

Lifebooks: Effective tool in the Adoption and Foster Care Systems or Not?

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Julie K. Campbell

Wittenberg University

Faculty Readers:

Dr. Jerry Pankhurst

Dr. Keith Doubt

Dr. Lori Askeland

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There has been very little research done on the use of lifebooks as a tool for children and families in the adoption and foster care systems. Currently lifebook making is mandated by Child Services in all of Ohio yet there is variety in literature and study on whether the lifebooks are effectively accomplishing the goals and purposes as described and set by social workers, Child Services, and foster care agencies themselves. Based on the interviews and written correspondence with two specialists, five foster and adoptive parents, and two former foster care children 1) The goals and purposes of lifebooks are understood somewhat unanimously across the groups; 2) Including as much of the children's lives as possible assists in the understanding and making sense of their past and why they are where they are now; and 3) Each book and each lifebook making process must be tailored to the children's needs, maturity, and circumstance, especially when there is abuse in the children's past. Complete data collection, analysis, and implications for further research are provided.

Lifebooks: Effective tool in the Adoption and Foster Care Systems or Not?**Julie K. Campbell, Wittenberg University**

Lifebooks are becoming more and more widely used by families and adoption and foster care agencies. Life books, also called life story books, are a tool used for children in adoption, foster care, or residential care living situations. They are created with a joint effort from the child and a social worker. The process usually begins around the time of placement, in a home whether foster or adoptive family. Beth O'Malley, a lifebook specialist and author of Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child (2004), defines lifebooks as "a collection of words, photos, graphics, artwork, and memorabilia that creates a life record for a child who was adopted. It is a simple, truthful story written through a child's eyes" (O'Malley 2004:7). The lifebooks consist of narratives, information about the child, photos, drawings, and whatever else the child would like to include. The purpose of the life books is to help the child understand their history, provide a tool to use when working through feelings and issues about their past and present with the foster or adoptive parents and/or social worker, and to help the child develop a positive self concept and identity. There not a very vast amount of research about lifebooks, yet they are becoming a popular tool for children. Lifebooks share some similarities with autoethnographies, a literary work created by sociologists and anthropologists describing one's own culture. Autoethnographies and lifebooks are both kinds of autobiographical narratives. Lifebooks are similar in that they describe children's own lives, the and structure of their lives and experiences. Autoethnographies are written to teach others and share information just as lifebooks are made to teach children about themselves as well as allow children a concrete tool to teach others about themselves. With autoethnographies the author is a member of the society they are writing about, and with lifebooks the author is the child

whose life is being described. Though lifebooks are written with the aid of parents and social workers, the main author and provider of narrative is the foster/adoptive child. The lifebook is a chance for children to engage in social anthropology of themselves and their own lives and relations with others.

I have researched how/if life books help children who are placed in foster care homes or adopted into families. My primary method of data collection was open, in-depth interview. I conducting interviews with individuals who willingly shared their experiences with me after I explained their identities would be kept confidentiality. I carried out interviews with adults who have created life books, or taken part in the process of helping another, in order to compare and analyze their responses. I have researched the use of lifebooks, lifebook models, and their proposed function; based on this research I created interview questions aimed to assess various individuals' opinions and experiences of lifebooks. I specifically looked at how the lifebook impacted the child based on these five main goals of lifebooks: to keep children connected to all of the different homes, schools, neighborhoods, churches, etc they have been involved with; keep important photos/keepsakes (grade cards, etc) that otherwise may get left in these different places; use it as a means to connect the dots, make sense of their life from birth to present, gain a sense of identity; use it as a means to teach others about themselves; and plan goals for future. In addition to these five goals I also studied how lifebooks impact: children's development of positive self-concept, understanding of their history, sense of identity, and coping skills.

I have gathered opinions from foster parents about their views and experiences regarding the effectiveness of life books in the development of their children, their children's coping skills, and their development and adjustment as a member of the family

unit. I interviewed people who have taken part in the creation of a life book for themselves, and are now over the age of eighteen. I worked closely with Oesterlen and Diane Stupp, a social worker employed by Oesterlen. She put me in contact with people who were formerly in foster care as potential respondents. She also provided me with the contact information of other specialists regarding the life book process.

The question of my thesis was whether or not life books are an effective tool for foster care and adoptive children; whether the children's understanding, self concept, and transition process benefitted from the creation of the lifebook. Researching this question is valuable to the adoption and foster care systems, social workers, parents, and children themselves. The process takes money, for materials, the time of social workers and therapists, and the training sessions, so it is important to study whether or not the outcome of the life book making is worth the money being used. There are different life books formats, procedures, and approaches; I will be studying which methods are preferred or considered most beneficial by those involved in the lifebook making process. If life books are going to be mandated, which they currently are, it is only logical to make sure they are benefitting the children and completing their purpose.

Sociological theorists whose ideas can be incorporated into this research are George Herbert Mead's definitions and theories about the self, the "I", and the "me"; Charles Horton Cooley's theory on the "looking glass self"; Sigmund Freud's theory on the id, ego, and superego; and Erving Goffman's concept of impression management and stress on defining the situation; as well as other theories on socialization and the sociology of the family.

Problem Statement:

Life books, also called life story books, are a tool used for children in adoption, foster care, or residential care living situations. They are created with a joint effort from the child and a social worker. The process usually begins around the time of placement. The books consist of narratives, information about the child, photos, drawings, and whatever else the child would like to include. The purpose of the life books is to help the child understand their history, provide a tool to use when working through feelings and issues about their past and present with the social worker, and to help the child develop a positive self concept and identity. There is little research about life books, yet they are becoming more widely used by various agencies.

I will specifically be looking at how the lifebook impacted the child based on these five main goals of lifebooks: To keep children connected to all of the different homes, schools, neighborhoods, churches, etc they have been involved with; To keep important photos/keepsakes (grade cards, etc) that otherwise may get left in these different places; To use as a means to connect the dots, make sense of their life from birth to present, gain a sense of identity; To use as a means to teach others about themselves; and to plan goals for future. In addition to these five goals I will also look at how lifebooks impact: Children's development of positive self-concept, understanding of their history, sense of identity, and coping skills.

I will gather opinions from foster parents about their views and experiences regarding the effectiveness of life books in the development of their children, their children's coping skills, and their development as a member of the family unit. I will interview people who have taken part in the creation of a life book for themselves, and are now over the age of 18. I will be working closely with Oesterlen and Diane Stupp, a social

worker employed by Oesterlen who is willing to put me in contact with people who were formerly in foster care. She also has given me contact information for other specialists regarding the life book process, and she herself is a good resource as a foster care mother and leader of life book training groups. In addition to interviewing, I will research how the various approaches to life books making. I will look at function in the foster care system and how they are structured to help children develop a more positive sense of self; identity; ability to cope with situations and emotions; and better understand their history.

The problem of my thesis is whether or not life books are an effective tool in the foster care and adoption systems. The process takes money, for materials, the time of social workers and therapists, and the training sessions, so it is important to study whether or not the outcome of the life book making is worth the money being used. Also there are different kinds of life books formats, and so I will be studying which format(s) are more preferred or beneficial. If life books are going to be mandated, which they currently are, it is only logical to make sure they are completing their purpose.

Some components of theory I can incorporate into my thesis are George Herbert Mead's definitions and theories about the self, the I, and the me; Charles Cooley's theory on the "looking glass self"; Sigmund Freud's theory on the id, ego, and superego; and various theories on socialization and the sociology of the family. I plan to incorporate content from Self, Identity and Society; Orphans in Public Policy, Literature, and History; and Sociology of the Family into my thesis project.

Research Question:

The research question is: Are life books effective in helping children develop a more positive self-concept, understanding of their history, sense of identity, and coping skills?

Are they effective in acting as a positive looking glass self for children to identify with? Do they help children present themselves for positively and develop a rational sense of self? To gather data I would develop a questionnaire of open-ended questions to interview foster care “graduates” or children who have been placed. I would interview not only people still in the process but more people who went through the process and completed it. I would not limit how they believed the books helped or did not help to the above categories but would specifically address those in the interviews.

