“They needed the attention more than I did”: How do the birth children of foster carers experience the relationship with their parents?

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that there is more likely to be a disruption to the placement where foster carers have birth children living at home. Given the limited presence of the birth children of foster carers in research and the importance of the retention of carers, it seems relevant to policy and practice to investigate the parent-child relationship in this context. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how the birth children of foster carers experienced their relationship with their parents. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyse semi-structured interviews with eight young people (aged 14-16 years) who were the birth children of foster carers. Three superordinate themes emerged: 1. 'relational processes that give value to my role in the family', 2.'threats to our relationship' and 3.'making sense as a way of managing the threats'. Each superordinate theme contained subthemes and whilst there were consistent patterns of experience, there was also individual variation. The findings suggest that the processes of 'making sense' and 'feeling valued' serve to buffer the impact of potential threats to the parent-child relationship. Theoretical implications include the application of a model that has been developed to elucidate the relationship between the themes. This has clinical implications for further understanding and informing the way services support both foster carers and their children.

Key words: foster care, looked after children, birth children of foster carers, parent-child relationship, qualitative

Introduction

Background and context

In the UK, there has been a substantial increase in the number of children and young people placed in out-of-home foster care, coupled with a decrease in the overall number of foster carers offering placements (Ofsted, 2015). This has led to a discrepancy between the need for placements and the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

For children who have been removed from their birth families, a good quality foster placement can be a valuable opportunity for intervention and rehabilitation (Ciarrochi, Randle, Miller & Dolnicar, 2012) and increase the likelihood of children developing secure attachments (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson & Guthrie, 2010). Thus, it is crucial to ensure these opportunities are available and that foster carers are supported and fully understood with regards to their motivations to offer and continue to offer placements.

Foster carers' perspective

Research investigating the motivations for fostering has previously identified that foster carers with higher levels of tension in their family had higher likelihoods of reporting intentions to discontinue fostering (Geiger, Hayes & Lietz, 2013). In addition, in a study exploring foster carer stress, Wilson, Sinclair and Gibbs (2000) found that of all stressful experiences identified by foster carers, only in the case of family tensions was there a significant association between this stressful experience and the carers' attitudes towards continuing to foster.

Foster family systems and attachment

Systemic theory provides a useful framework for understanding the processes involved in fostering (e.g. McCracken & Reilly, 1998) as it places emphasis on the way in

which individuals function as part of systems, rather than in isolation; and also gives due attention to all parts of the system including the wider statutory system. Family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974) proposes that the way in which family members interact is influenced by an underlying family structure and highlights the importance of relationship patterns at individual, dyadic and systemic levels, with recognition that all levels and subsystems are interconnected. Therefore, having a foster child in the family will impact on all family members and on all relationships within the family as roles, relationships and boundaries are renegotiated. Considering fostering through the lens of systemic theory highlights the importance of the experience of all family members. It has been argued that it is in fact the whole family who takes on the task of fostering. If we take this perspective then the level of involvement that the foster carer's children have in this process needs to be acknowledged (Martin, 1993) and including the perspective of the birth children of foster carers in research is a recommendation from existing research (e.g. Geiger et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2000).

Parent-child dyad

Attachment theory can be understood as a framework for understanding processes in the parent-child dyad, a microcosm of the larger family system (e.g. Demby, Riggs, & Kaminski, 2015). Bowlby (1969) suggested that a secure attachment relationship with a parent will allow a child to explore, develop and grow, and the parent-child relationship is a template for subsequent relationships. Thus, there is a bidirectional relationship between the parent-child attachment relationship and interactions in the wider family system (e.g Demby, Riggs, & Kaminski, 2015). With regards to the parent-child relationship in the context of fostering, Höjer (2006) found that many biological children of foster carers reported spending less time with their parents. Thompson and McPherson (2011) found that both positive and negative relationship changes were reported. Some children reported a loss of family

closeness whereas others felt that family relationships actually became closer (Thompson & McPherson, 2011). It may be that a secure attachment to parents will enable children to develop coping strategies to allow another child to 'share' their parents.

The birth children of foster carers

The birth children of foster carers have been referred to as 'quiet voices' (Sutton & Stack, 2012, p.1) and 'unknown soldiers' (Twigg, 1994, p.297) due to their somewhat limited presence in the research into fostering (Höjer, Sebba & Luke, 2013).

Sutton and Stack (2012) found that generally the experience of being a birth child in a foster family was viewed as positive. The researchers highlighted that strategies were utilised within the family to adapt to the experience. These emphasised the existing attachment relationship between the parent and birth children as being crucial to the development of these adaptive functions.

Younes and Harp (2007) report that the structure and roles for the family members shifted when parents were fostering and this not only impacted on parent-child relationships but also sibling relationships between the birth children, again with both positive and negative changes reported. Serbinski (2012) also found that fostering had impacted on subsequent relationships for the birth children with friends and partners. Thus, the experience of fostering for these children can impact greatly on their relationships both at the time of fostering and in the future.

Nuske (2010) argues that the fundamental nature of the experience for birth children is contradictory. Nuske (2010) found that most of the children in their research were unable to talk to parents about some of the negative experiences leading to a feeling of emotional turmoil. Indeed, Williams (2017) found that young people who were the birth children of

foster carers viewed themselves as a source of support and advocate for their parents rather than their parents being the source of support to them in the traditional sense.

