The Psychological and Sociological Development of Children in America’s Foster Care System

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Introduction: What Lies Ahead

During the middle of 2018, my family decided to become a foster family. My parents suggested the idea on the grounds that they were soon to be empty nesters; my sister and I were away at college and my brother was in his last year of high school. Given our shared love for children and our desire to help in our community, we embarked on this journey. Before receiving placements, my parents had to go through a tedious, but eye-opening training process and everyone in our family over the age of 18 had to submit background checks. Little did we know, six months later all my siblings, including myself, would be back living at home indefinitely. We soon became a family of seven people and two dogs. We received our first placement in May of 2019: two adorable little kids (half siblings), one 3-year-old girl and one 2-year-old boy. We fell in love with them right away, but that is not to say there were not any challenges. Despite completing the required training, our family was not mentally or emotionally prepared for our experience in the following six months. The foster care system is known to be imperfect to outsiders, but once having experienced the system directly, I found many challenges. In particular, I realized the persistent influence of the children’s original familial environment, regardless of the care they go on to receive, along with the foster system’s inadequate response to their additional developmental needs. With the desire for improvements to better serve foster children and placement families, my initial project idea was sparked.

The foster care system in America is a child welfare system in which a minor, newborns to age twenty-one, has been made a ward and is placed in an institution, group home, or private home of a state certified caregiver. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, in 2017 there were an estimated 443,000 children in foster care in the United States (Children’s Bureau, 2018). The goal of foster care is to provide children with a safe and stable environment for those who cannot be with their guardian for some reason. Foster care places an emphasis on reunification, with 56% of cases having the goal of reunification with parents or primary caretakers. An alternative option is adoption, with 27% of cases having this end goal (Children’s Bureau, 2018). While the foster care system’s intentions are genuine and well-aimed, there are blind spots that need to be addressed within the system that stem from the disconnect between foster families’ preparation of foster children versus the reality of the history of foster children. The truth is that foster children are often victims of developmental delays psychologically, emotionally, and socially due to the neglect experienced in their original familial environment. In America, there is a disconnect in the system about addressing that neglect, pertaining to the role of foster families, the decisions of placements, and the legal barriers that prevent foster children from acquiring the necessary care to aid in adequate development.
Background: A Look into Foster Children’s Initial Environments

When caring for foster children, it is imperative to consider their previous familial background, which in most cases is their biological environment. The specific reason why children are placed in foster care can affect development differently. The number one reason children are entered into the foster care system is neglect, with 61% of cases due to this (Children’s Bureau, 2018). If parents or guardians have neglected their children, they have failed in providing the basic necessities including food, shelter, clothing, and education. One factor that leads to neglect is poverty. Chipungu and Bent-Goodley report that “children in families with incomes below $15,000 are 45x more likely to be victims of substantiated neglect than children in families with incomes above $30,000” (p. 80). With limited income and few resources, it is difficult for impoverished communities to provide for their children; this is sometimes not related to the lack of love, but rather the circumstances the family must deal with. In other cases, 34% of children enter the system because of drug abuse in their previous environment (Children’s Bureau, 2018). Other reasons vary from physical abuse to housing insecurity, to parental incarceration or even parental death. It is crucial to know foster children’s previous environment to better understand the causes of developmental delays and deterrents of socialization.

Literature Review: Existing Facts and Conversations in Psychology and Sociology Pertaining to Developmental Delays and Deterrents of Socialization

Socialization is the life-long process of social interaction through which individuals acquire a self-identity and the physical, mental and social skills needed to survive in society (Diana, 2015). Family is the first and primary agent of socialization. Because children are the most malleable in development at young ages, the family, with whom the children spend most time with, is responsible for the psychological development, emotional support, and social values that are learned. If proper development is not instilled in the home, it will lead to poor implications for the child in their future. Not only will they have trouble surviving on their own in society, but also it is rare for them to excel in their accomplishments compared to their peers.

