The
SELF-IMAGE
of the
FOSTER CHILD

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Introduction

THE STUDY REPORTED IN THIS BOOK is one of many that have developed out of growing awareness on the part of social scientists and social work practitioners that each has something to offer to the other. On one hand, a number of problems faced by practitioners are amenable to solution by applying the knowledge and techniques of social science. On the other hand, the fact that problems are of a practical nature does not necessarily preclude their being of more general theoretical interest. Research in such problem areas has a contribution to make to social science. Our concepts for the analysis of social systems and our theories of personality development within such systems may be improved through such investigation.

As an attempt to further the partnership of social science and social practice, this study has two main objectives. The first is to find out something about the process of foster home placement and the impact of this process on the foster child. The second purpose is to show some of the limits and potentialities of research in an actual practicing agency. The study grew out of a Russell Sage Foundation residency held by the author during 1954–1955 at the Chicago Child Care Society. Both resident and agency had strong interests in the social psychological impact of placement of children away from their own homes.

The first several months of the residency were spent in becoming familiar with the customs, problems, and, to some extent, the language of the agency. The assistance of the agency staff in this was invaluable. In addition to formal devices such as reviewing the professional literature and

reading case records, many hours of informal conversations with members of the agency staff contributed greatly to whatever understanding of the situation the author developed. Among other things, it became apparent that there could be a good deal of difference in the way the situation was perceived, depending upon the position held in a given placement situation. Further, of the several possible perspectives, the one about which the least was known was the perspective of the foster child. With the concurrence of the agency, an exploratory study of the way foster children view the placement situation was undertaken. Without the cooperation and assistance of Miss Ethel Verry, executive secretary of the Chicago Child Care Society, and the agency staff, the project would not have been possible. This assistance extended from help in formulating the study and the research design to aiding in the interpretation of the results. In large measure, any credit for the success of the undertaking is theirs. Responsibility for its deficiencies is, of course, solely that of the author.

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1. The Placement Situation as a Social System

THIS STUDY IS CONCERNED with the impact of placement upon children placed in foster boarding homes.[1] More specifically, it is addressed to the problem of how children in such circumstances view the placement situation. As a starting point, some understanding of the general features of such situations is essential.

The component elements of any social system are social positions (or statuses). Individuals occupying these positions interact in a limited number of characteristic patterns (or role relationships). There is a set of values from which are derived prescribed standards for behavior in role relationships. These prescribed standards are what is meant by social norms.

In the context of this study each placement situation is viewed as a social system. It consists of four positions: child, natural parent, foster parent, and agency (as represented in the situation by the caseworker.)[2] The system originates in the agency intake process, and the central purpose of the system is to provide the child with temporary care. There are other important purposes as well, such as modifying the conditions that made placement necessary. From

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[1] For convenience, such children will be referred to as foster children throughout this report. This is a restricted usage, foster being a generic term referring to any type of placement of children away from their natural parents.

[2] This is a rather gross oversimplification. The four positions listed above are viewed as basic in any placement situation. The system may contain two foster-parent positions and two natural-parent positions. There may be other children in the foster home, either natural or foster. In addition, there may be other children of the natural parents. The presence of such additional positions modifies the structure of the system and may have important consequences for its operation.

the agency point of view, certain ideal patterns of interaction should emerge, structured around a dominant value of maximizing the child's welfare. One may think of these as ideal norms superimposed on the system. It is rare that any social system is so well integrated that all relationships conform to the prescribed norms and some kinds of "deviant" relationships may be fairly common. Such deviations may be a natural consequence of the way the system operates. This, of course, does not deny that a great deal of variation occurs among placement situations that may be due to such individual factors as personality and motivational differences.

Each of the four positions in the placement situation may be viewed in relationship to each other position in the system, producing six bilateral relationships:

1. Caseworker-Natural Parent (generally the mother)
2. Caseworker-Foster Parent (generally the mother)
3. Caseworker-Child
4. Foster Parent-Child
5. Foster Parent-Natural Parent
6. Natural Parent-Child

Before discussing the general patterns these relationships take, is is well to point out that the discussion is based on impressions derived mainly from an agency with a specific type of caseload and a specific set of policies. Although the basic structure of the placement situations may be the same, differences exist among agencies with respect to policies and scope of service offered. These differences may lead to variations in normative expectations and what are perceived as deviations from acceptable norms.

The Worker-Natural Parent Relationship

Ideally, the mutual goal of this relationship is to work out a permanent plan for the care of the child. The worker brings to this task the resources of the agency, both economic and as a source of consultation, his training and experience, and a set of assumptions regarding human motivation (com-

monly derived from psychoanalytic theory). Planning may proceed in one of two directions according to the worker's judgment of the total situation: either toward the child's return to his own family or toward his release for placement in adoption. In the former case, the role of the child's own parent (usually only the mother) is to maintain contact with the child, maintain emotional identification with him, and plan for his return. The role of the worker is to assist in each of these. The manner in which this role is played depends upon the reasons for the child's being in placement. Generally, a child is in placement because of either the physical or emotional incapacity of his parent to care for him.[1] In the case of physical incapacity, the relationship centers around the parent's convalescence or rehabilitation. The mother-worker relationship becomes more complex in the case of emotional incapacity. The worker has to prepare the parent for the emotional responsibilities involved in motherhood. In this process, the worker often analyzes the causes of the mother's emotional difficulties and interprets them to her. This help is assumed to aid in resolving these difficulties or at least in the mother's ability to make a consistent and meaningful decision as to the eventual return of the child or releasing him for adoption.

These patterns fit the goals of the agency and represent a majority of cases. Still, there are certain recurrent ways in which the relationship deviates from the norm. Generally, they involve a fundamental incongruence between the ways in which the worker and the mother define the situation and the goals of their interaction. The worker may define the situation as one of treatment of an emotional problem. The child is temporarily in a foster boarding home while the worker attempts to assist in resolving the problem. The

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[1] Economic incapacity is suspect as a motive for having a child in foster placement. In the intake process, if placement is requested solely for economic reasons, the mother is told of alternatives to full-time foster care, such as day care or the Aid to Dependent Children program. If she persists in her desire to have the child placed, this is sometimes taken as evidence of underlying emotional problems affecting her capacity to care for the child.

mother may define the situation quite differently. *Her paramount interest may be in obtaining services for her child*, not treatment for herself. She may be unwilling to accept interpretations of her problem; the effect of her relationship to her own mother as it relates to her need to have the child in placement may be quite alien to her perception of the situation. And, once the child is in placement, the balance of power in her relationship with the worker shifts in her favor, although the worker still has a limited amount of authority. The mother is generally aware that the agency has become committed to the welfare of her child. It will not cut off its services to him because of her unwillingness to make other plans for his care. This conflict in goal definitions between the worker and the natural mother is one of the principal causes of long-term foster placement; the mother is successful in her struggle to maintain the status quo and the relationship may continue indefinitely. If she withdraws from the relationship, ceases to maintain contact with the child, and cannot be located, legal machinery may be available for releasing the child for adoption. However, by then the child is often too old for an adoptive home to be found for him.

The Worker-Foster Parent Relationship

Generally, in this relationship, the worker's contacts are primarily with the foster mother; contact with the foster father is often minimal. The role of the foster mother is to provide temporary care for the child in the setting of her family. The role of the worker is to provide guidance in this care according to his conception of the practices and attitudes most conducive to the child's healthy personality development. The worker prepares the foster parent for the arrival of the child, consults with her on problems arising in caring for the child, mediates the relationship between the foster mother and natural mother, administers the provision of agency services such as clothing allowances, board rates, and the like, and prepares the foster parent for the eventual return of the child to his own family or for his placement in adoption.

Certain patterns of interaction frequently emerge between worker and foster mother that deviate from the norm. Once more these deviations may be explained by conflict in the definitions of the situation held by each of the parties. The worker may define the situation as one of consultation where he assists in the development of the child through advice based upon his professional knowledge. The foster mother may define the situation quite differently. What to the worker may be guidance, can be construed by the foster mother as an implicit attack on her adequacy as a parent. There may be an attempt on the part of the foster mother to curtail her relationship with the worker; in effect, to shut the agency out. There is a delicate balance of power in this type of relationship based upon two factors. On the one hand, the agency ultimately has the power to remove the child from the home if this "shutting out" process proceeds too far. However, removal of a child from a foster home may, according to agency conception, be more detrimental to his welfare than ceding some of its supervisory function. In addition, the foster mother is providing a service for the agency, a service that is in short supply. If agency demands to share responsibility for the child are too great, she may refuse to continue this service.

The Worker-Child Relationship

While the worker's identification with the child is perhaps the strongest in the system, his overt relationship with the child may be relatively minimal. This is especially true in the case of very young children where the child is guided through the worker-natural mother and worker-foster mother relationships. In the case of older children, there is likely to be more interaction with the worker. This interaction serves a number of functions. The worker is helped to assess the needs of the child and the extent to which these needs are being met in the placement situation. The child is helped to understand the situation and prepared for the periods of

stress which one might almost certainly regard as inherent in the placement of children away from their own parents.

Worker-child relationships do not always approximate these conditions. For the child, the worker may function as an insurance policy. He sees him as providing both compensation and protection; compensation for the inability of his mother to take care of him by arranging for his placement in a foster home; protection against mistreatment in the foster home by supervising the placement. This definition is not necessarily incongruent with the worker's view of the situation. Still, the extent to which such a relationship may be formed is impinged upon by the worker-foster mother relationship. In cases where the foster mother attempts to shut the agency out, it may be difficult for the worker to relate to the child on other than the foster mother's terms. Doing otherwise might raise anxieties in the child and detrimentally affect his adjustment in the foster home.

The Foster Parent-Child Relationship

Ideally, the foster parent-child relationship should be structured around the concept of meeting the child's needs, both physical and emotional. The child should perceive the relationship as one in which he can securely expect care and understanding. For older children, this expectation should be related to the notion of being unable to be with one's own family. The role of the foster parent is to make such a relationship possible within the framework of providing temporary care for the child.

However, the child may be psychologically incapable of entering the ideal relationship. He may generalize unfavorable experiences in his own family to his expectations regarding the foster family. Depending upon the type of relationship he had with his own family and the foster parents' definition of his status, the child may vary between overdependence on the one hand and withdrawal on the other. Differences also arise from the way the foster parents define their relationship to the foster child. It may be difficult for some foster

parents to strike a balance between constantly emphasizing the child's identity apart from the foster family and denying him a separate identity.

The Natural Parent-Foster Parent Relationship

The desirable pattern of interaction between natural and foster parents is one based upon an underlying mutuality of interest in the child's welfare, as well as agreement upon the way each of the parties is playing her role. The foster mother should facilitate the natural mother's maintaining contact with her child. They should share responsibility in helping the child adjust to his foster status and in preparing him for an eventual change in that status.

The mutuality of interest in the child's welfare is not always present, or perhaps more commonly, is structured quite differently by each of the parties. Some hostility is characteristic of the relationship. This hostility may initiate from either the foster mother or the natural mother or both, and is generally due to divergence in conceptions of the rights and responsibilities of the other in the situation. The foster mother may define the status of the natural mother as inferior in the relationship. She may be unwilling to entertain suggestions made by the natural mother on the grounds that she is inadequate by virtue of the child's being in placement. Any attempts on the part of the natural mother to participate may be resisted as unwelcome interference. The natural mother may see herself as superior in the relationship, according the foster mother a position similar to that of a "hired servant." She may see her position as the child's natural parent as entitling her to the right of unlimited critical review of the foster mother's actions. Such conflicting definitions of the situation may lead to open hostility.