Thompson, McPherson and Marsland (2014) specifically explored the relational changes between foster carers and their birth children by interviewing foster carers. Thompson et al. (2014) argue that relational changes between foster carers and their birth children are important to explore in order to develop support or interventions and to support a positive placement outcome.

Rationale for research

The relationship between placement breakdown and whether foster carers have their own children is contradictory. Some research suggests that there is an increased risk for placement breakdown if foster carers have children of their own living at home (e.g. Kalland and Sinkkonen, 2001). Some studies have shown that foster carers who felt that fostering was a difficult experience for their own children were more likely to give up (e.g. Triseliotis, Walker and Hill, 2000). Sinclair, Gibbs & Wilson, (2004) did not find that a perceived negative impact on their own children influenced foster carers decision to give up fostering (. In fact, Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) concluded that those carers whose children lived with them had lower rates of disrupted placements. Nevertheless, the impact of fostering on the lives of the sons and daughters of foster carers has largely been overlooked, both in research and practice (Höjer, 2007; Poland and Groze, 1993; Twigg and Swan, 2007; Walsh and Campbell, 2010; Watson and Jones, 2002).

However, some research has identified that when children experienced a change in their relationship, such as having to share parental time, being able to have open, honest discussions with parents about this influenced an overall positive attitude towards fostering (Sutton & Stack, 2012). Therefore, exploring the meanings that children themselves make of

their relationship with their parents is particularly important in understanding the potential impact of fostering, which can then be used to inform practice, particularly preparing families for fostering and supporting families whilst fostering.

Although current research has begun to explore the experiences of birth children of foster carers, much of this research is retrospective in design and focuses on carers or children recalling past experiences, and is identified as a limitation of the current evidence base (Höjer et al., 2013). In addition, a need to focus on the family relationships experienced in the context of fostering has been highlighted and to date the only research specifically addressing the relational changes between foster carers and their birth children did not interview the birth children themselves (Thompson et al., 2014). Further exploring the parent-child relationship from the perspective of the birth children in the wider foster family system is crucial to increasing the existing knowledge in this area.

This research is different in that it consists of interviews with the birth children of foster carers living with children in current foster placements and aims to explore how the birth children of foster carers experience the relationship with their parents.

Method

Design

A qualitative design using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in order to explore how individuals make sense of their experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The research utilised in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to allow for a detailed personal account of the participants' experience to be explored.

As Smith et al. (2009) point out, the researcher's role within IPA is to engage in a double hermeneutic, i.e. to engage in making sense of the participant making sense of their experience. Therefore, the researchers take on the dual role of both engaging with the

participants' interpretation and interpreting that more systematically (Smith et al., 2009). This was deemed the most appropriate analytic method in order to explore how the participants made sense of their relationship with their parents.

Participants

This study received ethical approval from Canterbury Christ Church University's Ethics Committee and from the participating local authority's research governance department. Following IPA guidelines, a small sample was recruited (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were eight young people (four male and four female) aged between 14 and 16 (see Table 1 for demographic information). Although an age range of 13 to 16 was selected, no 13 year olds took part. This age range allowed for participants to be old enough to discuss this topic in detail in a 1:1 interview and young enough to be distinct from existing research with young people aged 18. The number was selected to allow for a detailed exploration of experiences while ensuring that enough quality data were collected.

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Birth/adopted Siblings	Foster children in placement (age)
Casey	Female	15	White British	1 brother 2 stepbrothers 2 adopted	1 female (17) 2 male (17 and 15)
Ibrahim	Male	16	Black British	1 sister	1 male (14)
Lewis	Male	16	British Asian	1 brother	1 male (6 months)
Sophie	Female	14	White British	1 brother	1 female (6 months)
Sammy	Female	15	White British	1 sister	2 female (15 and 9)
Jamie	Male	15	White British	1 sister	1 female (15)

Jasmine	Female	15	British Syrian	None	2 female (16 and 11)
Charlie	Male	14	White British	1 brother 1 sister	1 female (14) 1 male (17)

To be eligible for the study, the inclusion criteria were:

- Aged between 13 and 16, and the birth child of foster carer/s
- Currently living with a foster child in placement
- Parent/s with a minimum of one year's fostering experience in order to ensure the young person has sufficient experience of fostering and to address ethical issues described below
- Parent/s fostering through the local authority
- Fostering social worker for the parent/s based within the teams that had received ethical approval from the local authority to be involved in the study

Participants were excluded if they met the following criteria:

- Foster child was currently receiving input from the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) where the supervising researcher was based, in order to avoid any conflict of interest
- Adopted child of foster carer/s

The researchers approached local authority fostering social workers by attending team meetings and foster carer support groups. Participants were recruited through the social workers referring the foster carers or directly from contact with the foster carer at the support group. The researchers offered a £10 voucher to each participant as an incentive and thank you for taking part in the study.

