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## Separated by the Child Welfare System: The Journey of One Set of Fraternal Twins

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Jocelyne Coan Bond

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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Separated by the Child Welfare System: The Journey of One Set of Fraternal Twins

by

Jocelyne Coan Bond

MS, Walden University, 2014

BS, Appalachian State University, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

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## Abstract

This study explored the separation of twins in foster care and examined how their lived experiences relate to their interpersonal relationships as adults. Many researchers have studied the long-term impact of nontwin sibling separation in foster care, but little is known about the separation of twins, leaving a significant gap in existing literature. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of twins who were separated in foster care as relates to their interpersonal relationships during adulthood. A qualitative, narrative approach was used to gather the lived experiences of one set of twins. The research questions examined how one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters interpreted their personal experiences of being separated from each other while in foster care and whether this experience had an impact on their interpersonal relationships. The study relied on the theoretical foundations of attachment theory and family systems theory to support the use of existing literature and to integrate the research findings into current child welfare practice. Through personal interviews, each twin was asked to recall experiences from foster care and comment on the impact of being separated from their twin. Thematic analysis of the interview data and observations of the interview process helped to identify four themes: forming successful attachments, mental health issues, trauma history, and number and type of placements experienced. To encourage social change these results can inform the child welfare system, add to the body of existing research, and influence future placement decisions regarding twins in foster care.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this body of work to the many foster children throughout the United States. These children face struggles that most people will never know or could even imagine exist. It has been my extreme honor to spend a significant amount of my professional career working with foster children. I feel proud, grateful, and privileged to have had some level of influence on these children and will always hold them in my heart.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

In this dissertation, I explored the complex relationship of twin siblings and the unique experience of being a twin in order to examine the phenomenon of childhood twin separation by the Child Welfare System (CWS). Throughout the United States, all children who have been placed in a foster care setting by the CWS have been found to be victims of child maltreatment (as classified by either abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment) and removed from their caregiver's home (United States Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), & Children's Bureau, 2016). Understanding how twins may experience foster care placement and separation is valuable for child welfare professionals nationwide due to (a) progressively rising twin birth rates in the United States (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2015), (b) elevated child maltreatment rates for twins (Lindberg et al., 2013; Ooki, 2013; Yokoyama, Oda, Nagai, Sugimoto, & Mizukami, 2015), and (c) complex twin attachment issues (Segal, 2012; Shumaker, Miller, Ortiz, & Deutsch, 2011). Data gathered from 100% of all birth certificates filed in all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, indicated that the twin birth rate is at an all-time high in the United States (Hamilton et al., 2015). Additional studies have determined that twins in general are at a greater risk for abuse and neglect than other at-risk children (Lindberg et al., 2013; Ooki, 2013; Yokoyama et al., 2015). Furthermore, there has been research conducted that discusses the potential for greater levels of secure attachment between twins versus nontwin siblings (Segal, 2012;

Shumaker et al., 2011), indicating that twins may experience the phenomenon of childhood separation differently than singletons. Based on the existing research, further knowledge in this area was warranted, as I was unable to find recent studies on the placement or separation of twins in the foster care system.

In this study, I married the current research available on all aspects of this topic with my own research on twins separated in foster care in an effort to close this gap in the literature and to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the placement and separation of twins within CWS. It is my hope that this qualitative study will effectively use narrative data gathered through the lived experiences of one set of fraternal twin siblings separated by the CWS to promote a deeper understanding of the separation of twin foster youth. I also hope to increase general awareness among child welfare professionals of the unique occurrence of the twin experience in foster care.

In this chapter, I discuss relevant background information that supports the foundation for this study, as well as current literature that assisted this research. I also define the problem and the purpose of the study and provide significant data that will guide the process of research. I articulate the specific research questions and explain the conceptual frameworks I selected to help inform the study. I also review the research method and discuss the specific nature of the study. Finally, I offer detailed definitions to help inform the reader on this topic and discuss relevant limitations and assumptions that were considered throughout the research process.

## **Background**

In general, childhood sibling separation can complicate both developmental progression and successful adult independence, depending on the type and duration of the placement experienced by each sibling (Shumaker et al., 2011). This separation and placement differentiation can also potentially affect each sibling's capacity to parent their own children by compromising their ability to establish healthy and secure attachments (McCormick, 2010; Shumaker et al., 2011). Research has indicated that a younger sibling's secure attachment with an older sibling can effectively reduce the potential impacts from adversities such as parental substance abuse, parental mental illness, and loss (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). The separation of twins during childhood could potentially influence their interpersonal relationships with their children, their intimate partners, and each other to a greater extent than is presently known about nontwin sibling attachments (Fortuna, Goldner, & Knafo, 2010; Segal, 2012). Closing this gap in the current literature may help to inform CWS on best practices regarding the placement of twin siblings in foster care and how separation may impact these individuals' adult interpersonal relationships.

From conception, twins share a different sibling relationship than that of nontwin siblings (Fortuna et al., 2010; Segal, 2012). Based on their shared time in utero and shared significant childhood events, such as development and adolescence, twins are often equally attached to each other as they are to their caregivers (Shumaker et al., 2011). Current statistics indicate that the twin birth rate has risen over 76% over the last three decades (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, & Mathews, 2013). Additional

statistics specify the most current evaluated rate of child maltreatment at 9.1 victims per 1,000 children, resulting in an estimated 679,000 maltreated children in the United States for federal fiscal year (FFY) 2013 (USDHHS et al., 2016). Therefore, with the growing number of twin births in the United States (Martin et al., 2013; Fell & Joseph, 2012) and the already high rates of child maltreatment (USDHHS et al., 2016), understanding twin issues regarding foster care placements is imperative. Current statistics show that roughly two-thirds of all foster children have a sibling in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). It is not known how many of these siblings are twins.

To fully understand the significance of this phenomenon, information from current research identifying a measurable interconnection shared between twins is presented (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012). Additionally, studies that have explored the impact of nontwin sibling separation within CWS are discussed, as well as information that depicts the emotional damage and child maltreatment recidivism that occurs as a result (McCarthy, 2014; McCormick, 2010; Ullmann-Gheri & Weiss, 2013; Wojciak, Hayek, & Burns, 2011). A brief explanation of the different types of twins—identical (monozygotic) and fraternal (dizygotic)—was explored to understand how zygoty may further influence the twin experience of separation (Fortuna et al., 2010). In addition, documented incidents of twin siblings being separated by other means are included to understand general perceptions related to twin separation and how they may relate to this study (Lacina, 2012; McIlroy, 2011).



### **Problem Statement**

In the United States, child welfare agencies are often confronted with psychosocial issues related to sibling separation (Shumaker et al., 2011). Research has shown that siblings who have been separated by CWS tend to develop significant emotional, behavioral, and/or mental health problems, both during childhood and later in life as adults (Shumaker et al., 2011). As previously stated, approximately two-thirds of foster children have at least one sibling also in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b), but it is not known how many of these siblings are twins. Currently, the USDHHS, ACF, ACYF, and the Children's Bureau all neglect to identify a multiple birth demographic (twins, triplets, etc.) in their statistical analysis of child welfare issues, including sibling separation while in care (USDHHS et al., 2016).

Regardless of their zygosity, twins experience a different type of sibling relationship than nontwin siblings (Fortuna et al., 2010; Segal, 2012). Based on their shared time in utero and of significant shared events, such as early childhood development and adolescence, twins are often as equally attached to each other as they are to their primary caregivers (Shumaker et al., 2011). This attachment only seems to strengthen when child maltreatment is present in the family (Goldberg et al., 2013). Other research has concluded that children of multiple births have a greater risk for abuse and neglect (Anderson, Rueter, Connor, Chen, & Damario, 2015), increasing the likelihood of child maltreatment for twins.

Research is available that examines the separation of twins due to individual educational needs and/or pursuits (Staton, Thorpe, Thompson, & Danby, 2012; Lacina,

2010) as well as through the death of a twin (McIlroy, 2011; Segal, 2012). Outcomes of this research show that while fraternal and identical twins often experience separation differently due to their unique zygosity, both types of twins experience significant psychosocial issues when separated from the other (Lacina, 2010). Furthermore, current research has also demonstrated the special relationship often experienced by fraternal and identical twins (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012). Although identical twins appear to have a stronger attachment to each other than fraternal twins, twins of either zygosity seem to have an overall stronger sibling attachment than nontwins (Fraley & Tancredy 2012; Segal, 2012). This further supports the need for extended research to determine the potential impact of fraternal and identical twin separation within the realm of child welfare.

After a thorough review of recent literature, I was unable to locate research exploring the experiences of twin siblings (either fraternal or identical) who were separated from each other while in foster care. Regardless of the seemingly high level of awareness specific to sibling separation in care and the apparent understanding of the unique relationship often shared by twins, I was unable to find literature or any specific data on the potential impact of separation of twins within CWS, making this study and its outcomes significant to the welfare of this population and the professionals who work in this system.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and increase an understanding on the impact of childhood twin separation on adult interpersonal relationships to contribute to

the existing literature on useful practices related to foster care placements of twin siblings. To address this gap, I used a qualitative narrative analysis method of inquiry to strengthen the current level of understanding on this issue. I explored the lived experiences of one set of fraternal twin sisters who were separated while in foster care and progressed through their childhood years in different foster care settings. Through a narrative analysis, I explored the unique individual perspectives of these twins raised in the foster care system and examined how this experience may have influenced their interpersonal relationships as adults.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters interpret their personal experiences of being separated from each other while in CWS?

RQ2: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters explain the impact of this separation on their individual abilities to develop secure interpersonal relationships as adults?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundations used for this study were Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and Bowen's (1966) family systems theory. Both theories provided guidance and details on the development of interpersonal relationships as well as the influence of separation on the formation of these relationships. These theories are well-known for their significance in human service professions such as social work and child welfare, and they appropriately explore the complex relationships that can form within the family

structure (Bowen, 1966; Bowlby, 1969). As such, these theories provided appropriate support to the various concepts examined throughout my research.

### **Attachment theory**

Although Bowlby explored elements associated with the concept of attachment as early as the 1950s, it was not until 1969 that he published his findings specific to what is commonly known today as attachment theory (1969). A motivational process known as the *attachment behavioral system* helps children to determine their proximity and availability to an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). As such, Bowlby (1969) posited that a secure attachment is demonstrated when the attachment figure is close, accessible, and attentive to a child's needs. If a child perceives this to be true, the child often feels loved, secure, and confident enough to explore their environment and to be social with other children (Bowlby, 1969). However, if a child perceives this to be false, they are more apt to experience anxiety and exhibit what Bowlby calls attachment behaviors (1969). These range from basic visual scanning to locate the attachment figure to a more heightened response of crying or clinging (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965). Bowlby (1969) observed that these attachment behaviors typically continue until a child can reestablish an acceptable proximity to the attachment figure or at least until the child tires from exhaustion. This may occur due to prolonged separation, which could result in extreme cases of despair and depression for children (Bowlby, 1969).

Another interesting component of attachment theory is the concept of individuation (Brandell, 2010). In terms of attachment theory, *individuation* refers to the process of separating self-identity from that of a caregiver or significant other (Brandell,

2010). Researchers have demonstrated that secure individuation can foster a healthy balance between an adolescent's need for both separateness and connectedness (Engler & Wiemann, 2010). This is an important concept to consider when exploring the potential impact of childhood twin separation and weighing the impact of both sibling attachment and individuation.

More recently, research has concentrated on the phenomenon of sibling attachment and how it may serve as a buffer from trauma associated with child maltreatment (Foroughe & Muller, 2014). Throughout the course of the past two decades, various studies have explored the potential protective functions of strong sibling relationships in the face of child abuse and neglect (Foroughe & Muller, 2014; Shumaker et al., 2011). This research has determined that secure sibling attachments can help prevent psychological disturbance and promote beneficial behaviors, such as independence and stability (Foroughe & Muller, 2014). Scholars in this field have theorized that there is an increased potential for strong sibling relationships when parents are unavailable, whether due to physical or psychological absence or abuse (Foroughe & Muller, 2014; Shumaker et al., 2011). Citing the accumulating body of evidence on the adaptive value of sibling attachment, Shumaker et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of considering such attachment when courts are contemplating custody and parenting arrangements during family separation and divorce. This theoretical perspective provides significant support to this study and helps to guide the research regarding issues of attachment experienced by twins.

## **Family Systems theory**

Bowen (1966) developed family systems theory and proposed that people are understood better when examined as a member of a greater family system. Bowen (1966) focused on the patterns of behavior that developed naturally in most families as their effort to defuse anxiety. In doing so, Bowen (1966) noticed that one of the primary producers of anxiety in a family is the perception of either too much distance or too much closeness in a relationship. Of course, Bowen (1966) identified that other variables—such as external stress, familial norms, and generational expectations—also impact the degree of anxiety experienced by a family. One of the primary tenets of Bowen’s family systems theory is the concept of *differentiation* (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). An individual’s level of differentiation may stem from their ability to manage anxiety; a person may regulate their anxiety in one of two ways: (a) balancing togetherness and individuality within relationships and (b) emotional self-regulation (Bowen, 1966). For example, when a person poorly manages their anxiety, they may react to a situation with their emotions, resulting in behaviors that may conflict with their long-term goals (Werner & Gross, 2010). Another consequence of poor anxiety management may be fusing with or cutting off from another person, which could lead to an inflexible pattern of behaviors (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Furthermore, poor anxiety management may be a result of negative family of origin experiences (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Specifically, Kerr and Bowen (1988) stated that the presence of abuse and violence in a family negatively impacts the emotional development of children, indicating a poor relationship process within a family unit.