In addition in interviews I would also study the history of life books and how they have changed and evolved since they were first created the idea has been credited to Mary R. Horn of the Children’s Bureau of Los Angeles in the 1960’s. This is an important study in terms of social science today because the number of children in the foster care and adoption systems is both extremely large and growing. Permanency has been an ongoing issue in these social systems so life books being a tool that could increase permanency and success stories for children in placement would be beneficial not only to the children, but to families and people all over the country and even the world.

To gather more data I will interview foster and adoptive parents as to how they believed the life books helped or did not help their child. I will interview adults who have created lifebooks as children growing up in a foster care of adoption situation. I will also interview social workers who have worked with children on creating life books on what they believed the function of life books was and if they believed they were, or were not, successful in reaching those aims.

Literature Review

There is quite a bit of research on foster care and adoption and some informational materials on lifebooks, but very little research on the use of lifebooks. After reading twenty literary works on lifebooks, adoption, and the foster care system I separated them into five categories based on their content: the change toward more open adoptions; lifebooks as a means to improve children's self concept, create identity and work through issues; why lifebooks are important and how they help children understand their histories; procedural methods of how to create lifebooks; and how lifebooks are a type of personal narrative.

Lifebooks would not be possible if no information was available to foster and adoptive parents about their children prior to placement. Lifebooks would have to start at the time of placement rather than including the entirety of the children's history. In the recent past the United States has been moving more toward open adoptions and further from closed adoptions. As stated in one of the excerpts in Lori Askeland's (2006) *Children and Youth in Adoption, Orphanages, and Foster Care: A Historical Handbook and Guide*, a group called Bastard Nation, an Adoption Rights Organization, discussed their efforts to push for adoptees to be treated as citizens with equal rights and the right to access to their full history, including birth certificates and medical history. Groups such as these have helped create the trend toward open adoptions that allow for children to create complete lifebooks starting with their birth. *Families by Law: an adoption reader* (Cahn 2004) also discusses the change toward open adoptions and how that can benefit adopted children. A study done on how openness affects family relations was published in a series entitled *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* (1999) that concluded openness allows for greater attachment, coherent narrative, and functional relationships. This study shows a correlation between openness and coherence and understanding

but does not include whether lifebooks, created fully due to open access to information, assists in the reaching of those outcomes. In Rao and Moody's (2001) article in the *British Medical Journal*, they directly address how the birth mother's openness in adoptions makes it so "The adoptive parents can keep a lifebook, which tells the child all about you [the birth mother] so that s/he grows up with a sense of where s/he comes from" (pg. 867). Lacking in these works on the trend toward and effects of open adoptions is how the information that is accessible via open adoptions helps the children—and what evidence there is as to whether or not the children benefit from having that knowledge.

The second category of research materials I reviewed was how lifebooks can be used to improve the children's self concept, help them work through issues, and assist them in the creation of identity. Patricia Aust (1981) placed her attention on how lifebooks can be used for therapeutic purposes in helping children work through feelings that arise as they begin to understand their history and develop identity. She concluded that the completion of life books can help improve the children's self-concept, view of situation, understanding of history, increased social and academic skills, and it improves socialization. While encouraging the use of lifebooks as much of my study supports, Aust only used one child's experience as an example, her discussion regarding studies done on how lifebooks affect children is therefore limited. Backhaus' (1984) research however, lacked any discussion with children or parents directly involved in the creation of lifebooks. Backhaus' study was designed as a questionnaire for social workers focusing on how lifebooks are made, limitations, issues, and effectiveness (pg.552). My research is similar in focus but included responses from more than social workers but also parents and former foster children. Backhaus' work is referenced by Holody and Maher (1996) in their article "Using Lifebooks with Children in Family Foster Care: A Here-and-Now Process

Model.” The difference between the two articles is that Holody and Maher focus more on the involvement of the children and the therapy involved with the lifebook making in order to help children develop a sense of identity. The goals are mentioned various times but not whether those goals are actually being met through the lifebook making process. In other works the outcome is mentioned but how lifebooks can be used to meet those outcomes is not. In

Handbook of Adoption: Implications for researchers, practitioners, and families by Rafael Javier (2007) the goal of children coming to terms with their placement is mentioned but how lifebooks could help attain this goal is not. Homer (2005) writes extensively on Jacques Lacan and the mirror stage which relates to the importance of constructing identity and self understanding, but not in reference to adoption. My research discusses how lifebooks meet the goals discussed by so many writers who discuss foster care, adoption, and lifebooks.

There is a growing variety of resources on why lifebooks are important. My study relates to this question because before asking whether lifebooks are important it is logical to ask, well are they effective? Are they helpful? Are they worth the time? Donna Barnes, an adoptive parent who did not create traditional lifebooks for her children says yes. Though her children survived without them she believes they would have been helpful in working with her children about their histories and processing information. Clegg and Toll’s article on “living lifebooks” in the form of videotapes is also non-traditional but they believed they were useful in helping children develop continuity, identity, and individuality. Though these two sources do not directly relate to studies of the effects of lifebooks they do relate to how lifebooks are in the same category as other methods they have found useful. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2005) offers many resources to adoptive parents regarding children’s transitioning, including what should be done with lifebooks and how to do it. Though this website offers various resources, it does not

provide evidence or narrative regarding how useful those resources to people who have used them. Another book I reviewed that provided resources but evidence based conclusions on the usefulness of those resources was a lifebook guidebook written by Susan Gabel (1988). She explains the lifebook section by section that is useful in understanding how lifebooks work which is important in any reader of my research in terms of understanding the content that I am interviewing participants about. A uniquely useful approach was described in *Lifebooks*:

Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child by Beth O'Malley (2004). O'Malley does give direct quotations and statements from adoptees, parents, and social workers who have worked with the creation of lifebooks. Her work is persuasive in encouraging the use of lifebooks. My study is similar to O'Malley's qualitative studies, but adds more information and evidence to the field. Willis and Holland also conducted a qualitative study on the use of lifebooks. They interviewed young people on their experiences with lifebooks and their results were significantly positive. The participants were chosen by practitioners so the practitioners may have been selective in picking what they considered to be more positive cases, but the social workers who led the study were not lifebook specialists so they presumably did not have a bias positive or negative. While I think this study is very valuable, since concerns regarding lifebooks were not addressed I do not believe it gives any indication of how to improve lifebooks or find what it effective and what is not.

How to create lifebooks is another category of the lifebook sources I reviewed. Presumably the writers discovered what they found to be effective and with those ideas wrote guidelines and workbooks of how to make lifebooks. The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA) created a website offering tips, guidelines, and free lifebook pages for adoptive parents and social workers to use with foster and adopted children. A unique aspect of

an article written by IFAPA was the emphasis on the children building self esteem and self awareness while creatively learning and processing their histories. I would assume that for this website to maintain its business there must be some positive results from their products, but there is no study or evidence given on the site as to whether the lifebooks actually work effectively for the children in reaching the goals mentioned. Beth O'Malley (2002, 2004) has also written two articles on how to create lifebooks entitled "Adoption Lifebooks: Do's and Don'ts" and "Lifebooks and Lip Smacking Stories." O'Malley's works are encouraging and powerful because she uses stories, narrative, and emotion—but these characteristics also bring along a lack of objectivity.

In addition to lifebooks being viewed as a tool for children in adoption and foster care because they document the children's life histories, they can also be compared to personal narratives. This idea is discussed extensively by Catherine Cooke-Cottone and Meredith Beck (2007) in "A Model for Life-Story Work: Facilitating the Construction of Personal Narrative for Foster Children." Cooke-Cottone and Beck discuss how life-story work (another name for lifebook making) helps children develop their sense of self and narrative personally as well as help children integrate into the family and community in which they are placed. They stress the process of narrative in order to help children reminisce, construct a life story, narrative, document transitions, collect artifacts and information, and facilitate therapeutic processing of information. The need for research such as mine is also brought up by Cottone and Beck because they acknowledge that there is a lack of research and study on the effectiveness of life-story work. Dan McAdams (2006) also discusses narratives, but in relation to helping adults work through their lives, situate themselves at different stages of life, reconstruct their past, anticipate future, and find a sense of purpose and identity. I argue that this same narrative work can be used

by foster or adopted children in order to reach the same goals. I do not think this process should be limited to adults because could benefit children as well, especially in the form of a lifebook.