Interview schedule

In developing the semi-structured interview schedule, current literature was considered alongside consultation with an adult who was the birth child of foster carers and had lived with foster children as a child themselves. A pilot interview was also conducted with a 16-year-old young person (not living with a child in foster care) in order to ensure the interview schedule would flow and elicit relevant information from this particular age group. No changes were made to the schedule in response to this. Interview questions included: what it is like to be in a family with foster children; how they would describe their relationship with their parent/s?; the ways in which (other) relationships in their family are different because your parents foster?; what they thought may help you or other young people whose parents are foster carers?; advice they would give to another young person in their situation?; things they would have liked to have known before their parents started fostering?

These more general questions were followed with clarifying questions such as 'Can you tell me more about that?' or 'Can you give me an example of that?'.

Procedure

All social workers within the local authority teams identified were approached either via contact at their team meeting or by email with information about the research. Social workers were asked to hand out information sheets to foster carers with children who met the inclusion criteria. The researcher also attended foster carer support groups (run by social workers) to speak directly to foster carers and hand out information sheets both for them and their children. These two strategies combined reduced the likelihood of data being influenced by selection bias (e.g. the possibility of social workers selecting only young people who would speak positively about their experience). In addition, social workers and foster carers were informed that it was important for the research to explore both positive and negative aspects of the birth child's experience in a family that fosters. .

Foster carers were asked to consider the information and discuss it with their child/children. If a child expressed an interest in taking part, then an interview date was arranged via email or telephone contact. All interviews took place at a NHS clinic.

At the interview, each participant and their parent were each asked to sign a consent form before taking part in the interview and the parent was asked to remain in the waiting area while the interview took place in a separate room. The interview schedule was used as a guide and interviews ranged in duration from 40-69 minutes, guided by how long the participant chose to speak about their experience. At the end of the interview, the researcher spoke with each young person in order to debrief, answer any questions and advise whom they could contact if they would like to ask anything else about the research.

Interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed and anonymised for analysis. All recordings were stored on an encrypted memory stick and written material was stored in a locked cabinet.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009). This initially involved repeated reading of each transcript and immersion in the data, followed by recording descriptive, linguistic and conceptual aspects of the data for each transcript. Themes from each individual transcript were printed and visually organised into clusters in order to explore spatial representations of how the emergent themes related to each other. Clusters were organised into superordinate themes and given representative titles. This process was repeated for each participant and superordinate themes were then subsequently compared across all participants to explore pattern across cases. This led to a reconfiguring of some themes and the development of higher order concepts to form overall superordinate themes and subthemes. The researcher compared the superordinate themes with the original quotes from the

transcript at each stage to ensure this was an accurate representation of the participants' reported experience. The researcher engaging in this process was a Trainee Clinical Psychologist supervised by a Clinical Psychologist based at the university and a Clinical Psychologist based within a specialist Children in Care CAMHS. All researchers had worked with children in care and foster carers and none had direct personal experience of fostering.

Quality assurance

The quality of the study was ensured by following guidelines outlined by Mays and Pope (2000) and Yardley (2000). To ensure commitment and rigour, established methodological guidelines for IPA were followed (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure reflexivity (Yardley, 2000), a bracketing interview (Fischer, 2009) was conducted in order to identify pre-existing assumptions that may bias the interpretation of the results. The researcher also kept a reflective diary in order to continuously identify further perspectives throughout the research. Throughout the process of data analysis, the bracketing interview and research diary were referred to, in order to ensure the interpretation of the results were not biased. If any identified assumptions also emerged from the data, the researcher discussed this with supervisors and thought about the origin of these assumptions and the extent to which this could impact the findings. To ensure identified themes were grounded in the data, inter-coder agreement (Yardley, 2008) was used by comparing analysis of four transcripts with the internal supervisor's analysis and two further transcripts with the external supervisor. Any potential disagreements between coders were resolved through verbal discussion in order to reach agreement. There was also discussion and agreement with both additional researchers around the three superordinate themes. One example of this was some discussion around whether the theme of 'taking it out on each other' was a way of managing rather than a threat to the parent-child relationship. The discussion around this concluded that this was different to the other subthemes, which described ways of making sense or coping, as these are

processes that the young person is actively managing independently, whereas this seemed to be a more systemic effect and similar to the other subthemes in this category. Therefore, we agreed that this would stay as a subtheme of threats to the parent-child relationship.

Ethical considerations

The researchers acknowledged that the interview may highlight concerns for the wellbeing of the participant in the context of a family that fosters and/or impact on the dynamic of the family. For this reason, the fostering social worker was made aware of the child's involvement in the research and was available to the family to discuss any issues that may have arisen. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher outlined the limits of confidentiality and made it clear to the young person that if any safeguarding concerns were to arise in the interview, this information would need to be discussed further with the external supervisor, and any further necessary steps taken. Parents were also asked to remain in the waiting room should the researcher need to share any concerns during or after the interviews. At the end of each interview, participants commented on their experience of the interview and none of the participants raised any concerns or reported any distress. There were no issues of concern raised in any of the interviews. In addition to the support provided by the fostering social worker, participants were able to contact the researcher or the supervisors should they have any concerns following the interview.