Not all deviant relationships between natural and foster parents are characterized by hostility. A dependency relationship sometimes emerges, especially where there is a large discrepancy in age between the natural and foster mother. In such cases, the foster mother "adopts" the natural mother,

assuming a maternal relationship to her and a grandmother relationship to the children. The worker may attempt to mediate any of these nonnormative relationships by applying pressure for change on either of the parties. In one case, the child may be removed from the foster home; in another, limitations may be placed on the control or veto power of the natural parent. However, the worker is restricted in the use of such pressure by considerations of its possible effects on the child.

The Natural Parent-Child Relationship

The relationship between the natural mother and her child should ideally be directed toward the child's adjustment in his present situation and his potential adjustment to a change in that situation. The mother should maintain regular contact with the child, aid him in his relationship with his foster parents, and help him understand his situation and maintain his identity within that situation.

Certain less desirable patterns of mother-child relationships are found. The mother may withdraw from the relationship, ceasing to maintain contact with the child without making plans for his future care. The child may view the mother as threatening and withdraw from the relationship or function erratically in it. The mother may try to structure the situation for the child as one of conflict between herself and the foster mother, where he must take sides and only grudgingly accept the care of the foster mother. She may also structure the situation for the child in a manner inconsistent with her actual plans for him. In this type of relationship, the mother periodically leads the child to expect to return without any conviction actually to carry out this plan.

There appears to be a common theme running through most of the deviant relationships. Not only do they differ from the ideal norm prescriptions, but usually involve disagreement between parties as to how the situation is to be defined. On the basis of impressionistic evidence derived from case records and conversations with agency staff, incon-

gruent definitions of the situation are fairly frequent. The prevalence of "definitional disputes" can be accounted for by certain ambiguities that are built into the placement system. The most important of these ambiguities concerns the distribution of power among the several positions in the placement system. There is little in the way of clear-cut formulations of the limits of responsibility and power to initiate or veto decisions associated with each of the positions in the system. In consequence, relationships develop in which there are disagreements about the rights and responsibilities of each of the parties. The child may be confronted with three sets of adults, all of whom have some stake in caring for him and planning for his future. In the absence of clearly structured role expectations, both power and responsibility may sometimes be shared, sometimes competed for, and sometimes denied by one or more of the three.

2. Agency Practice and the Impact of Placement on the Child

WHAT IMPACT DOES PLACEMENT HAVE upon the foster child? More specifically: How well do foster children understand the placement situation? How do they view themselves in relation to the situation? With whom do they identify? What conditions in the placement situation (including those already mentioned) tend to promote or attenuate the child's ability to function effectively in it? A survey of the literature in the field of foster care reveals that surprisingly little systematic research has been done on these questions. A good deal has been written about the impact of placement on the child which summarizes clinical impressions or presents as facts deductions from current casework philosophy. The state of research knowledge in the field has progressed very little, however, since Sophie Theis' monumental follow-up study over thirty-five years ago.[1]

During the course of the research here reported, a number of relationships turned up that seemed to have a definite bearing on professional practice in the field of foster placement. The highlights of these findings are presented in this chapter. Succeeding chapters contain the more detailed findings and a description of the methods on which they are based. Because of the exploratory nature of the study the implications from these findings naturally do not constitute directives for practice. Rather they are presented here in the hope that they may stimulate agencies and researchers to test further our tentative findings.

[1] Theis, Sophie, *How Foster Children Turn Out*. State Charities Aid Society, New York, 1924.

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1. *Continuing contact with the natural parents is important for the child's adjustment in placement.* It is often very difficult if not impossible to maintain contact with the natural parents, and agencies frequently have to struggle with this problem. When contact with the natural parents is lost, the child is likely to remain in foster care for a long time. This is a kind of limbo for the child that is difficult to escape because of complex legal barriers to making more definite permanent plans for him. Except in unusual circumstances, long-term foster care is regarded as an inferior but necessary adjustment to a situation in which the child's parents are not currently interested in taking him back, but in which adoption is also not feasible.

Our data strongly suggest that continuing contact with the natural parents has an ameliorative effect on the otherwise detrimental consequences of long-term foster care. The average well-being of children whose natural parents visit them regularly was significantly higher than children who did not have contact with their natural parents. This was the case even when the children had been in foster homes most of their lives and identified predominantly with their foster parents. The correlations in this area are among the strongest to be found in the study.

2. *The child's predominant family identification is an important factor in his well-being in placement.* On the basis of interview responses, children in the study were classified as falling into one of three identification groups: those identifying predominantly with their natural parents; those identifying predominantly with their foster parents; and those with mixed identification. On the average, children who identify predominantly with their natural parents have the highest well-being ratings of any group in the study. Unless there are definite contraindications, foster children should be encouraged to maintain a clear-cut identification with their natural parents.

Ratings of well-being of children who identify predominantly with the foster parent or who have mixed identifications were

significantly lower. However, when the effects of identification on well-being were looked at in combination with the effects of contact with the natural parents, a rather surprising pattern emerges. Children whose natural parents visit them regularly but who also tend to identify with their foster parents get along much better than children with similar identification patterns but whose parents do not visit them. Such children appear to have structured the situation as involving a choice and have made one. The average well-being rating may be interpreted as suggesting that they are able to "live with" this choice with relative success.

The two groups that are most problematic are those with mixed identification and those with foster parent identification whose natural parents do not visit them. While much can be said in the way of speculation about reasons for low ratings of well-being in these two groups, there is no supporting evidence for such speculations to be found in the data of this study. Additional research directed at verifying the patterns found in the present study and attempting to uncover the reasons for such patterns should prove of great value.

3. *Adequate conceptions of the meaning of foster status and of the role of the agency are important for the child's well-being.* Theoretically, the situation most conducive to a child's healthy emotional development is the traditional family setting. It is regarded as desirable for the foster home to reproduce the conditions of a normal family environment as far as is possible within the limits of the placement system. In consequence, agencies sometimes appear hesitant to play an active role in their relationship with the foster child. Usually, the preference is to exercise their share of responsibility for the child more indirectly through their relationships with the natural and foster parents. They seek to avoid being obtrusive in the situation, so that differences between foster and normal family conditions are not emphasized in the eyes of the child and the foster parents.

Two sets of findings in the present research suggest that a more direct relationship between agency and child may be

desirable. First, adequate conceptions of the meaning of foster status and of the agency role in the placement situation are conducive to the child's adjustment. Second, these conceptions most frequently develop under circumstances in which the agency plays a more direct role with the child, as in cases in which a child must change foster homes. Our analyses indicate that it is desirable for children to have some notion of the agency's responsibility for them and how this responsibility is carried out. Yet the only place the child is likely to get this understanding is from the agency itself. It is hoped that these findings will encourage agencies to try, on an experimental basis, playing a more direct role in interpreting the placement situation and their own functions in it to the child, and to evaluate the results carefully.

As by-products of the process of formulating and conducting the study, two further comments are appropriate. The first has to do with the facilitation of cooperative research between social science and social work; the second, with casework orientation toward the placement situation.

Traditionally, there has been some resistance to allowing social scientists direct contact with agency clients in the course of collaborative research. This has stemmed from two sources: the agency's concern in protecting the client's right to privacy, and concern that the contact might prove upsetting to the client. The alternative most frequently proposed is that the researcher use case records to get the information he needs. For certain types of problems this is a workable alternative. However, all too often, the kinds of information the investigator needs to have consistently from case to case are available in only a few records or in a form that cannot be used for the purposes of the study. While they may contain a wealth of data, case records are far from a panacea for the problems of all research in social agency settings. Occasionally, agency staff have been used for collecting necessary data. This procedure has many advantages, but it also has two major disadvantages. First, it may draw too heavily upon the staff's limited time resources. Second, the client may feel

uncomfortable about discussing certain areas with someone he feels is directly involved in the situation or the worker may feel that in exploring these areas he may prejudice his relationship with the client. More valid information might be obtained by an "outsider" in such cases. Of course, there remains the possibility that the client may be upset by an interview with an unfamiliar person. In considering this problem, the staff cooperating on the present study felt that they were willing to risk upsetting the child. If he was upset, it was important for them to know that the child had problems in that area and they were ready to pick up significant clues. In the course of this study no such problems developed. The prognosis seems favorable for extending this practice.

The second comment is a point for emphasis: Behavior in the placement situation is more than the product of the individual personalities of the parties involved. Here a plea is made for the inclusion of a sociological perspective as well as a psychodynamic one in attempting to understand what goes on in placement. Because of the nature of his task, the caseworker tends to focus on the personalities of the people with whom he interacts. Yet certain patterns of behavior may be natural consequences of the operation of the placement system rather than being determined primarily by individual personality factors. It may be necessary to "step back a few paces" and view placement more abstractly as a system of relationships before one can fully understand the factors operating in any particular case.

3. The Interview and Sample

FOSTER HOME PLACEMENT was discussed previously as a social system, with special emphasis being placed on the matrix of interrelationships in the system. In analyzing these relationships and trying to sketch some of the forms they may take, one very important social psychological principle was dominant: the behavior of any party in the relationship is a function of his conception of his role in the situation, which in turn is a function of the way he defines that situation. From this point of view, it would follow that if one is interested in developing an understanding of the impact of placement on the foster child it is necessary to know the way he defines the placement situation and his role in it. It would be a formidable, if not impossible, task to spell out all the elements in a definition of the placement situation. However, it may be possible to delineate certain conceptions with which the child approaches the situation. These might be phrased as a series of questions.

Who am I? Identity does not develop in a vacuum. The child's conception of who he is emerges in interaction with specific (and later generalized) others. It is a reflection of whom he believes parents, peers, and people in general think him to be. Thus in investigating the foster child's notion of who he is, one is immediately plunged into a consideration of the network of relationships that surrounds him.

Within this network it is important to know whom the foster child sees as responsible for him, since he is simultaneously a natural and foster child. The way he conceives of this dual status is central to his definition of a placement. He may be confronted by such questions as, "What is my relationship

to the parents who visit me? To the parents I am living with? Who is Boss? When?" With the presence of agency supervision, additional questions may be raised such as, "Who is the caseworker? Why is there a caseworker for me when other children don't have one?"

Aside from issues of authority and responsibility, another important dimension of the question of "Who am I?" is the child's identification. With the presence of three sets of figures, each responsible for him in some way, with whom does the child identify? He may consciously or unconsciously be faced by such questions as, "To whom do I really belong?"

Where am I? Essential to the concept of being foster is the idea of living somewhere other than the home of one's natural parents. "Somewhere else" may or may not be equivalent to home to the foster child. He may regard himself as being "at home" or at "the place where he stays." In the latter case, it is important to know whether the child sees the situation as one involving invidious comparisons with that of other children living with their natural parents or the hypothetical situation where he would be living with his.

Why am I here? It is important to know the foster child's conception of the circumstances that make it necessary for him to live away from his own parents. He may conceive of these circumstances in a number of different ways that can be, in part, independent of the circumstances themselves. For example, the child may define the situation as resulting from a combination of unavoidable external factors or as a situation in which blame is to be fixed. In the latter point of view, the blame may be fixed externally upon the parents as unjustly deserting (or upon the agency for taking him away), or it may be fixed internally with placement seen as punishment for something the child himself has done. Similarly, the child may conceive of the circumstances leading to placement as unique to himself or he may view these circumstances as something that happens to a number of children who consequently share a common status, foster child.

