find the issue of separating siblings difficult and so it is hoped that the research study will add to the literature base in this area, providing a greater understanding.

What will happen if I decide I no longer wish to take part?
You are free to withdraw from the research study up until the point when the interview is transcribed. You will not be required to give a reason and this will not affect your legal rights.

What if there is a problem?
If you have any concerns or questions about the study, you are able to contact myself, or my supervisor based at the university, and we will try to help you.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?
Yes, all personal information that is collected will be kept strictly confidential at all times. Any information that could identify you or a client will either be removed or obscured. If verbatim quotes are used in the write-up, these will be anonymised and identifying information will be removed or obscured. If you decide to participate in the study, you will be given a number to protect your identity. This will be used on all forms and in interviews. During the research study, all audio recordings will be kept on an encrypted memory stick. These recordings will be destroyed after the research is completed. The only time that confidentiality may be broken is if you disclose something that suggests either yourself or another individual are at risk of harm, or if you disclose examples of bad practice. If this happens during the interview, I will first discuss this with you and then contact the appropriate people to ensure safety of all involved. This is highly unlikely and I will discuss this with you before beginning the interview.
What will happen to the results of the study?
If you are interested, you will be sent a summary of the results of the study. The results will then be submitted for publication in an academic journal and may be presented at conferences. It is possible that direct (verbatim) quotes from your interview will be used in the write-up, however your personal details and identifiable information will not be included.

Who is organising and funding the research?
This research is being undertaken as part of a doctoral research project in Clinical Psychology. The research is funded and regulated through the University of Hull. Some sections of data collected during the study that are relevant to taking part in this research may be looked at by responsible individuals from the University of Hull or from regulatory authorities to ensure that appropriate guidance was followed by the researcher.

Who has reviewed the study?
The Faculty of Health and Social Care Research Ethics Committee at the University of Hull, an independent research ethics committee, has reviewed this study. The committee aims to protect the interests of people who participate in research.

If you have any further questions, comments or queries, please don’t hesitate to contact me. Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Yours Sincerely,

Supervised by,

Lorna Fallon
Trainee Clinical Psychologist

Dr Annette Schlösser
Clinical Psychologist
Academic Coordinator & Clinical Lecturer

Further information and contact details

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Tel: 01482 464101
Email address: a.schlosser@hull.ac.uk
Appendix J – Consent Form

Title of Project: Understanding the decisions made by social workers when placing siblings for adoption

Name of Researcher: Lorna Fallon

Please initial boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 17/03/2016 (Version1.1) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason up to the point of transcription, without my legal rights being affected.

3. I confirm that direct quotes from the interview may be used in future publications and understand that they will be anonymised, with any identifying information removed or obscured.

4. I understand that the data collected during this study may be looked at by individuals from regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.

5. I agree to take part in the above study and understand that my interview will be audio recorded.

6. I understand that the lead researcher may contact my supervisor/manager if I disclose any details of poor practice or misconduct.

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature
Appendix K – Participant Demographic Form

INFORMATION ABOUT YOU

Title of Project: Understanding the decisions made by social workers when placing siblings for adoption

Name of researcher: Lorna Fallon
Participant number:

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your gender?
   □ Male          □ Female

3. How many years have you worked as a social worker for? ____

4. What is your ethnic background? ____________

5. What is your relationship status?
   □ Single
   □ Engaged
   □ Married
   □ Civil partnership
   □ Divorced
   □ Separated
   □ Cohabiting
   □ Widowed

6. Do you have children?
   □ Yes          □ No
   a. If yes, how many? ____

7. Do you have siblings?
   □ Yes          □ No
   a. If yes, how many? ____
Appendix L – Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

The interview schedule will not be strictly followed but will be used to guide questions and the general direction of the interview.

Research Question
What influences social workers when deciding on joint or separate sibling placements when placing children for adoption?

Research aims:
1. To understand social workers’ experiences of deciding whether to separate sibling groups when placing children for adoption
2. To understand the influence of social workers’ past professional and personal experiences, values, and beliefs on the decisions that they make

Opening statement:
Can you think of a time where you had to make a decision about placing a sibling group that felt quite difficult? The outcome of this decision is not important, as I am more interested in the process that you went through to reach this decision.