Results

The study aimed to explore how the birth children of foster carers experience and make sense of the relationship with their parents. Although each participant reported a unique experience of this relationship, three superordinate themes that emerged appeared to capture this overall experience. These reflected the threats that fostering posed to the parent-child relationship, and the processes that enabled the participants to manage these threats and

continue to feel valued in their role within the family. Eight subthemes were incorporated under these three superordinate themes (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Table illustrating superordinate themes and subthemes identified

Superordinate theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quotation
Relational processes that give value to my role in the family	Feeling valued within fostering/ being the carer	"If you're playing a game and that's your mission it makes you feel like you've completed that so it's like a bonus for you" (Charlie)
	Feeling valued within my relationship with my parents/ being cared for	"She'll cook me my special food, she'll give me really good advice, she'll be open, she'll sing like our favourite songs" (Ibrahim)
Threats to our relationship	Missing out	"I remember on a Thursday night I'd have ballet and after that in the evening we'd go out for um we'd go out to like get dinner and stuff and obviously I remember that stopping when we first got like the boys" (Casey)
	Loss of attention	"We're really close but where we share the attention is like my friends are closer to their parents because it's just them or it's just them and their brother or sister"(Sammy)
	Taking it out on each other	"It just impacted on all of us and we ended up getting in a lot of arguments just because of the things of him, in a way" (Jamie)

Making sense as a way of managing the threats	Rationalising/ positive re-framing	"For that moment, and for that month, they needed the attention more than I did" (Casey)
	Staying attuned to parents' needs	"If I see that she's like getting stressed out about it or she's not in like a good mood and stuff then I'll just leave her, keep it to myself or speak to my brother" (Lewis)
	Negotiating working together	"with the fostering obviously we have to work together" (Casey)

The results demonstrated that although there were negative effects of fostering identified as potential threats to the parent-child relationship, these threats were buffered by the ways that participants attempted to make sense of these. Experiencing a sense of value in their role, both in their relationship with their parents and in the family, also served to alleviate the impact of the threats. Through utilising both of these processes, participants were able to effectively manage potentially negative threats to their relationship with their parents (see Figure 1).

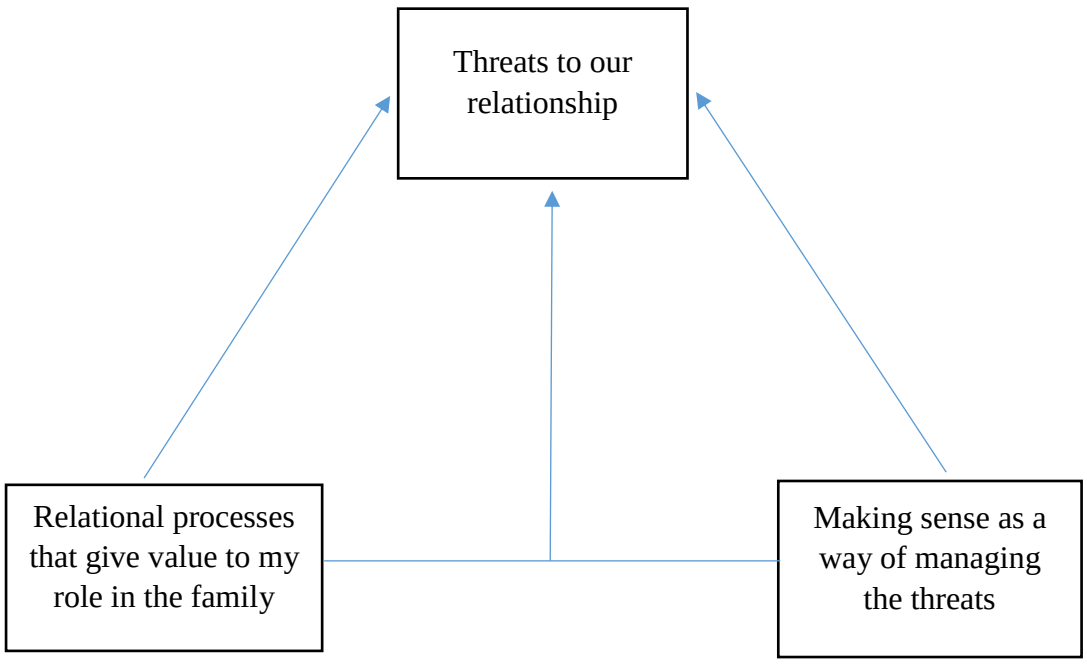

Figure 1. A preliminary model of managing threats to the parent-child relationship

Relational processes that give value to my role in the family

This superordinate theme reflects the relational processes that enabled participants to experience a sense of value and importance within their family.

Feeling valued within fostering/being the carer

Participants reported a sense of their role in the family in relation to fostering, at times almost taking on the role of the carer and appearing to gain a sense of value from this. Some participants spoke about experiences where the foster children had opened up to them and the meaning they assigned to this:

"I remember like two weeks after he came he told me about his situation and all the stuff and ever since then I was like wow this guy's opened up to me!" (Ibrahim)

Ibrahim reflected on an experience of a foster child sharing the story of being an asylum seeker and the difficult experiences he had encountered. Ibrahim's language here reflects the almost wonderment he experienced at this being shared with him and he appeared proud that he was the person that the child had opened up to. The way Ibrahim says 'ever since then' also reflects the long lasting effect this interaction has had on his feeling value in this relationship. This was also experienced by Casey:

“I think to myself if I hadn’t done that he probably wouldn’t have spoken which would have like stopped the development of him opening up” (Casey)

Casey has experienced a foster child speaking to her when they had not spoken to anyone else, and expresses the significance in this interaction in her feeling important. She described her feelings in a similar way to Ibrahim-“Oh my gosh wow I can’t believe I did that” (Casey). Casey expressed feeling that something she did had enabled this change and thus she has taken a direct valuable role in a child’s progress, as if she were the carer.