McAdams believes the life-story model as a narrative for adults is effective, and so as it relates to lifebooks my study looks at how that same kind of model can be effective for children in foster care or adoptive situations.

Methods:

The method used in my research was in-depth interview. I conducted some interviews in person and some over the phone depending on what was most convenient for the participant. I decided this would be the best way to gain enlightening qualitative data. I asked open ended questions to facilitate conversation. The questions I prepared for the interview asked for narratives on their role in the lifebook making process; how the process worked or didn't work for them; what their opinions were on the goals and uses for lifebooks; overall opinions; and ratings on specific aspects of lifebooks. In order to create interview questions that would provoke informative answers I researched how lifebooks are used in various settings, the history of lifebooks, and the goals of the lifebook making process. This research also helped guide my follow up questions and gain credibility with the participants.

Before requesting participation I created a cover letter to send via email to possible respondents. In the cover letter I included a summary of study, a description of who I am, what the study is, and what it is for. I clarified what I would do with the information gathered and explained the confidentiality of each participant. I framed the cover letter as an invitation to participate in my research and a request for a response. I asked for thirty to sixty minutes of each participants' time for an interview.

To start gathering possible respondents I talked with case workers at Oesterlen Services for Youth. Oesterlen is a program in Springfield, Ohio and one of their missions is to children in foster care before, during, and after placement. Through discussion with the Oesterlen staff I gathered names and emails of possible participants. In addition to Oesterlen, Dr. Askeland referred me to some people she has connections with in her community. I also sought communication with some respondents with whom I had prior acquaintances/conversations; I do not think this caused any bias because I had had no conversations with any of those people regarding anything related to their experiences with lifebooks, adoption or foster care. It was extremely difficult to get initial responses. From October 2010 to March 2011 I sent out numerous emails seeking participants and got very few responses thus my sample size for social/case workers, foster and adoptive parents, and former foster care children were all small. I requested assistance from the Congressional Coalition for Adoption in Washington DC and the secretary sent out emails to possible participants, but again this led to few responses. After hearing back from the emails requesting participation I set up times and places for interviews. Rather than recording the conversations I took notes during and after each interview. When all my data was collected I could begin to analyze the responses of each group and each individual. I examined how opinions compared between the three categories of correspondents; comparison of ratings of overall usefulness; and analysis of ratings of specific purposes and goals and how effective and important each respondent believed they were. Before looking at the data, I will include a description of what makes a lifebook effective.

What does it mean for a Lifebook to be effective?

For a lifebook to be effective it would have to be truthful, complete, and done with the help and care of the parent and/or social worker. An effective lifebook is catered to the child's needs and situation. Much of the effectiveness is determined by the child; do they find it helpful, useful, and informative. The process can be difficult for children, especially if they have endured trauma or lies, so happiness through the process is not a necessity to effectiveness. Rather effectiveness is determined by how these difficulties are addressed and whether they are addressed with compassion and discussion. An ineffective lifebook would be poorly understood by the child, not fully true and informative, and more harmful to the child than positive. Simply putting in information without conversation is also a sign of ineffectiveness, the creation of lifebooks is a process that takes time, effort, and dialogue. There is no specific criterion for what makes a lifebook "good" or not, rather the assessment is of how well the child, parent, and social worker believe the book is meeting the goals and aims of the lifebook making process.

Empirical Data

I have collected data by the means of in depth interviews with two lifebook and foster care specialists' five foster/adoptive parents who have aided their children in the creation of a lifebook; and two former foster care or adopted children, now legal adults over eighteen years of age.

Responses from Specialists/Social Workers:

Both of the lifebook specialists are also social workers who assist both parents, by training them on how to assist their children with lifebooks, and children in the lifebook making process. They were in agreement that lifebooks were important, even crucial, if done correctly.

Specialist A claimed her “only concern is that the lifebooks are not being done, or not being done well.” Specialist B has worked with lifebooks for several years and found it to be helpful in some cases and difficult in others. But also shared that now that lifebooks are mandated in the state of Ohio there has been much more enforcement in regard to lifebook making, including check-ups led by Child Services, so difficulties must be faced.

While doing research I came across various definitions of lifebooks and goals, so I asked the two specialists how they understood the goals of lifebooks—goals that if met would make the lifebooks effective. A goal that both specialists emphasized was allowing the children to get questions answered and open communication about their placement that they may not have been able to ask before. It allows children to make more sense of their past and recreate their history, putting together the past with the present. Specific additional goals Specialist A mentioned are: (1) Making up for the fact that kids forget things (referring the lifebooks as the “children’s memory storehouses”)—giving them an opportunity to hold on to that information, including pictures so children are not left wondering what people looked like; (2) Giving children the reason why they were placed, why they were taken from, or left, home; (3) Answering developmental problems; now sometimes videos are used, called “transition visit”—video of birthparents for children, which has added importance because the first thing you lose memory of is a person’s voice; (4) Allowing for truthful sharing of information; rather than omission or secret keeping that cause issues; and (5) Keeping communication open. Further goals mentioned by Specialist B include: (1) Creating a keepsake the children can take with them wherever they go, that they can put items into regularly so that if they move they will have items with them; (2) Helping the children work through past issues; (3) To help explain to a new parent or biological parent the story of the children’s lives (in re-adoptive or reunification situations); building a

bridge between placements; (4) To save things and memories to look back upon later; and (5) To set goals and plans to reach those goals.

The two specialists' opinions on what approach to take differed. Specialist B believed the lifebooks should focus on the present, the "here and now," unless the child chooses and is ready to look back. Specialist A claimed the best approach to take is including the entire child's history because the longer they wait the more information they will lose or forget and because it is much more possible now to gather information because adoptions are far more open now than they used to be; openness is expected in both infant adoptions and child welfare adoptions (due to abuse or neglect). Specialist A did account for difficulties in her approach, mentioning pages should be able to be taken in and out easily (from a binder) so the children can deal with things as they come up and traumatizing pages can be removed and replaced as the children process and mature. By definition the lifebooks are supposed to include the child's history, the reason Specialist A said she preferred the "here and now" model was because she saw so many children struggling with the emotions that arose looking back on their histories.

I questioned the specialists on how they ranked the importance of specific goals I had read about from literature on lifebooks to see how their responses compared. My findings are as follows:

A. Keeping children connected to all of the different homes, schools, neighborhoods, and churches, etc. that they had been involved with

Specialist A said this was a key goal—referring again to the lifebooks as memory storehouses to retain memories and stay connected.

Specialist B said this goal was only effectively met if the lifebook was made well which largely depended on who is helping the children with their lifebooks.

B. Keeping important photos/keepsakes (grade cards, etc.) that otherwise may get left in these different places

Specialist A and B both said this was crucial, critical, and necessary.

C. Use as a means to connect the dots; make sense of one's life from birth to present

Specialists A and B both said this too was of critical importance, bringing truth and accuracy to their understanding of their lives.

D. Use as a means to teach others about oneself

Specialist A had never thought of this as being a goal of a lifebook; but thinks it could be useful if they children are careful when sharing, don't share too much, and be careful how they use the lifebook to give out information.

Specialist B believes this is an important goal of lifebooks but also said caution must be taken; the children must learn appropriate boundaries—especially since often kids who have been abused develop poor, skewed boundaries or none at all.

E. Plan goals for the future

Specialist A said this goal is crucial because goals are important and the lifebooks can help normalize to the children that they too can have hopes and dreams.

Specialist B thinks the lifebooks should be used to plan and encourage goal-setting.

F. Build positive self concept

Specialist A said positive self concept comes with healing.

Specialist B said the lifebooks should be set up with the goal of raising the children's self esteem and self concept and therefore processing, healing, and goal-setting become possible.