Questions:
How did it feel to make that decision?
Prompts: Stressful Rewarding
           Upsetting Satisfying

What did you consider/think about when you made the decision?

What were the particular aspects of the sibling relationship or family that guided your decision?

How do you think that your beliefs and experiences, personal and professional, might have influenced your decision?
Prompts: Beliefs/values about families
          Influences from your own family experiences – either of being a sibling or having children
Influences from previous decisions about placing sibling groups that you’ve made
Personal experiences of adoption

What specific tools did you use to help guide your decision? Do you think they made a difference to how you approached this decision?

How supported did you feel in making this decision? Where did this support come from?

What were the barriers or things that you found difficult, which you felt made your decision harder?

How mindful are you of the number of children (local and national) waiting to be placed as part of a sibling group? Do you think it had any impact on how you approached this decision?

Were there other service related pressures that impacted this decision?
**Appendix M – Example of Data Analysis** (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploratory comments</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own relationships/experiences influencing ease of decision</td>
<td>P: But it for me <em>it was a hard decision</em> I think because I’ve got siblings</td>
<td>Difficult decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker emotions about decision – I feel it was hard</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comparing to personal experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity between their family and the sibling group – 3 siblings a year apart</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition of how close sisters are – best friends, value sibling relationship</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about the sibling relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating her experience of the sibling relationship to the decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transference issues – own experiences/relationships making decision harder. Raised in supervision or during the process? Or reflections afterwards? Hard to make decision, difficult – can relate to own experiences</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R: Yep</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: And my sisters are my best friends because I’m the middle one. I’ve got one a year older and one a year younger. And we are bestest friends. We go away together, we spend all Christmases together, we go shopping together, and I felt that was hard for me because I knew what a sibling relationship was like and how important it is to me.</td>
<td>Similarities to case</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R: Mhm</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comparing to personal experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: And <em>that made it even harder to split them.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of sibling relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R: And I’m just wondering, I was just thinking, you said you’ve got one a year older and one a year younger, and that’s almost the same age difference that those three siblings had and did that make it even sort of more like your experience?</td>
<td>R: And I’m just wondering, I was just thinking, you said you’ve got one a year older and one a year younger, and that’s almost the same age difference that those three siblings had and did that make it even sort of more like your experience?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more, not necessarily swaying her
decision one way or the other. Putting
self in children’s shoes but then taking a
step back and reminding self of
differences. Emotive comparison with
her own family, showing importance of
sibling relationship.
No mention of decision being a team
one, reflecting on her decision: I/me.

Importance of sibling relationship.
Looking at literature or research?

Differences between own experience
and children’s experience – being a
different person. A difference that is not
favourable? I am not like them?

Going through all the possible options,
avoiding breakdown wherever possible.
Felt sure of breakdown – no objective
evidence, using emotive reasoning. Felt
sure repeated – emotive reasoning.
Use of I then we then I – distancing
from responsibility?

P: It did, but it made me think more, I think. Because I knew the
importance of my siblings and I looked at my relationship,
and I remember thinking how can I separate them? What if
we were separated at this age? But then I thought well the
circumstances are completely different, you know obviously I
wasn’t brought up, thankfully, like these children and their
needs are significantly different.

R: Mmm

P: Erm, so I just had to, so although I looked at the importance of
sibling relationships and what it means and how long they can last

R: Mm

P: The other side of me was this is completely different.

R: Okay

P: Erm and I felt the el the eldest child that was separated, my
concern was if we did get an adoption group and we adopted them
all together, I was very very sure it would break down.
If we placed them all in foster placement and they were all
together in long-term, I felt sure it would break down too.