Therefore, if a person comes from a home where poor anxiety management resulted in children witnessing or experiencing violence, they may be more likely to have poor emotion regulation as well as difficulty balancing individuality and togetherness as adults (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Rellini, Vujanic, Gilbert, & Zvolensky, 2012). This indicates a cyclical nature of family violence, as these individuals may perpetuate violence in their own relationships (Black, Sussman, & Unger, 2010; McWey, Pazdera, Vennum, & Wojciak, 2013). This conceptual framework helped guide the research in consider the twins' levels of anxiety management and emotion regulation, as well as their perceived abilities to balance individuality and togetherness.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was a qualitative narrative analysis to explore the lived experiences of one pair of twins separated in childhood by CWS. The participants in this study were one set of fraternal twin sisters who were separated in the foster care system at 9 years old. Using a narrative specific interviewing method allows participants the opportunity to tell their story in their own ways, therefore sharing power within the overall conversation (Riessman, 2008). The use of a narrative analysis aligns with this study in its focus on the individual stories and lived experiences of individuals impacted by a specific phenomenon (Watson, 2009). This method of qualitative analysis is based on the notion that relevant knowledge and information can be found in individual stories that are told, processed, and retrieved, even if by only a few people (Riessman, 2008).

## Definitions

*Attachment:* An affectional tie that people form between themselves and another specific person; the tie binds them together in space and endures over time (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965). Bowlby (1969) identified four styles of attachment: (a) secure, (b) avoidant, (c) resistant, and (d) disorganized/disoriented.

*Child maltreatment:* Any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver (e.g., clergy, coach, teacher) that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008).

*Child Welfare System (CWS):* An entity that receives and investigates reports of possible child abuse and neglect; provides services to families that need assistance in the protection and care of their children; arranges for children to live with kin or with foster families when they are not safe at home; and arranges for reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children leaving foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

*Foster care:* A formal system in which a minor is placed as a ward of the state (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). These placements can vary from a group home setting to a private licensed foster home or even a kinship placement. In most cases, these institutions or foster parents receive compensation for expenses related to the care of the child. The placement of children is typically facilitated by a governmental or social service agency, which assumes the primary legal responsibility of the minor (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).



*Generational recidivism:* The phenomenon of child maltreatment as it occurs across generations within a singular family (Wigg & Tuell, 2013).

*Interpersonal relationship:* A strong connection between two or more people that may be brief or long-term. This connection may be based on love, solidarity, community, or some other social construct. Interpersonal relationships can be established in various contexts, which can vary from family, marriage, friendship, work, recreation, culture, religion, or even proximity. These relationships may be regulated by law, custom, or mutual agreement and are often considered the backbone of social groups and society in general (Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013).

*Nontwin siblings:* Any siblings (full, half, step, adopted, or honorary) born independently of each other from different pregnancies (Koeppen-Schomerus, Spinath, & Plomin, 2003).

*Recidivism:* A substantiated report of child maltreatment following a prior substantiation that involves the same child victim or family (Wigg & Tuell, 2013).

*Singleton:* Used synonymously with *nontwin siblings*.

*Twin siblings:* Any set of twins (fraternal or identical) produced by the same pregnancy.

*Zygosity:* The degree of identity in the genome of twins.

### **Assumptions**

As a component of any study, certain assumptions must be made throughout the course of the research process. I assumed that the participants in this study would answer the interview questions honestly and that they would be able to remember their childhood

experiences and be willing to talk about them. I assumed that the participants would be able to reflect on their life histories and recount the family of origin they grew up in as it related to their twin relationship and other relationships. Finally, I assumed that the participants would be willing to discuss the details of their current relationships.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study included the exploration of occurrences as conveyed by one set of twins who have experienced childhood separation because of CWS interventions. Given the specific nature of this study, other twin sets were not interviewed due to availability. Additionally, this study primarily focused on the phenomenon of attachment, interpersonal relationships, and parenting as related to twin childhood separation. Other issues related to criminal activity, employability, homelessness, and education were not examined due to the lack of available measures.

In this study, I used attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and family systems theory (Bowen, 1966) as theoretical support of the findings. I selected these concepts due to their historical use in human services, such as CWS, and their relevance regarding the phenomenon being studied. While other theories may have provided added support to this research—such as intergenerational transmission theory (Schelbe & Geiger, 2016), mimetic theory (Craig & Sprang, 2007), and parental investment theory (Francesconi & Heckman, 2016)—each had a component not relevant to the phenomenon being considered and, therefore, was not employed.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study that impacted its generalizability. For example, I used the lived experiences of only one set of twins who were separated by CWS. Additionally, selection bias was a limitation to the study due to the specific selection of the research participants based on their availability and my knowledge of their situation. Researcher bias was another potential limitation, given my professional experience and employment in this field. Finally, because I conducted the research through interviews and observations, the information gathered may not fully represent the complete array of the phenomenon under consideration.

### **Significance**

This research fills a gap in the existing literature by exploring the personal experiences of one set of twin siblings separated in foster care by CWS. Through each twin's narrative, I developed a deeper understanding of how the experience of separation in foster care has influenced their interpersonal relationships as adults, including relationships with their own children, their intimate partners, and with each other. While the current research shows that nontwin children separated from their siblings while in foster care can experience higher rates of criminal activity, substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships, and ongoing child maltreatment issues with their own children (Goldberg et al., 2013; McCormick, 2010), I found limited research on how foster care separation impacts twin siblings. With the increase in twin births, the unique nature of the twin sibling relationship, and the known psychosocial issues of nontwin

separated siblings, there is a definite need to further understand the impact of separating twins as children.

### **Summary**

This study focused on how the separation of twins in foster care potentially influences their interpersonal relationships in adulthood; the findings may influence positive social change on a multigenerational level. As such, this knowledge may help to reduce any potential negative impacts of twin and nontwin sibling separations, including the rates of generational child maltreatment recidivism, by promoting awareness throughout CWS on the process of separating siblings in foster care. In addition, I feel that through an increased understanding of this issue, child welfare professionals may be able to better affect social change regarding policy and practices of twin placement within CWS.

In Chapter 2, I address the relevant literature associated with CWS's placement determination process, nontwin sibling separation, twin sibling separation, twin attachment, and twin zygosity. I review available literature pertaining to the conceptual frameworks used in this study to fully understand how they related to the identified problem. I also discuss in greater detail the process of narrative inquiry and how the accumulation of lived experiences can contribute to the current body of knowledge referenced by the scientific community.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the particular methodology used in this study, which was a qualitative narrative approach. I explore the process that I used to collect and analyze the data in the narrative. I also discuss my role as a researcher and the research design and

rationale for the study. Issues surrounding trustworthiness are also explored, and methods such as participant co-construction and interpersonal contact (Guercini, Raich, Müller, & Abfalter, 2014) are considered.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The problem identified in this study is the phenomenon of twin separation in foster care and the possible long-term effects that result from that separation. This problem emerged in large part due to my inability to locate literature describing the phenomenon of twins in foster care or their identification in CWS in general. As a result, child welfare professionals are currently unable to access information regarding the significance of twin separation in childhood, making it difficult to formulate educated decisions regarding the placement of these youth in a foster care setting. Ample research has been conducted exploring the phenomenon of nontwin sibling separation in foster care, and these findings provide a wealth of data that may prove useful in considering the separation of twins (McCarthy, 2014; McCormick, 2010; Ullmann-Gheri & Weiss, 2013; Wojciak et al., 2011). The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of one set of fraternal twin sisters who were separated by CWS when they were 9 years old. The purpose of this study was to enhance the current level of understanding regarding any potential influence childhood twin separation may have had on these twins' interpersonal relationships as adults

Chapter 2 includes an overview of the relevant literature that supports the identified problem and the various factors that contribute to its existence. Evidence supporting the rising twin birth rate (Hamilton et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2013) and the overall greater risk of child maltreatment for twin children (Anderson et al., 2015) is presented to establish the need for continued research on twins in foster care. This

chapter provides detailed information related to the conceptual frameworks chosen to support this study and how they relate to the identified problem. For example, I discuss literature discussing the unique phenomenon of twin attachment and how it differs from sibling attachment (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012; Segal, 2012; Shumaker et al., 2011), as well as the unique twin sibling dynamic within the family system (Butterworth, 2015).

I briefly explain the different types of twins—identical (monozygotic) and fraternal (dizygotic)—to explore how zygosity may further influence the twin experience of separation (Fortuna et al., 2010). Additionally, I include documented incidents of twin siblings being separated by other means to understand general perceptions related to twin separation and how they may relate to this study (Lacina, 2012; McIlroy, 2011; Staton et al., 2012). Studies that have explored the phenomenon of nontwin sibling separation within CWS are discussed as well as information that depicts the prevalent child maltreatment recidivism and emotional damage that occurs as a result (McCarthy, 2014; McCormick, 2010; Ullmann-Gheri & Weiss, 2013; Wojciak et al., 2011).

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To find relevant information and current supporting literature, I used the following databases to identify scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles: Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost Research, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SocINDEX with Full Text, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Google, Google Scholar, and EBSCO. The following keywords were used: *twins in foster care*, *twin separation*, *twins in child welfare*, *twin placement*, *twin separation by divorce*, *twin separation by death*, *twin separation by education*, *twin attachment*, *sibling attachment*, *sibling*

*separation, sibling separation in foster care, twin zygosity, attachment theory, family systems theory, twin child maltreatment, child maltreatment rates, child maltreatment statistics, multiple birth maltreatment, and multiple birth separation.* I also located articles through the following websites: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (<http://www.hhs.gov>), Administration for Children and Families (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov>), Administration on Children, Youth and Families (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/acyf>), and Children's Bureau (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb>).

I was unable to find literature specifically on the separation of twins in foster care and was obliged to weave together tangible research associated with one or more variables germane to this issue. For example, in lieu of finding data on the separation of twins in foster care, I explored literature that described conditions of twin separation due to educational needs and/or co-twin death. I then extrapolated information regarding the impact of the separation itself and applied it to the topic of twin separation in foster care. Similarly, I explored available literature on the prevalence and impact of nontwin sibling separation in foster care and extracted information relatable to the phenomenon of twin separation, given the similarities of the sibling bond.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Attachment theory**

To explore the phenomenon of childhood twin separation in foster care, I needed to understand the level of attachment experienced between twins and to consider if parental attachment types influence a twin's attachment to their co-twin. Identifying how twins are connected and how that connection may vary from nontwin siblings provided



much needed insight into the emotional impact that a separation may have on this population.

First published by Bowlby in 1969, attachment theory was used to examine infant behavior related to proximity to an attachment figure, based on the inherent need for protection and love. While newborns typically respond to primary caregivers indiscriminately, as infants they become increasingly focused on the primary figure who responds to their emotional needs by engaging them in social interactions (Bowlby, 1969). Once this attachment is established, ambulatory children use this figure as a secure base for exploration and as a safety resource for comfort (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965). However, Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) has clarified that the efficacy of the attachment figure largely depends on the quality of social interaction with the child. This quality of interaction defines the type of attachment that is ultimately developed between the child and the caregiver (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980).

Ainsworth collaborated with Bowlby and is arguably a cofounder of attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965). Ainsworth conducted possibly the most famous body of research depicting attachment and its various forms, known as the *strange situation* (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). This experiment was staged in a small room equipped with one-way glass to covertly observe infant behavior (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). The children included in the study ranged between 12 and 18 months of age, while the overall sample was comprised of approximately 100 middle-class American families (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). The experiment included a series of eight steps, lasting for about 3 minutes each:

1. Mother, baby, and experimenter (lasts less than 1 minute).
2. Mother and baby alone.
3. Stranger joins mother and infant.
4. Mother leaves baby and stranger alone.
5. Mother returns and stranger leaves.
6. Mother leaves. Infant is left completely alone.
7. Stranger returns.
8. Mother returns and stranger leaves.

From this experiment, Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) were able to identify three main attachment styles they felt were the result of early childhood interactions with the primary caregiver: (a) secure, Type B; (b) insecure avoidant, Type A; and (c) insecure ambivalent/resistant, Type C. A fourth attachment style known as disorganized (Type D) was identified several years later by Main and Solomon (1986) based on their review of discrepant infant behaviors in the strange situation classification experiment. This fourth classification typically reflects attachment as it relates to infant maltreatment, poor parenting, and/or dysfunctional parental communication (Main & Solomon, 1986). In disorganized attachments, the parent or caregiver is often the main source for the child's distress, causing children to disassociate from their selves (Main & Solomon, 1990). Disorganized attachments are typically characterized by their inconsistency, presenting a child who both searches for and fears their caregiver simultaneously (Main & Solomon, 1990).

Based on this concept, a child's sense of security is directly related to their perceived responsiveness and accessibility of their attachment figure (Sloman & Taylor, 2016). When this responsiveness and accessibility are lacking or missing altogether, the parent/child attachment system is impacted (Sloman & Taylor, 2016). The concept of attachment theory suggests that, based on their caregiving experiences, infants may develop specific sets of expectations regarding attachment relationships in general. These expectations form the basis of a cognitive internal working model (Sloman & Taylor, 2016), which can influence an individual's future interpersonal expectations and ongoing attachment behaviors. Researchers agree that attachment relationships developed during childhood can influence how people relate to others in adulthood, including their ability to regulate emotions, develop trust, and self-soothe (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2010; Sloman & Taylor, 2016). Some literature suggests that parental attachment patterns can predict adult behaviors related to the development of social supports, marital relationships, psychopathology, and even personality (Ensink, Bégin, Normandin, Godbout, & Fonagy, 2017). Ensink et al. (2017) stated that the parent/child attachment type may be linked to personality disorders in adults, effectually creating an overlap between the determinants of infant security and long-term predictors of adult stability.