The way the child approaches each of these problems may have important consequences for his notions of personal adequacy. He may raise further questions such as, "Why do other people have to take care of me?" "Why do they want to?" "Do people think I am inferior because of these things?"

What is going to happen to me? Notions about the permanency of foster status may vary from child to child and from time to time within the same child. It is important to know the child's conception of the tenure of his present situation and the alternatives he sees to that situation. What does he think would have to happen in order for a change in his present arrangements to occur? When could this happen? Who would be involved?

Each of these four broad areas is intrinsically bound up with the others. The child's notion of who he is involves his notions of where he is, why he is there, and what is going to happen to him. The same may be said of any of the other questions. One purpose of this study was to describe the child's understanding of these areas; to try and delineate the picture of himself as a foster child that he presents to the outside world.

The primary consideration in developing methods to achieve this purpose was the source of information on children's definitions of the placement situation. The possibility of using case records for this purpose was explored first. With the exception of cases where special work was being carried on with the child, the records contained relatively little information of direct interest to this part of the study.[1] Some consideration was given to using foster parents as the main source of data. The anticipated lack of comparability between foster parents' reports led to the rejection of that alternative. It was decided that the best method would be to obtain the necessary data directly from the children through some kind of interview.

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[1] This might be expected, since in most cases where the child does not exhibit any serious problems the bulk of the caseworkers' contacts are with the foster mother.

As a basis for planning such an interview, preliminary interviews of a sample of 13 foster mothers were made by the staff. These interviews focused on the mother's recollection of instances when the child talked about being "foster." The information obtained in this way was supplemented by suggestive materials from the case files and from staff conferences. Based on these sources, an Interview Schedule was constructed.

FIGURE 1. THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

These questions comprise rough guides for structuring the interview. Phrasing and emphasis was varied, depending on the course of initial responses. However, an attempt was made to keep the content areas comparable from child to child.

1. You have a different last name from the people you stay with. Why?
2. Sometimes people talk about foster children or living in a foster home. What does "foster" mean? Is that like where you are?
3. What are some reasons for a child's mother or father having someone else take care of him?
4. Did you ever live anyplace else before you lived here? What was it like there? Why did you move?
5. Do you think foster children are different from children who live with their own parents all the time? Are they treated any differently?
6. How long do you think you will stay at this place?
7. Why do some people take care of foster children?
8. Do your own parents ever visit you? What is it like when they do?
9. What do you call your own parents? Your foster parents?
10. If you had some trouble or were worried, whom would you like to talk to about it?
11. Whom do you love most in all the world? Who loves you most?
12. What would you like to be when you grow up? Why?
13. If you could pick anyone in the whole world to live with, whom would you pick?
14. Does your own mother have any other children? Where do they live? Why?
15. Were there ever any children here who moved away? Where did they go?
16. Do you call the other children who live here your brothers and sisters? What if you moved away? Would they still be your brothers and sisters?

17. Do you have any nicknames? Who calls you that?
18. Miss _____ comes to see you sometimes. Why does she come?
19. What is her job? What is she supposed to do on that job?
20. Where does she work? What is the name of that place? What do they do there? Why do you think there is a place like that?

The interview consists of a set of 20 open-ended items designed to elicit responses in three broad areas: the child's conception of his situation vis-a-vis his own family and his foster family; his conception of the role of the agency and its relationship to him; and the pattern of his identification with either his own or foster parents. The child's responses to questions in these areas should give an indication of his conceptions of who he is, where he is, why he is there, and what is going to happen to him.

The open-ended type of item was chosen to avoid as much as possible imposing a frame of reference on the child's responses. The Interview Schedule, as it appears in Figure 1, probably gives the impression of more structure in the interview than was actually present. In practice, the items merely served as content guides to ensure comparability in the areas covered. The course of the interview would vary, depending on the child's initial responses.

All the interviewing was done by the author. The agency staff pointed out that they were closely identified with the situation by the children, making it difficult for them to ask questions of the nature involved in the interview. Moreover, it might prove difficult to obtain valid responses if the children thought what they said might affect their present situations. Responses were tape-recorded (with the consent of the child).

Interviews generally lasted between a half-hour and an hour, excluding the time necessary to establish rapport. It should be noted that in no instance did a child reject the interview situation entirely. The attention of some of the younger children would stray and frequently have to be refocused; some of the older children would sidestep one or two questions. In no case did this result in an ultimate refusal to answer a specific query. On the whole, the children seemed

interested in the interview, responded to it with surprising
frankness, and exhibited no signs of post-interview disturbance.

Altogether, 61 children were interviewed. Four considera-
tions entered into the selection of this group. First, the children
had to be old enough to have some intellectual understanding
of the situation and be able to respond meaningfully to an
interview of the type proposed. Second, they had to have been
in foster placement for a sufficiently long period of time to
have developed some stable conception of what the situation
is about. Third, children at several different age levels had
to be available so that there was a possibility of making
inferences to developmental process through the observation
of systematic age-linked differences in responses. Fourth, the
child and the placement situation had to be sufficiently
secure so that the interview would not be a seriously upsetting
experience. With these considerations in mind, it was decided
to study all of the children under agency care who were
five years of age or older and who had been in placement for
at least one year. Any child whose worker felt might be
threatened or upset by the interview was excluded.[1] The age,
sex, and race distribution of the sample appears in Table 1.

Before describing the results of the interviews, a word
about several methodological limitations of these data is in
order. One might be subsumed under the heading "sampling
procedure." The children in this study are all under the care
of one agency, having its own specific policies with respect
to intake, type of care, case planning, and the selection of
foster parents. Moreover, the cases studied are not a repre-
sentative sample of the agency's caseload. Restrictions were
imposed on the basis of age, length of time in placement, and
psychological or situational stability. In succeeding chapters,
reference may be made to "foster children." It should be
clear that this usage is intended merely for the purpose of
linguistic convenience. "Foster children" is shorthand for

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[1] Sixteen children were excluded on this basis. Of these, two were excluded on
the basis of mental retardation; six because of some imminent or recent change
in the placement situation; and eight on the basis of emotional disturbance.

TABLE 1. AGE, SEX, AND RACE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SAMPLE

Age	Male		Female		Total
	White	Negro	White	Negro	
5	2	2	6	0	10
6	5	1	4	0	10
7	3	3	4	0	10
8	1	3	4	0	8
9	2	0	1	0	3
10	4	0	1	0	5
11	1	0	3	0	4
12	4	0	2	0	6
13	3	0	0	0	3
14 and over	2	0	0	0	2
Total	27	9	25	0	61

children who are in foster boarding homes under the super-
vision of the Chicago Child Care Society, and who are five years
of age or older, have been in placement at least one year, and
are not considered seriously emotionally disturbed. The relation-
ships reported refer only to this group. It is our hope that
the findings of this study will stimulate other agencies to
undertake comparable investigations. In this way it would
be possible to determine whether the results have any more
general applicability.

Another set of problems centers around the psychological
status of the data. One of the purposes of this study is to
describe the way foster children define the placement situa-
tion. This purpose is implemented by asking the child ques-
tions about himself and his situation and describing his
responses. A question of validity immediately comes to mind:
"Do the child's responses reflect what placement *really*
means to him?"

This question points to one of the classic issues in social
psychological research, namely, the relationship between
verbal behavior and such intrapsychic phenomena as attitudes,
feelings, and motives. Since the primary data of this study
are verbal responses, the position taken on this issue should
be made explicit. The study makes no claim of perfect corre-
spondence between what the child says about placement in

the interview and what he privately feels about placement. The intent of the interview was to maximize this correspondence, but there is no way of knowing how well it succeeded in that purpose.

The foregoing qualifications are intended to point out that there are several ways in which the interview data might be interpreted. Viewing them as reflecting "actual" conceptions of placement is one alternative; there are others that raise less serious problems of validity but are still psychologically meaningful. One alternative is to view the interview as a test measuring the correspondence between the child's conception of the situation and a sophisticated conception as represented by the agency viewpoint. This approach is adopted to a limited extent in the study in the ratings of the child's understanding of the situation and of the role of the agency found in Chapter 6.

A second possibility is to interpret the interview responses as reflecting the way the child represents himself to the outside world. For the most part, this is the approach that has been adopted. It is held that these external representations are important in their own right and bear directly on our understanding the placement system. People may respond differently to different types of pictures of themselves that foster children project. These differential responses may, in turn, have important consequences for the way in which the child views himself. To the extent that meaningful relationships can be found between the child's conception of placement, characteristics of the placement situation, and the child's well-being, this point of view is a useful one.

4. The Development of Conceptions of Placement

Responses to the various interview items took many different forms. In order to analyze the results, it was necessary to develop some system of categories for each of the content areas. This was done by reviewing a sample of the tape recordings, noting broad categories into which the responses seemed to fall. Another sample of recordings was then drawn, the old categories refined, and new ones added. This process of refinement continued until a final set was developed.[1]

Developmental considerations would lead one to expect important differences in the content and organization of children's answers according to their age. In order to examine the influence of age, the sample was divided into three age groups, 5 to 6 years, 7 to 9 years, and 10 years and over. Roughly one-third of the cases fell into each group. Whenever possible, the categorized responses to content areas covered by the interview were then cross-tabulated by age. Chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant association between age and interview responses.

The first of these cross-tabulations was based upon the answers to Item 1 of the Interview Schedule appearing in Chapter 3. In this item, the child was asked to account for the difference between his last name and that of the people he lives with. There was not much age patterning.

[1] The recordings were also coded into the final set of categories by another person working independently. Intercoder agreement on the items ranged from 62 to 100 per cent, with 77 as the average per cent agreement.

The issue of names can be of crucial importance to the foster child. His last name (in most cases) remains that of his natural parents during his stay in the foster home. When attention is focused on last names, such as in the school situation, this difference can act as a visible badge of status, both to the child and to the outside community. Requesting the child to account for the difference provided an excellent entree into a discussion of the total placement situation as the child saw it.

The most frequent initial response to this item gave some indication that the child has (or had) another set of parents. This was done either directly, by referring to them, or indirectly, by mentioning that they are not his real parents. For example:

My mama—that's what her name is.

It's my real name 'cause it's on the card.
(What card?)
Birth 'tificate.

They just take care of me . . . I'm not adopted.

That isn't my real mommy.

Eleven of the children used the same last name as their foster parents, although all but one, when questioned further, were aware of another set of parents in their backgrounds. The following is a typical pattern.

Their name is Smith and my name is Smith too.
(Did you always have the name "Smith"?)
I don't know. Just Smith.
(Did you always live with the Smiths?)
Oh. When I was a tiny baby, I had a different mother. But she wasn't married so the police wouldn't let her keep me. They don't allow that.

Eight of the children did not understand the question and gave irrelevant responses. A few of the youngest did not know what a last name was. One, when informed that she had a last name, too, ran outside to her foster mother to find out what it was.

In the second item, the children were asked for their notions of what the word "foster" means.[1] For the most part, the younger children were not familiar with the term. A few had some idea, usually expressed in language such as the following:

You're not really their children.

If someone can't take care of you, you're a foster.

That means I wasn't born with the Hankins, the Johnstones, or the Runnels, but I'm a little foster boy.

Almost all of the children in the two older groups gave some response indicating that foster implied living with parents other than one's own.