G. Develop positive sense of identity

Specialist A claimed that if lifebooks are done well than they will help the children understand who they are and where they have been, helping secure their sense of identity and positive outlook.

Specialist B believes working one-on-one on lifebooks with foster parents, social workers, or counselors will help children build sense of identity the most, as well as having a strong team and cooperation with parent, child, and social/case worker.

Though the goals are largely similar the specialists had quite different views on whether there were any downsides to making lifebooks. Specialist A said there were no downsides unless the lifebooks are inadequate or incomplete—the biggest downside being that they often are. Specialist B had a lot of concerns about downsides to making lifebooks. The main concern was the recreation of children's past trauma, that timelines and pictures from past can cause the child to relive traumatic events. She explained this concern with a story about a child she worked with in a lifebook group.

I once worked with a young man in a lifebook group who was high functioning and overall very pleasant. His mom had passed away when he was very young and his father got remarried. The stepmother was abusive toward the boy, especially when his father was not around. In one of the lifebook group sessions the boy got a copy of his birth certificate; he immediately shut down, closing his book and putting his head down. Then he visibly showed his anger and ripped up his lifebook. The boy expected to see his birthmother's name on the certificate but instead saw that it had been changed to include only the name of his stepmother.

Another difficulty Specialist A noted was the pain a child may feel if they cannot access the information for their books, for example if the county does not have the background information available to complete the lifebook. While it is true that information is *generally* more available that does not mean that is always the case.

When asking about the most valuable or beneficial aspect of lifebooks and the lifebook making process, Specialist A responded that the biggest value was in the children's ability to look back and remember their past, get answers, and have the lifebook as a memory storehouse. Specialist B focused more of the visual aspect, saying the most valuable part of a lifebook was the pictures (of birth family, foster family, birthdays, schools, cookouts, etc.) She believed pictures were so valuable because she had seen kids focusing on the pictures, using them as a way to tell stories, usually, of happy times. She believed pictures were the best way to help children remember.

Responses from Foster/Adoptive Parents:

I corresponded with seven parents: three foster parents and four adoptive parents.

Parent A:

Parent A kept lifebooks for his two children as mandated by Child Services, from ages one to four, in the years they were foster parents for them. The parents did all of the lifebook work because the children were too young to understand them at that time. Parent A believes the best lifebook model is starting from birth because as he understands it the main goal is to allow the children a way to connect to their previous life as much as possible. When the two children were four years old, he and his wife officially adopted them and from that point described the lifebook making for his children as more like a traditional scrapbook. Now, "They do know that they are adopted and look at those scrap books, but we are withholding the identity of their birth-mom." Child

services asked Parent A and his wife to include information about the birth-mom so the parents have the information but that take it out when sharing the lifebook with the children. For now, they have decided to keep out the information about visitations and child care information from when they children were young because it is “messy” and the children are not old enough to deal with that information yet. They believe there is no downside to the lifebook as they are doing it, tailoring it to the child’s needs. Parent A claims that he finds the method they are using to be effective for their children.

Parent B:

Parent B created a lifebook for her son but has not worked on it much since he was about one year old. She would like to have worked on it more and is thinking about continuing it post-participation in this study. She believes it is important to start the lifebook from the beginning of the child’s life so it can act as a record/documentation of the child’s history, mainly for the child but also for future foster/adoptive parents if the child is relocated. Parent B saw no downsides in the creation of lifebooks and believes they are most valuable as “A way to remember details of a life, which can be passed down to generations to learn about one’s past and about relatives.”

Parent C:

Parent C has foster children of her own in addition to being a social worker at a foster care agency. Parent C has worked on lifebooks were her own foster children as well as help other children and parents understand and create lifebooks. When Parent C originally started leading lifebook making groups at the foster agency where she works they started from the beginning of the children’s lives and included their entire history, as much as was available. She led groups for approximately four years before stopping. In the groups she realized that the groups were too emotionally difficult, even traumatic, for the children. The last group she led was called “Me Now” and focused on the children’s lives at the present moment. She found this group less painful for the children and may return to it in the future. Prior to working on lifebook Parent C thinks it is important to assess how stable the child is and whether they are ready to delve into the past. The main downside she saw in lifebooks was the probability of children

having to relive past trauma, but does think they are valuable for maintaining memories and remembering their past.

Parent D:

Parent D believes lifebooks are crucial; “It is their story.” As a foster parent she believes the lifebook is a lot of extra work but that the extra work is necessary and worth it. She described the process as very much like making a scrap book of the child’s life. The main goal of lifebooks, according to Parent D, is to gather as much information about the child as possible and their family tree so the child can have a record of their roots for when they exit out of foster care or if they decide to reconnect. When asked what the best approach to take in the lifebook making process Parent D gave a detailed response.

It is best if you have enough information to start from the beginning, most of the time we do not have the information showing when a child started walking and talking or sat up first or even if the child was a premature baby, birth weight or any drugs in its system. We need the medical information but usually never have it, so I would stress when you first get the child into foster care to try to obtain as much information from the bio-visits as you can before the rights are terminated. OK DHS has forms for the life books with questions we can ask. Or just get a baby book and start from there with the questions. When we take a child to the doctor we never have the answers to the medical questions, such as, has your child ever been hospitalized, had measles or such. Also the child never has a baby picture and they have gaps such as in high school when most of the yearbooks are asking for baby pictures they don’t have one. We have had teens that would just take a picture of baby and give it to the school saying it was them so as not to be embarrassed by not having a picture of themselves.

Parent D did not consider there to be any downsides to lifebooks. She thinks it is imperative that the child have written documentation of their lives. She particularly stresses honesty. When

children are young they often develop incorrect perceptions, glorifying or demonizing, about their birthparents. So the foster parents must assess the development of the child so they can share with them the truth about their birthparents when the child is old enough to understand; age may vary child to child. She clarified that honesty is vital even when it is painful; her example was “So be as honest and understanding as possible, even if the pictures of the bio -parents are prison mug shots, they are still pictures and important people in the lives of the kids. They belong in the life book.” Lying or omitting the truth will deny them the opportunity to work through the feelings associated with the truth about their past and answer their questions and curiosities.

Parent E:

Parent E is a foster parent, as well as growing up as a foster child. She is the guardian of two boys, ages six and ten, and believes they are not ready to begin participating in the lifebook making. Currently Parent E is the one creating the books, but has little information about the children’s history. She thinks lifebooks are much more useful when the parent has access to the information about the children in their care. Especially now that information tends to be more available, including birth certificates being more informative, Parent E thinks lifebooks are a good idea but frustrating when even now the information is unavailable. Two of the main goals Parent E emphasized were keeping the children informed on their history and where they came from; documenting each phase of life; and having information about family members if the child ever decides they would like to reunite with their birthparents or relatives of birthparents. When Parent E took the children into her home they had no baby pictures so now she takes lots of pictures to help document and celebrate the children’s lives.

When I asked about what approach she believed was best she answered that her children were more curious when they were younger and now seem to have adjusted to living in her home and ask about the past less often. Her children always knew they were foster children and when she believed they were old enough she told them she too had been in foster care and then adopted by her foster parents.

Parent E thinks lifebooks could have a downside if children have bad memories and the lifebook brings back those scars and hard feelings. But also sees this as having a positive swing because it gives the children a chance to address those feelings and move forward with their lives. She views the lifebooks as most helpful in giving the child the knowledge about where their lives began so they can relate to their past.

Parent F:

Parent F had many positive comments about lifebooks and general and how she has used them with her two adopted children. She believes they are most important as a means to preserve memories, bind the past and present, help the child feel valued, and providing children with information about their lives. Parent F thinks that including the child as much as possible is important and sees no real downsides to the lifebook making process. Parent F stated that what she valued most about the lifebooks was “letting the kids know they are special and there is a physical representation of it to refer back to.”