While researchers believe that shifts between attachment types are possible, moves from secure to insecure types are more probable than from insecure to secure (Shumaker et al., 2011). To promote a transition from insecure to secure, repeated interactions are required that explicitly contradict the established internal working models of attachment theory (Shumaker et al., 2011). Changes from secure to insecure

attachment styles, however, are typically associated with negative life events, such as divorce and/or transitions in caretaking arrangements, and/or child maltreatment issues (Shumaker et al., 2011).

The developmental outcomes for infants with secure versus insecure and/or disorganized attachment types are both striking and significant. Research has shown that children classified with an insecure attachment experience an elevated risk for behavioral problems, negative peer relationships, and even mood disturbances (Shumaker et al., 2011). As these same children reach adolescence and adulthood, they begin to display characteristics indicative of emotional disturbance and personality disorders

**Sibling attachment.** While there is ample literature spanning the last four and a half decades depicting the significance of parent/child attachment, some research has focused on the significance of sibling attachment, specifically in incidents that include child maltreatment. Bowlby (1973) recognized the importance of sibling attachment, stating that ameliorating effects may be experienced among siblings with a strong bond, especially upon the loss of their primary caregiver. Literature continues to emerge discussing the protective function that secure sibling attachment may have against intra-familial trauma (Foroughe & Muller, 2014). Scholars in this field theorize that the probability for strong sibling relationships may increase in the face of parental abuse and/or neglect, and in families that experience high levels of conflict and stress (Foroughe & Muller, 2014). This strengthened sibling attachment works to protect each child against additional psychological disturbance by providing a shared recognition of their mutual experiences, and a common ally during high conflict or parental abuse

(Foroughe & Muller, 2014). For example, the adaptive value of sibling attachment can be seen in situations involving family separation and divorce, often resulting in fewer externalized behaviors (Shumaker et al., 2011).

Additional findings substantiating the significance of sibling attachment have been duplicated in a longitudinal, prospective study (Waldinger, Vaillant, & Orav, 2007), and are congruent with the notion that quality sibling relationships may protect against the adverse effects of poor parent/child relationships. Studies have further demonstrated the positive impacts that secure sibling attachment can have on child survivors of abuse and neglect, allowing siblings to safely disclose and address past traumas together (Foroughe & Muller, 2014).

**Twin attachment.** As previously noted, the most commonly identified characteristics of attachment are proximity seeking, separation distress, and the establishment of a secure base from which to explore (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). Based on a review of existing twin research, twin relationships often meet most, if not all, of these characteristics (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012). In many cases, these attachment characteristics are developed out of necessity. Mothers of twins must meet the needs of two infants simultaneously, often resulting in reduced individualized attention to each child (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012). In fact, some research suggests that mothers speak to their twin infants only half as often as they speak to their singleton infants (Kehoe, Dempster, McManus, & Lewis, 2016). Koch, who first published her research on twins in 1927, is one of the original researchers to consider attachment issues with twins. In a groundbreaking study for its time, Koch explored attachment issues as they relate to

preschool-aged twins (1966). In her study, Koch (1966) found that twins were more likely than nontwins to spend time together and share playmates. Whereas nontwin siblings said they were happier without their brothers or sisters, twins reported that they preferred being together (Koch, 1966). In fact, most of the twins interviewed by Koch (1966) expressed a desire to be in the same classroom as their co-twin. Kehoe et al. (2016) suggested that the twin relationship experiences an enduring attachment that lasts throughout childhood and well into adulthood. This study concluded that regardless of age and situation, a twin would naturally retreat to the twinship for safety and security (Kehoe et al., 2016). Fraley and Tancredy have also concluded this finding in their most study exploring twin attachment (2012).

The information presented on attachment theory indicates that there have been ample studies concluded over time that both verify an increased attachment between twin siblings, and address attachment issues that are distinct to twin relationships. This unique twin attachment indicates a special relationship specifically among twins that may indeed influence long-term success if able to form and develop throughout their lives. Further support for the use of attachment theory for this study comes from Fraley and Tancredy (2012), which suggest that twin children rely more heavily on their co-twin for safety and security than do nontwin siblings. Differently aged siblings also claim to be happier without their brothers or sisters around, whereas twins state a preference for being in each other's company (Anderson et al., 2015).

## **Family Systems theory**

To better understand the twin experience and to attempt to discover how childhood separation may influence a twin's ability to establish secure attachments and maintain interpersonal relationships, it becomes crucial to understand how twins fit into their family systems. Assumptions are typically made that families with twin sets are inherently different from families with nontwin siblings, based on the unique properties of twin relationships and family dynamics. Knowing if the presence of twins alters the typical family system is vital in understanding the various circumstances that can impact the twin experience. Therefore, an exploration of family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), also known as Bowen Theory and Bowenian Theory, becomes necessary.

Family systems theory was first formulated by Bowen (1966, 1976, 1978) based on his clinical observations of families and his existing knowledge of the biological and evolutionary sciences of his time (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This particular framework posits that every family is comprised of a structure of subsystems; such as the mother/father dyad, the parent/child dyad, and sibling alliances (Palkovitz, Trask, & Adamsons, 2014). The general concept of family systems theory is that every family is made up of systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals (Palkovitz et al., 2014). The tenants of this perspective propose that to understand the individual, we must first understand the family system of that individual (Bowen, 1978). Simply put, people cannot be considered to live in complete isolation from one another and assumed to be devoid of interfamilial influence. Family systems theory can provide insight into

parenting behavior through the understanding of the significance of the other people in the family, including nuclear, extended, and surrogate families (Palkovitz et al., 2014).

As previously stated, family systems theory considers all related subsystems in determining the lived experience of each family member (Bowen, 1966, 1976, 1978). For example, when looking at the dyad of the parents, research has indicated that their level of quality relationship directly affects co-parenting issues (McHale, Bissel, & Kim, 2009). This, in turn, has a direct impact on another subsystem, the parent/child dyad (McHale et al., 2009). Typically, the greater the disturbance between the parent dyad, the greater the disturbance between the parent/child dyad (McHale et al., 2009).

Family systems theory is comprised of eight specific concepts. Understanding each of these eight concepts will help to inform how family systems theory can be used to clarify the unique situation of the twin component within the family dynamic.

**Levels of differentiation of self.** This concept considers how larger family and social groups influence what individuals may think and feel (Bowen, 1978). However, Bowen (1978) specifically points out that people may vary in their response to this influence, some being more susceptible to the pressure for conformity by the larger group, while others being more able to maintain autonomy. Bowen (1978) states that an individual with a limited development of self will experience a greater impact on his/her functioning from others.

**The nuclear family.** This concept describes four typical relationship patterns that often dictate the onset of problems among family members (Bowen, 1978). These are (a) marital conflict, (b) dysfunction in one spouse, (c) impairment of one or more children,



and (d) emotional distance (Bowen, 1978). The primary force driving these patterns is emotion, however, attitudes and beliefs also play a role in their formation (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015). These patterns can be seen in a variety of family configurations, such as intact, single-parent, and stepparent relationships (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015).

**Family projection process.** This concept explains how parents can transmit their own unique emotional problems onto their child (Bowen, 1978). These parents tend to imagine how the child is coping with something rather than knowing how they are coping. The family projection process follows three distinct steps: (a) first the parent focuses their attention on the child out of an unconfirmed notion that something is wrong with them; (b) then the parent interprets the child's response as though something is wrong; and finally, (c) the parent actually treats the child as though something is wrong with them (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015). Typically, the child who experiences the greatest level of emotional attachment to the parent(s) is the most likely object of family projection (Bowen, 1978).

**Multigenerational transmission process.** This term describes the process in which relatively small differences in the span of differentiation between parent and child can grow into marked differences in differentiation over time, and throughout multiple generations (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015).

**Sibling position.** Bowen's family systems theory incorporates the earlier work of psychologist Toman's (1961) relating to sibling position. Toman (1961) and Bowen (1966, 1976, 1978) agree that siblings who grow up in the same sibling position share common characteristics. For example, first born children tend to develop into leadership

roles while last born children often become followers (Bowen, 1966, 1976, 1978; Toman, 1961).

**Triangles.** One of the better known of Bowen's eight concepts is the representation of a three-person relationship called a triangle (1978). Referred to as the smallest stable relationship configuration, a triangle can manage greater stress and tension than a two-person relationship, as stress and tension moves among the three participants freely (Bowen, 1966, 1976, 1978). There are several therapeutic practices that utilize triangles to defuse dyadic tension such as marital stress and parenting conflicts (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2015).

**Emotional cutoff.** This term refers to a method that some people turn to when faced with unresolved issues with family members by either reducing or terminating all contact. Bowen (1978) felt that this method of coping with stress resolves little, and in fact risks an overemphasis on making new relationships in lieu of existing ones.

**Societal emotional process.** The eighth, and final concept of Bowen's theory, explores how the emotional system dictates one's behavior on a societal level (1978).

While there are many important concepts espoused within family systems theory that provide support to this research topic, I feel that two in particular may speak directly to the twin experience; sibling position and differentiation of self. These components specifically address the unique relationship shared among siblings and can support research indicating how a separation may impact this group.

**Twin sibling position.** The concept of sibling position directly examines the birth order of siblings, and how it may influence various factors of their lives and personality.

Butterworth (2015) contributed to Bowen's work on the eight concepts of family systems theory, and specifically identified 11 different types of siblings that can influence sibling position including: (a) oldest brother of brothers, (b) youngest brother of brothers, (c) oldest brother of sisters, (d) youngest brother of sisters, (e) male only child, (f) oldest sister of sisters, (g) youngest sister of sisters, (h) oldest sister of brothers, (i) youngest sister of brothers, (j) female only child, and (k) twins.

It is this 11<sup>th</sup> category of twins that identifies the sibling position of interest.

Butterworth (2015) states that twins have the unique distinction of being the only sibling arrangement to share the exact same age, position, and in most cases, childhood experiences. However, even this specific sibling type exhibits unique behaviors typical of their position. For example, there is often a stronger, more active twin, whom may or may not become the leader of the two (Butterworth, 2015). Additionally, parents seem to distinguish between the twins according to their birth order as well, considering one to be older than the other (Butterworth, 2015), which may contribute to variations in differentiation, and/or separation.

While family systems theory supports the notion that systemic influences can impact and even predict individual behaviors, there is limited research that describes its interpretation of the family system that produces twins, and how those twins may in turn behave as a result. Except for its recognition as a sibling position, family systems theory does little to delve into the uncommon family dynamic of twin siblings. However, this conceptual framework lends itself to the complex understanding of the family system, which plays a large role in understanding the twin phenomenon (Butterworth, 2015).

**Twin differentiation of self.** Since many twins report that it is hard for them to imagine life without the other, researchers posit that they may experience a certain level of co-dependence, or a lack of differentiation of self (Butterworth, 2015). Bowen (1978) stated that the concept of differentiation of self stems from the balance between the need to belong and be accepted, and the need to be independent and autonomous. Each of these desires are equally important and serve significant roles in a person's process of becoming a successful adult. The need to belong and be accepted promotes safety, education, collaboration, and nurturing (Butterworth, 2015). These attributes help people to thrive and function optimally, and aids in the process of child rearing (Bowen, 1978). The need to be independent and autonomous can help to foster a person's values, goals, and beliefs (Bowen, 1978). This need promotes a person's desire to be their own person, and to determine their own actions and futures.

In most relationships, the needs of togetherness and individuality may sometimes conflict, requiring significant effort to balance any tensions. It is through a greater understanding of their differentiation of self that can help people to affirm their personal attributes while maintaining successful relationships with other partners and members of their family (Bowen, 1978). This aspect of differentiation is called interpersonal differentiation (Frederick, Purrington, & Dunbar, 2016), and can also be applied to the twinship phenomenon.

Many twins report that through familial and societal constructs, they feel significant pressures to be the same as their co-twin. For example, some twins state that their parents would dress them the same, celebrate special events simultaneously, and

respond to individual behaviors to both twins equally, regardless of fault and action (Fraleley & Tancredy, 2012; Segal, 2012). This involuntary joining of self does very little to promote individuality and autonomy, effectively skewing the natural balance of differentiation most siblings and family members are able to achieve (Frederick et al., 2016).

A recent study concluded that an individual twin's attachment type with their parent(s) might strongly influence their capacity to differentiate from their co-twin (Zhou, 2015). For example, a secure parent/child attachment may promote healthy differentiation between twins, while a discordant parent/child relationship may compromise a twin's ability to differentiate (Zhou, 2015). Therefore, for a twin that has experienced some level of child maltreatment, the probability of being able to successfully differentiate from their co-twin becomes lessened. Zhou (2015) discovered that the differentiation process makes twins more vulnerable than nontwins, as they must separate both from their parents and their co-twin. Consequently, Zhou (2015) also posits that an individual twin's ability to differentiate from their co-twin may impact that twin's level of secure attachment with his/her parent.

A family systems approach to child maltreatment suggests that any abuse and/or neglect of a child is due to an identified pattern of abuse and cyclical transactions conducted by all members of the family (O'Gorman, 2013). Family systems theory provides an interesting framework to consider the phenomenon of twin separation in foster care. While delivering an in-depth exploration of the various concepts of the family system, this framework also provides insight into the potential benefits that separation

may provide, specifically about differentiation and individuation. Through exploring the ramifications of a shared twinship experience, particularly in the face of child maltreatment, research has indicated that separation during childhood might support a healthier sense of individuality and autonomy (O’Gorman, 2013).

### **Child Welfare System**

To fully comprehend the phenomenon being explored, one must understand the various elements that have contributed to its discovery, including the complexities of the setting. Therefore, an exploration of the Child Welfare System (CWS), along with current foster care rates and challenges, was conducted. This includes relevant information on nontwin sibling separation in foster care, to put the concept of twin separation in context. Twin specific issues such as birth rates, child maltreatment rates, attachment issues, and correlating incidents of twin separation are also considered to provide relevant background information supporting the need for this research.