It's like a home, but not a real home.

You can't live with your mother and father so you live with them.

You get tooken care of in another home. Like the agency put me in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Nolan.

There seemed to be a slight difference in emphasis between the two older groups. Responses in the 7 to 9 year group more frequently emphasized not "belonging" to the people they lived with; in the 10 years and over group, emphasis was on being cared for by people other than the natural parents.

An analysis was also made of the distribution of children who do and do not identify themselves as foster. A clear progression with age was evident (ss). Since only a few of the youngest group understood what foster means, many would not be expected to apply the term to themselves. In the older groups, children who understood what foster meant used it as a self-designation with only six exceptions. All of the exceptions were children who had been placed early in life, had remained in the same foster home, and who were not visited by their natural parents. Although they were able to

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[1] Chi-square, as computed for this item, indicates that there is a better than chance association between age and response type. The 5 per cent criterion of statistical significance is used throughout this report. When a relationship is statistically significant, it is marked ss in parentheses — (ss).

connect the term with its referent conditions, they did not see those conditions as applicable to themselves. For example, one girl was discussing two other foster children who formerly lived in her foster home:

> Oh, they were real cute. Sandy was four and Jerry was three. *We used to take care of them.*
> (Where did they go?)
> Sandy went back to live with his family. I don't know where Jerry went. To another home, I think.

In the third item, the child was asked for reasons for being in placement. The language used in answering this question was highly varied, but generally fell into three main types (ss). In the first, appearing most frequently in the youngest group, the child simply affirmed that his parents cannot or do not take care of him.

> My real mommy can't take care of me.
> (Why?)
> 'Cause I don't live by her.
> (Well, Lila, why don't you live with your real mommy?)
> I don't know.
>
> She works so she can't take care of me.
> (Doesn't your daddy work so your mommy can be with you?)
> No . . . Uh, yes, he works but she works too.
>
> My other mother, she lives in a different place.
> (Why doesn't she take care of you there?)
> Because I don't live there.

In the second type, the child placed the "cause" of placement in the parent-child relationship.

> She had too much work to do. She didn't want washin' diapers and all that hard stuff, I guess.
> I couldn't stay there. They had another baby.
> (Why didn't your mommy take care of you and the other baby, too?)
> She has to work.
> (What about your daddy? Does he work so your mommy can take care of you?)
> Daddy works, too. Mommy has to make food. Daddy has to pay for it.
> Well, sometimes a mother just doesn't want to keep her.

In the older group, the cause of placement was most frequently seen as external to the child. The focus of these responses was on interparental rather than parent-child relations.

> My folks split up. My pa ran off when I was just a baby. Now my ma, she has to work so I stay with these people.

> My dad, he's away. I can't tell you where. Only my ma and me know where that is. But when he comes back, then we're gonna all live together.

Except for this older group, few of the children, even when pressed, could account for their natural fathers beyond acknowledging their existence.

It was interesting to note the correspondence (or lack of it) between the child's account of the circumstances leading to his placement and information obtained from the case records and from caseworkers. Illegitimacy, separation, and divorce are involved in over three-fourths of the cases. Less than one-third of the sample mentioned having an incomplete family, even when pressed. Neglect by the mother was a factor in over half of the cases in the sample, yet was mentioned by about one-fourth. The age of the child at the time of initial placement (as well as his current age) seems to be an important factor in the degree of realism about the reasons for his being in placement. This was especially true for children who indicated that parental neglect was responsible for their present circumstances.

Item 4 dealt with the child's recollection of his previous foster homes and the reasons for his being moved. Since this area was explored only with children who had lived in a foster home other than their present one after they were three or four years old, no cross-tabulation with age was made.

One might have reasonably expected that children would remember a home that they had lived in when they were at least three or four years old. Such expectations were not borne out by the children's responses. Of the 28 children questioned, 6 had no recollection of other foster homes.

Fourteen of the remaining 22 acknowledged having lived elsewhere, but could not remember anything about the former home except, in some instances, the names of the foster parents.

Eight children (all of whom had been re-placed within two years) had some rationale for their change of homes.

> Uh, let me see. There was the Johnsons and the Hammonds and the Roberts and the Bookers.
> (Why did you move from all those different homes?)
> Well, the Johnsons, she had a baby, and the Hammonds, he didn't like a lot of noise, and I guess the Roberts didn't like me too well, and the Bookers, I guess they couldn't stand it either, so they took me here.

> This other girl, Arlene, she came to live with us. But the lady downstairs she could only have one children upstairs so they had to find this home for me.

> Some homes they find for me are just for temporary and some are for permanent. Like the Grimms and the Jenners they were just for temporary.

In the fifth question, the child was asked about the differences between being foster and living with his own parents. There was little age patterning, responses at each age level being equally divided between those indicating some difference between the two situations and those indicating none.

Responses indicating some difference between placement and living with his natural parents fell into three groups. The first and most frequent was a simple reiteration of the essential condition of placement:

> You don't live with your own real parents.

In the second, the child indicated some difference in treatment:

> You get the things you want. We got television.
> They (the foster parents) treat you nicer.

In the third type, the child indicates that some difference in behavior is required of him. A kind of classic status anxiety is often revealed in these responses:

> You have to be good or they might not keep you.

Whenever a child indicated that there was no difference in the two situations, an effort was made to probe further. These children were asked if they were treated differently, whether they had to act differently, if people thought they were "different," or if it was harder to be a foster child. Responses to these further questions were uniformly in the negative.

Any attempt to account for the rather high proportion of children who maintained that there was no difference runs head on into the issue of whether what the child says publicly reflects what he feels privately. Strong emphasis has been placed on the dissatisfactions for the child that are inherent in foster placement. From this point of view, the immediate tendency would be to dismiss such responses as reflecting defensiveness or repression of a painful consciousness of the deprivations involved in being a foster child.

Before accepting such a conclusion wholeheartedly, a further investigation was made of the types of children who said there was no difference. About half of the 28 cases were "semi-adopted" children; placed in their current foster homes early in life and not visited by their natural parents. An additional seven cases identified predominantly with their foster parents. Twenty-four of the 28 children expected to remain indefinitely in their current foster homes. It would appear that there is some consistency between the experiences of these children and their answers.

In the sixth item, the child was questioned about how long he expected to remain in placement. As might be expected, there was a tendency for older children to expect to remain in placement indefinitely, but the overall pattern was not statistically significant.

Of primary interest in the distribution of responses was the high proportion of children, regardless of age, who see their tenure in placement as relatively permanent. About two-thirds of the cases were of this type. Answers such as the following were frequent:

I'm gonna stay there always.
Until I'm a big man. Then I'll have a house of my own.
Until I'm grown.

To some extent, this proportion is due to certain characteristics of the sample children. All of them had been in placement for at least one year; three-quarters, for four or more years; over half of the children had known only placement since they were old enough to talk.

Interestingly, the presence of visiting parents does not consistently make a difference in the child's expectations. Over half of the children who expect to remain indefinitely in the same foster home have a parent who visits them regularly. Some of these parents annually assure the child that he will be "home by Christmas" and annually deliver their Christmas presents to him in the foster home with a promise of "next year." However, of those children expecting some change in arrangements, all but three had a parent visiting regularly.

About a third of the children expected to move or were not sure what would happen. Their expectations were expressed in statements such as these:

> As soon as my Ma gets enough money, she's gonna take me and my brother back to live with her.
>
> Till my mommy gets out of the hospital.
>
> I guess some day I probably will go back to live with her.

The expectations of the children in the sample seem to be highly realistic. Their caseworkers were asked about the child's probable future living arrangements. The caseworkers' expectations were cross-tabulated against the child. There were only 12 instances of disagreement. In seven, the child expected to remain indefinitely in his current home while the caseworker anticipated some change. In five, the conditions were reversed. It should also be pointed out that in many cases the worker's prediction was at best an informed guess.

This item was initially included in the battery to try to get at "status anxiety" aroused by the tenuousness of the foster child's living arrangements. Very little of this came out in the responses. Instead, most of the children expected to remain where they were. Of those who expected to move,

the expectation generally was to go back to their own parents rather than to another foster home, and it was usually fairly realistic.

Before drawing any inferences from these data, it must be remembered that most of the children for whom some move was imminent (and who might be expected to be most anxious concerning the stability of their living arrangements) were excluded from the sample. Moreover, whether the child's answer correctly reflects his internalized expectation is open to debate. He may merely be parroting what the caseworker, his foster parents, or his natural parents have told him. One must exercise some caution in concluding that real sense of permanence with consequent feelings of security does develop in all of the children expecting to remain indefinitely.

In Item 7, the children were asked for their conceptions of their foster parents' motivation for taking care of them. The ways of describing these motives were quite varied. However, there seemed to be two broad classes into which the responses could be placed. The first was termed "child-centered" because the foster parents' motives are "activated" by the child or his particular circumstances. These responses occurred most frequently in the youngest group. The second type, given by all but a few of the older children, was called "parent-centered" because the motives described could exist independently of any particular child or set of circumstances (ss).

Child-centered responses such as the following were frequent:

'Cause she likes me.

'Cause I'm nice.

My momma can't take care of me so this momma does.
(Why does this momma want to take care of you?)
She loves me.

Parent-centered conceptions often involved considerations of altruism or of a generalized liking for children.

She just likes children.

'Cause they're good.

> (Is there any other reason you think they might take
> care of you?)
> 'Cause they're happy good.
> Well, they didn't have no kids of their own and they
> wanted to, so they took me to stay with them.

The financial motive was conspicuous by its absence. Only once, during the entire course of all the interviews, was there an allusion to money. This came during a different part of the interview.

> (Were there ever any other children here who don't live
> here any more?)
> Oh, yes. Lots of 'em. Babies. She's in that business. Their mothers
> can't take care of 'em so she takes care of 'em for a little while
> 'til they find a place.

Those children known to have natural siblings were asked about where they lived and why. The number of responses was too few to permit any formal analysis. There were certain consistencies, however, which may be of interest. The children were all aware of all of their siblings and able to account accurately for where they had lived. Three arrangements were mentioned: living in the same foster home, in a different foster home, and with the natural parents. There were several instances of the last type, and some fairly interesting explanations developed. For example:

> (Does your mommy have any other children besides you?)
> My sister—she never moved so many times.
> (Where does she live?)
> She lives at my mommy's house.
> (Oh, I see. Tell me, Margie, why didn't your sister
> move so many times?)
> She was the baby. My mommy had a baby and she couldn't
> keep another baby so I went to live at that other place.

Children who had been in a foster home when another foster child was re-placed or returned to his own parents were questioned about this experience. Again, there were too few responses to permit statistical analysis, but some definite impressions were formed. First, there was a considerable amount of "forgetting" children who had moved, especially among children who had been frequently moved themselves.

Second, the children more frequently knew what had happened when another child returned to his own family than when a child had been moved to a different foster home. Third, children who did not identify themselves as foster children, made no connection between the shift and their own circumstances. Fourth, in an area that was expected to be emotionally charged, responses were mostly quite matter-of-fact. The bulk of errors and omissions were made in the youngest group. The older children were much more accurate concerning incidents involving a longer time span.

Children who had lived in a foster home in which there was another foster child or a natural child of the foster parents were questioned about kinship relations. The younger children had a difficult time disentangling their siblings (ss.) It was usual for children at all age levels to refer to other children in the home as brothers and sisters. However, this became easily confusing to the youngest ones.