Other participants also expressed positive feelings around taking a role in fostering:

“If you’re playing a game and that’s your mission it makes you feel like you’ve completed that so it’s like a bonus for you” (Charlie)

Charlie used the metaphor of a computer game to express the sense of achievement he felt from taking an active role in fostering. The expression ‘playing a game’ also gave a sense of something enjoyable and Charlie referred to his enjoyment of games and computer games throughout the interview. The language used in describing this as a ‘mission’ could be related to the context of language used frequently in computer games, but also gave a sense of a higher purpose and an experience of something that is both challenging yet rewarding.

Feeling valued within my relationship with my parents/being cared for

In addition to feeling valued in taking on the responsibility and rewards of caring for a foster child, participants also expressed the ways they feel valued by their parents in their role as son or daughter and position of being cared for. Through parents making special time, being available and doing regular activities with their children, the participants were able to still experience value in their relationship and thus allow for the impact of the difficult experiences to be buffered (Figure 1).

Some participants expressed the ways in which their parents are still available to them:

"I mean if I really said to her like next Tuesday can we go out for a meal unless she had something really big planned she wouldn't be like no" (Jasmine)

Jasmine highlighted that having the knowledge that her mother would always make herself available to her if she requested this, made her feel special and valued, and she spoke of having Tuesday as their day when they will spend time with just each other. Some participants spoke about the importance of requesting this time with parents:

"Yeh I was like well I can't actually say it otherwise I'm going to get told off and now it's just like I can say what I want when I want to say it (laughs)" (Sammy)

Sammy reflected on feeling able to suggest spending time alone with her parents now whereas previously when fostering was a newer experience, she had felt worried that she might be 'told off' at expressing this. Sammy expressed that having the confidence to request this and feeling like it was an option was important to her sense of value and almost portrayed a sense of empowerment in her role in that relationship.

Ibrahim also spoke of special time with his mother being of importance:

"She'll cook me my special food, she'll give me really good advice, she'll be open, she'll sing like our favourite songs" (Ibrahim)

Ibrahim emphasises the personal significance of his mother's actions in terms of '*my* special food', '*me* really good advice' and '*our* favourite songs'. Through these personal connections, Ibrahim is still experiencing value in his relationship with his mother.

Threats to our relationship

This superordinate theme highlighted the negative experiences of fostering that have the potential to threaten the parent-child relationship. They were organised into three subthemes.

Missing out

Participants spoke about experiences that they are not able to have or things they are not able to do with their parents due to fostering:

"If they have like contact or if they like meetings or my mum has meetings and this sort of thing that she can't cancel then we can't go" (Lewis)

Lewis spoke about the commitments fostering involved outside of the day to day care of children, such as time spent taking children to contact visits and meetings, and expressed this taking priority over going out with his parents. Participants also expressed that having foster children increased the number of people in the family, which changed the activities that they would do with their parents:

"I remember on a Thursday night I'd have ballet and after that in the evening we'd go out for um we'd go out to like get dinner and stuff and obviously I remember that stopping when we first got like the boys" (Casey)

"I mean if the girls are on respite then obviously we can go up as a family just like me, my stepdad and my mum but with the two girls here we can't really because there's too many of us" (Jasmine)

Jasmine reflected on not being able to go with her mum to visit her aunt and grandmother due to the number of people who would need to go on this visit. Jasmine also reflected on being 'a family' when the foster children are in respite, indicating missing out on

not only this particular visit, but also the experience of being able to do things with her parents and being ‘as a family’.

Loss of attention

The participants reported a loss of attention from their parents as a result of fostering, particularly when the children first moved in:

“ sometimes it’s really hard because especially when they first move in, a lot of the time, for mum and dad it’s their sort of sole focus is on those children” (Casey)

“Well the attention thing like when the first children came it was very much you had to be with them all the time” (Sammy)

Sammy and Casey both described most of the attention being focused onto the foster children at the start of placements and acknowledged that this is difficult. The expressions ‘sole focus’ and ‘all the time’ emphasise that there was not space for the birth children to be the focus or have time and attention during this period. Sammy goes on to explain:

“I’d make up things like I’ve got homework and I need help with it I would make up things so I get to spend time with them like one time I said I’ve got to make a globe thing out of paper mâché just so I could spend time with my Dad” (Sammy)

Sammy emphasised the lack of time and attention that was available to her at this time, and her feelings that she needed to have a concrete reason with the focus on school, in order to spend time with her Dad. Homework is something that she has to do and thus perhaps provided a safe way of asking to spend time together, as this is a necessary task. This gives us an insight into Sammy’s thinking that her wish to have time and attention, just because she enjoys this, was not important enough and she felt that she needed a more task oriented reason.