CWS is a group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to care for their children successfully (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). While the primary responsibility for the CWS rests with the states, the federal government plays a major role in supporting states in the delivery of services through funding of programs and legislative initiatives (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). The Children’s Bureau, for example, works with state and local agencies to develop programs that focus on preventing child abuse and neglect by strengthening families, protecting children from further maltreatment, reuniting children safely with their families, or finding permanent

families for children who cannot safely return home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

The Children's Bureau is an Office of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, which is a Division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS et al., 2016). The Children's Bureau's mission is to improve the lives of children and families through programs that reduce child abuse and neglect, increase the number of adoptions, and strengthen foster care (USDHHS et al., 2016). To achieve this goal, child welfare professionals must be able to understand the various dynamics, demographics, and family characteristics that contribute to child maltreatment (Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015). This requires extensive data collection efforts throughout the country on an annual basis to identify trends, evaluate ongoing research, and to explore gaps that will better inform Child Welfare practice (Nadan et al., 2015).

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines child maltreatment as serious harm (neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse or neglect) caused to children by parents or primary caregivers, such as extended family members or babysitters (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). Child maltreatment also can include harm that a caregiver allows to happen or does not prevent from happening to a child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a). While some states authorize Child Protective Services agencies to respond to all reports of alleged child maltreatment, other States authorize law enforcement to respond to certain types of maltreatment, such as sexual or physical abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

## **Child Maltreatment**

Child maltreatment is an unfortunate reality in the United States and occurs at an alarmingly high rate. Recent statistics indicate that over 702,000 youth experienced some level of abuse or neglect in FFY 2014, which is about 9.4 out of every 1000 children in America (USDHHS et al., 2016). Furthermore, the overall number of children who received a formal Child Protective Services (CPS) response to a report of abuse, neglect, or dependency also increased from 2010 to 2014 by 7.4 percent (USDHHS et al., 2016). Child welfare professionals attribute this increased response rate to improved intake procedures, child maltreatment hotlines, and a general heightened level of awareness regarding child abuse and neglect issues (USDHHS et al., 2016). Given the fact that these improvements are likely to continue, the child maltreatment rate is expected to remain high, requiring the ongoing interventions of the CWS.

Additional data informs that over 415,000 of these 702,000 maltreated children came into the foster care system in FFY 2014, which is an increase of approximately 15,000 children just since the previous year (USDHHS et al., 2016). Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System uses the definition of foster care found in the Code of Federal Regulations, where it is defined as “24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes.” (Code of Federal Regulations, 2012, pp. 272; USDHHS, 2015). Foster care settings include, but are not limited to, nonrelative foster family homes, relative foster homes (whether payments are being made or not), group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, and pre-adoptive homes (Child Welfare



Information Gateway, 2016). Figure 1 depicts various levels of influence over potential foster care placement stability.

### **Twin Maltreatment**

There has been a significant amount of research that portrays a greater risk of child maltreatment among twins. One study indicated that twins were found to have more abusive fractures than nontwin children who suffered abuse (Lindberg et al., 2013). A more recent study reported a significantly higher rate of substantiated child maltreatment for twins, as compared with singletons or triplets (Ooki, 2013). Additional research indicates that the reality of rearing two children of the same age simultaneously overburdens parents physically, mentally, and socially (Yokoyama et al., 2015). This study found that families with multiple births had an elevated risk for fatal child maltreatment, both per individual and per family unit (Yokoyama et al., 2015). Yokoyama et al. also discovered that twins experienced a significantly lower birth weight and neural abnormality, which are common risk factors for child maltreatment (2015). Furthermore, twin mothers also had a significantly higher rate of poor health as compared to singleton mothers, which is also a common risk factor for child maltreatment (Yokoyama et al., 2015).

### **Foster Care Statistics: Nontwin Siblings**

Of the 415,000 children entering foster care in FFY 2014, approximately two-thirds of them were found to also have a sibling in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). Federal studies have shown that for many of the children imbedded in the CWS, their sibling relationships become even more significant based on the lack of

consistent support and nurturance provided by their parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). For children who are taken into state custody, their siblings often serve as a safeguard against the harmful effects of child maltreatment (Rast & Rast, 2014). There have not been any additional federal studies that sample children with siblings since the passage of The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). As it has now been 9 years since the passing of this legislation without further analysis on this phenomenon, a study on the placement of both twin and nontwin siblings is long overdue. It is my desire that this twin specific study may inspire additional research on the placement of siblings of every variety.

### **Twin Statistics**

Another factor to consider when exploring the need for this research is the growing trend of multiple birth rates (Martin et al., 2013). The twin birth rate was reported at 33.9 twins per 1,000 births in 2014, which was a record high for the United States (Hamilton et al., 2015). Additional research has concluded that children of multiple births have a greater risk for abuse and neglect (Lindberg et al., 2013; Ooki, 2013; Yokoyama et al., 2015), further strengthening the need to understand this population's involvement within the CWS. Issues related to stress, fatigue, time management, financial burden, and marital problems are more commonly associated with parents of twins than singletons (Lindberg et al., 2013). Other relevant studies have shown that both fraternal and identical twin siblings often experience a greater level of attachment with each other than nontwin siblings, sometimes even to the same or greater

extent than most children experience with a secure caregiver (Shumaker et al., 2011).

This finding provides a strong foundational support for the need to understand how twins interpret their unique experiences regarding their placement within the CWS.

Other areas of research that explore the separation of twins are related to education and death and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. These studies portray a variety of circumstances resulting in the separation of twins and evaluate the short- and long-term impacts of the separation. Studies have reported the effects from the forced separation of twins in a school setting as negatively impacting child behavior, academic progress, and reading ability (Staton et al., 2012; Lacina, 2010). These studies also discovered that anxiety was often experienced among separated twins and determined it to have long term impacts relating to the development of emotional problems as adults (Staton et al., 2012; Lacina, 2010).

Research on co-twin death discusses the impact of twin loss by the surviving twin, and the impact this separation has on the remainder of the surviving twin's life (McIlroy, 2011). While research in this area is also limited, available comparisons between twin loss and other forms of familial loss have consistently shown that twins grieve the loss of a co-twin more than almost any other loss (Segal, 2012). Interviews of twinless twins have provided some insight as to how a twin may feel when separated from their co-twin due to death. These twinless twins express feelings of loneliness and talk about being plagued with an unexplained emptiness and an obvious void throughout their life (Segal, 2012). Furthermore, the surviving twin appears to not be able to fill this void through other means, such as with a spouse or children (Segal, 2012).

### **Sibling Separation in Foster Care**

While previous research indicated that a substantial proportion of foster care youth were not initially placed with their siblings, this statistic varied across studies (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is the first Federal law to address the importance of keeping siblings together (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008). This law requires states to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections in order to receive federal funding (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008). Since no additional federal studies have sampled children with siblings since the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, it is possible that the percentage of sibling groups initially placed together may have improved (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). Meanwhile, many states have passed legislation regarding sibling placement in foster care, and several more continue to develop similar laws (National Conference on State legislatures, 2012). Even though these laws were developed to help enforce the significance of the sibling relationship in foster care, a gap remains between what the law may require and what is practiced among local agencies (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010).

Studies have shown that for many of the children imbedded in CWS, their sibling relationships become even more significant based on the lack of consistent support and nurturance provided by their parents (Herrick & Piccus, 2009). For example, a younger child who has developed a secure attachment to an older sibling can counteract the

adverse effects of parental substance abuse, mental illness, and/or loss (Gass et al., 2007). Additionally, children who age out of care at 18 years of age often report the value of their sibling connection while in care (Courtney et al., 2010). For instance, a study conducted in the American Midwest explored over 600 foster alumni and discovered that most youth identified a sibling as the family member that they felt the closest to (Courtney et al., 2010). Another study conducted in Texas concluded that children who were either placed with their sibling, or at least had frequent access to them, developed higher levels of self-esteem, social support, and reported higher income earnings than those that were not (McCormick, 2009). This finding further supports the extent that siblings share a significant bond that can impact stability, connectedness, and success. Yet another study produced data indicating that strategically enhancing sibling relationships has demonstrated positive effects on not only the children, but also their relationship with their origin family (Wojciak et al., 2011). This finding has lifelong implications that could impact reunification efficacy between foster children and their birth families.

Furthermore, joint sibling placements can increase the likelihood of achieving permanency (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). One study found that placing siblings in the same foster home is associated with a significantly higher rate of family reunification (Kothari, McBeath, Sorenson, Bank, Waid, Webb, & Steele, 2017). This study also found that children placed with the same number of siblings consistently throughout foster care had greater chances for adoption or subsidized guardianship than those placed alone (Kothari et al., 2017). Additional findings discovered that children

placed with their siblings also experience more stability and fewer disruptions in care than those who were separated (Kothari et al., 2017).

The benefit of sibling placement is in direct contrast to the traumatic consequences of separation, which may include additional loss, grief, and anxiety over their siblings' well-being (Herrick & Piccus, 2009). Some studies have found that separated siblings in foster care or adoption are at higher risk for negative adjustment outcomes, including running away (Courtney, et al., 2010) and higher levels of behavior problems (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009). Another study found that girls separated from all their siblings are at the greatest risk for poor mental health and socialization (Waid, 2014). Finally, a recent study based on the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being found that teachers reported lower academic performance for separated siblings (either partially or totally) than for those placed together (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011).

Siblings have a shared history, and maintaining their bond provides continuity of identity and belonging. The benefits of keeping brothers and sisters together are most clearly evidenced from the perspectives of youth themselves (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). When youth in foster care unite to work toward protecting the rights of children entering out-of-home care, keeping brothers and sisters together is invariably near the top of their list. For example, a New England Youth Coalition joined with the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors in the summer of 2012 to develop a regional Siblings' Bill of Rights (Regional and Foster Youth, 2012).

## **Twin Separation**

There has been a significant amount of research discoverable on the importance of placing siblings together in foster care (McCarthy, 2014; McCormick, 2010; Ullmann-Gheri & Weiss, 2013; Wojciak et al., 2011); however, I have been unsuccessful in locating any information on the topic of placing twins in foster care. Matter of fact, I have been unable to even locate an identified demographic on this population, as it seems to be a variable that is not currently measured by the CWS, or child welfare organizations in general. While there is ample literature that depicts the sensitive and unique interconnection often shared between twins (Fortuna et al., 2010; Fraley & Tancredy, 2012; Segal, 2012), I have been unable to locate information pertaining to twins in the CWS, much less those that may have experienced separation from each other while in this setting. As previously discussed, the twin birth rate is on the rise, marking a record high for the United States (Martin et al., 2013). Couple this fact with the various research that indicates an increased risk of child maltreatment for twins (Lindberg et al., 2013; Ooki, 2013; Yokoyama et al., 2015), and it becomes clear that understanding this population's unique needs and experiences has become vital for the CWS. To extrapolate information pertaining to the phenomenon of twin separation, studies have been considered that explore the separation of twins in other scenarios, such as educational setting separation and the untimely death of a co-twin.

**Education.** While little is known about the separation of twins within CWS, limited studies have explored the separation of twins in other circumstances such as education. A study on the impact of twin separation in schools conducted by Staton,

Thorpe, Thompson, and Danby (2012) portrays a series of harmful effects from the forced separation of twins in a school setting, specifically in the areas of behavior, academic progress, and reading ability (Staton et al., 2012). This study also discovered that anxiety was often experienced among separated twins and determined it to have long term impacts relating to the development of emotional problems as adults (Staton et al., 2012). Mandatory twin separation has long been prevalent in many schools throughout the United States (Lacina, 2012). Because of new research indicating the detrimental effect of twin separation in school, new state laws have been implemented giving the decision back to the parents to determine if their twins should go through school together, or apart (Lacina, 2012). Currently, twelve states have laws allowing parents to decide classroom placement for their twins, ten other states have made a stand against the forced separation of twins in school, and two additional states at least allow for parental input on school placement decisions for twins (Jones & De Gioia, 2010). As previously established, families with twins have greater levels of stress, fatigue, and financial problems, as well as higher rates of child maltreatment (Anderson et al., 2015). One author cautions that when twins are already experiencing a difficult family situation such as divorce, health problems, or involvement with the CWS, it becomes even more advisable to place the children in the same classroom to minimize any additional sources of stress (Faulkner, 2009). Faulkner goes on to state that placing the twins together in school will work to maximize the familiarity and comfort available to the children (2009).



This information provides evidence to support the notice that the separation of twins during a period of familial discord may cause undue stress, anxiety, and the potential for complex emotional and behavioral difficulties as adults (Faulkner, 2009; Staton et al., 2012; Lacina, 2012). Since the only reason for foster care intervention is some measure of familial discord, one may deduce that these research findings may be applicable when considering the potential effects of twin separation in foster care. These outcomes further support the need for additional research to be conducted specifically on twins in foster care, to identify and account for the unique circumstance of child maltreatment, foster care, and the CWS in general.

**Death.** Another potential cause of twin separation is the untimely death of a co-twin. Those that experience the phenomenon of a twin sibling's death are commonly referred to as the "twinless twin" (McIlroy, 2011). Research in this area discusses the impact of twin loss by the surviving twin, and the impact this separation has on the remainder of their life (McIlroy, 2011). While research in this area is also limited, available comparisons between twin loss and other forms of familial loss have consistently shown that twins grieve the loss of a co-twin more than almost any other loss (Segal, 2012). Interviews of twinless twins have provided some insight as to how a twin may feel when separated from their co-twin due to death. These twinless twins express feelings of loneliness and talk about being plagued with an unexplained emptiness and an obvious void throughout their life (Segal, 2012). Furthermore, the surviving twin appears to not be able to fill this void through other means, such as with a spouse or children (Segal, 2012).