> Johnny and Suzie live at my house.
> (Do you call them your brother and sister?)
> Yes.
> (Were they your brother and sister before you came
> to live there?)
> No, 'cause I didn't even know them then.
> (Suppose you were to move to a different house. Would
> they still be your brother and sister?)
> If I still lived with them, they would be.

When there was a natural sib of the foster child in a different foster home, the picture became even more complicated.

> (Was Eddie your brother before you came to live with
> Mr. and Mrs. Welch?)
> No, I didn't live with him then.
> (If you moved away would he still be your brother?)
> No, I still wouldn't be living with him.
> (Well, what about Nora? Is she your sister?)
> Yes.
> (Even though she doesn't live with you?)
> No, oh, yes, she's still my sister.
> (Oh. Why is she your sister if she doesn't live with you?)
> Oh, that's a hard one. She's still my sister and . . . I just
> can't think how to say it.

Most of the children in the two older groups were able to distinguish between the two kinds of kinship and usually volunteered the reason.

> I call them my sisters, but they're not really my sisters, just foster sisters.

> We don't have the same real mother.

> Jimmy, he's just my brother for now where I'm living, but Albert is my brother for always.

In Items 18 and 19, the child was questioned about the nature of the caseworker's job. Excepting irrelevant answers, three main functions were ascribed to the caseworker: giving some kind of medical service, seeing how children are getting along, and finding homes. These functions were mentioned both singly and in combination. Irrelevant responses or those indicating only some medical function were disproportionately more frequent among the younger children. The relationship with age was statistically significant.

Irrelevant responses were most frequent in the youngest group. They often indicated a rather vivid and sometimes insightful imagination.

> (Miss S., she comes to see you and your mom sometimes. Why does she come?)
> I don't know. She talks to my ma.
> (Do you know what her job is?)
> She works.
> (What kind of work?)
> She cooks and stuff like that.
> (Does she do any different kind of work besides cooking and stuff like that?)
> She rakes the leaves in the yard.

> (What do you suppose Miss G.'s job is?)
> She works in an office.
> (Oh? Do you know where that is?)
> Yes, here.
> (And what does she do in the office here?)
> She writes.
> (What does she write about?)
> She writes about me.

Medical services in one form or another were frequently mentioned. This is understandable in the light of the way medical services are provided by the agency. There is a clinic on the agency premises. The workers sometimes arrange to be in the office on clinic day if one of the children under their supervision is scheduled to come in, or they often happen to be there at that time. In either instance, when the child sees his worker at his "place of business" it is likely to be in conjunction with being examined, getting a tooth filled, getting an injection, and so on. This accounts for responses such as the following:

She gives shots—Poley shots.

She takes sick kids to the clinic.
(Does she take foster children *and* children who live with their own mommies and daddies?)
If they're sick.

Almost half of the children mentioned that part of the worker's role is to see how children get along in their foster homes. Given the usual pattern of caseworker-child relationships, this is not surprising. What is of interest is the reason the children give for this function. This reason often was the basis for the child's understanding (or lack of it) of the relationship between the worker and the agency. The younger children's reasons were usually egocentric in character and gave little indication of the caseworker's real responsibilities.

(What does Miss A. do?)
She comes and sees me.
(Why does she come and see you?)
To see how I am.
(Oh? She comes and sees little children to see how they are. Why do you suppose she does that?)
Because she likes me.

In contrast, older children see this as part of a general "insurance policy" for foster children. The "insurer" is the agency and the worker is cast in the role of a friendly inspector.

(Why does Miss J. come out to see you from time to time?)
Oh, she comes to see how I'm doing.

(Why does she want to know that?)
Well, she sees if I'm all right and if I like it here
and if they like me.
(Does she do this for anybody else besides you?)
Oh, sure. Kids who are in foster homes. See, she works for the
agency and they take care of kids like if their real parents can't
take care of 'em. She comes around and sees how they're getting
along.

The third main function of the worker was finding homes.[1]
The younger children rarely mentioned this unless it came
up in conjunction with the circumstances of their placement.
For example:

(Who brought you to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Wilson?)
Daddy Stoverton.
(Did anyone else bring you?)
Just Miss V. She had the car, Daddy Stoverton didn't.
(How did Miss V. know where to bring you?)
She knows where's the bestes' place for us.
(How did she know that?)
'Cause she's smart.

For the older children, homefinding is a natural extension
of the agency's function of caring for children whose own
parents cannot.

She finds places for them to live in. They (the agency) take
care of kids when they haven't got their own parents to stay
with, so they find 'em a foster family and they live with them.

The children were asked if they knew the name of the job
their caseworker had. Slightly over half the children men-
tioned worker, social worker, or caseworker, and the majority
of these were older children. Among the irrelevant responses,
"Nurse" was the leader, again reflecting a medical emphasis.

A number of questions were asked, exploring the children's
conceptions of the agency's purpose. Almost two-thirds of
the children under ten years old thought medical service of

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[1] Technically, this is inaccurate. The agency maintains a separate home-
finding staff. However, since it is the worker who brings him there, the child's
inference that he found the home is reasonable. It is unlikely that he would
be aware of the details of agency organization within which this is carried out.

some kind was the only service the agency provided. They referred to it simply as "the clinic," a place where "they give you shots." This is considerably higher than for their idea of the caseworker's purpose. However, the children see the caseworker in other situations, while the clinic may well be their only direct contact with the agency as an institution.

The older children mentioned two other agency services: taking care of foster children and finding homes for them. Generally, the two were interrelated, the latter being the means of implementing the former.

> Well, if your own parents can't take care of you,
> they take care of you.
> (Who does that? The caseworkers?)
> Well, they don't really take care of you. They find a home that would like to have a foster child living there and then come around to visit every so often to see how everything is.

The phrasing of this response is typical, especially with reference to the use of "take care." This seems to be synonymous with what the agency calls "having responsibility for." However, only three children indicated directly that the agency was "responsible" for them. All three had a concept of the agency as a social institution meeting social needs. As one went on to say,

> They have to have a place like that. A lot of kids, their folks split up or they can't take care of them. You just can't let them roam around in the streets. They find homes for them and they see that they like it there. If they don't, well, they'll find them a new home.

The older children seemed to have a fairly good grasp of the elements involved in the operation of the agency, but their notion of the actual process was fuzzy at best. The agency's financial responsibility was never mentioned, although there were many opportunities to do so. The process of intake was never voluntarily described. When pressed, the children assumed they came to the agency because "their mothers bring them or maybe the police." Finally, their notion of the relationship between their real parents and the

agency was quite limited. The children saw placement as a service to themselves and their real parents, in which the agency finds the home and sees that the child is not mistreated in it. It is somewhat surprising that no child in any way indicated that the agency might also operate to facilitate his return to his real parents.

The presence of systematic differences between children of various age groups in their responses to the areas covered by the interview provides a basis for inferring a rough developmental sequence in the overall conception of foster status. It should be pointed out that more is being implied than the descriptive generalization that children at one age usually make one kind of response, children at an older age make a somewhat different kind of response, and so forth. The notion of developmental sequence assumes that there is an order in which a child will approach, modify, and finally master the various elements that constitute the meaning of a concept. One can think in terms of a series of levels through which each child must pass. The sequence in which the levels are mastered is similar from child to child. Since some things have to be learned before others can be integrated, a correlation between chronological age and development level is to be expected. However, it is the order rather than the age in which a particular element is mastered that was the focus of this analysis.

A very crude developmental sequence may be outlined. At the lowest level, the child is only vaguely aware that he has, or had, another set of parents. He is confused about the difference between them and the parents with whom he lives. If any distinction is drawn it is simply for purposes of identification such as "other mommy" or "this mommy and that mommy." He has no notion of the reasons for the agency and caseworker, but describes them in terms of the most concrete aspects of his experience. The agency is a place where shots are given; the caseworker visits to "see me" or to "talk to me." The child first learns to differentiate more clearly between sets of parents. His "other mommy" is now

his "real mommy" or "I was borned out of her tummy." This distinction involves an awareness of the essential condition of placement, "They don't really have me, I'm just staying here." Once able to make some distinction between who "owns" him and where he lives, the child begins to develop an explanation for this distinction. This involves reasons for his having to be placed. These reasons usually describe a combination of circumstances which the child perceives as unique to himself. "My real mommy's house is too small." "My mommy can't take care of me so I have to stay here." The people "here" take care of the child because "they think I'm nice," or "they like me."

Such responses reflect a kind of characteristic egocentricity in the perception of younger children. This "*me*-ness" is seen in other areas as well. Other children in the foster home are brothers and sisters "because they live with me." The caseworker visits "because she likes me." At this level, the child perceives the situation only in terms of unilateral relationships and draws little connection between them.

Gradually there is a reduction in egocentricity and an increased ability to adopt perspectives other than one's own. This basic process leads to a major reorientation of the child's conception. The locus of reorientation seems to be the incorporation of the term "foster" as part of the child's identity. He no longer conceives of placement as due to circumstances unique to himself, but as something that can happen to a number of children, who by virtue of an underlying similarity in the consequences of such circumstances, share a common status. This is subsumed for the child under the label "foster."

This understanding is the basis for concomitant changes in the child's notions of the reasons for his being in placement, the reasons for foster parents taking care of him, and the role of the agency. He is in placement because "My folks split up and my mother has to work," or "I guess it was too hard for my ma to take care of a kid, so she had this mother do it." His foster parents take care of him "because they didn't have no children of their own and wanted some," "they like

children," or "they want to do good and take care of children when their own parents can't take care of 'em." His worker now has a job with a name—caseworker. This name connotes a formal set of responsibilities to the child. "She finds homes for me and sees how I'm gettin' along."

At this level, the child is aware of the four key positions in the placement system. He can clearly distinguish between natural and foster parents and generalizes this distinction to his siblings. "They're just my foster brothers." He understands something of how the system operates. The caseworker is seen as having a facilitating role in carrying out its main purpose, arranging for one set of parents to perform a function which another set does not perform. He understands something of the history of the system in his case and has formulated expectations concerning his future participation in it. These expectations are contingent upon what he sees as the future situation of his own parents. He is not aware of possible efforts by the agency to modify that situation.

In the succeeding level, the child begins to be aware of the complexity of the network of relationships in which he is involved. For the most part, this is reflected in an increased understanding of the purpose and function of the agency and caseworker. While this was the highest level tapped in the present study, it represents considerably less than a sophisticated understanding of the placement system and its operation. A number of important facts are unknown or are dimly grasped at best. No child gave any indication that his foster parents received payment for his care, or that the payment came from the agency, acting directly or as a go-between for the natural parents. While some of the children were aware that their natural parents continued to be in contact with the agency, this was accepted rather matter-of-factly, with no indication that the basis of the relationship might be to make other plans for his care. Conceptions of the intake process and the agency's legal responsibility for the child were also obscure.

5. Patterns of Predominant Family Identification

FAMILY LIFE can be complex indeed for the foster child. The placement situation involves a transfer of many parental responsibilities to groups outside the child's kinship system. Unlike adoption, this transfer takes places without a concomitant shift in *formal* group membership for the child. Thus the child has a dual family status. As has been pointed out, this duality frequently has a visible badge; the difference between the child's last name and that of the people he lives with. Given this dual status, with whom does the child identify? And if there are differences among foster children in their predominant identifications, what conditions in the placement situation are related to these differences?