Lewis also reflected on the impact of taking a foster baby to events, such as a recent family wedding they had attended:

"It's just like having the pushchair, having to like push the pushchair around, make sure the baby's eating and my mum even said that you know she would have liked to have spent a bit more time with like family and things…everyone just put their handbags on the pushchair so you have like random women's handbags on the pushchair and stuff and then it's just like you have to push this thing around and fold it up, upstairs, down stairs, make sure the baby's eating, make sure he's not crying, nappy change, as well as like looking after us" (Lewis)

Lewis described quite a chaotic scene and emphasised the extent of all the different things his parents were managing, by listing the different obligations, and then lastly says 'as well as like looking after us', perhaps reflecting the order that these different commitments have to take, with the attention on him feeling last in the long list of priorities. Lewis also describes the 'random women's handbags' weighing down the pushchair and this felt like it was an intrusion, perhaps an illustration of the public role his Mum is now taking as a foster carer, attending to all these external factors and 'random' people, before being able to attend to him.

Taking it out on each other

This subtheme related to participants recognising that they would often take their annoyance or frustration out on their parents and feeling their parents would also do this, rather than expressing negative emotions to the foster child. This was not necessarily an active process that was managed by the young people but a negative aspect that they had noticed occurring:

“If I’m getting annoyed with like the child or something like I would take it out on them” (Sophie)

“It just impacted on all of us and we ended up getting in a lot of arguments just because of the things of him, in a way” (Jamie)

Sophie described taking out her annoyance on her parents, perhaps as a way of protecting the foster child, perhaps partly due to Sophie’s family typically fostering very young children or babies and it not being possible to express frustrations in a way that would be understood by the foster child. Jamie recognised that he and his siblings would argue more with his parents and attributes this to the foster child’s presence and difficulties with the foster child’s behaviour.

Some participants felt blamed for situations when this involved the foster children and this led to arguments between themselves and their parents.

“Like I won’t get let off as easily as they would, I know my mum will you know punish them by doing whatever they will get off a bit easier, whereas with me she’ll be harsher and it kind of annoys me” (Jasmine)

“If I’ve had an argument with anyone it’s always I’m in the wrong” (Sammy)

This was another way of perhaps taking out negative feelings on each other, perhaps because this was a safe interaction and could be resolved. Casey explains:

“If one of, like one of us is annoyed obviously we can’t take it out, well not that we would, but we obviously can’t be like ‘oh you’re really annoying me ‘*foster child’s name*’ because he wouldn’t understand” (Casey)

Casey suggested that there was something in taking frustrations out on each other, even if this resulted in an argument, which could not be expressed to the foster children

directly due to them being perceived as not able to understand. The implication in this is that her parents do understand and thus it is an acceptable way of handling difficult emotions such as anger and annoyance, although still a threat to the parent-child relationship.

Making sense as a way of managing the threats

The third superordinate theme reflects the approaches that the young people took in order to make sense of the potential threats to the parent-child relationship. The young people were able to utilise different ways of managing, which served to buffer the impact of the difficulties (Figure 1).

Rationalising/positive re-framing

Participants often explained or justified difficulties by rationalising or framing them positively:

"For that moment, and for that month, they needed the attention more than I did" (Casey)

"Not all the attention is on me so I kind of do get a bit more freedom" (Jasmine)

Both Casey and Jasmine are considering the impact of loss of attention. Casey attributed this to a reason that perhaps could be understandable to her and thus make sense and no longer be a negative aspect of her relationship with her parents. Similarly, Jasmine viewed less attention as a positive thing in her life as a 16-year-old girl and focused on this meaning that she has more freedom.

Casey also elaborates further:

"There was a part of it that I had to understand that because if I didn't, I would-, I wouldn't cope" (Casey)

Casey is explicit in her thinking around the foster children needing more attention and if she had not 'understood' this and made sense of this change in her relationship with her parents, she would not feel that she could manage this.

In thinking about the experience of missing out on a family weekend away due to contact visits for the foster children, Charlie also utilises this way of making sense of his experience:

"If they want to see their family I'm fine with it don't get me wrong, there's 52 weeks in a year, we go down every weekend so it doesn't really bother me, we're seeing them most of the time" (Charlie)

Charlie had spoken about finding it disappointing that they were not able to be away that weekend but was able to quickly rationalise his feelings and see the perspectives of both the foster child and his parents: "It makes me feel like they are doing the correct thing" (Charlie). This has the effect of managing the impact of the potentially negative experience of missing out on a weekend away with his parents.

Staying attuned to parents' needs

The participants also demonstrated an ability to stay attuned to their parents' needs and take these into account, sometimes meaning that they put their parents' needs before their own:

"If I see that she's like getting stressed out about it or she's not in like a good mood and stuff then I'll just leave her, keep it to myself or speak to my brother" (Lewis)

Lewis demonstrated a conscious process of reading his parents' mood and assessing whether he would speak about difficulties to them. Lewis was aware of when his parents

might be stressed and therefore would rather keep difficulties to himself at times when he perceived this. Jamie also expressed this attunement:

"I could speak to my mum but she didn't really, she had other stuff so it was a bit hard" (Jamie)

Jamie expressed the dilemma of knowing that he could speak to his mum but reading her emotions and deciding that she 'had other stuff' in the context of difficulties with a foster child. Jamie demonstrated assessing that his mum perhaps did not need any more 'stuff' and therefore he would not speak about difficulties with her at this point.