Stepping back from personal experience
Distancing personal experiences
from case
Importance of sibling relationship
Comparing to own relationships
Difficult decision

Importance of sibling relationship

Distancing personal experiences
from case

Use of emotive reasoning
Fear of adoption breakdown
Distancing self from responsibility
of decision

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Considering children’s needs to make decision
Using professional opinion to judge that they would not cope together
Justifying decision with strong emotional language

Having years of experience helping inform current decisions. Looking back on previous experience.
Use of word obviously when not obvious – seems obvious to her?
Child’s response after the separation – resentment, anger of child. Makes fearful for future decisions?
Basing decisions on old research, not up to date
Importance of sibling contact impacting on decision, if they were separated they wouldn’t have contact – impact on child in future
I – my responsibility, negating team decision
Importance of sibling relationship, considering impact of separating them

R: Okay

P: Because I think the needs of all the children, not only for the foster carer, but I felt the siblings wouldn’t be able to cope being together all of them because of all their needs. So actually I think it was a it was it was a lose-lose situation if these children had stayed together.

R: Right. Okay. And do you think your experience of sort of having looked at breakdown in quite a lot of detail um and having worked with children who have experienced breakdown possibly influenced that?

P: I think it did, but I think the hardest thing for me when I was separating was around the contact. Because when I did, I mean this was 20 years ago when I did research into breakdowns, but obviously we’ve been looking, you know I’ve been working in adoption for a long time, I’ve done adoption for many many years, a lot of that when you look at, when you meet people where the adoption has broke down or you’ve got teenagers where it’s broken down, the biggest thing for them is well I was separated from everybody. So that was one of the key things that came to me thinking if I separate these children, they may never ever have a relationship again, ever.
on the long-term relationship, looking at the future
Strong emphasis – never ever, impactful decisions – weight of decision on their shoulders

The unknown – decisions are made and you don’t know the impact. Reality of responsibility/decision, has long-term impact. Hard for social workers. Repetition of you just don’t know, emphasising – uncertainty is difficult
Severed – brutal language
Emphasis – forever

R: Mm

P: Because you don’t know whether they’re gonna come back and see one another and find each other. You just don’t know. And that was hard to think that this could be severed forever.

Descriptive comments - underlined
Conceptual comments - bold
Linguistic comments – italics

Long-term impact of decision
Unknown/uncertainty of decision-making
Responsibility
Weight of decision
### Appendix N – Example of Supporting Quotes for Superordinate and Subordinate Themes (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Theme</th>
<th>Additional Examples of Supporting Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balancing subjectivity and objectivity</td>
<td>‘The sibling relationship is SO important’</td>
<td>‘But I think for a future going on, it’s so hard because in your heart of hearts you know that they should be together and you’re balancing it, not that they should be together but that they have a right to be together. That’s the difference, d’you know, they have a right to be together and who are we to say they can’t be.’ (A)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>‘So they have the shared experience of living in the birth family, then the shared experience of being removed and put in the same foster placement, and, you know, I think your head and your heart, you know, in terms of siblings, because we know it’s one of the longest most enduring relationships in terms of any relationship is the relationship you have with your siblings um and so it’s always hard um to separate them because you’re effectively breaking you know a bond um you know in terms of siblings.’ (B)</td>
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<td>‘They were all full siblings so, not that it makes a difference if they’re half siblings or full siblings, but they share that kind of history, that background, why they’re not with birth parents, why they’ve got that plan of adoption, erm having that familiar person, someone that is related to them and looks like them’ (C)</td>
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<td>‘If you immediately look at it you think they’re a sibling group they’ve got to stay together.’ (D)</td>
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<td>‘I think for me I suppose if it’s that-that-that children are you know born into a sibling group um and under no cir- you know under no fault of their own they have that they um have been placed in foster care um you know I suppose sibling groups are separated through divorce and things in a you know um children that aren’t in care, but I just feel that their relationships can be str, can be strong into the future, they can be supportive of each other, they’ve shared, you know they share that-that link don’t they? They share that um and they seem to be, there’s a very strong bond between alot of the children.’ (E)</td>
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‘Because they are, they’re the only, as far as I’m concerned, they’re the only ones that knew what happened in that home and they’re the only ones that experienced that trauma. And at some point they may need to share that and they may not feel able to share all of those experiences with their adopters. And if they’re close in age to their sibling groups, as they get older, they can talk about that together so yeah I would probably say it’s a value.’ (G)

‘That’s the longest relationship you have sometimes’ (H)