To answer these questions, some means was necessary for categorizing predominant family identification. Responses to the following items on the Interview Schedule provided the necessary data:

> If you had some trouble or were worried, whom would you like to talk to about it?
> Whom do you love most in all the world?
> Who loves you the most?
> If you could pick anyone in the whole world to live with, whom would you pick?

If the child's responses to all of these items included only his natural parent(s), he was regarded as identifying predominantly with his natural parent(s). If they included only the foster parents, he was classified as having predominant identification with them. If both were mentioned, either in

response to a single item or on different items, he was regarded as having mixed identification.[1]

It is recognized that this is a "surface" definition of predominant family identification and perhaps it would be more accurate to say this is the picture of his family identification the child presents to the outside world. While aware that there may be a considerable gap between what the child says to others and what he really thinks, it seemed useful for exploratory purposes to operate under the opposite assumption. With these limitations in mind, 17 of the 61 interviewed children were classified as identifying predominantly with their natural parents, 28 with their foster parents, and 16 as having mixed identification.

It seemed likely that differences in patterns of predominant family identification would be reflected in other areas of the child's conception of placement. To check this possibility, differences among the three identification groups in the content of their conceptions of placement and their level of understanding of the placement situation were explored.

First, children whose identification is predominately with their natural parents tend to have a clearer understanding of the placement situation than children with either mixed or foster parent identifications (ss). In identifying with his natural parents, it is likely that the child's awareness of not being able to live with them is heightened. Such a child might be expected to be concerned with his status and more active in seeking clarification of the situation and his position in it. Most of the children who identify with their foster parents and who have low understanding of their status are in the "semi-adopted" group. They were placed early in life, have not been moved frequently, and are not visited by their natural parents. They are not subject, to the same extent, to conditions that would occasion frequent concern with their foster status.

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[1] Surprisingly, the social worker was mentioned in only two cases, each time in conjunction with the foster parents. These cases were classified as identifying with the latter.

The difference in concern with foster status between children identifying with natural parents or having mixed identification and those identifying with their foster parents is further illustrated by cross-tabulation of responses to the question, "Do you think foster children are different from children who live with their own parents all the time?" (ss) Three-fourths of the children identifying predominantly with their foster parents gave responses indicating that the two situations are about the same. In contrast, nearly two-thirds of the children with mixed or natural parent identification pointed to some difference. Most frequently this difference was the essential condition of placement, not living with one's own parents. In addition, it was found that children with mixed or natural parent identification label themselves "foster" with disproportionately greater frequency than do children with foster parent identification (ss).

These patterns are to be expected on the basis of the definition of family identification that has been used. If a child maintains he loves his natural parents more than anyone else in the world, he would be more likely to see a situation in which he is not able to live with them as different and have a name for the difference—foster. On the other hand, even though the child who identifies with his foster parents may be aware of differences in biological relationships, one would not expect these differences to be as psychologically meaningful for him.

Children's expectations concerning the tenure of their current foster placement are generally congruent with their preferences as implied by identification (ss). Most of the children identifying with their foster parents expect to remain indefinitely with them. In contrast, over half of the children identifying with their natural parents expect to return home. Before concluding that the wish is the father of the expectation, it should be pointed out that these expectations were generally realistic.

There were sharp differences in the way the child accounts for his being in placement among the three identification

groups (ss). The differences were greatest in the frequency with which parental neglect or rejection is mentioned. This occurred in over a third of the cases identifying with their foster parents compared with none in the natural parents group. Responses such as the following were included.

> That isn't my real mother. . . . Alice and Bob, they're gettin' to be bad. Drinkin' beer and bringing home sour milk. Bob, he spilled it all over her head.

> She [the natural mother] hit me on the head with a shoe.
> It was bleedin' real bad.
> (How did you get to come here?)
> I just wanted to.

> I guess they didn't want me so they let somebody
> else have me.

> There was a fire. Mickey (younger brother) was playin' with matches and they was away. He played with the matches.
> (Well, how come you came to live with a different mommy?)
> There was a fire an' they wouldn't let us stay with
> them no more.

Other responses of children identifying with their foster parents tend to have rather matter-of-fact flavor. For the most part they indicate simply that their natural parents do not take care of them because the home is broken or their mothers must work. In contrast, most of the children with natural parent or mixed identifications emphasize that their natural parents *cannot* take care of them, usually through no fault of their own. They often give detailed and sometimes rationalized accounts of why.

> I just stay here, they aren't my real parents. My real mother lives in a hotel. She's afraid we won't be able to reach the lunch . . . to reach the lock on the door and reach the lunch. My little brother, Marvin, he's too little to reach the lock.

> My mommy's sick so how can she take care of us.
> When she gets better she's gonna take us and we'll
> never come back.

> My dad, he left, so mom has to work. She can't
> afford to keep us yet.

These results indicate a good deal of internal consistency in the children's overt responses. The child who identifies with his natural parents tends to defend his being in placement as necessary, more frequently expects to return home, more frequently identifies himself as a foster child, more frequently expresses a difference between being in a foster home and living with natural parents, and tends to have a better understanding of his foster status. While such consistency does not prove there is high agreement between the child's overt and covert responses, it does lend strong inferential support to that point of view.

In order to discover possible relationships between the nature of the placement situation and the child's identification, patterns of identification were cross-tabulated with each of 13 characteristics of the placement situation.[1] In the following three instances there was a statistically significant relationship.

Visiting Pattern of Natural Parents

Regular contact with natural parents is a prerequisite for identification with them (ss). In only one case did a child identify with his natural parents when they visited no oftener than once a year. The pattern is about the same for the group with mixed identification. However, 11 of the 28 children who identified predominantly with their foster parents had natural parents visiting regularly. Thus continuing contact with natural parents may be regarded as a necessary but not sufficient condition for identification with them.

On the surface, the explanation of the relationship appears obvious. The relative lack of interaction with a potential set of identification figures leaves the child no choice. However, a commonly held assumption of theories of identification is that once formed, there is a carryover of identification beyond the period of direct and intensive interaction. This is given special emphasis when identification arises out of a dependency relationship in the early years of life. It should be noted that

[1] See Chapter 6.

no relationship was observed between predominant family identification and the age at which the child first entered foster placement. Thirteen of the 28 children identifying with their foster parents were not initially placed until after their second birthday; eight of these were four or more years old. Thus, at least at the level being tapped in this study, carryover of identification would seem to require periodic reinforcement through contact. If not, the child is likely to perceive and describe his natural parents as unloving or as having deserted him, and present himself as identifying with the foster parents.

Proportion of Lifetime Spent in the Present Foster Home

A number of approaches were taken in attempting to assess the relationship of time to identification. Analyses were made of total length of time spent in placement, total length of time spent in the present placement, age of the child at first placement, age of the child at placement in the present foster home, proportion of the child's lifetime spent in foster placement, and proportion of the child's lifetime spent in the current foster home. Only the last characteristic showed a significant association with identification. Twenty of the 28 children identifying predominantly with their foster parents had spent half or more of their lives in the present foster home. In contrast, only 12 of the 33 children having either mixed or natural parent identifications were in their present foster homes proportionally as long.

Given the functions performed by the foster parents, it would seem that their position offered a number of strategic advantages in promoting identification with them. The findings may be interpreted as suggesting that the effect of this advantage is not immediate but requires a period of stabilization. The necessary length of this period seems to be relative rather than absolute, with the optimum breaking point at equal time. However, since all the sample children were at least five years old, equal time involved a minimum of two and one-half years in the present foster home. This agrees

with the observations of social workers about a sequence in the development of the child's adjustment to a foster home. The first stage is a kind of honeymoon period in which the child sees the foster parents as objects who will be able to compensate for all his previous deprivations and life will be like the child's version of Utopia. The parents are somewhat more receptive initially to dealing with demands they regard as somewhat excessive and more prone to looking at undesirable aspects of the child's behavior as temporary. There follows a period of mutual disillusionment and frustration which is critical in the placement. If this period can be successfully weathered, and it may take several years, an adequate adjustment involving more realistic appraisals of the situation by all concerned may take place.

Age of the Foster Mother

The major variation in this relationship comes from the disproportionate number of children with younger foster mothers (under age forty-five) who identified predominantly with them (ss). Fifteen of the 23 children with younger foster mothers identified with them. In contrast, all but 8 of the 33 children with either mixed or natural parent identifications had foster mothers who were over forty-five years old.

A number of interpretations of these findings may be advanced. In the case of older foster mothers, the child's conceptions of age-status relationships might interfere with identification. There might be some inclination to perceive a woman over forty-five as a grandmother rather than as a mother and hence less suitable as an object of identification.

Impressionistic evidence from agency records and discussions with caseworkers suggest an alternative (though not mutually exclusive) interpretation. It has been informally observed that younger foster mothers often tend to structure the placement situation in terms of adoption rather than boarding home care, although they may overtly acknowledge the difference. Instances of conflicting role definitions between foster parents and both natural parents and caseworkers seem

more frequent in the younger group. On the other hand, older foster parents are more frequently described as cooperative and "willing to share the child with the agency and his parents." For most of the older parents, the absence of a long-term and exclusive loyalty commitment from the child is not necessarily incongruent with their definition of the placement situation. If this is the case, it would appear less likely that they would organize their relationship to the child in ways designed to develop such a commitment.

In order to illuminate further the relationships between these three characteristics and identification, a four-way cross-tabulation was made which appears in Table 2.

TABLE 2. PATTERNS OF PREDOMINANT FAMILY IDENTIFICATION, BY VISITING PATTERN OF NATURAL PARENTS, PROPORTION OF CHILD'S LIFETIME SPENT IN CURRENT FOSTER HOME, AND AGE OF FOSTER MOTHER

Visiting pattern of natural parents	Proportion of lifetime in current foster home	Age of foster mother	Predominant identification		
			Natural	Mixed	Foster
Twice a year or more	0 to 49 per cent	20 to 44	2	4	0
" " " " "	"	45 and over	7	3	1
" " " " "	50 to 100 per cent	20 to 44	0	1	9
" " " " "	"	45 and over	7	4	1
Yearly or less	0 to 49 per cent	20 to 44	1	0	5
" " "	"	45 and over	0	4	2
" " "	50 to 100 per cent	20 to 44	0	0	1
" " "	"	45 and over	0	0	9

Cross-tabulation of variables:	Chi-square
Visiting pattern with predominant identification	*14.900*
Proportion of lifetime in current home with predominant identification	*7.771*
Age of foster mother with predominant identification	*6.103*
Visiting pattern with proportion of lifetime in current home	0.641
Visiting pattern with age of foster mother	0.511
Proportion of lifetime in current home with age of foster mother	0.339

By this means it becomes possible to examine the influence of each of the three factors separately, with the others held constant. This is not to say that "all things are equal" but that all things found to influence identification for which data

are available are statistically controlled. As the first step in this analysis, the relationship of each of the placement characteristics to each other was examined. In no case were they significantly associated, which indicates that each is relatively independently related to identification. For example, if children who had spent over half their lives in the present foster home also were not so frequently visited by their natural parents, this alone might account for their tendency to identify with the foster parents. However, the analysis indicated that the contribution of each characteristic was not due to any direct relationship with one or both of the others.

The next step in the analysis was to explore the relationships between certain combinations of characteristics in relation to patterns of identification. For example, what is the relationship between age of foster mother and identification when the child's natural parents visit him regularly? By examining such patterns one can see a little more clearly the conditions under which each of the three characteristics has its relationship with identification.