Parent G:

Parent G has used lifebooks minimally with her adopted child; it currently contains mostly pictures. As Parent G understands, “the main goal of lifebooks is to provide children whose living arrangements and family associations shift and change with a sense of continuity, a way to order/make some sense of those shifts, and a way to see their own growth and

individuality through those changes.” She thinks it is best to include as much as possible in the book and put a specific emphasis on the importance of including pictures. A possible downside Parent G mentioned was the chance that children who had been through several placements might start to see the book as a documentation of their “failures” rather than help the child grow and adapt positively. Parent G stated that the most valuable aspect of lifebooks is using them as a way to keep important documents in one place.

Parents’ ranking the effectiveness and importance of lifebooks in certain areas:

A. Keeping children connected to all of the different homes, schools, neighborhoods, and churches, etc. that they had been involved with

- Parent A believes this is important and can be done well with pictures in a scrapbook format.
- Parent B believed including these elements was important.
- Parent C said this goal was only effectively met if the lifebook was made well which largely depended on who is helping the children with their lifebooks.
- Parent D believes including pictures and keepsakes can help keep children connected, but that with those pictures and keepsakes there should also be identification written in the book with names and dates and possibly even where and what was going on so the child can better recall the memories.
- Parent E thought this was important, but more for people who are placed in more than one home than when they are placed in one home and then adopted by that same family. Parent E thinks keeping the information is important so the children have an opportunity for later contact unification if they have interest in doing that.
- Parent F could not comment because she never had a child with more than one

placement.

- Parent G said they are as effective as the adults who document and preserve those memories and photos with the child make them.

B. Keeping important photos/keepsakes (grade cards, etc.) that otherwise may get left in these different places

- Parent A believes this is crucial/central to the lifebooks creation and value to the child.
- Parent B saw the inclusion of pictures and keepsakes as the most effective way for the children to carry memories with them.
- Parent C said this was crucial, critical, and necessary
- Parent D highlighted the importance of photos and keepsakes as a way to help children remember their past. She emphasized the importance of including happy memories so the children can see their lives and past more positively.
- Parent E described photos as “way up there in importance.” For Parent E personally she believes they are important because she was a foster child growing up and didn’t have any and when her current children were placed with her they didn’t either so now she takes a lot. She also keeps grades, ribbons, notes, etc. so the children have things to look back on, and helps the children keep positive memories.
- Parent F thinks it is very important to keep all the information together in one place.
- Parent G thought that lifebooks could help in this way but commented that the children rarely see the lifebooks, or have them in their possession, because it can be triggering. She did think it was important however that the lifebooks are updated and looked at with the child.

C. Use as a means to connect the dots; make sense of one’s life from birth to present

- Parent A did not recognize the lifebook as a means to explain the connection of the dots, but rather document the past so the child could look at it and see the different times and experiences of their lives.
- Parent B recognized this is an ideal goal, but only possible if adequate information was available to the parents and children to include in the lifebook.
- Parent C said this too was of critical importance, bringing truth and accuracy to their understanding of their lives.
- Parent D thinks lifebooks can be effective in connecting the dots especially if a timeline is included and kept up to date. She said including dates is important, especially dates or memories of birthparents/relatives so that if they decide to reunite they can share those memories.
- Parent E thinks this is important to have if it is available. Without it the children will be left curious and with time will begin to forget more and more.
- Parent F thinks this is a crucial goal of lifebooks and as much as possible should be included.
- Parent G answered this question similarly to how she answered the question regarding keeping children connected—if well maintained then yes.

D. Use as a means to teach others about oneself

- Parent A had not thought of using lifebooks in this way, but does believe it could be valuable for the children to be able to tell stories and share memories.
- Parent B thought this could only be done effectively if the lifebook had good detail.

- Parent C believes this is an important goal of lifebooks but also said caution must be taken; the children must learn appropriate boundaries—especially since often kids who have been abused develop poor, skewed boundaries or none at all.
- Parent D considers the lifebook a private part of the child's life that may include confidential and personal information. She said it should only be shared if and when the children feel comfortable. Parent D noted, "It is not a picture book or brag book, it is about their whole life and sometimes they don't want everyone knowing where all they have lived or what all they have been through.
- Parent E thinks this is important for her children and for herself. For her children she thinks they can use their lifebooks to share stories of positive memories. And Parent E has shared her story with a Metropolitan housing committee and her lifebook helped her remember her story.
- Parent F thinks the books could be used to help inform future foster parents but overall should be kept private since they are a very personal part of the child's life.
- Parent G said this could be a valued purpose if the books are well maintained.

E. Plan goals for the future

- Parent A does not believe this is a necessary part of a lifebook.
- Parent B did not believe lifebooks would be useful in this area.
- Parent C thinks the lifebooks should be used to plan and encourage goal-setting.
- Parent D keeps forms for some goals and how to reach those goals in order to give the children hope and positive thoughts about their future. She has found that when they do not make goals for the future the children tend to engage in more dysfunctional behavior and less hopeful about having future success and happiness. Parent D said discussing the

children's future helps them realize they have a future and that their lives are workable and worth living.

- Parent E thinks this depends on age. Her biological children understand what it means to grow older and what work ethic is, but her foster children have had no example (until moving in with her) of work ethic, planning for the future, and setting goals. Currently she does not think lifebooks act as a way to plan goals for the future but could see how they could help in that area with older children.

- Parent F did not see this as a goal of lifebooks.

- Parent G did not see this as a goal of lifebooks.

F. Build positive self concept

- Parent A did not see this as a goal but rather something that may come with the process.

- Parent B stated that lifebooks could effectively help raise children's self esteem.

- Parent C said the lifebooks should be set up with the goal of raising the children's self esteem and self concept and therefore processing, healing, and goal-setting become possible.

- Parent D stated that "When a child can see happy memories and pictures of themselves with families it makes them feel loved and wanted, and it helps build their self worth and self esteem. When they think more of themselves they can plan for higher goals in life, better education, jobs, relationships and such."

- Parent E thinks it depends on the experience of the child; she does not see having a lifebook as necessarily helping self-concept but sees how it could help.

- Parent F thinks this is a goal and a very achievable goal because all the child's life should be positively displayed and help in high regard in a special place. She believes the lifebook helps the child develop value in their life, family, and self.
- Parent G believes this is an important goal of lifebooks.

G. Develop positive sense of identity

- Parent A thought having more history could help solidify identity so this was important.
- Parent B recognized this as a goal of lifebooks and effective use of lifebooks.
- Parent C believes working one-on-one on lifebooks with foster parents, social workers, or counselors will help children build sense of identity the most, as well as having a strong team and cooperation with parent, child, and social/case worker.
- Parent D believes that the children's ability to gain a positive sense of identity for themselves is important. Their morals and values play a large role in how they view themselves and their identity so it is important to encourage and foster healthy moral character in children. Especially if the children reunite with their biological families who may be struggling, or go out on their own and come across the negative lifestyles of others, having a strong sense of identity and morals is important to their success.
- Parent E believes lifebooks could help build a positive sense of identity, and that would be ideal, but is not an inevitable result of lifebook making.
- Parent F said yes because "they are someone, from somewhere and from some very important people (their parents) so the book should represent that."
- Parent G said this should be a goal but can be difficult if the child has been placed more than once and starts to see the book as a list of "failures."

Responses from Former Foster Care/Adopted Children:

I spoke with one former foster care child who was later adopted and is now a foster care parent herself, and one woman who was not in the foster care system but was adopted as a child. The former foster child (who I will refer to as Child A also Parent E from above) had a much more hesitant acceptance of lifebooks than Child B. Child A was placed at age eight and adopted four years later. Child A's lifebook was incomplete due to a scarcity of information but as much information as her foster parents had access to was included. Also due to lack of access, there were no pictures included from the first five to seven years of her life. The creation of her lifebook was largely done by others; she received it when she was placed and from then on she only added pictures occasionally. The reason Child A described herself as hesitant or not convinced lifebooks are necessary is because she did not have a complete lifebook but still defines herself as successful, happy, woman with a job and family. And her sister, who was three and a half years old when placed did not turn out to be "a productive citizen and did not work" even though she had "just as much if not more of a lifebook and more opportunities." Child A claimed she believed lifebooks could help but having one did not mean the child would be successful. She said it was helpful to have a lifebook to know her past and turn the negative into positive, but that her past is only a part of her life and where she is now is much more important; she said her past does not define her.