The intense feelings of grief and loss experienced by twins that have lost their co-twin suggest what previous research has already discovered; twins experience a special type of relationship and attachment with each other that may even rival the typical parent/child attachment (Anderson et al., 2015; Segal, 2012) and that is not easily replaced by other significant relationships (Segal, 2012). From the information gathered on the studies that have researched the phenomenon of twin death, one can understand the feelings of grief and loss that may accompany a twin that has been both separated from their parent and their co-twin simultaneously. Again, these concepts further strengthen the need to conduct additional research into the phenomenon of twin separation in foster care.

### **Twin Zygoty**

In theory, full biological siblings should be just as likely as fraternal twins to rely on their siblings as attachment figures because both kinds of siblings share an average of 50% of their genetic variation (Fralely & Tancredy, 2012). From an attachment-theoretical perspective, full siblings and fraternal twins have had distinct relational experiences and different relational identities. As such, fraternal twins should be more likely than nontwin siblings to use one another as attachment figures even though both sibling types share the same coefficient of relatedness (Fralely & Tancredy, 2012). Another more recent study also concluded that twinship is overall beneficial for twins, with benefits varying in magnitude from one twin group to another (Hegedűs, Pári, Drjenovszky, & Kónya, 2014).

Using the alternative attachment-theoretical explanation, Fraley and Tancredy (2012) have argued that the so-called ‘twin situation’ naturally encourages the development of a secure attachment bond, regardless of whether the target siblings are MZ or DZ twins. These authors claim that twins form distinctively close relationships in comparison to nontwin siblings, due to circumstances such as sharing birthdays, peer groups, and bedrooms, and spending a lot of time in proximity to one another (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012). In a more recent study, researchers compared the nature of the twin relationship specifically between identical (MZ) and fraternal (DZ) twins to determine the impact that genetics may have on this familial bond (Mark, Pike, Latham, & Oliver, 2016). This quantitative study concluded that there were no significant differences in the levels of attachment between MZ and DZ twins (Mark et al., 2016). The findings of this study indicated that nontwins were less attached to their siblings ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ) than fraternal twins ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ),  $t(24409) = -2.29$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = -0.12$ , who in turn, were less attached to their siblings than identical twins ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ),  $t(383) = -2.28$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $d = -0.26$  (Mark et al., 2016).

### **Summary**

As we have seen in the literature review above, there are obvious themes and assumptions that can be made based on both historic and current research pertaining to the phenomenon of twin separation. As has been stated, the twin birth rate is on the rise, currently maintaining the highest rate in the history of the United States. Similarly, the child maltreatment rate has remained high in the past decade and shows signs of only increasing based on heightened community awareness and improved reporting processes.

The reviewed literature has also discussed the prevalence of child maltreatment among the twin population, and how this demographic may be at a greater risk than nontwin siblings based on the unique strain and complications inherent to twin children and parenting. Additionally, current foster care statistics indicate that the vast majority of children that come into the custody of the Child Welfare System (CWS) do so with at least one sibling, warranting knowledge and guidance on how to place these youth. Furthermore, it has been discussed that twin siblings share a significant attachment, sometimes even rivaling that between parent and child, and may serve as a guiding force in the long-term stability and success of twins into adulthood.

Most of the literature reviewed suggests that there is very little information readily available on the separation of twins within the CWS. While the CWS has explored some of the potential impacts of nontwin sibling separation, there is an obvious dearth of information existing on the separation of twins in foster care. What is known about nontwin separation supports the idea that siblings rely upon each other for emotional support and can experience adverse effects into adulthood if prematurely and traumatically separated. Similarly, what is known about the twin relationship supports the notion that twin siblings often establish a significant attachment with their co-twin, stronger than that which is typically experienced between nontwin siblings. While studies have been conducted which specifically consider the long-term impacts of nontwin separation by the CWS, there is a lack of discoverable data regarding the separation of twin siblings in the same system.

Armed with this knowledge and understanding that twins may suffer significant long-term negative consequences from the untimely and unexpected separation that occurs in child welfare, it is imperative that more information is known about how this specific demographic responds to the phenomenon being considered. This study has begun to address this gap in the literature by sharing the story of one set of twins that were indeed separated while in foster care. It is my greatest hope that their shared lived experience will help to inform child welfare professionals on the potential impacts of twin separation and will begin a dialogue on this hidden topic.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of twin siblings who were separated from each other while in the care, custody, and control of CWS. I used a qualitative narrative approach to extrapolate the unique lived experiences of the twins being considered for this study who were impacted by this phenomenon and to decipher information gathered through interviews to relay their personal stories.

Narrative analysis can offer rich insights into the lived experiences of individuals through its focus on the interpretation of detailed, yet concrete, events (Carless, Sparkes, Douglas, & Cooke, 2014). Through the telling of incidents in story form, subjects can relay details regarding certain life events, including where they happened, when they happened, to whom they happened, and the consequences that occurred as a result (Carless & Douglas, 2017). In this chapter, I explain how a qualitative, narrative method of analysis was the best choice to decipher the lived experiences of a set of twins separated by CWS in foster care. I also discuss both the qualitative method and narrative analysis in detail and explore its use both historically and in this research. I examine my role as a researcher and discuss the specific methodology I used, plus any relevant issues surrounding trustworthiness.

### **Qualitative Research Design and Rationale**

Qualitative research is comprised of interpretative and naturalistic methods sensitive to the people and places under study (Dowding, 2013). Dowding (2013) defined qualitative research as the method of gathering and representing the voices of the

participants combined with the reflexivity of the researcher to portray a multifaceted description and interpretation of the problem being considered. By incorporating a variety of data collection methods, a researcher can create a comprehensive picture of intricate phenomena (Dowding, 2013). The qualitative method helps to formulate an iterative process to analyze data and generate meanings in a recursive and fruitful way, generating results that can produce original knowledge (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). This method of research can provide a foundation for understanding how feelings, values, and perceptions influence behavior, and it is typically used when an issue or problem needs to be explored (Dowding, 2013).

The use of qualitative research in this study was justified based on the gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of twins who were separated from each other as children in foster care. If a quantitative method of research was employed to explore this topic without a complete understanding of the lived experiences, a researcher could easily misrepresent findings based on geographical and cultural bias. Rudestam and Newton (2015) stated that while quantitative research typically works to isolate specific phenomena, often down to a single variable, qualitative research requires an aspect of spontaneity and flexibility when exploring phenomena in their natural environment. Because I was unable to locate any information regarding the long-term interpersonal impact of the separation of twins in foster care, I felt that exploring the lived experiences of this specific population was vital to understand how this issue influences the lives of this unique group of people. I considered various types of qualitative methodologies to

conduct this study and determined that a narrative approach was best suited to explore the research questions proposed.

### **Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analysis is an exploration of events told through the life stories of those who experienced them (Dowding, 2013). This method allows researchers to better understand certain phenomena by collecting stories, gathering documents, and participating in conversations that retell the personal experiences of one or two individuals (Dowding, 2013). Researchers record these stories and conversations using interviews, observations, documents, and images, and then they discuss the told experiences in chronological order while striving to discover their overall meaning (Dowding, 2013).

Narrative analysis originally emerged from a more literary and storytelling tradition, becoming a viable qualitative research methodology in the early 20th century (Riessman, 1993). This method uses measurements and tools typically seen in field research, such as interviews, conversations, journals, letters, stories, and life experiences (Dowding, 2013). These units of analysis guide researchers in their aim to better understand the way people create meaning in their lives based on their lived experiences (Riessman, 1993). Therefore, a narrative approach to qualitative research focuses more on the actual organization and interpretation of knowledge than just the collection of data (Byrne, 2017). This approach further implies that knowledge itself is powerful and noteworthy, even when known only by one person (Byrne, 2017).



Narrative inquiry has long been employed as a tool for qualitative analysis in the social sciences (Dowding, 2013). This method of inquiry supports the notion that people naturally talk about their lives and selves in a storied way, which can foster learning in both the individual and others about the experiences, consequences, and lessons learned through telling these stories (Byrne, 2017). Narrative inquiry as a methodology is not just about collecting stories or telling them; the narrative approach is an overarching principle where data, analysis, and representation are all narrative in form (Byrne, 2017). Riessman (2015) concluded that the human narrative is the primary mode of understanding phenomena that occur in real life and therefore lends itself well to the social sciences.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters interpret their personal lived experiences of being separated from each other as children, while in the custody of CWS?

RQ2: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters explain the impact of this separation on their current individual abilities to develop secure interpersonal relationships as adults?

### **Role of the Researcher**

In most qualitative research, the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection, often interpreting data without the use of inventories, surveys, or machines (Dowding, 2013). As such, researchers must disclose relevant information about themselves, including any biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences that qualify

their ability to conduct the research (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). This transparency conveys the overall ideology espoused in qualitative research of *researcher as instrument*, taking into consideration the subjective worldview of the researcher and how that may impact the data collection and interpretation process (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Utilizing the researcher in this way also reflects an interpretivist paradigm frequently seen in qualitative research, which postulates that one cannot separate themselves from that which they already know (Maxwell, 2013). In other words, the researcher and the participants are joined in knowing that who they are and how they understand the world is a central part of how they understand themselves and others in the world (Maxwell, 2013).

In this study, I gathered information through personalized interviews and observations relevant to my research topic. I audio recorded participant interviews to accurately capture their verbal responses and to maximize accuracy. I used a responsive interview approach, which is heavily supported by the interpretivist paradigm (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This approach encouraged flexible and adaptive questioning to promote the sharing of new information and adapt to an unexpected direction in conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The goal of responsive interviewing is to concentrate on depth rather than breadth of understanding regarding the investigated topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The primary responsive interview questions are typically open-ended, followed up by subquestions and probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

As I was once a social worker employed by the same Department of Social Services (DSS) agency that obtained custody of the participants as minors, I acknowledge

having a prior knowledge of their unique situation of being twin sisters who were separated from each other while in foster care. While I have been aware of their previous involvement with DSS, I was neither their foster care social worker nor did I ever work with them while they were minors in custody. The twins are now adults and have not had any level of involvement with DSS in several years. Furthermore, the twins have indicated a desire to reach out to others with similar experiences and backgrounds to help foster youth in whatever way possible. I conducted each interview in a private and comfortable self-contained space unaffiliated with DSS, to reassure the participants and to minimize any stress or anxiety they may have experienced in the retelling of their stories. I also provided necessary referrals to services that I thought may be needed. I also prepared consent forms for each twin, in addition to a letter of cooperation and data use agreement for DSS, to ensure that the proper protections were put into place for all parties.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

There are several different factors that can affect sample size in qualitative research. Researchers must not only determine the setting, but also consider the method of participant access (gatekeeping) and how they will obtain the information sought (Huber, Miles, & Saldana, 2014). Furthermore, the type of study being conducted, the intentions of the researcher, availability of time and resources, as well as credibility, can all have an influence on the type of sample needed to best address the issue being explored (Dowding, 2013). For example, if a researcher desires more in-depth

information on a specific topic and is less interested in large-scale generalization, then a sample size of one or two participants may be more appropriate (Huber et al., 2014). On the other hand, if the research question examines a more common issue likely to be experienced by a larger group of people, large-scale sampling would yield greater generalizability (Dowding, 2013). While the relevance of sample size in qualitative research has been debated, most researchers agree that it should be purposeful (Huber et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) stated that only one or two participants are needed in a narrative analysis, relying heavily on the specific lived experience of the participant to guide the research. As such, I identified a pair of adult fraternal twin sisters that were separated from each other while in foster care as minors; therefore, my sample size was two participants.

As a child protective services social worker, I had previous knowledge of this pair of twins as children being in the legal custody of the DSS agency where I used to be employed. Having been aware of their unique situation and of their ongoing desire to contribute as adults to the success and well-being of other foster children, I felt that their participation and contribution to this research was vital in the quest to understand this phenomenon. Therefore, I employed a combination/mixed purposeful sampling strategy, combining both critical and convenience sampling methods, with the criteria for inclusion as individuals who are a part of a twin pair who was separated from their twin while being in the legal custody of CWS. This type of sampling meets multiple interests and needs (Dowding, 2013).

**Critical case sampling.** Critical case sampling focuses on specific cases that are either dramatic or very important (Dowding, 2013). This method of sampling allows a researcher to identify participants that most accurately fit the criteria being explored, and who will most likely provide vital information crucial to the understanding of the phenomenon (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). This type of sampling is particularly useful when only a small number of cases are being sampled (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, I used a critical case sampling method to identify a specific sample population able to share information unique to the phenomenon being explored.

**Contact.** As both twins have previously expressed a desire to make a difference in their community through sharing their personal experiences in foster care, I provided the twins with my complete contact information, and invited them to contact me for any further clarification or questioning regarding the study. Because both twins agreed to participate, I provided the consent forms and made necessary arrangements for the interview process.

### **Instrumentation**

The primary source of data collection used for this research was through interviews. When used in qualitative research, interviews can produce the exchange of dialogue between two or more participants, identify themes present within the context of the narrative, and work to incorporate both researcher and participant in the story telling process (Edwards & Holland, 2013). A narrative interview comes from an interpretivist perspective and is based on the idea that people share stories about themselves through

time that not only convey their personal experiences, but also include culturally significant references, which help them to make sense of their world (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

I used a semi structured interview format, incorporating open-ended questions, to promote the opportunity for spontaneous and fluid responses. While an informal, unstructured process was used at the beginning of the interview to acclimate the participant to their surroundings and to reduce anxiety, I used the interview guide throughout the duration of this semi structured process to ensure consistency between both interviews. The interview guide explored the following issues related to interpersonal relationships: (a) relationship with twin sibling, (b) relationship with their children, and (c) relationship with intimate partner.