On the basis of this analysis, it appears that the three variables can be usefully viewed as delimiting an ordered set of contingencies. First, visiting pattern of the natural parents determines whether or not there are competing figures for identification in the situation. When the natural parents do not visit, identification tends to be with the foster parents *regardless of the other two conditions.* (See Table 3.) One might say by default.

TABLE 3. PATTERNS OF IDENTIFICATION, BY VISITING
PATTERN OF NATURAL PARENTS

	Identification			
Visiting pattern	Natural	Mixed	Foster	Total
Twice a year or more	16	12	11	39
Yearly or less	1	4	17	22
Total	17	16	28	61

Chi-square = 14.900

Turning now to the cases in which the natural parents do visit, how do the other conditions influence identification? If the child has been in the home for a relatively brief period, he will tend to identify totally or in part with his natural parents *regardless of the age of the foster mother*. In Table 4 it is seen that only one of the 17 such cases identified predominantly with his foster parents.

TABLE 4. PATTERNS OF IDENTIFICATION, BY PROPORTION OF LIFETIME SPENT IN CURRENT FOSTER HOME WHEN NATURAL PARENTS VISIT REGULARLY

Proportion of lifetime in current foster home	Natural or mixed	Foster	Total
0 to 49 per cent	16	1	17
50 to 100 per cent	12	10	22
Total	28	11	39

Chi-square = 7.435

When the natural parents visit regularly and the relative time spent in the foster home has been sufficient for the stabilization of identification with foster parents, the predisposing tendencies of the situation for identification may be viewed as in balance. As can be seen in Table 5, under both these conditions the age of the foster mother serves to discriminate sharply between patterns of identification.

TABLE 5. PATTERNS OF IDENTIFICATION, BY AGE OF FOSTER MOTHER WHEN NATURAL PARENTS VISIT AND CHILD HAS BEEN IN CURRENT FOSTER HOME OVER HALF HIS LIFE

Age of foster mother	Identification		Total
	Natural or mixed	Foster	
20 to 44 years	1	9	10
45 years and over	11	1	12
Total	12	10	22

p less than .05 (based on Fisher Exact Probability Test)

It is in this type of situation that the age of the foster mother becomes a determining factor. It was noted that the position of the foster parents offered a number of advantages in promoting the child's identification with them. The age of the foster mother is interpreted as being associated with differences in the exploitation of these advantages. It has been suggested that this association might come about in two ways. First, the child's view of appropriate age-status relationships might make such exploitation difficult in the case of older foster parents. Second, there may be difference in motivation between the age groups, with younger foster mothers prone to disregard the agency's definition of the situation as one of sharing responsibility for the child while providing temporary care for him.

6. Conditions Related to the Child's Understanding of Placement

THE DATA PRESENTED subsequently in Chapter 7 strongly suggest that a clear understanding of the placement situation may be an important precondition to the child's adjustment to it. If further research supports those findings, it will become important for agencies to know how well foster children under their supervision understand the meaning of their status and the operation of the agency. Furthermore, it will be equally important for them to be able to identify those conditions in children's placement careers seen to produce good understanding. This chapter is concerned with an exploratory attempt to delineate some of these conditions.

In order to approach this problem, two kinds of information were needed. First, it was necessary to have information about conditions characterizing the placement situation. The case records provided an excellent source of current and historical data of this type. Information from the case records on the following 13 characteristics was recorded: the child's age, sex, number of placements, age at first placement, total time in placement, time in the present placement, being present when other foster children in the home were re-placed or returned to their natural parents, the foster mother's age, the standard of care she provided, whether she had natural or adopted children currently living with her, the natural parents' marital status, visiting pattern, and the planning status of the case.[1]

[1] Data were collected on eight additional characteristics. However, they were either unavailable for some cases or were distributed in such a way as to prevent any analysis of their relationship with understanding of placement.

The second kind of information needed was an estimate of each child's level of understanding of placement. The interview responses provided the basic source of data for these estimates. However, the focus was not upon the content of the responses *per se*, but on the degree of sophistication implied in that content. Two ratings of level of understanding were made. The first focused on the child's understanding of the meaning of foster status and his role in the placement situation. The second focused on the child's understanding of the functions of the agency. In the following discussion they will be referred to respectively as the Understanding of Foster Status and the Understanding of Agency ratings.

Both sets of ratings were made on a five-point scale: none, little, fair, good, excellent. The content areas corresponding roughly to Items 1 to 7 and 14 to 17 of the Interview Schedule, taken as a whole, were used as a basis for making the Understanding of Foster Status ratings. Those corresponding to Items 18 to 20 provided the basis for the Understanding of Agency ratings.[1]

TABLE 6. DISTRIBUTION OF UNDERSTANDING OF FOSTER STATUS AND UNDERSTANDING OF AGENCY RATINGS

	Understanding of foster status	Understanding of agency
Excellent	19	11
Good	12	6
Fair	17	16
Little	11	17
None	2	11
Total	61	61

Table 6 shows the distribution of each of the sets of ratings. One can observe a marked difference between the two distributions. About half of the children fall in the "excellent" and "good" categories of the Understanding of Foster Status ratings

[1] The ratings were made by a second person working independently as a check on reliability. A correlation between the sets of .63 was found for the Understanding of Foster Status ratings. A corresponding value of .86 was found for the Understanding of Agency ratings.

as compared to about one-fourth in the case of the Understanding of Agency ratings. Several conditions might account for this difference. First, access to information about the agency may be more limited. This would be especially true of the agency's relationship with the child's own and foster parents where the child is less directly involved. Second, the agency is a very complicated organization, and its complexity is not directly experienced by the child. Even if specific information were available concerning the operations of the agency and the philosophy on which they are based, it might be beyond the child's capacity to integrate it.

In order to explore the relationships between characteristics of placement and the ratings, rating categories were combined. Cutting points were selected that divided each of the distributions into two groups of roughly equal size. The dichotomized ratings were then cross-tabulated with each of the 13 characteristics of the placement situation. For the following characteristics, a significant relationship with one or both of the ratings was found.

1. Older children tended to have better understanding in both areas than younger children.

2. Children who had lived in several different foster homes tended to have better understanding in both areas than children who had only one or two placements.

3. Children of married, separated, or divorced parents tended to have better understanding of foster status than children of unmarried mothers.

4. Children of older foster mothers tended to have better understanding of the agency than children with younger foster mothers (45 years being the breaking point for age of foster mother).

5. Children who were first placed in a foster home after they were two or more years old tended to have better understanding of the agency than do children first placed earlier in life.

Eight of the 13 characteristics failed to meet the criterion of statistical significance with either of the ratings. However,

in such cases relationships may have been obscured either by the crudeness of the measuring instruments or by the operation of uncontrolled variables. Taking these possibilities into account, the nonsignificant relationships were reexamined. The following characteristics approached but did not meet the significance criterion and seemed to produce meaningful patterns.[1] Along with the others, they may be good prospects for further research.

6. Children for whom some move was anticipated in the case planning tended to have better understanding of foster status than children for whom no move was anticipated.

7. Children receiving a higher standard of foster care (as evaluated by the caseworker) tended to have better understanding in both areas.

8. Children who have been in a foster home when another child was re-placed or returned to his natural parents tended to have better understanding in both areas than children who did not have this experience.

The reasons for the relationships between age and the ratings of understanding are clear-cut. Both experience and the logical facility necessary to integrate this experience increase with age. In consequence, one would expect a relationship between this segment of the age continuum and understanding in almost any conceptual area.

Not so obvious, however, are the factors operating to produce the relationship between understanding and some of the other characteristics. In the absence of carefully controlled research, one can only speculate about the reasons for some of these relationships and present the results of these speculations as hypotheses for future study.

Two kinds of factors may be suggested as involved in most of the relationships that have been observed. First, in some of the conditions examined, the child would be expected to have increased concern with his foster status. Under such conditions one would expect him to be more active in seeking clarification of the situation. One can easily

[1] The probabilities were in the .05–.10 range.

see how being moved from home to home, or seeing another child living in the home being moved, is likely to heighten the child's awareness of his status and of the placement situation in general.

The marital status of the child's natural parents falls into this same category although the relationship is less direct. Children of unmarried parents tended to have relatively little understanding of the situation. The unmarried mother tends to have a special type of participation in the placement system. Ordinarily, her need for placement service occurs shortly after the child's birth. The data indicate that unless she removes the child from placement shortly thereafter, he is likely to remain in placement and she is unlikely to continue to participate fully in the situation. Consequently, many children of unmarried mothers come to occupy a "semi-adopted" status: placed as infants, in their present foster home most of their lives, not visited by their natural parents, and likely to remain in placement until grown. As a rule they have not been subject to recallable experiences which might heighten their awareness of the situation and their foster status.

Second, in some of the conditions, the child is more likely to be exposed to interpretations of his foster status or of the functions of the agency. This second factor is closely tied in with the first, so that the presence of visiting parents, for example, is likely both to increase the child's concern with his foster status and to expose him to an additional source of interpretations of that status.

This second factor is especially important in relation to the child's understanding of the agency. Children who are placed early in life, for example, tend to have a relatively poor grasp of the agency's services. Such children have their crucial experience with the agency at a time when they can neither understand nor later recall what went on. Hence they are not subject to interpretations that would contribute to their understanding. Older foster parents have been described as more willing to "share" the child with the agency.

If this is the case, one might expect that their foster children would have closer contacts with the agency and would be more likely to have its relationship to them clarified. Being moved to a different foster home, or being present in a foster home when another child is re-placed, is ordinarily an occasion in which the relationship between the caseworker and the foster child is intensified. In these circumstances, the worker is normally more active in clarifying the role of the agency and its relationship to the child.

It would appear, then, that the chief source of the child's understanding of the agency is the agency itself. This takes place through his relationship with the caseworker. It is interesting to note that ordinarily this relationship tends to be one of clarification and interpretation only in times of crisis or imminent change.

7. Understanding of Placement and the Child's Well-Being

THE DEGREE TO WHICH the child understands the complexities of placement and certain characteristics of placement situations related to his level of understanding were considered in Chapter 6. This chapter is concerned with understanding and the conditions that give rise to it as they are related to the development of personality resources in the child.

In order to examine whether an adequate and clear-cut understanding of placement is related to the child's well-being, it was necessary to have information on the well-being of each child in the sample. These data were obtained from the caseworker. They were recorded in the form of ratings, using a scale of Total Well-Being developed by Howard R. Stanton in conjunction with another cooperative project at the agency.[1] The scale appears in Figure 2 on page 65. In scoring the ratings, checks were given numerical values ranging from zero to six, corresponding to the closest of the seven major subdivisions of the scale.

In order to estimate the degree of association between well-being and level of understanding, correlations were computed between the worker's well-being ratings and each of the ratings of understanding. A correlation of .25 was found between well-being and the Understanding of Foster Status ratings (ss). A corresponding value of .28 was found for the Understanding of Agency ratings (ss). Since the correlations are based on very crude measures, the degree of association is probably underestimated.

[1] As a check on reliability, Stanton asked caseworkers to rate the same children independently. He found a correlation of .80 between the sets of ratings for his Total Well-Being Scale.

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FIGURE 2. TOTAL WELL-BEING SCALE

This is a general rating of the child's total well-being (overall condition and performance).