Sophie also spoke about feeling the need to help her parents if they are having any difficulties with the foster children:

"I don't want my mum just to have to deal with it all or my dad" (Sophie)

Sophie felt an obligation to help her parents as a result of staying attuned to their needs. Sophie also expressed feeling excited when a new foster child is due to stay because this will be positive for her Mum:

"I get excited because um and also it's just like if we don't have a child for a few months and then we like someone and they tell us that we're going to get another one like um it's really good because my mum, like my mum hates being bored and um like with a child like having a child there like she never gets bored" (Sophie)

In this way the participants described being attuned to both 'positive' and 'negative' emotions experienced by their parents and actively adapting in response to these. This reflected the interaction between experiencing potentially negative threats to their relationship and making sense, through this attunement, as a way of managing (Figure 1).

<u>Negotiating working together</u>

This theme reflected the way participants would sometimes explicitly negotiate working together with their parents:

“Yeh we all talked about it and we all talked find or tried to find solutions” (Ibrahim)

Ibrahim discusses the approach his family took when considering hypothetical scenarios of what might be difficult with fostering. The approach sounds like that of a team and sounded quite methodical in the way that they worked together to problem solve any difficulties.

Some participants also spoke about internally negotiating working together, for example when a foster child had told them something that they thought their parents needed to know, the process of considering this:

“Sometimes I would tell them but sometimes I would just handle it myself if that doesn’t work then I’ll go and tell mum” (Sophie)

Sophie considered whether she could manage things alone, whether she needed to involve her parents and work together or sometimes whether it would be taking a trial and error approach in managing situations. This was also reflected by Charlie:

“They may ask me er can you not tell (Mum’s name) but I think it’s better to let the parents in on it then they can help deal with the situation” (Charlie)

Charlie also speaks about negotiating communication with his parents when he has been witness to something that has happened at school involving the foster child:

“I’d go into the office and ask to use my phone to call my mum to just say could you pick us up after school, there’s a problem and then like explain it to them after, like when we get home” (Charlie)

Charlie describes the way he negotiates the situation with school and what he decides to tell his Mum, reflecting the complex decision process and constant managing of this.

Discussion

The results revealed that although there were negative effects of fostering identified as potential threats to the parent-child relationship, the young people were able to utilise processes that served to buffer the impact of these. Participants were able to make sense of the threats as a way of managing these. In addition, participants experienced a sense of value in their role, both in their relationship with their parents and in the family as a whole. These processes, both individually and combined, enabled participants to alleviate the impact of negative experiences in the parent-child relationship. These concepts are explored further in relation to relevant theory and existing literature.

The foster family system has been described as open system rather than the semi-closed traditional nuclear family (Fanshel, 1966) and in this way it is possible to recognise the way in which fostering poses a threat to the parent-child relationship. Participants described missing out on experiences with parents or 'family time', having to share parental attention, and one participant talked about making up a homework project in order to spend time with her father. Some of the participants recalled what their relationship had been like before fostering and reflected specifically on the changes to their old routines, or missing out on family visits due to the number of people now in the family. This supports previous research by Poland and Groze (1003) who found that sharing parents' time was one of the most tangible impacts on children's lives when their parents foster. The current findings also provide validation through triangulation for the research with foster carers by Thompson, McPherson & Marsland (2016) which identified 'feeling overstretched', with foster carers specifically referring to the competing demands on parental resources between birth child and

foster child. Family systems theory provides a framework for understanding the way in which changes in the wider family system impact upon the parent-child dyad as a subsystem.

Where participants experienced frustration, they often expressed directing this towards their parents and the arguments this could cause. Within this subtheme, some participants also expressed feeling blamed for arguments with the foster child. This supports the existing literature which has found that the birth children of foster carers reported that foster children would sometimes lie and they would get the blame for things they had not done (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004) and that foster children were not punished for things which they would be punished for themselves (Spears and Cross, 2003). However, it appeared as though participants may have wanted to protect foster children from their negative feelings and it is possible that these were then directed towards their parents. Höjer and Nordenfors (2004) found that children of foster carers took responsibility for and worried about the foster children living with them and this may provide an explanation as to why participants in the current study were reluctant to express frustrations directly to the foster children.

Participants were able to demonstrate various ways of making sense of the difficulties, which appeared to enable them to manage and buffer the impact of threats to their parental relationships. When talking about the difficult experiences, all participants rationalised and positively framed the difficulties, perhaps as a way of lessening the impact.

Participants focused on positive factors gained from fostering, such as potential experience for the future. One participant framed having less attention as positive in terms of having more freedom. Another participant outlined that the foster children needed the attention more than she did and understanding this helped her to cope. Although this could be viewed as positive in enabling the young people to ‘cope’, previous research has also

highlighted that children of foster carers can tend to put their own needs behind those of the foster children and view these as having less importance (Höjer et al., 2013).