The interview questions, and how they relate to the research questions, are as follows:

Table 1

## Interview Questions Mapped to Research Questions

RQ	Introductory questions
R1	1. You may have had a lot of different experiences in the Child Welfare System. Can you tell me about your first experience as a child in foster care?
R1	2. I understand that you and your twin sister lived apart during most of your time in foster care. What can you tell me about the day you were separated from your sister?
R1	3. What can you tell me about the period of time that you and your sister were apart? How did that affect you?
R1	4. What can you tell me about the day when you saw your sister for the first time since being separated?
R1 & R2	5. Tell me about any other people, either foster siblings, foster parents, or other significant individuals that you feel you connected with during your time in foster care. Explain what (if any) relationship you still have with them today.
	Interpersonal relationships
	A. Siblings:
R1	What was it like being a twin growing up?
R1	What have you discussed with your sister about being in foster care? What experiences have you talked about?
R1 & R2	How connected were you to your twin during your time in foster care? What, if anything, did you do together? How often did you see each other?
R1 & R2	Can you tell me a memorable moment you have had with your sister in the last year?
R1 & R2	What is the level of closeness you have today with your sister? Explain how (if at all) you think this might be different if you were placed with your sister while in foster care.
R1 & R2	How do you think your separation from your twin influenced your childhood? How about your adulthood?
	B. Children:
R2	I would like to know about your experiences with motherhood. What can you tell me about the day your first child was born?
R2	What has been something that was challenging in being a mother?
R2	What can you tell me about how your twin is involved with your child's life? How many children do you have and what are their ages?
	C. Intimate partner:
	What is your current relationship status?
R1 & R2	What is the longest time that you have been with an intimate partner?
R2	Tell me about a time when you reached out to a partner for help? What was that like?

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To capture the lived experiences of the target population of this study, I conducted face-to-face interviews of each participant. These interviews were also audiotaped to ensure complete accuracy of the information gathered. To these interviews, I applied a method of data analysis commonly utilized in qualitative research known as thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis requires the researcher to become very familiar with the data by reading the material multiple times (Riessman, 2008). Once familiar with the data, I labeled the entire text with codes that represent previously identified themes specific to the research questions. Some examples of these themes may include reference to an emotion, feeling, action, event, and/or response to an event. To maintain a high degree of accuracy and interpretation, each interview transcript was hand coded within three days of conducting the interview. By identifying these themes, I was able to obtain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the twins being interviewed and how this experience has impacted their lives. This method of data collection helped to answer both research questions being considered by determining if mutual themes are present in each twin's interview. Since each twin faced a very different foster care experience, it was interesting to see if the impact of their separation was experienced in similar or different ways. This will inform child welfare professionals on the variations of impacts that may be a result of the type of foster placement used, regardless as to whether a separation has occurred.



### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

There is no greater concern in research than attending to the rigor of the research process. Guba (1981) identified four concerns that require attention by every researcher: (a) How can a researcher have confidence in their findings? (b) How can the researcher know if his or her findings are applicable in different settings? (c) How does the researcher know if the outcome of the findings would be consistent if the study were repeated with similar participants and context? and (d) How does the researcher know if the investigation was influenced by one's personal bias? These questions provide the framework for establishing rigor in one's research. In qualitative research the researcher seeks to find ways to support the trustworthiness of one's process and findings. To address trustworthiness concerns, a qualitative researcher must address how he or she will support credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Below I present a detailed description of how rigor was established.

Credibility is the standard for measuring the internal validity of qualitative research (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). Credibility is achieved when a study's results are recognizable to those who share the same experience (Hammarberg et al., 2016). It is the function of the researcher to defend the credibility of qualitative research through practices such as (a) reflexivity; reflection on the influence of the researcher on the research, (b) triangulation; where appropriate, answering the research question in several ways, such as through interviews, observation and documentary analysis, and (c) member checking; participant review of the data gathered post interview

(Hammarberg et al., 2016). I utilized these three methods to determine the credibility of my research.

Transferability is the degree to which research findings can be applied or transferred beyond the bounds of the current study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This concept implies that specific findings identified throughout the course of research can be applied to similar situations. There are a variety of ways to address issues related to transferability. In this research, I used a rich description of data, as provided both by the participants through the process of interviewing, as well as through the inclusion of field notes and observations (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). I also established transparency of the descriptive details regarding both the subjects and the setting of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), which will provide readers with an illustration of the process used in the research that can then be transferred to other studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Dependability in qualitative research is the process that works to ensure the consistency of findings (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). Through a thorough description of the data collection and analysis process, the opportunity for replicating research is made possible. This thick description of the research process offers information to other researchers on how to replicate the study, and just how unique the phenomenon may be (Creswell, 2012). To determine dependability in this study, I used digital audio recordings of the interviews to accurately convey the interview content, and to assist in the process of coding. In addition, I used recoding, which is the process of revisiting the data collected after the initial coding process to recode the data again. This helped to facilitate dependability within the data analysis process.

Confirmability is the degree to which research findings can be either confirmed or corroborated by other people (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This criterion has to do with the level of confidence that the study's findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases. In other words, confirmability helps to verify that study participants shape the findings more so than the researcher. Through the process of reflexivity, a researcher can identify any assumptions and/or preconceptions that may have influenced research decisions, such as the creation and phrasing of interview questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). To achieve reflexivity, I maintained a field journal to document my feelings, impressions, values, and interests as they relate to the research process.

To ensure ethical practice and research transparency, a preliminary IRB application was submitted and approved, prior to this topic even being considered. Additionally, participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process by using pseudonyms. All identifying information (such as documents and audio recordings) are stored on a flash drive and kept in a locked filing cabinet in my personal office. All electronic files (such as transcripts, coding and recoding data, research results, and interview materials) are password protected, and shared only with my Dissertation Chair, as necessary. During the member checking process, interview summaries were given to the participants for their review and approval and presented without personal identifiers to minimize the risk of unwanted public disclosure. All files (electronic and print) will be kept for 5 years after the study is completed and will then be destroyed.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 included a description of the narrative approach that will be used in this research to better understand the experience of participants who faced the loss of a sibling during their adolescent years. The study design and rationale, the role of the researcher, along with the potential for biases due to the researcher's personal experience with the participants, were all addressed. Participant selections, sampling strategy, instrumentation, methodology, data analysis issues of trustworthiness and ethical concerns were all reviewed.

Chapter 4 consists of a descriptive report of the data gathered through the interview process, reviewing consistent themes among the narratives as well as differences in each of the participant's stories. Participant demographics, a review of the data collection process and content analysis are presented with a clear explanation of all results.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study with a narrative approach was to explore the dynamics of twin separation in foster care and the potential influence it may have had on the participants' ability to build and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. In this research, a set of fraternal twins were selected to share their personal experiences in CWS and of being separated from each other while in foster care. Although they were interviewed separately, I consistently looked for specific themes that would help to identify both their attachment to each other and their ability to form successful attachments with other relevant and significant people in their lives. Throughout the interview process, I explored their connection as twin siblings in hopes to highlight the unique attachment status that had been previously discussed in the literature review with the intent to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters interpret their personal experiences of being separated from each other while in CWS?

RQ2: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters explain the impact of this separation on their individual abilities to develop secure interpersonal relationships as adults?

In Chapter 4, I explain the data collection and analysis process I used for my study and discuss the findings in detail. This chapter includes information and significant excerpts from each of the interviews I conducted, an analysis of the coding system I used, and a presentation of the various themes identified during the research process. The

conclusion of the chapter provides a summary about the lived experiences of the participants and the impact of twin separation in foster care on the participants' ability to develop successful interpersonal relationships.

### **Setting**

As previously stated, I had some prior knowledge of the twins due to my employment with the placement agency that worked with them as children. After they agreed to participate, I arranged each interview for the time and date that best suited their personal schedules and scheduled a private study room at a local university library; the interviews were conducted separately at different times.

On the day of each interview, I arrived approximately 20 minutes before the scheduled time to ensure the room was ready, to hook up my computer, to prepare the software for recording, and to arrange the seating to promote high audio resolution. Upon arrival, each participant was given a copy of the IRB approved consent form. After introductions and greetings, I read the consent form aloud to each participant as they followed along reading their own copy to promote consistency and comprehension. I also discussed the process of audio recording the interview, the projected length of the interview, confidentiality, data storage and access to research findings, the voluntary nature of the study, and the process for contacting a Walden representative. Then I asked each participant if they understood the contents of the consent form and if they had any questions, concerns, or objections. Once each participant provided me with verbal consent to continue, I asked them to sign the consent form and provided them their own copy.

Because we were in a study room, the room itself was private and soundproof. Each of the participants stated that they were comfortable in this setting. The first interview with Participant 1 lasted for approximately an hour and a half, while the interview with Participant 2 lasted for about two hours.

### **Demographics**

I used a critical case sampling method to identify the participants (Palinkas et al., 2015) To specifically select individuals who would provide the most relevant information in reference to twin separation in foster care. Other than the specific criteria of being a twin who was separated from their co-twin while in foster care and that each participant was no longer a minor, no other demographic information was necessary to participate in this study. However, other demographics were measured throughout the course of the study to fully answer the two research questions. As Table 1 shows, both participants were parents at the time of the interview. At that time, however, only one of the participants was in an intimate relationship. Only one participant was engaged with their family of origin.

Table 2

#### *Participant Demographics*

Identifier	Twin separated in foster care	Gender	Parent	Currently in a relationship	Currently engaged with family of origin
Participant 1	Yes	F	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant 2	Yes	F	Yes	No	No

*Note.* This demographic information was self-reported by participants during the interview.

### **Data Collection**

The participants were administered the same 20 interview questions. As the interviews began, I thanked each participant for their willingness to participate and let them know I would be taking notes. Using the IRB approved interview questions, I conducted a semi structured interview with each participant. This allowed me to explore experiences outside my predetermined questions, to ask follow-up questions for a deeper understanding of the response, and to check for clarification on a participant's response. I recorded each interview on my laptop using QuickTime Player.

Various emotional responses were noted throughout the course of the interview from each participant: (a) laughter, (b) crying, (c) sadness, (d) anger, (e) disappointment, (f) frustration, and (g) hope. While both participants experienced some degree of each of these emotions, only Participant 2 became upset to the degree that she was temporarily unable to continue. At that point, I suggested we stop the interview and take a break. I asked her if she was all right, and she stated that it was just hard for her to relive some of the situations she had been in throughout her lifetime. I asked her if she would like to end the interview, and she emphatically stated that she wanted to continue. After a few minutes and a trip to the restroom, she resumed the interview.

At the end of each interview, I asked the participants how they were feeling to gauge safety, well-being, and to determine if they were experiencing any adverse effects from the research process. Both participants assured me they were fine and did not need any follow-up or intervention services. However, as a precaution, I provided contact



information for a local mental health services agency to both participants, so they could receive support if they desired.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, I reviewed each of the audio recordings for clarity and sound quality to ensure accurate transcription. I used the transcription website [www.Temi.com](http://www.Temi.com), which is protected by TLS 1.2 data encryption and secure servers (Privacy Policy, 2017), to transcribe each of the audio recordings. I listened to each complete audio recording, while reading the accompanying transcript, to ensure accuracy and to familiarize myself with the content of the interview. I then listened to each transcript a third time, while reviewing the field notes and journal reflections, to begin the process of identifying themes and establishing codes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

As discussed in Chapter 3, credibility is established when the internal validity of the research can be determined and the results of a study are familiar to others who have experienced the same phenomenon (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This is commonly achieved through practices such as (a) reflexivity, reflection on the influence of the researcher on the research; (b) triangulation, answering the research question in several ways; and (c) member checking, participant review of the data gathered post-interview (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

To achieve reflexivity, I kept a journal of self-reflection both prior to and after conducting each interview. This process helped me to recognize my personal feelings,

expectations, and emotions leading up to the interview and after (Ortlipp, 2008). This method is frequently used in qualitative research and can help to identify a researcher's personal assumptions and clarify any belief systems and subjectivities that might be present for the researcher (Ortlipp, 2008).

Triangulation is another method of establishing credibility in qualitative research (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This was achieved in the study by taking the opportunity to explore each research question with a myriad of sub questions tailored to obtain a variety of information, in addition to taking field notes throughout the entire interview process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Field notes help to explore another perspective of the data and can sometimes provide additional insight into a participant's response (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Most of the field notes that I collected throughout the interview identified the various emotions and physical characteristics that participants expressed while telling their stories.

I also used member checking (Hammarberg et al., 2016) to further support credibility by providing a copy of the written interview transcript to each of the participants for review and confirmation that their interview responses, thoughts, and experiences were captured accurately. This procedure provided the participants the opportunity to make any corrections, clarifications, and or additions that they felt were necessary to fully convey their stories (Hammarberg et al., 2016). However, neither participant chose to do so.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the degree to which research findings are transferable to another setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this research, I purposefully gathered a rich account of descriptive data to provide a strong representation of the participant's stories, and a detailed depiction of the subjects, and setting for the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This rich description will provide readers with a comprehensive illustration of the specific process that I used in this research, which can then be transferred to other studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The specific research findings, however, are not transferrable given the unique and individual opinions and stories shared by the participants. Each person may indeed experience a similar situation in a completely different way.

**Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research is the process that works to ensure the consistency of findings (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). Establishing dependability provides the reader with the opportunity to replicate the research, and to conclude if the phenomenon is unique (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). To determine dependability in this study, I audio recorded the interviews to fully capture the interview content and used transcriptions of these recordings to aid in the process of coding the data.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree to which research findings can be either confirmed or corroborated by other people (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This criterion has to do with the level of confidence that the study's findings are based on the participants' narratives

and words rather than potential researcher biases. In other words, confirmability helps to verify that study participants shape the findings more so than the researcher. Through the process of reflexivity, a researcher can identify any assumptions and/or preconceptions that may have influenced research decisions, such as the creation and phrasing of interview questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). To achieve reflexivity, I maintained a field journal, in which I documented my feelings, impressions, values, and interests as they related to the research process.