Child B recognized many of the same goals and outcomes of lifebooks as found in my research and interviews with specialists. Child B made her lifebook with her social worker in England—the social workers gathering and recording information and bringing photos for the child to arrange and decorate. Child B admitted she did not fully appreciate the lifebook until she was between sixteen and twenty. Then her interest and grew and she realized the value in being

able to connect memories, discover and understand her past, and satisfy her newfound curiosity about her history. She believes lifebooks can be helpful for older children to contextualize what they are going through but still thinks it is important to start as early as possible in order to gather as much information as possible. She advocates starting from birth if the information is available. She claimed the more complete the history the more power the child, and later adult, has over themselves and the better they can develop a personal identity.

I asked Child B to rank the effectiveness of lifebooks in specific areas the same way that I did with specialists and parents:

A. Keeping children connected to all of the different homes, schools, neighborhoods, and churches, etc. that they had been involved with

Child B said this was very important particularly addresses and names of people in different shelters, homes, and schools possibly including close friends. She emphasized the importance of including as much concrete information as possible.

B. Keeping important photos/keepsakes (grade cards, etc.) that otherwise may get left in these different places

Child B believed photos were an important way to keep memories especially when having to leave people behind. While some specialists mentioned included grade cards, Child B had not thought of this as particularly important but believed it could be on a person to person basis. Even after needing assistance with her lifebook, Child B has occasionally added more keepsakes and pictures she found valuable and noteworthy.

C. Use as a means to connect the dots; make sense of one's life from birth to present

Child B found this goal to be a reason why lifebooks are so important to keep and maintain not only as a child but later in life, to be able to look back on as a resource and reminder.

D. Use as a means to teach others about oneself

The ways in which Child B uses her lifebook to teach others is via sharing pictures and stories.

E. Plan goals for the future

Child B does not really think this goal is imperative, but believes it could be a good idea depending on the age of the child.

F. Build positive self concept & G. Develop positive sense of identity

Child B did not think lifebooks were particularly important for building a positive self concept or identity, but were important in developing a sense of control and security.

A possible downside to lifebook making, according to Child B, is the difficulty that can arise when trauma is brought up and not dealt with properly. However, she did see the lifebooks as a tool to facilitate dealing with past trauma, confusion, and hurt. She stated that the biggest value of lifebooks making was providing a way for the adopted child to look back and understand what has happened in their lives, especially for children in their teen years when they have matured enough to understand and process the information.

Analysis of Findings

Analysis of Specialists Responses:

In the process of comparing the responses from the two specialists I found several overlapping ideas. Both encouraged the creation of lifebooks for all children with the help of

parents/guardians and social workers. They identified similar goals, uses, and reasons why lifebooks are a mandated practice for children in foster care or adoption situations. They agreed on the importance of using lifebooks to help answer questions, maintain memories and hold on to keepsakes, open communication, and understand history. They both believed the most valuable aspect of lifebooks is giving the child a place to store memories they can look back on, Specialist B particularly emphasizing pictures.

There was agreement that one of the downsides was that lifebooks are often not done well or adequately, for example: not including enough information, not being done compassionately, etc. The starkest difference in responses between the two specialists was also about a possible downside. Specialist B had significant concerns regarding the possibility of traumatizing children by bringing up painful memories or realizations from their past. Based on this concern she did not think lifebooks should always be done from the beginning of a child's life, but rather look more at the present/ "here and now" and only looking back into the past if/when the child is ready. Specialist B does say the foster/adoptive parents' obtaining the information is of critical importance, but including it in the lifebooks for the child is not.

Prior to leading lifebook groups at a foster care agency Specialist B thought the best method was to start from the beginning but after seeing the pain it caused some children she stepped back. She stated from the beginning is ideal for the child's understanding and connecting with their history, but questions whether it is worth it for children who have trauma from their past.

Analysis of Foster and Adoptive Parents Responses:

The parents' responses were very similar in terms of goals; the variation was in regard to how to look at the child's past and how critical lifebooks were for the children's development. Parents seemed to think it was important to include the children's history to the extent that it would not upset the child beyond what they were old enough or mature enough to deal with. All of the Parents identified tailoring the process to the child's needs to be important. In order to do this, two parents chose to take a more scrap book like approach, including mostly pictures and explanations of past events. Another parent, Parent A, chose to only show the children the information they believed they were ready for by leaving out painful information about the birthmother.

Each parent stated that the more information they could obtain the better they were able to complete the lifebook with their children. Parent E, who was a foster child herself and then later became a foster parent, described how information tends to be easier to access now but difficulties still arise in certain cases, like with her two boys, that make the lifebooks hard to complete. Due to this she focuses more on her children's history of their time with her because that is what she knows the most about and can add keepsakes from for the children to look back on. Every parent said it was important to have a lifebook and could at least start from when the child was placed in their care. While all parents could see a value in lifebooks, not all recognized the lifebooks as critical to the child's development. For example, Parent E thought too much emphasis was put on lifebooks and that while they could be helpful children could turn out just fine without them, or struggle even if they had one. She was hesitant to identify the lifebook as crucial because she saw no direct correspondence between lifebooks and later success in life. Parent G thought the more information the better but recognized that the information may be difficult for the child and therefore should be kept in the parent's possession.

Parents A, B, and D all pointed out they thought lifebooks were a lot of extra work for foster and adoptive parents. Parent A thought they were a lot of work and did not like the specific format they were taught in foster parent training sessions. But Parent A and his wife found that since they were not checked up on regularly or thoroughly, him and his wife could use their own method, more like a scrapbook of the children's time in their care and not showing the children the information that may be painful to them while they were young, to be more useful. Parent B thought making a lifebook was a lot of work and has not been keeping up with it adequately since her child was an infant. She said it was just a lot of work and she got too busy, but does want to return to it. Parent D acknowledged the lifebook was a lot of extra work but found that work to be necessary because she believes the lifebooks are a necessary part of the child's life.

All five of the parents that I corresponded with had taken part in the creation of lifebooks so I do not have information on the views of parents who choose not to create lifebooks for or with their children. There is a possibility my responses from parents would be disproportionately positive in comparison to all foster/adoptive parents since they all chose to partake in the lifebook making process with their children. Lifebooks are now mandated by Child Services though, so technically the five parents I spoke with could show differing views on lifebooks, as they did in varying degrees.

Analysis of Former Foster Care/Adopted Children's Responses:

The two children I spoke with regarding their experiences with lifebooks are both now independent adults who identify themselves now as living happy, productive lives. They were both adopted by the first family they were placed with. Child A found the lifebook to be useful

and helpful in understanding her past, but believed the lifebook was not a determining factor in her success as a person. She is creating lifebooks for her children because she thinks keeping records of childhood events, pictures, and keepsakes are important. Child A did not have all of the information from her childhood in her lifebook and does not have access to a lot of information regarding her foster children's early lives, before their placement with her. She says the lifebooks cannot be as useful as a record of history when history is hard to obtain, but that they can always be useful as a record of the child's past with the foster/adoptive parent.

Child B still has her lifebook and finds it very informative. She does not believe having the lifebook made a large difference in her growth, but does believe that with the information she now has more control and security in her life and understanding of her past. She stated that the lifebook answered a lot of questions and she appreciates having it to look back on. She thinks it is important all children who have been in foster care have a lifebook in order to answer questions but that the format does not need to be an exact science. Child B did not find the lifebook making process traumatizing but rather just informative. It did not mean as much to her as a child as it does now; now she appreciates knowing and having documentation of where she came from.

Theoretical Considerations:

Lifebooks are a tool for children who have been placed out of the care of their birthparents either through adoption or foster care. The use of lifebooks reflects concepts of classic sociological theorists including Sigmund Freud, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Erving Goffman. These four theorists studied various aspects of the self, all of which are relevant to lifebooks. Freud's definitions of the id, ego, and superego; Cooley's three

components of the looking glass self; Mead's theories on the self, the I, and the me and symbolic interactionism; and Goffman can all be applied to the goals, understanding, and creation of lifebooks.