As stated previously, the psychological development during infancy and childhood is in its most important stage, and if the brain’s neural connections and child’s temperament are not properly developed, this can lead to serious, sometimes irreversible, consequences. During infancy, the brain is in early development and the quality of the infant’s environment they are raised in will influence how their brains develop. Throughout this phase, the brain is undergoing pruning, or the degradation of synapses and dying off of neurons that are not strengthened by experience. This is nature’s way of making the brain more efficient. The quality of one’s environment heavily influences whether neural connections are strengthened through the pruning process, or are weakened through the pruning process. In normal, enriched environments, the brain creates more complex and stronger neural connections. However, in abusive, neglectful and impoverished environments, the brain creates less-developed neural connections and fewer of them. Neural connections are responsible for mental processes including learning, memory, thinking, and attention. With fewer and less-developed neural connections, the child can have difficulties with simple and complex tasks or may develop neurological disorders, such as autism. These correlations have been confirmed by research found in Psychology: Perspectives and Connections. It includes findings from research on children in Romanian orphanages, who were confined to their cribs and had very little stimulation. As a result, brain activity in orphans who were neglected since birth was greatly diminished and there were decreases in brain size (Feist & Rosenberg, 2018). While these neurological setbacks are not ideal,
they can be overcome if the children are removed from a neglectful environment early on. However, the longer one stays in a deprived situation, the less likely they are to recover.

In addition to the brain’s development during infancy, the child’s personality starts to take form. Mary Rothbart defines temperament as the “individual differences in emotional, motor, and attentional reactivity measured by latency, intensity, and recovery of response and self-regulation processes such as effortful control that modulate reactivity” (p. 207). Children react to new environments with one of three genetically predisposed temperaments: easy, difficult, or slow to warm up. This model was developed by Thomas and Chess and can be used in the situation of foster children to predict how these children will react and adapt to new living conditions. An easy child is very predictable in daily functions, is happy most of the time and is adaptable to new situations. A difficult child is unpredictable in daily functions, is unhappy most of the time, and is slow to adapt to new situations. A slow to warm up child is mildly intense in his or her reactions to new situations and mildly irregular in their daily patterns of eating and sleeping, but, after repeated exposure to a situation, they develop an approaching style to new situations to ease the transition (Feist & Rosenberg, 2018). In her article “Temperament, Development and Personality,” Rothbart enhances this topic of temperament with her analysis of effortful control. She defines effortful control as “the children’s ability to choose a course of action under conditions of conflict, to plan for the future, and to detect errors” (p. 207). A child with low effortful control is predictably more likely to externalize their problems (through acting out) and less likely to internalize their problems. A child’s temperament is directly related to their effortful control, which in turn leads to behavioral problems. During situational transitions in the foster system, keeping track of a child’s temperament based off information from the parents or from previous experiences, can be helpful in predicting and controlling their reactions to new living conditions.

In addition to the psychological effects from the neglectful environments, foster children can also experience emotional strains from both the separation from their biological family and the constant instability in their lives. Children, especially infants, develop an attachment to their caregiver as a survival tactic, leading to the formation of a strong emotional bond. The attachment theory states that a child will form a strong attachment if a responsive and accessible caregiver creates a secure base for a child (Feist & Rosenberg, 2018). Infants internalize this bonding relationship, as it shapes the child’s social and emotional development. Unconsciously, this relationship is providing the child with a mental model on which they build future social relationships. Although this bonded relationship with the caregiver and infant is healthy, when this relationship is severed, it causes a distressed reaction in the infant, known as separation anxiety. There are two different ways to view the foster system through the lens of the attachment theory (the second will be discussed in the argument section). The first perspective views the system as a possible positive intervention tool that can aid in attachment. Children who are first placed in foster care are in an emotionally deprived state for one of two an attachment bond to their caregiver, or they are experiencing separation anxiety from being torn away from their bonded caregiver. Once in the foster care system, the chance of establishing or rebuilding an emotional attachment is possible, especially in young infants. In an article “Placement in Foster Care Enhances Quality of Attachment Among Young Institutionalized Children,” researchers found that children placed in foster care before 24 months of age were more likely to have secure attachments (Smyke, A. et al., 2010, p. 220-221). Another study, completed in 2001, titled “Attachment for Infants in Foster Care; The Role of Caregiver State of Mind,” supports this argument through its findings. Despite having severed the infant’s initial attachment, the second study says that
during the first year and a half of life, babies appear capable of organizing their behavior around the availability of new caregivers (Dozier, M. et al., 2001, p. 1474). Due to their inability to provide for themselves, young infants attach to the opportunity of new caregivers to hopefully satiate their deprived state. This proves that foster care is an important intervention to the adverse effects following early deprivation from their biological environments.