## **Results**

The names and other identifying information of each participant are excluded to ensure privacy. For each identified theme, I provide a table to display the predominate subtopics that emerged during the interviews indicating which participant experienced which subtopic.

### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 was a 24-year-old Caucasian woman, who was a part of a twin sibling group taken into protective custody by the CWS at the age of 9 years old. After being moved around to several foster placements, she was adopted at the age of 13 by her last set of foster parents. She is the biological mother to two male children from different fathers and is currently providing kinship parenting to her biological nephew. She has never been married but is currently living with her boyfriend who is the father of her youngest child. She is a full time stay at home mother and says that she lives in a constant state of fear of her children being taken away from her.

I feel like I have to be the perfect mother... never make a mistake. I'm afraid that if I look overwhelmed or like I can't control my kids, someone is going to call DSS and report me. All of that pressure adds up and makes me feel like I'm going crazy, and then I look crazy. I can't seem to get it all together.

### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 is the co-twin of Participant 1, also making her a 24-year-old Caucasian woman taken into protective custody by the CWS at the age of 9 years old. She was never adopted like her sister, and she stayed in foster care until her 18th birthday. She is the biological mother to one daughter, who was taken into custody by the CWS at 1 year of age and subsequently adopted. She has limited contact with the adoptive parents, who send her photos of her daughter on an annual basis. Participant 2 is currently homeless and has been for many years. She resides fulltime at the transitional living center located within the local homeless shelter. She reported having multiple medical and mental health problems, as well as substance abuse issues. She stated that she was not currently in a relationship and that she felt very alone. "I have nobody. Nobody cares about me except for people that try to help me in the community. I can't remember the last time I saw [Participant 1]. I keep texting her, but she never texts me back."

### **Theme 1: Forming Attachments**

A predominant theme that emerged from the research was the inability of both participants to form successful attachments. Each twin reported feelings of not belonging, not feeling connected to people or places, alienation, and extreme sadness. Other topics

identified by the participants that relate to this theme include family relationships, twin relationship, parenting, romantic relationships, and friendships.

**Participant 1.** Participant 1 indicated that the only reason she is somewhat successful today is in large part to her current support system.

There is no way I'd make it at all if it wasn't for [her boyfriend] and his family. They've taken me in and treated me like one of their own. They treat my older son like he's theirs too. They've given me a car to drive and everything. That's more than anyone else has ever given me.

When asked if she has any contact with her biological parents or siblings, she said that it is limited.

Now that I'm a parent too, I see how hard it can be. I know that my mom wasn't perfect, and she made a lot of mistakes. But I have forgiven her for everything you know... I see things from a different perspective now. As far as my siblings go, I don't really have a lot of contact with them. We all grew up in different places and never really got along. I'm taking care of my youngest sister's son right now, and I never hear from her. I see everybody on holidays and stuff.

When asked if she spends much time with her twin, she responded by saying:

Not really. It's really hard to see her now. She has really gone downhill... and I feel so guilty that I couldn't take care of her daughter when she went into custody. There is just so much history between us, and none at the same time if that makes any sense. Our relationship was stolen from us.

**Participant 2.** Participant 2 reported having virtually no attachments or connections in her life today. She said that she does not speak to anyone in her family anymore and only speaks to her twin on occasion.

No, I don't talk to anyone. They don't talk to me either. Nobody ever calls me, even on Christmas. I spent a week in the ER a few months ago and nobody even bothered to visit me. I almost died in there. [Her twin] came to see me once, and that was it. Some of the staff from the [homeless shelter] came too.

When asked if she had any type of relationship with her biological mother, she responded:

No! After having a kid, I found it really hard to believe that she would do all that stuff to us. I mean, I've never loved anyone so much in my life as my daughter, so I don't see how you could just treat your kid like they were nothing.

Table 3 indicates the various types of present-day attachments that the twins report having. Both twins state that they do not have successful attachments with their family or each other. However, Participant 1 reports having a successful parenting relationship, romantic relationship, and friendships. Participant 2 only reports having successful attachments with her friends.

Table 3

## Theme 1: Forming Successful Attachments

	Family relationships	Twin relationship	Parenting relationship	Romantic relationship	Friendships
Participant 1	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant 2	No	No	No	No	Yes

*Note.* This information was self-reported by participants during the interview.

**Theme 2: Mental Health Issues**

Another theme consistent throughout the data was the presence of mental health issues. Both participants report having struggled with mental health issues throughout their time in foster care, and since becoming adults. While some of their experiences vary from each other, both participants indicated feeling depressed, anxious, and often confused when it came to functioning within the constraints of society. The other identified topics within this theme include mental health diagnosis, mental health treatment, medication management, and hospitalization.

**Participant 1.** Participant 1 repeatedly discussed situations in her childhood and adulthood that have made her feel extremely depressed and anxious. Throughout the interview, Participant 1 cried frequently and expressed emotions of sadness and regret. When asked if Participant 1 felt that being separated from her twin impacted her in any way, she began to cry.

Yes. I feel like a failure. Like I failed her you know? And me too, I guess. I always felt like something was missing, like a part of me was missing. There were times that I just felt really scared all the sudden, and I knew that something bad



was happening to her. I felt it in my skin. There has always been a big hole in my heart, that even my kids can't fill. And I know that is because I was taken away from my twin sister.

Participant 1 shared that she was once diagnosed with a mental illness. She talked about how she maintained as an adult, and how her time in foster care impacted her ability to establish relationships. Participant 1 stated:

I was diagnosed with all kinds of stuff when I was in foster care, I don't really remember what. But when I got adopted, I was only told that I suffered from separation anxiety and attachment disorder. I used to go to a therapist every week when I was a kid. I never took any medication for anything though.

As a follow-up question, I asked if she currently receives any types of treatment, therapy, or counseling for anything now. She responded by saying: "No. Not really. Sometimes I'll go back to DSS and talk to my old Social Worker if I need advice or support or something. But that's it."

**Participant 2.** During the interview, Participant 2 was frequently distressed, crying, frustrated, and anxious. Although she was asked several times if she needed one, she only ended up taking one break from the interview process to gather her thoughts and control her emotions. She reported having a multitude of both physical and mental health problems, which have increased severely since she aged out of the CWS according to her own assessment. Participant 2 indicated that she has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety disorder, and reactive attachment disorder (RAD). She also

indicated that she has been diagnosed with a seizure disorder, a heart malfunction, impaired memory, and a traumatic brain injury from a domestic violence incident.

Upon hearing this information, I once again asked Participant 2 if she wanted to continue with the interview. She expressed her strong desire to do whatever she could to inform others regarding the placement of twins in foster care and asked to continue through the duration of the interview. She felt strongly that her mental health issues were a result of her experience and therefore were relevant to the research. As the interview progressed, I frequently assessed the situation and her behavior to determine if I felt that she was both able to continue and that it would not be a detriment to her. As I continued to check in with her, she continued to reassure me that she wanted to keep going.

It's just not right what happened to us. Someone needs to do something to make sure it never happens again. People don't understand; when you're a twin, it's like you share your brain with another person. You think the same thoughts, feel the same things... I always knew if something was wrong with her even when we were apart.

Participant 2 talked about how her various diagnoses continued to pile up each time she moved to a new placement.

No one knew how to deal with me, so they would run tests and stuff all the time. Every time I moved somewhere new, they would put me on another medication. I felt like a zombie, you know? I hated it. Sometimes when I got sick of it all, I would just do something crazy... you know what I mean? I would just go off so that they would get me out of that place. That's usually when they would just put

me in the mental hospital for a while until I calmed down. Then I would go someplace new! It always worked like that.

Table 4 discusses the various mental health issues that each participant identified with, and the types of follow-up often experienced by them. Participant 1 stated that she has received a mental health diagnosis, as well as treatment. However, she reported that she has never been on medication or been hospitalized for mental health issues.

Participant 2 stated that she has not only been diagnosed and treated for a mental illness, but that she has also received medication management and hospitalization services for it as well.

Table 4

*Theme 2: Mental Health Issues*

Identifier	Mental health diagnosis	Mental health treatment	Medication management	Hospitalization
Participant 1	Yes	Yes	No	No
Participant 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Note.* This information was self-reported by participants during the interview.

**Theme 3: Trauma History**

Another theme identified in the data analysis process was the existence of a trauma history for each of the participants. Because child maltreatment is a precipitating event for any child in foster care, it was determined that the participants had experienced some level of trauma as children. As they shared their lived experiences, it became evident that their trauma history played an integral role in their overall development as

adults. Events cited by the participants included childhood neglect, childhood abuse, parental separation, twin separation, and adult trauma.

**Participant 1.** Throughout the course of the interview, Participant 1 shared many experiences with me. She talked about when she was first removed from her mother.

I remember we were in a hotel somewhere out of state. My mom and her boyfriend had gone down there to party and brought me and [her twin] with her. I think we were left in the hotel room alone for like 3 or 4 days or something before somebody noticed and called the cops. [Her twin] would go out and try to find us food, but mostly we just stayed in the room and watched TV. I remember being really hungry, and kind of mad at my mom for leaving us alone for so long, but I didn't really feel scared. She did this kind of thing all the time. Anyway, when the cops came, they called the DSS in their state. Once they found out where we were actually from, they sent us back to our home county and put us in foster care there.

When asked how this experience impacted her, she responded by saying:

When we were put into foster care for the first time, then I was really afraid. I remember thinking that I would never see my mom again. The only thing I had was [her twin]. We were put together in the beginning. That was the only thing that kept me alive. We had each other, you know?

Participant 1 went on to discuss when her twin was moved to a different placement.

When they moved [her twin], I remember feeling like my world was coming to an end all over again. I was screaming and crying, and she was screaming and

crying. We didn't understand why, you know? We were only 9, so we had no idea what was happening. After she left, I felt horrible. I knew that they put her somewhere with more restrictions and rules and stuff, and I got to stay where I was. I felt so guilty that I had done something to make her go, or that I could have done more to make her stay. I still kind of feel that way.

Participant 1 discussed how she moved around between a few foster homes before being placed with her final foster family, where she was adopted at the age of 13. She stated that from that point on, she had very minimal contact with her twin sister. She said that her adoptive parents thought that her twin was a bad influence on her and would negatively impact her if they communicated. However, she said that they would allow her to write her letters periodically.

I was taken away from my mother and then my twin sister. I think I just sort of went numb after a while and tried not to care. I kind of shut her out of my heart a little, just to make it easier to survive without her.

**Participant 2.** Participant 2 freely discussed the various traumas she experienced both as a child and as an adult. During her interview she talked about being removed from her mother. However, she was clear that being taken away from her sister was much more traumatic.

I was kind of used to my mother's ways, and her being gone for long periods of time you know, so being away from her wasn't as hard on me as it was on [her twin]. But when they took me away from [her twin], I thought I was going to die. I was her protector, and I took care of her. I remember thinking that no one was

going to take care of her now that I'm gone. I used to worry about her all the time, like was she getting enough to eat and stuff. It's like I was her mom. I used to cry and cry all the time to take me back to her, or to at least let me talk to her you know? But they never would. I guess she started having her own life and stuff, you know, without me.

Participant 2 also talked about her adult relationships and the various traumatic events that occurred within them.

I've had lots of bad relationships. Lots of them. I've had many concussions you know? Like from guys hitting me in the head and stuff. I've had one guy break my jawbone in several places. I've also been raped a few times. I tried reporting it to the police, but they never believed me. There was one guy that I thought really loved me, you know? But he was just like the rest of them.

When I asked Participant 2 if she felt like her past experiences in foster care and her separation from her twin had any impact on her present-day relationships, she stated:

Hell yeah! I know it does! No one ever taught me how to be, you know? I had no family, no connections; I was just figuring everything out on my own. But I grew up in group homes and stuff, so I had no good role models. I think that if I had been adopted by [her twin's] foster parents too, I would have turned out better.

Table 5 demonstrates the different types of trauma that each participant identified experiencing both in childhood and adulthood. While both participants reported being victims of childhood neglect, only Participant 2 stated that she was also a victim of childhood abuse. Similarly, both participants stated that they have been separated from

their parents, as well as from each other. However, only Participant 2 stated that she was a victim of adult trauma.

Table 5

*Theme 3: Trauma History*

Identifier	Childhood neglect	Childhood abuse	Parental separation	Twin separation	Adult trauma
Participant 1	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Participant 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Note.* This information was self-reported by participants during the interview.

**Theme 4: Number and Type of Placements**

The final theme found to be relevant to the research questions were the number and type of placements that each participant had. This theme continued to emerge throughout the duration of the interview in various ways. The data analysis suggests that the number of foster care placements seems to indicate a level of stability and security experienced by the participant. The participants described relative placements, family foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, group homes, and adoption.

**Participant 1.** When asked how many foster placements Participant 1 has been in, she stated 4 or 5. She reported having been placed with an aunt at first and then being moved to a couple of different family foster homes throughout the county. While Participant 1 did indicate that she got along alright in each of these placements, she also said that she did not try very hard to connect with anyone. However, when she was finally adopted, she stated that she tried very hard to connect with her new family.

I called them Mom and Dad, you know? Like they were my parents. For a long time, they took really good care of me and loved me. I could feel it. I had a nice

house, and my own room. But they would keep telling me that my sister was no good, and that I can't end up like my mother. After a while I began to resent them. During my teenage years I started to rebel a little bit. Nothing major, just staying out past curfew and stuff like that. They totally freaked out. They didn't like that at all. That's when they kept saying things like, "you're just like your mother after all!" I never really understood why that was such a bad thing, I guess.