Sigmund Freud was the founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychiatry. He is well known for various aspects of his work including his studies of psychopathology, dreams, the unconscious, repression, transference, and sexual desire. In my research with the use of lifebooks I will focus on Freud's theories on the components of the psyche, the id, ego, and superego, as described in "The Physical Apparatus and the Theory of Instincts." Freud describes the id as containing "everything that is inherited, that is present at birth that is laid down in the constitution— above all, therefore, the instincts" (Lemert 2010:130). The id is child-like, impulsive, and focused on merely seeking pleasure without regard to possible consequences. The superego develops when a child is dependent on his or her parents/guardians, their influence stays with the child from that time period forward; the superego is considered the moral factor of the human psyche. The ego is the balance between the id and the superego; according to Freud, "Here are the principal characteristics of the ego. In consequence of the pre-established connection between sense perception and muscular action, the ego has voluntary movement at its command. It has the task of self-preservation" (Lemert 2010:130). The ego is reflected in a person's actions; it connects the id and the superego in a rational and practical way.

This passage from Freud provides an introduction to how lifebooks can help the development of the ego.

...the super-ego, in the course of an individual's development, receives contributions from later successors and substitutes of his parents, such as teachers and models in public life of admired social ideals. It will be observed that, for all their fundamental difference, the id and the super-ego have one thing in common: they both represent the influences of the past—the id the influence of heredity, the super-ego the influence, essentially, of what is taken over from other people—whereas the ego is principally determined by the individual's own experience, that is by accidental and contemporary events.

All children, whether growing up with their birth parents or not, are going to have similar development of the id because it is hereditary and not based on experience. A child begins to develop the superego when living with parents—but what about children who do not grow up in the traditional setting of living in one home with their birth parents? Spending time in the residential care of the state and/or entering a foster home or being adopted can alter children's development of the superego. It may be delayed by lower level of involvement or support of adults in their lives. For example, specialists and parents recognized that caution must be taken if children are going to share their lifebooks with others because their sense of boundaries may be lacking or skewed based on the lack of consistent boundaries placed by their parents from birth. Presumably all children, whether living with their birth parents or not, grow up with the guidance of an adult and thus can develop some degree of the superego. The development of the superego varies because of the different parental influences, but the ego also fluctuates between children. The rational ego that develops through experience varies greatly from child to child. How children are raised and their life experiences shape how they will think and act. The ego mediates between the primitive id and response to the influence of the superego. I believe it is fair to

assume that if a child adjusts well and connects with the parents or guardians they are placed with they will more fully develop a superego and will be able to mature to develop the rational ego between their instinctual id and parental influence. Using lifebooks to work through life experiences can help children move beyond actions pursued through impulse, instinct, or rules of guardians. The children can start to process their history and begin to act more rationally. The id and superego are both childish in that they are impractical, whereas the ego reaches a realm of sensible functionality.

Charles Horton Cooley, a famous sociologist who was a professor of Economics and Law at University of Michigan and one of the founders of the American Sociological Association, is most well known for his concept of the looking glass self. The idea of the looking glass self is that self growth and understanding comes from interpersonal interactions with others as well as how one perceives others to be viewing him/her. In “The Looking Glass Self” Cooley describes this concept: “...the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self: ‘Each to each a looking-glass; Reflects the other that doth pass’ (Lemert 2010:189). Cooley claims that the way people views themselves is largely determined by how they believe others view them. So think of children in the care of the state awaiting placement or children already placed—how might they think others are looking at them? If the children think of themselves based on how they believe their birth parents viewed them there is a likelihood the children will feel neglected, unwanted, and develop low self-worth and self-esteem. The children are not only identifying themselves based on another’s opinion, but doing so based on an imagined or assumed opinion. I believe this is why the specialists and parents I spoke with placed so much

emphasis on compassion. Even when the information that may be shared about the children's past is difficult, the children seeing themselves in a negative light can be absolved by explaining the children's history with compassion, sympathy, and letting them know that the people surrounding them in their current situation love and care about them. The children may also make assumptions about how peers view them which could hurt their self esteem, for example feeling looked down upon, different, or lesser than others. Working on the lifebook opens the doors to communication about the children's history and placement so those feelings do not have to fester in the child alone, but they have a place to share and process those feelings. Also, not having the facts can lead to difficulty understanding one's self which is why I think all parties (specialists, parents, and former foster care children) emphasized the need for honesty. The feelings of negativity about one's self and the perceived negativity from others is a vicious cycle, each feeling feeding the other but having the lifebook process as a tool can help stop this cycle.

The concept of the looking glass self can be explored further by looking at Cooley's three elements of a self. Cooley states that the self has "three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Lemert 2010:189). Cooley claims that the looking glass self is most related to the second element, how we perceive others judge our appearance. Appearance does not merely mean physical appearance; in this context appearance refers to how one appears as a person, including character, morals, worth, and quality. For example, I may feel good about myself if I believe others are viewing me positively. I believe Cooley is thinking of this looking glass self in terms of someone actually making a judgment based on interaction, but I think it could also

apply to how children in foster care or a children who have been adopted feel their birth parents are viewing them, or viewed them before placing them into the care of another. Without understanding or working through the emotional issues surrounding being put up for adoption, a child may perceive his or her birth parent's feelings toward them as negative and thus develop negative self-image, or as Cooley describes it—mortification. One's image of oneself may be more on assumptions about one's past and less based on personal experience.

Cooley's concepts are closely related to the purpose and goals of the lifebook making process. Lifebooks are meant to connect past, present, and future; develop and understand history; gather facts and record memories; and work through emotions and issues that arise from communicating and learning about oneself. Looking at facts and talking about the past with a caring adult, or adults if a social worker or therapist are closely involved, counters the child's possible feelings of neglect or worthlessness. Having an adult there consistently showing care and support for children allows them to view themselves through how they perceive that adult's opinions of them, which are presumably positive and loving. The looking glasses the children see themselves reflected in are ones mirroring affirmation. The adults the children are working with to create lifebooks can also describe to the children that their birth parents did not necessarily want to give them up or that they didn't care about them, but rather the birth parents may have felt they could not give the child the care they deserve. Discussion between parent/guardian and child can clear the air of the child's perceived negative feelings or at least open them up for conversation and processing. The lifebook making process can transform the looking glass of the looking glass self. A lifebook, however, could enhance the third element of the looking glass self, a

sort of self feeling, moving that feeling toward one of pride rather than mortification. Creating the lifebook moves children's perception beyond how they believe they appear to others or how they believe others are judging that appearance and toward their own definition of self and their lives. Lifebooks can improve children's pride in themselves because they can provide more certainty and less fear and insecurity. Children may not understand this concept, but they may see the effects or learn to understand as they grow older and look back on their lifebooks and sort out the lifebook making process.

George Herbert Mead, author of "The Self, the I, and the me," was an American sociologist, philosopher, and psychologist. He is considered one of the founders of Social Psychology. Mead's work on the social definitions of the self, I, and me provides insight for this research. Mead is a social behaviorist, which means that he believes the mind and self arise out of communication and social interaction rather than human physiology. In his work, "Social Psychology," he states, "The thinking or intellectual process—the internalization and inner dramatization, by the individual, of the external conversation of significant gestures which constitutes his chief mode of interaction with other individuals belonging to the same society—is the earliest experiential phase in the genesis and development of the self" (Lemert 2010:228). Mead believed the primary structure of the self is cognitive.

According to Mead the self is composed of the I and the me. Understanding the I and me is crucial to understanding Mead's reasoning behind his claim that the self is created through social interaction. Mead writes in "The Self, the I, and the Me," that the I is more individual whereas the me is more social. "The 'I' is the response of the individual to the attitude of the community as this appears in his own experience" (Lemert 2010:229). And

although the I is aware of the social me, it is not the same as the me. The me is created by the social attitudes of others, but how one reacts individually is based on the I. So how do the I and the me make up the self? According to Mead in “Mind, Self, and Society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist”, “the self appears in experience essentially as a ‘me’ with the organization of the community to which it belongs” (Mead 2010:.200). This notion of the self arising from social experience and significant communication is the basis of the school of sociology called symbolic interaction.