The last category of development for foster children is their social development. There are serious social implications for children who are separated from their family, including the loss of cultural and social values and the loss of self-identity. Families transmit cultural and social values throughout generations. Younger generations acquire their social position from their family, which include the subcultures of race, ethnicity, class and religion. This social position determines where you start in life, and although social mobility is possible, the values learned at a young age are crucial to the development of socialization within these communities of culture. For example, the ability to function biculturally is an important survival skill for African American children. African American communities teach their children how to deal with their bicultural identities healthily and safely; however, if biracial children grow up outside of a minority community, they will most likely not acquire this skill. Chipungu and Bent-Goodley discuss the conflict of minority communities’ values, such as communalism and social obligation, with supposedly traditional American values, including independence and autonomy. These authors conclude: “this difference can pose developmental confusion for children of color in a foster care system whose objectives may conflict with their cultural heritage” (p. 82).

The cultural and social values only make up a part of one’s identity. A child’s sense of self is formed at a young age, and the support and guidance from the family during this time is essential. Some kids have warm, loving and safe environments that enable them to grow as children, whereas other kids are in neglected environments that lead to low self-esteem, an inability to trust, and feelings of isolation. An article titled, “Adolescent Identity Development in Foster Care,” studies the effects of long-term foster care on the development of adolescents and found that the institutional structure of group foster care, diminished status, and stereotypical view of the foster child contribute to devaluation of the adolescent's self by others. There is unfortunately a negative stigma surrounding foster children, which stems from derogatory stereotypes; this negative light devalues foster children’s position in comparison to their peers. This is problematic because on top of not having a supportive environment, a foster child can experience additional devaluation from society and be treated as a second-class citizen, receiving inferior rights and opportunities compared to their peers.

After thorough analysis of various scholarly texts, it is apparent the crucial role the foster system plays in the psychological, emotional, and social development of the children in its care. This is further explored by looking through the psychological and sociological lens of the reviewed scholarly articles to analyze the role of foster families, the decision of placements, and the legal barriers within the foster care system that deter development in children.

**Argument: Analysis of the Current Flawed Foster Care System**

The foster care system in America inadequately addresses the extra needs of the foster children population pertaining to their psychological, emotional, and social instabilities from their original familial environment. The unrealistic expectations placed on foster parents, the lack of decision-making in foster placements, and the strict legal barriers all play a role in preventing the system from accomplishing this essential task.
Foster parents assume the role of the primary agent of socialization for foster children, taking on the biggest, and often, too much responsibility in the system for nurturing this child and directly tending to their additional developmental needs. Because the majority of the child’s time is now spent with the foster parent, they are dealing with the potentially adverse effects from their biological environment, while trying to encourage proper development. One deficiency foster parents can work to develop is the child’s neural connection. Because infants and children are constantly undergoing pruning, their neural connections that were unconditioned in their previous environment, can be strengthened with extra stimulation to improve mental processes. Foster parents also must handle any outlashed behavior of children who are acting out as a way of coping with the changing environments and situations. This can be very difficult for foster parents who sometimes endure loud verbal language, aggressive physical behavior, and rebellious actions from their foster children. Because the system curtails punishment that is allowed, foster parents have limited options that would enforce positive behavioral changes. Foster parents can opt to use constant positive reinforcement and repetitive conditioning, including methods such as a token economy, but this tactic can be exhausting in everyday life. Foster parents are additionally a critical source of attachment to their foster children. Infants who were taken away from their previous guardians will easily attach to a new caregiver as a survival technique, forming a strong emotional bond with that caregiver. In these instances, foster parents need to emotionally support their foster children and carefully work to foster that bond gently. Lastly, foster parents have the responsibility of creating a safe and warm home environment for their foster children to promote the healthy development of a self-identity. Foster children face the challenge of leaving their parents, living in new and unfamiliar situations, and being labeled a foster child, which in turn can create a negative self-image. If foster parents create a welcoming and supportive home, the foster child can feel safer to explore their identity. While foster parents have the ability in aiding with these four areas of development to improve socialization, it is a very difficult task due to foster parents’ mixed motivations, expectations, and the lack of training received.

Foster parents are all motivated differently to initiate their role in the foster system, which often times correlates with their intentions and carried out efforts of caring for a child. People decide to become foster parents for a variety of reasons. Some may feel as though it is their social obligation to contribute to their community, others wish to enhance children’s lives, take advantage of the supplemental income, increase their family size through possible adoption later on, or substitute for the loss of their own child. The reasons why people choose to initiate their involvement with the system usually correlate with their intentions and expectations. While some foster parents who are only interested in the supplemental income may not truly care for the children’s best interest and lead to another neglectful environment for the child, other foster parents truly want to improve the lives of these children and go into the process open-hearted, eager to make a change. The problem with the foster parent certification process is that while supervisors can guess a person’s motivation and intentions, one does not know for sure. This leads to poor foster parents in the system that further deters children’s development rather than strengthen it.