‘Um sibling relationship. Oh my god, probably more important in some ways than the parent relationship. Um on, er, not nec, I don’t mean that, suppose differently important but it’s an enduring relationship that tends to go past the parent-child relationship. Obviously we all have different experiences. You know there’s lots of people that don’t get on with their siblings. But the sibling relationship is SO important because it’s that real tie’ (I)

‘They just had such a connection. You could just see it when they were playing, when they were talking to each other, um and as I said before, where one was the other was.’ (J)

‘I guess I like it I like the sibling relationship I think I thin it’s important I think you can huh I don’t know I think you you have that um tut what’s it called? Like a you know your parents you know you’ve had very similar experiences is what I’m saying. Yeah that kind of unites you I think a little bit. So yeah for me it’s important relationship but I know that there’s lots of different relationships.’ (K)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Balancing subjectivity and objectivity</th>
<th>You can identify with your own situation</th>
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<td></td>
<td>‘But I do I do take a lot of me own things. I think how would I react as a Mum d’you know? And as a parent cos looking at it from birth parent’s point of view as well they didn’t really fight to keep em all together d’you know? But I think looking at it from a Mum how I do my practice now I would look to how what questions would I have? What would I be fighting for? D’you know and I try and cover those bases first and then I think'</td>
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how would I feel?’ (A)

‘You know, I think for any of us, it’s something that if you’re a sibling yourself, as well, um that you understand. You know, on a deeper level um what that means.’ (B)

‘But it for me it was a hard decision I think because I’ve got siblings And my sisters are my best friends because I’m the middle one. I’ve got one a year older and one a year younger. And we are bestest friends. We go away together, we spend all Christmases together, we go shopping together, and I felt that was hard for me because I knew what a sibling relationship was like and how important it is to me. And that made it even harder to split them…It did, but it made me think more, I think. Because I knew the importance of my siblings and I looked at my relationship, and I remember thinking how can I separate them? What if we were separated at this age.’ (D)

‘That that I had, you know, my brothers were there in my family and erm you know through the difficult times and yeah… Yeah definitely. Yeah, yeah. You-you, although I mean my family separated so we we, but we stayed together and were brought up by our father. And I think yeah thinking about it, it it has made us a stronger little, a unit I suppose. Although all of our experiences of that separation are very different so that’s very you know be mindful of that, although all the children have have come from the same place, it’s their experiences of that are different at different ages etc so. So yeah perhaps it does come part part of that with my experience as well so.’ (E)

‘I don’t actually know but but being a parent does impact it’ (F)

‘I guess there is a level of personal involvement in that but not because I’ve experienced any of that myself because I just think I guess if I put myself in that situation and I had to be removed from my birth family would I want to be with my siblings? Yes.’ (G)

‘I’ve got two brothers so one’s older and one’s younger. One, my older one is two and a
half years older than me and my younger one’s ten years younger than me Erm so our relationships were all very different anyway um but I’m very close to both of them. So when I’m looking at sibling, a sibling group of four, erm the little girl doesn’t live with them but they see her each week and they’re very aware she’s their sister. Erm and they probably do sort of question really why she doesn’t live with them because I they knew Mum was pregnant and you know they all live together. So yeah it’s really difficult because I think to myself how would I have felt if I didn’t wasn’t brought up with my brothers and it would have been really hard because that’s the longest relationship you have sometimes’ (H)

‘Yeah I mean you know it’s very hard because you’re only human. Yeah? I have my own feelings and thoughts about how um because for me per on a personal note this was doubly hard for me because my boys are similar ages to the two girls and I couldn’t for a minute imagine, this is making me tearful now, to think about how I could separate them. Absolutely not. So it really touched me personally because I could really relate to it.’ (I)

‘Um w-w I guess just in terms of I mean I can only compare it to my own sibling relationship really I mean I’ve got a brother that’s three year younger than me and a sister that’s 12 years younger than me, um and my brother, I talk to all the time, I see him all the time, he lives quite close by. I ring him for support, he asks me you know we rely on each other for various things. Erm my sister is she lives up in near [place]. So I don’t I don’t see her very often but I do talk to her on the phone quite a lot but we don’t see each other so much. The last time I saw her was two years ago. However I really like that I’ve got a sister as well and I think I’ve got two boys and I think ‘oh I wish I’d had three’ just having three gives it that other dimension’ (K)