It is assumed that the agency is seeking to develop, in children under its care, competence to handle future situations. These ratings give you a chance to describe, in this sense, the total well-being of these children. Keep in mind the child's physical health, intelligence, ability to relate to others, autonomy, integration, and imaginativeness. Ask yourself: To what extent has this child developed the physical, intellectual, emotional and social abilities, and resources to weather his or her life situations?

"X" the scale at a point indicating where he is as compared with most children his age.

_____ *Extremely high total well-being.* This child will be able to handle anything. He'll make out fine regardless of the situation.

_____ *Markedly high total well-being.* This child will have difficulties only under situations of extreme pressure. He will weather with ease anything he's likely to meet.

_____ *Slightly above average well-being.* This child will handle anything that the average child will, but perhaps with more ease than most.

_____ *About average well-being.* This child will handle adequately the kind of life situations he is likely to meet. A situation of unusual stress might be beyond his abilities, however.

_____ *Slightly below average well-being.* This child will handle anything that the average child will, but perhaps with more difficulty than most.

_____ *Markedly low total well-being.* This child will handle his life situations adequately only if he is in a supporting environment. In ordinary life situations, some protection should be available for the times he will need it.

_____ *Extremely low total well-being.* This child will have difficulty in successfully weathering anything but the simplest type of situation. He will need constant protection in even ordinary life situations.

Child_____

Worker_____

The importance of a clear-cut definition of the situation and one's role in it for psychological integration has been emphasized in sociology since the days of Durkheim, who discussed the effects of the lack of consistent and binding norms (anomie) in connection with suicide. Consistent and clear-cut social expectations provide the actor with directives for his action. Without them, he may be confronted by ambiguity, the absence of a sense of purposiveness, and consequently develop feelings of anxiety and alienation. One would expect these processes to operate in the case of foster children. Without an adequate conception of who he is, where he is, and why he is there, it is difficult to see how the foster child could develop well in a situation that is as complex and problematic as placement.

The child's understanding of the services of the agency serves additionally to reduce the ambiguity of his position, and consequent anxiety. In Chapter 4 it was pointed out that when the child had some grasp of the agency's part in finding foster homes and in continuing supervision of placements, he came to view it as a kind of insurance policy. It provided double protection: first, against maltreatment in the foster home; second, against being stranded without any home. The correlation with the Understanding of Agency ratings suggests that this conception is a valuable one. It serves as a buttress for the child, against stress which could be evoked by the realization of the tenuousness of his position.

This view is given additional support when the relationship between well-being and number of different placements the child has had, is examined. The potentially damaging effects of changes in foster homes is often discussed in social work. One of the most difficult decisions agencies occasionally have to face is whether to remove a child from one foster home and place him in another. Placed in the deliberative balance are the potentially disrupting effects of moving the child against the potentially (or actually) disruptive effects of a home that is not satisfactorily meeting the child's needs. Yet, on an overall basis, there appeared to be no difference in

well-being between the group of children who have had only one or two placements and those who have lived in three or more foster homes. Average well-being ratings were 2.65 for the former group and 2.63 for the latter. However, when level of understanding of the agency role is also included, very sharp differences appear, as can be seen in Table 7. Regardless of number of placements, an adequate grasp of the role of the agency is important to the child's well-being. It now appears that the effect of number of placements *per se* on well-being was obscured because a disproportionately large number of the children who have had three or more placements are also in the high understanding group. When

TABLE 7. AVERAGE WELL-BEING RATINGS, BY NUMBER OF FOSTER PLACEMENTS AND LEVEL OF UNDER-STANDING OF THE AGENCY ROLE

	High understanding		Low understanding	
	One or two placements	Three or more placements	One or two placements	Three or more placements
Number of cases	15	18	22	6
Average well-being	3.40	3.00	2.14	1.50

the effect of the disproportion is canceled out statistically, there is a significant difference between the group with only one or two placements and the group with three or more.[1] Thus, having a number of different placements may have a disruptive effect on the child's development, but this effect can be reduced considerably if the child has developed an adequate conception of the agency's responsibility for him.[2]

The emphasis on the importance of a clear-cut definition of the placement situation can be extended to patterns of predominant family identification. With whom he identifies is an integral part of the child's notion of who he is. Mixed

[1] Using the analysis of variance, correcting for disproportionate subclass numbers, $F = 5.292$ for the placement groups with 1 and 57 degrees of freedom.

[2] Of course, this is only one of several possible lines of interpretation. One possibility is that the child's poor adjustment could be the "cause" rather than the effect of his being replaced.

identification may be viewed as an instance in which the child has not resolved the issue of who he is. Consequently, he is likely to be more insecure in his relations with both families. Thus one would expect the well-being ratings to be lower in the mixed identification group than in the groups in which there is consistent identification with one family or the other. This expectation is borne out in Table 8. The differences among the three groups are greater than would be expected on the basis of chance alone.

TABLE 8. AVERAGE WELL-BEING RATINGS, BY PATTERN OF PREDOMINANT FAMILY IDENTIFICATION AND VISITING PATTERN OF NATURAL PARENTS

	Predominant identification		
	Natural	Mixed	Foster
Don't visit			
Number of cases	1	4	17
Average well-being	1.00	2.25	2.12
Visit			
Number of cases	16	12	11
Average well-being	3.44	2.17	3.09
Total			
Number of cases	17	16	28
Average well-being	3.29	2.19	2.50

Average well-being for the group identifying with their foster parents is also low when compared with the group identifying predominantly with their natural parents. In an attempt to account for this, the relationship between well-being and each of the three conditions associated with identification was explored. No significant differences in well-being were found for age of foster mother or proportion of lifetime spent in the current foster home. However, average well-being was higher in the group whose parents visited them (ss).

As the next step, average well-being ratings were computed for the three major identification groups, separating out the visiting pattern of the natural parents (See Table 8.) Children

with mixed identifications do not develop well, on the average, regardless of the fact that most have natural parents visiting them regularly. On the other hand, there is a substantial difference in well-being among children identifying with their foster parents, depending on whether their natural parents visit. Were the effects of visiting pattern controlled statistically, it can be seen that the difference in well-being between the natural parent and foster parent identification groups would be considerably diminished.

If the child identifies predominantly with his foster parents, one might have supposed that continuing contact with his natural parents would not be of great importance to him. As one can see from Table 8, this is definitely not the case. Most of the 17 foster children whose natural parents do not visit fall into the "semi-adopted" category. Yet, on the average, their well-being ratings are the lowest of any group. A number of reasons for this might be speculatively proposed. First, it might be argued that regardless of what the child overtly says, there is always some covert identification with natural parents. While this may be true in some cases, almost half of the unvisited children were placed within the first few months of life and have no recollection of their natural parents. Under such conditions, it is difficult to see how they could identify (in the usual sense) with them. Second, the relationship between the child and his natural parents prior to placement may have been so disruptive as to leave long-lasting or even permanent effects on the child. But again, this would only be applicable if the child had spent more than a few months with them. A third possible source is the relationship between the child and his foster parents when the natural parents do not visit. Under such conditions, the foster parents may be less likely to resolve problems stemming from the fact that they have only a partial claim to the child. There may be some tendency to over-react, binding the child so closely to them that a pattern of passive dependency is fostered. Finally, unvisited children may develop feelings of being unwanted by their natural

parents and of being somehow inferior or unworthy because of this. Such conceptions are likely to be detrimental to the child's ability to cope with the pressures of his life situation.

It should be emphasized that all of these findings and interpretations have assumed that the caseworkers' ratings were actually measuring well-being. The fact that there was substantial agreement among workers about the ratings in a previous study using the well-being scale does not guarantee that the scale is valid. It is always possible, when using global judgments of this type, that certain systematic biases may have entered into the judgment. For example, in some cases the ratings may have been based in part on the worker's knowledge of the particular placement situation and her *inferences* as to the probable effects on the child. Experience with global ratings has indicated that such processes frequently do occur, although usually they are not directly conscious.

Thus the relationships described in this chapter have the same logical status as all of the study's findings. They stand as hypotheses with strong inferential support, and as such, they are but starting points for more definite research.

APPENDIX
THE SOCIAL AGENCY SETTING

Appendix: The Social Agency Setting

THE CHICAGO CHILD CARE SOCIETY is a private, Protestant nonsectarian child welfare agency specializing in child placement. Its beginnings trace back to 1849, when it was founded as the Chicago Orphan Asylum. For most of its existence, the agency maintained an institution for the congregate care of dependent and neglected children. In the 1920's the emphasis of the agency shifted from institutional care to the placement of children in foster homes, with maintenance of the large institution being finally discontinued in 1931. To reflect the shift in program, the agency name was changed to Chicago Child Care Society upon the occasion of its one-hundredth anniversary in 1949.

The agency occupies a group of offices in Chicago's Hyde Park district. These consist of a meeting room for the Board of Managers and staff, interview and reception rooms, a playroom, a medical and dental clinic, and offices for the professional and clerical staff. At the time of the study, the professional staff included the executive director, 2 pediatric nurses, 16 caseworkers, and 7 supervisors, some of whom also have direct caseload responsibilities. An attending pediatrician and dentist operate the clinic. In addition, there are available the services of specialists in psychiatry, psychology, ophthalmology, and laryngology and otology. The technical competence and professional training of the casework staff is high. Graduate training in an accredited school of social work is mandatory for the social work staff; most of the staff have a master's degree in social work.

The largest service of the agency is the placement and supervision of children in foster boarding homes. In an aver-

age month about 215 children are under its care. In addition, a small number of children receive casework services after returning to their own parents. The agency also maintains an adoption program, annually placing between 30 and 40 children in adoptive homes. Many of these are children who have become adoptable after having been placed in temporary boarding homes by the agency.

Intake policy is designed to expend the limited resources of the agency most efficiently in trying to meet the needs of the larger community it serves. Intake is generally restricted to children for whom no sectarian agency is available, ". . . under 6 needing foster home care and casework service—in situations where it seems possible by casework service to arrange for the child's return to his own family or for his permanent placement in adoption."[1]

As would be expected, this intake policy is one of the major determinants of the age and race composition of the agency caseload. Most Negro children belong to Protestant groups that do not maintain programs for child care. About half of the children in foster homes are Negro; the proportion is approximately the same for children placed in adoptive homes. Because of the policy of not taking children who are over six years, the bulk of the caseload of the agency is made up of children who are below this age. However, implementation of the policy of developing alternative arrangements for children in placement is not always possible. A number of factors, often beyond agency control, prevent the return of some children to their own parents or their placement in adoption. Consequently, about one-third of the children are over six. Many of these are likely to remain in placement for fairly long periods.

Although not formally stated in its intake policy, the agency has often served a "trouble-shooting" role in the community, especially with cases of so-called hard-to-place children. Over the years, a group of foster homes has been developed particularly skilled in the care of convalescent, mentally

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[1] *104th Annual Report of the Chicago Child Care Society, 1953–1954.*

retarded, and disturbed children. Caseworkers' skills in such areas as guidance and play therapy are available to supplement this care. Consequently, a number of such children are regularly referred to the agency by other child welfare agencies in the community.

While there is little in the way of formalization of casework philosophy in the official policy of the agency, there is considerable consensus in perspective among the staff. This consensus has developed even though the staff have been professionally trained at a number of different schools of social work. In casework philosophy, the dominant theme is the diagnostic approach (as contrasted with the functionalist approach influenced by Rank). Concomitant with this, the emphasis in interpreting client behavior and problems tends to be predominantly psychoanalytic.

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