During the training and vetting process, the expectations of the role of foster parents is typically minimized prior to actually experiencing it, which leads to unforeseen hardships and a low retention rate of foster parents. Being a foster parent is so much more than just providing the basic necessities and love. Because these children are a part of the child welfare system, there are additional tasks a foster parent must assist in, in order to thoroughly fulfill the child’s needs. In addition to tending to the
day to day needs of the children, the long list of duties of a foster parent that is not known to the
common folk includes responding to the children’s emotional and behavioral needs, arranging
transport to and from appointments, advocating for foster children in school settings, arranging visits
with birth parents and case workers, staying up to date with their medical paperwork, and so on.
While caseworkers attempt to provide support to foster parents, the majority of responsibility for the
child falls on the foster parents. The responsibility for caring for a child that is neither biologically or
legally yours, in addition to parents’ typical obligations, such as work or their own children, can be
emotionally and physically taxing. As a result of these hardships and lack of support from the system,
“many certified foster families become dissatisfied with their experiences as foster parents and quit
fostering within the first year of service” (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, p. 86). It is because of this
overwhelming responsibility placed on foster parents and the unleveled support from the system
that both the foster system and foster parents have a poor image in the public and media.

Foster parents are required to receive training prior to becoming certified; however, these training
sessions tend to offer the bare minimum to potential foster parents, leaving parents feeling
unsupported in their roles. Training sessions include statistics about foster care, stories from
experienced foster parents or previous foster children, and the current legislation/rules to
demonstrate guidelines. This training introduces prospective foster parents to the system at a glance
and is insufficient, as “less than one third [of foster parents] report being well prepared, and often
there is no reinforcement of what is learned in the training once the child comes homes” (Chipungu &
Bent-Goodley, p. 86). Because foster children have seven times the developmental delays of other
children not in foster care (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, p. 85), it is unrealistic to assume that foster
parents can properly tend to these additional developmental needs without additional training, extra
resources, or enough support from the system. The most qualified and passionate foster parent can
attempt to aid in children’s developmental delays; however, it is a draining process. Foster parents
are not therapists and have not received the education or training of a therapist, but they tend to
assume the role of one, in order to alleviate stress for themselves and in hopes of improving the
child’s behavioral or emotional problems. The system fails in providing foster parents the additional
resources such as therapy for the host family to aid in emotional support, or a break from fostering to
regroup and center themselves in the midst of stress.

On top of the heavy distribution of responsibility on foster parents, there is also a lack of decision
making of placements by the system, which fails to address each child’s individual needs on a case-
by-case basis. The foster system is known to be well overpopulated. With the overwhelming number
of children in the system, the lack of foster families available, and the sense of urgency in placement,
important factors including a child’s temperament, a child’s attachment to their caregivers, and a
child’s cultural values are often overlooked.

A child’s personality and temperament start to develop during infancy, which as both Thomas and
Chess and Rothbart succinctly noted, can affect how they will react to new situations. Poor emotional
and behavior problems such as depression, anger, aggression, and the failure to thrive are a result of
coping with the separation from their previous environment and adjusting to their new environment.
During situational transitions in the foster system, keeping track of a child’s temperament, based off of
information from the parents or from previous experiences, can be helpful in predicting and controlling
their reactions. If the system were cautious and strategic when placing kids to foster parents,
unwarned behavioral problems can be prevented.
Regarding the attachment of a child to their caregiver, the constant movement children experience within the system creates instability in their lives. There is an undeniable unpredictability of placements within the foster care system; children are moved from situations due to factors outside of their control. A child might change family placements due to a complaint by the foster parent, reunification with their biological parents, or the transition from a foster to a foster-to-adopt home. Although the system has potential for fostering healthy attachments, it will only be successful if these relationships are not disrupted, which is rarely the case. With some foster children enduring constant changes in their placements, this unstable lifestyle leaves children in an even more deprived state. As both Smyke and Dozier concluded, the older children get and the more relationships that are severed, the less chance there is of successful attachment to their caregiver. Foster children, who are repeatedly exposed to numerous short-lived and often neglectful relationships, are likely to take these unhealthy patterns into future platonic or romantic relationships.