Mead’s ideas can also be applied to the social aspect of lifebook making. The lifebook process is never done by the child alone or the parent alone; it is always a joint effort—ideally with the foster/adoptive parent, the child, *and* a social/case worker or counselor. Without the interaction and communication with the adult the child cannot fully make the most of the lifebook, just as the self cannot fully develop without interaction. The lifebooks are meant to connect the I and the me, the individual person with the social person. The children need to interact with parents/guardians to uncover their past and begin to understand who they are based on their past experience and social interactional processing of experiences from past and present. Through this holistic and social understanding, the children can truly come to understand themselves and develop a social me. In further research it would be interesting to compare children who took part in the lifebook making process to those who played little or no role and see how their responses to the effectiveness and purposefulness of the books compares.

Erving Goffman was a sociologist who focused largely on symbolic interaction, the presentation of self, face-work, impression management, and stigma. Some of his studies and literary works tie in well with the use of lifebooks. One of the key components to lifebook

making is gathering the information about the child's life from past to present. Goffman describes the reasoning for this is in "Seeing Ourselves." He states that "Information about the individual helps define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him." Children in foster care or adoptive situations who are engaging in the lifebook making process gather information about themselves in order to find more definition in their lives and their history. Often social or case workers and guardians assist in this gathering process but the purpose is to provide the information for the children. Lacking the information or pieces of the puzzle, of the children's lives makes it hard for the children to completely make sense of themselves and outline their lives and themselves. Lacking this information can be detrimental to the child, as one parent stated "Curiosity kills the cat" meaning without information the child may feel hopeless, angry, or act out due to confusion or frustration.

Defining the situation is important in managing social interaction. As stated by Goffman, "In stressing the fact that the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the cooperative activity that follows—in stressing this action point of view—we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character." This is important for the guardian and social workers assisting children in the lifebook making process. When the adults define their relationship with the child and the situation that they are in, either before or after placement, their honesty about the child's history is crucial to the cooperation and success of the lifebook making process. If the process starts out with deceit or secrecy, there has already been a dishonest moral character set in place for the situation. This is why starting

the process by sharing the information honestly, yet also sensitively and compassionately, is critical—as emphasized by all participants in my research (as long as they are also taking into consideration the age and readiness of the child for certain information that may be difficult.)

Children perceive themselves similarly to how the people around them perceive them, according to Cooley’s concept of the looking glass self. Goffman describes this in his statement that, “An individual experiences themselves based on the standpoints of other individual members of their same social group or the general standpoint of the group in which they belong as a whole.” When children’s social group is not that of intimate families the children may see the lifebook as a procedure the state is mandated to implement, whereas when they are placed it is more likely the children will view themselves based on the standpoint of the guardians they have been placed with. Since the goal of placement is to put the children with loving guardians, the hope is that the children will be able to see themselves in a positive light. Creating the lifebook can bring the guardians and the children together through bonding and communication about the children and their lives in a positive, compassionate, and honest way. Hopefully, this process will result in the children taking on that positive view of themselves.

Jacques Lacan looks at a different angle of how children see themselves. Jacques Lacan was a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who focused largely on psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literary theory. Lacan’s work is often related to that of Freud and Lacan himself originally considered himself a Freudian. The area of Lacan’s work that this study relates to is that of the mirror stage. The mirror stage is the stage when a child can see themselves as a person but cannot fully understand their self or feel a sense of wholeness. There is a sense of fragmentation between feeling like an individual and independent from the mother yet also dependent and less

able than the mother. This sense of fragmentation leads to the child seeking an ideal self or the Ideal I, anticipating the future, and forming the ego. The mirror stage relates to the topic of lifebooks in that the child will still go through this stage but may not be close to or with the birthmother. The sense of separation and fragmentation which will be increased by the physical separation from the birthmother. The anticipation will also be increased because it will not only be for full ability but for a new family, independence, understanding, and truth about self and self identity. Lifebooks have the potential to help psychological fragmentation and lack of knowledge that may keep the child from fully understanding their self. Acknowledging that children will go through the mirror stage, whether they are in foster care or with their birth parents, is important because all children need to work through the construction of identity, the struggle for independence. Analyzing the use of lifebooks within the context of Lacan's mirror stage concept may actually help children, social workers, and parents use lifebooks more effectively.

Dan McAdams analysis about the use of narratives relates closely to the goals for the use of lifebooks. McAdams how studies and theorizes in the realms of literary, social and psychological studies. In his work *The Redemptive Self: Generativity and the Stories Americans Live By* (2006) Dan McAdams explained his concept of the life story model as a type of narrative theory. He states that adults organize their lives in narrative terms and use that narrative to reconstruct their past and anticipate their future and find a sense of unity and purpose in their lives. He describes narratives as a way for adults to understand and mature in their creation and understanding of their identities. McAdams describes how the life story model can help situate a person, which relates closely to how lifebooks are used to situate and help foster or adoptive children with developing their identity and understanding their lives. Lifebooks are not only a

way for children to understand themselves but a way for them to understand how they got to be where they are, and why they were placed in the first place. Often included in life story narratives are redemptive stories or second chances that adults experience; from an adopted or foster care child's standpoint the placement may serve as second chance. These second chances affect people's lives and thus documentation and processing helps, arguably for both adults and children. McAdams says life stories help adults work through their lives and I believe that is what social workers aim to have lifebooks achieve for children in adoption situations thus the two works are strongly correlated.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

The wide use of lifebooks does not match the little research available on how effective lifebooks are in helping children and families. Based on the sample of my research every participant could recognize some benefits of adopted and foster care children creating and maintaining lifebooks. Everyone's understanding of the goals of lifebooks was similar to the research I have done and similar to the other participants' responses. No one claimed lifebook making should not be practiced. Answers regarding the importance were similar; there was variation however on just how beneficial they are, to what extent they are useful or helpful.

The most recurring goals of lifebooks mentioned by the groups were: 1) Keeping children connected to all of the different homes, schools, neighborhoods, and churches, etc. of which they have been involved; 2) Keeping important photos/keepsakes; and 3) To use as a means to connect the dots; make sense of life from birth to present. These are the goals most participants mentioned as why lifebooks should be made and how they are useful. The specialists recognize the lifebooks as necessary for all children, as long as tailored for each individual; the parents

recognize the lifebooks as a positive tool for children as long as they are done compassionately and with respect to the age and maturity of the child; and the children I spoke with both commented that they did not see the importance of the lifebook until they were older and could understand what all of the information meant and had more serious curiosity about their pasts.

More research is needed on the topic of lifebooks in order to find out what methods and formatting are best for the child. A wider sample of former foster care children would provide more insight into what approaches worked with children who have had trauma in their pasts and what works best for those who did not. One of the biggest variation of opinion in my research came about when I asked about downsides of lifebooks—some saying there are no downsides and others mentioning that lifebooks may cause children to relive past trauma. Both of the former foster children I corresponded with did not share any trauma with me so I did not include any discussion in that area on my analysis or data of their responses. A possible focus of future research could be specifically aimed at the effectiveness of lifebooks with children who have been abused—since that seemed to be an area that even specialists were uncertain of how to approach.

More research could be done on how lifebooks relate to autoethnographies. An analysis of lifebooks from the views of Mary Louise Pratt's understanding of lifebooks could really add to the understanding of both lifebooks and autoethnographies.

Another factor that was absent in my research that has potential to answer some questions regarding the usefulness of lifebooks, is how foster children who did not create lifebooks view them, and perceive their lives could have been different if they had kept a lifebook. There are numerous aspects of a child's life that can affect how they understand their past, how important they feel memories and information about their past are, and how they adjust in different

placements, so the larger the sample is the larger the likelihood that the conclusions made on the findings will be accurate.

There is definitely need for more research in the area of lifebooks so that the children and families in foster care and adoption situations can have the most fulfilling and successful lives as possible. Helping refine the lifebook as a tool has the potential to help the vast amount of children currently in the foster care systems right here in the United States.

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