**Participant 2.** When asked how many placements she had been in, Participant 2 responded right away.

Forty-two. I have been in 42 different placements between the ages of 9 and 18. I've been in every type of placement you can imagine, sometimes 4 or 5 in the same year. If I didn't like a place when I got there, I would already start thinking, "how can I get moved?"

I asked Participant 2 if she ever made any connections with anyone along the way.

Why should I? I knew I was only gonna be there a few months, so why bother, you know? Sometimes I knew what I was doing was bad and that I would get to see my sister and my family if I would follow the rules. But people there were so stupid, no one really cared or understood, and it just got so frustrating! It was all fake, you know? They were all so fake.

I then asked Participant 2 if she felt that her constant changing of placements had anything to do with how she formulates relationships now, and she emphatically responded:



Well yes! Doesn't that make sense? Like I said before, I don't know how to be with people, how to act around them, you know? I never know what people want from me, so I feel like I don't know what I want from them either. Sometimes I just want a hug, you know? But I wouldn't even know how to say that to someone.

Table 5 indicates which types of placements each participant reported living in during their time in the CWS. While both participants experienced relative placements and family foster homes, only Participant 2 had placements in therapeutic foster homes and group homes. Also, only Participant 1 was adopted as a child.

Table 6

*Theme 4: Number and Type of Placements*

Identifier	Relative placement	Family foster home	Therapeutic foster home	Group home	Adoption
Participant 1	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Participant 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

*Note.* This information was self-reported by participants during the interview.

### Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from my narrative analysis of the face-to-face interviews that were conducted. The four themes that emerged were forming successful attachments, mental health issues, trauma history, and number and type of placements experienced. These results indicate a very small population with unique stories, thus warranting further investigation on the topic.

In Chapter 5, I presented an exploration of the findings, and discussed their impact on the CWS. I compared the results of the study to the previous literature

available on the topic and discussed the similarities and differences that were noted in the research findings. I also discuss the various limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and possible implications to direct practice.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The goal of this qualitative research was to enhance the current understanding of how childhood twin separation in foster care might impact the twins' adult interpersonal relationships. In this study, I sought to inform the systems of care and add to the body of research regarding twins in foster care with similar situations, context, and conditions. This information could benefit future placement decisions regarding twins in foster care and deepen the knowledge of the CWS's placement of children in general. Through a narrative process, I gathered the lived experiences of two twin sisters with firsthand experience of the phenomenon being studied. The primary research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters interpret their personal experiences of being separated from each other while in CWS?

RQ2: How does one specific set of adult fraternal twin sisters explain the impact of this separation on their individual abilities to develop secure interpersonal relationships as adults?

Results from the data analysis led to the identification of the following four themes: (a) forming successful attachments, (b) mental health issues, (c) trauma history, and (d) number and type of placements experienced. As evidenced by the lived experiences shared by the participants, it appears that twin separation in foster care can negatively impact an individual's ability to establish successful interpersonal relationships. The results from this research extend the existing literature on twin

separation in foster care and present details on a group of foster children not previously mentioned in the literature. In the following section, I discuss the interpretation of the findings and compare those findings to the literature review presented in Chapter 2.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

This section includes my interpretation of the findings based on participant responses during interviews, researcher notes, and the literature review. These interpretations arose from my analysis of the data collected, through the process of hand coding and thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). Themes were generated based on the participants' responses and often reference a specific emotion, feeling, action, event, or response to events. This thematic analysis allowed a deeper level of understanding of the lived experience of the participants and helped to determine that mutual themes were present in both interviews. Even though each twin's foster care experience was vastly different, their responses and interpretation of their separation from each other appeared similar. The findings from my study suggest that adult twins have difficulty establishing successful interpersonal relationships if separated from each other as children in a foster care setting and regardless of their placement type or duration.

### **Results in Context of Literature Review**

A significant amount of research has been conducted exploring sibling separation in foster care, indicating that such separation is detrimental to a child's ability to form successful interpersonal relationships as an adult (McCarthy, 2014; McCormick, 2010; Ullmann-Gheri & Weiss, 2013; Wojciak et al., 2011). Not been previously measured was the phenomenon of twin sibling separation in foster care, leaving a significant gap in the

research. However, previous research continues to inform the general phenomenon of sibling separation in a foster care setting and provides important information that helps to support the findings of this study. I will take a closer look at the findings from current literature regarding sibling separation as it relates to the identified themes of this study exploring twin separation.

Children who are victims of maltreatment often form significant attachments to their siblings (Courtney et al., 2010; Gass et al., 2007). When siblings are placed together in foster care, higher levels of self-esteem and social supports are reported (McCormick, 2009), and greater levels of stability and connectedness are experienced. Conversely, separated siblings display more negative adjustment outcomes such as running away (Courtney, et al., 2010), significant behavior problems such as truancy and violence (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009), and overall lower academic performance (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011).

The findings of this study fall closely in line with the results presented in the current literature regarding sibling separation. The twin participants of this study clearly defined the significant impact that their separation had on their childhood and continues to have on their adult lives. As discussed in Chapter 4, both twin participants conveyed a feeling of loss, a disconnection from each other and their extended family, and feelings of regret and sadness related to their separation. Both participants reported historical events that include episodes of drug use, homelessness, academic difficulty, and running away from various placements—all which they associate to some degree with their separation from each other.

Perhaps most interesting, and not discovered in the literature on sibling separation, is that both twin participants expressed intense feelings of guilt about being separated from each other, each taking some level of responsibility for the separation. Participant 1 made statements regarding her regret for leaving her twin behind, saying she should have done more to keep them together. Participant 2 also stated her feelings of guilt and remorse regarding her separation from her sister, saying she should have behaved better and might have been able to remain with her twin. Based on the heightened level of attachment often experienced by twins (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012), twin siblings might feel a greater level of impact from being separated than nontwin siblings.

### **Results in Context of Theoretical Framework**

To support this research as much as possible, I used two established and widely recognized theories as the frameworks for this study: attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and family systems theory (Bowen, 1966). Both theories provided guidance and details on the concepts related to attachment and the development of interpersonal relationships specifically through the lens of twin separation in foster care. Additionally, both theories specifically address the unique situation of twin siblings, addressing this phenomenon as it relates to twin attachment (Bowlby, 1969), and the twin position in the family system (Bowen, 1966).

#### **Attachment theory**

A significant amount of research has been conducted to explore the unique attachment between twins. Because mothers of twins must respond to the demands of two

infants simultaneously, there is often a lack of individualized attention for each child (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012), sometimes even resulting in a drastic reduction in overall verbal communication (Kehoe et al., 2016). This reduction in parental attachment only works to strengthen twin attachment (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012), leaving the twins to rely on each other for whatever needs go unmet. One study conducted to explore the impact of twin separation in school discovered that each twin often experienced severe anxiety, leading to the development of emotional problems as adults (Staton et al., 2012). Other studies discuss the increased level of trust, support, and need felt between twins, superseding the attachments experienced by nontwin siblings (Shumaker et al., 2011).

While considering previous research on the significance of twin attachment, attachment theory provided an excellent framework for this research study. During the interviews, the twin participants communicated their sense of reliance on each other as children, making statements that reiterated their dependence on one another for love, support, nurturance, and safety—characteristics often expressed toward a parent or caregiver. Both participants stated that once separated from each other, they experienced emotions such as guilt, anxiety, fear, isolation, and abandonment. Both participants made statements regarding a feeling of being split in half or losing a part of themselves when being separated from their twin.

### **Family systems theory**

Family systems theory also helps to support this research due to its focus on how various members of a family system interact and how that might impact their ability to function later in life (Bowen, 1966). More specifically, family systems theory suggests

that a negative family of origin experience can create poor anxiety management in children, leading to significant behavioral and emotional problems as adults (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This is important to know when discussing any phenomenon that relates to child maltreatment. Bowen (1988) also states that when abuse and violence are present in a family system, they can negatively impact the emotional development of children, causing them to struggle with emotion regulation as adults. Some researchers consider this the origin of the cycle of violence, perpetuating generational maltreatment recidivism (Black et al., 2010; McWey et al., 2013).

Another significant element of this framework includes the idea of the twin sibling position (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Butterworth, 2015). Even though twins share the same date of birth, infant experiences, and lifetime events, there is often one who is considered to be the leader (Butterworth, 2015). Parents also seem to distinguish between the twins according to their birth order, considering one of them to be “stronger” or “older” than the other (Butterworth, 2015). This may help to contribute to further variations in another concept discussed by family systems theory, which is the differentiation of self. This theoretical framework helped to guide the research about the consideration of the twin’s level of anxiety management and emotion regulation, as well as their perceived abilities to balance their individuality and togetherness.

Throughout the course of the interview, both participants shared stories relating to their position within their family of origin, as well as their twin sibling position. They discussed various family dynamics, which they felt helped to contribute to their current state of being, and to their ability to formulate successful relationships at this stage of



their lives. Participant 1 talked about a time when her step-father had attempted to take care of her, and how it created significant difficulties for her other siblings and family members. Participant 2 shared a story pertaining to her self-identity as the leader of the twin pair, tasked with the responsibility of protecting her “younger” twin sibling. These experiences are supported by the various concepts found within family systems theory and help to provide a greater structure for consideration.

Additionally, each twin specifically identify their separation from each other as the leading cause for numerous issues that they face in their present day lives. While some variations in their reasoning do exist, they both clearly state that if they would have remained together throughout their time in the CWS, they would have emerged with fewer complications and would have been overall more successful in developing positive relationships with others.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

I used the lived experiences of only one set of twins separated while in foster care. If a sample size were able to include several different twin sets of varying zygosity, gender, and ethnicity, perhaps more comprehensive findings would be discovered. A greater diversity of sample might rule out results that were specific to the twin set identified as participants for this study.

Another potential limitation would be selection bias, due to my previous knowledge of the participant’s unique situation. This could have contributed to the specific information gathered during the interview process, or even in the application of the thematic analysis.

Finally, since the research was conducted with interviews, observations, and field notes, the data collected may not fully convey the complexity of the phenomenon being researched. If a quantitative study were conducted to measure more concrete variables, such a research approach could contribute to the depth of information gathered on the topic of twin separation in foster care.

## **Implications**

### **Social Change**

Social change can be defined as the “process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity and development of individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, cultures, and societies” (Walden University, 2019). Social change works to improve both human and social conditions. Given this definition, this research study has to the potential to promote positive social change on many different levels.

It has always been my goal to promote positive social change through the process of this research. As a lifelong advocate and practitioner of human services, it is my own personal mission to enhance the lives of those that I work with. It is clear to me that the findings of this study can promote positive social change for the individual, family, organization, and society as a whole.

Based on the findings of this study, human service professionals can significantly advocate and promote for the unified placement of twins in foster care. The implications of this focus could not only help maintain the significant level of attachment between the twin pair, but also work to provide a more stable, productive, and successful adult life for

them as well. Many studies have shown that when placed together, siblings can thrive in adulthood (Fraley & Tancredy, 2012). The social change for the individual in this situation could be life altering.

Similarly, positive social change may also be experienced by the family system, including the twins' family of origin, and their future families. Based upon the current literature, we know that when siblings are placed together, the possibility for reunification and permanency improves (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b; Kothari et al., 2017; Wojciak et al., 2011). This finding has lifelong implications that could impact reunification efficacy between foster children and their birth families, impacting a significant social change.

These findings may also impact a positive social change for the CWS itself. With increased knowledge on the experiences of twins who have been separated from each other while in foster care, improved systems of care can be created to mitigate this practice. Trainings, seminars, and updated policies can begin to address this organizational issue, therefore, impacting a positive social change at the organizational level.

Finally, positive social change can also be found at the society level. As we begin to re-evaluate the practice of twin separation, we may see an overall improvement in the self-sufficiency, employability, sustainability, and productivity of twin foster care alumni throughout our communities. This increased positive connection to society can impact positive social change for much more than just the individual.

**Direct Practice**

Implications for direct practice in child welfare are far-reaching. Even though many states have already adopted policies that promote the placement of siblings together, various issues continue to provide a barrier to this practice. A combination of limited resources, lack of placement options, and an overall lack of understanding regarding the impact of sibling separation keep this practice alive.

Placement agencies, foster care networks, and the court system must become aware of the long-term negative impacts that result from the separation of twins (and siblings in general) that are placed in foster care. Strategies such as stronger foster parent recruitment and training efforts, exploring extended kinship options, and even looking for alternative placements outside of the current jurisdiction could help to ameliorate some of the negative effects of twin separation.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of twins separated by the CSW. This study provided a vehicle for one set of twin sisters to share their story, and to convey their profound conviction for the improved practices of twin sibling placement in foster care. It was my intention to close the gap in the current literature on this phenomenon and provide insight and information on the implications of twin sibling separation in foster care.

Children in foster care suffer in ways most of us cannot understand. Many children suffer at the hand of their parent, while others are forced to witness events that damage them emotionally. It is often imperative to remove these children from their

biological parents for their own safety and wellbeing, placing them in the foster care system. However, regardless of what has happened to them or where they go, most children just want to stay home with their parents. Therefore, when they are taken away, they experience trauma from the separation from their parent/caregiver.

When these children have siblings (or twins) that are also removed, another complex layer is introduced to the situation. As stated throughout this study, when siblings are placed together much more positive outcomes are typically experienced. Conversely, when they are separated, a vast array of negative outcomes impact the remainder of their childhood, and potential throughout their adult lives as well. Separating these siblings from each other not only compounds the existing trauma but has the potential to devastate any hope they may have for a normal adulthood.

The twins represented in this study were very clear and emphatic in their testimony: they blame their separation from each other for many of the issues they have faced throughout their lives. Their stories are compelling, emotional, and difficult to hear. However, the lived experiences of these twins may help to inform a better practice moving forward, and impact significant social change within the CWS.

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