Foster children’s cultural values are often lost in the system because of the system’s inability to match placements based on similar cultural backgrounds. As discussed earlier, involvement in one’s cultural community is essential in order to learn the needed skills and values of that culture. The foster system is a highly disproportionate representation of children of color, as “children of color, who comprise 33% of the child population in the United States, constitute more than 55% of children in foster care placement” (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, p. 79). The excessively high number of children of color results from the correlational high poverty rates of minority communities. Poverty, as noted previously, is one factor leading to neglect. Because of the high rates of African American children in the system, it is unlikely that they will get paired with an African American foster parent, and the system does not prioritize this when matching placements. As a result, minority children in the foster care system face challenges with the intersection of being both black and a foster child. Neither part of their identity is being properly nurtured when in the system, which leads to confusion, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation that further deter their social development.

Lastly, the legal barriers within the foster care system limit access to potential remedies, such as therapy, that could help assuage developmental delays and prevent resulting issues. The welfare system is under restriction to make any decisions on behalf of the child until the child becomes a ward of the court; this further delays the child from receiving any helpful resources to improve their developmental state. Even once this occurs, emotional and behavioral therapy that is recommended by the social workers needs to be approved by either the judge or the biological parents. The heavy caseload of the judge leads to long wait times for approval, and when the decision is left up to the parents, they have the option of denying therapy. The biological parents might be in denial that their child needs help, they have not been present to witness the hardships of their child in other environments, or they simply may not comply with the system as an act of rebellion. In addition to the troubles of obtaining very much needed developmental therapy, the overpopulation in the foster care system leads to an inefficiency of court cases. Court hearings for each individual case are rare and occur every couple of months due to the high capacity of cases. During a court hearing, a foster child’s attorney will try to accommodate the requests of the social workers and foster parents, such as therapy; however, the biological parents side’s attorney often use tactics to delay any efficient work from being done. This, in turn, leads to prolonged stays in foster homes and a slower process of either reunification or adoption.
Solutions: Possible Resolutions to the Foster System’s Blind Spots

After extensive research on the psychological and sociological developmental delays of foster children, and analysis of the current foster system in response to this, I propose the following possible solutions that will better the system, and hopefully aid in the development of children. First, cognitive, emotional and behavioral counseling or therapy should be required if the majority of workers on the child's case (social workers, attorneys, placement coordinators, public health nurse, etc.) recommend it. This will avoid the wasted time waiting for the court's approval, and the possible denial from the biological parents. Therapy can be very beneficial to foster children in strengthening their mental processes, supporting them during this difficult time, and coaching them how to properly express their emotions and behave in society. By designating this job to trained and certified therapists, it will alleviate the pressure on the foster parents to feel the need of correcting developmental delays and dealing with behaviors on their own. Second, more resources need to be dedicated to America’s child welfare system so that the children are given more dedication, the foster parents are given more support, and the social workers are given better working conditions. If a greater amount of funds were dedicated to this vast child welfare population, early intervention in developmental delays can be solved to prevent problems in the future that can have a negative impact on society. If more in-depth training and consistent check-ins with foster parents were required, they would feel more readily prepared to endure this challenging, but rewarding role. Foster parents should also be offered state funded family therapy to support host families emotionally in exchange for the service they are giving to their communities. If the working conditions of social workers were improved with higher pay, fewer hours, and more vacation time, it would incentivize more people to consider this career. With more available workers in the system, it would allow for a more even distribution of caseloads and more individualization and dedication for each foster child to best suit their unique needs, such as considering cultural backgrounds during placement. Changes in legislation should be implemented to speed up court processing and create more stability in foster child’s life. Finally, more media coverage and education should be encouraged to the general public about the foster care system. This will hopefully eliminate the stigma attached to foster children and the system, and get others involved whether that be donating items or time, choosing a public service occupation in the child welfare system, or deciding to become a foster or respite care family.

Conclusion: Why Any of This Matters

In conclusion, foster children are the most at-risk child welfare population in the United States due to their psychological, emotional, and social developmental delays stemming from their social environment. Since they are under the care of the state, it is the government’s responsibility to not only provide necessities in everyday life, but also attempt to resolve any developmental delays in order for foster children to be equal functioning members of society. Foster parents, the lack of decision making in placements, and the legal system all play a role in providing an alternative environment for foster children; however, due to overpopulation in the system, essential aid is not given to children, and in some cases the system further deters development. Currently, we are failing our child welfare population by placing them at an automatic disadvantage due to their prior experiences out of their control. It is imperative that these children’s additional needs are addressed individually and properly to ensure healthy development, full participation in society, and a chance at a successful future.
References