In their review of the literature, Höjer et al., (2013) also found that the children of foster carers would often put the needs of their parents before their own. This finding relates to the current study in identifying participants' abilities in staying attuned to the needs of their parents, and this research further highlights that young people were actively adapting their own responses in relation to these perceived needs of their parents. It is perhaps surprising, given the age range of the participants, that they were able to skilfully acknowledge and consider the perspectives of others as well as attribute reason and rationalise their own and their parents' responses. It seemed as though these were already established processes and that the interview provided an opportunity to articulate these, rather than being a function of the interview process itself.

An important finding in this study was that the impact of threats appeared to be buffered by relational processes that gave participants a sense of value and purpose. Participants reported a sense of value, sometimes achievement, from taking a role in fostering. This was evident through positive feelings of being able to teach or care for the foster children as well as feeling as if their role had been particularly significant in the child's overall development. This seemed to reflect genuine feelings of being valued and gave the young people a sense that they were important in their role. It often appeared that participants seemed to be taking on a caring role, with one participant explicitly describing themselves as a foster carer rather than the child of a foster carer.

Pugh (1996) has highlighted that foster children may find their role identity confusing in thinking about whether they are taking a caring role or that of an equal peer with a foster child. However, the current findings suggest that the experience for these participants was

that in taking on the caring role and feeling some value from this they were perhaps able to stay motivated and involved in the fostering process. Through the lens of family systems theory this could be interpreted as the birth child becoming part of the parental subsystem as a way of responding to the presence of foster children in the wider family system. This may be understood as a way of attempting to protect the parent-child attachment and that by taking on a caring role this in some ways aligned participants with their parents in a positive way, which together with feeling value in their relationship enabled them to consistently manage the impact of negative experiences.

Some previous research has found that being involved in fostering had a positive effect for young people as they viewed this as giving them a purpose (Swan, 2002). However, it seemed that the young people also needed to experience value in their relationship with their parents in order to stay motivated in actively contributing to this purpose. This element of the findings may relate to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), in that participants were able to experience feeling secure through this process, which allowed them to develop ways of coping that enabled them to feel able to 'share' their parents. Participants experienced this through their parents making special time for them, as well as 'knowing' that their parents were available to them if they requested this. Some participants expressed a change from when they first started fostering in their ability to request time with their parents, reflecting that they felt more able to do this now and this was a positive factor in their relationship. Through this relational process, participants experienced a sense of importance and value from their parents and thus were more able to manage negative experiences and more motivated to engage in ways of lessening the impact of these. This study supports the research of Williams (2017) who concludes that 'birth children are not passive observers in how fostering influences their daily lives. Instead they use strategies to influence fostering

processes, in particular to protect their parents and birth siblings, while also having feelings of responsibility for their foster siblings' (p. 1394).

Unlike much of the current literature, this study did not employ a retrospective design and thus provides an insight into the experiences of young people currently in a foster family. The research also focused specifically on how the birth children of foster children experienced the relationship with their parents, rather than exploring their experience generally. Some of the difficulties that young people highlighted have been supported in previous research, yet focusing on the relationship directly enabled an understanding of the way different factors can interact in the participants' overall experience to enable them to manage some of the difficulties and continue to feel valued in their role, and these factors are vital in enabling a positive experience and ultimately promoting a positive placement outcome.

Limitations

The study is limited insofar as only the children of carers who put themselves forward for the research took part. Nothing is known about those carers who met criteria but decided not to approach their children, or in fact those who approached their children but they themselves then declined to participate. Some feedback from foster carers whose children did not take part included that children were too nervous about being interviewed or that they did not want to give up their time. It is possible that the sample represented young people who were more outgoing or confident. This study also only represents views of young people of a limited age range (14-16 years). Swan (2002) found that young people who were the children of foster carers experienced a shift towards becoming more equal in the fostering process at this age and thus the views of the young people may have been different, had they included

younger children. It is possible that the experience of younger children may vary and this could be explored further in future research.

There was also variation between the participants in terms of their experience of fostering. The children who were being fostered also varied in age. These differences may have been a factor in how participants experienced their relationships.

It is possible that participants actively chose to present certain narratives in response to an interview in a clinical setting with a mental health professional. This also may have been influenced by the sensitivity of the topic, both for themselves and their parents and the fact that their parents were waiting for them in the building. One participant did acknowledge at the end of the interview that she expected the interview to be asking her about what she did to help in relation to fostering.

Finally, the interviews were a snapshot of one-time point and interpretations cannot be made about temporal aspects of experience.

Clinical implications

Although this research utilised a small sample, the results can offer several implications for practice. Cairns (2002) argues that foster carers need theories and models to make sense of the challenges they face in caring for children who are looked after. These results suggest certain relationships between the themes seem to indicate a way of managing threats and could be explored in further research to further understand the processes experienced by young people. The findings of the research support the value of a systemic approach to understanding the processes of fostering. Not only do family systems theory and attachment theory provide useful frameworks for understanding, but the interview process itself lends weight to the value of systemic family therapy as it "pays acute attention to language and the narrative by which people strive to make sense of and bring meaning to

their world" (McCracken and Reilly, 1998, p.21) and this research has demonstrated the extent to which the sense and meanings can be protective buffers. These results could be developed in services to inform the way foster carers and their birth children are supported, including highlighting the value of a systemic approach.

The finding that participants experience a sense of value from fostering point to the importance of events organised by children's services that promote the importance of the whole foster family system and provide recognition of the contribution that the birth children of foster carers make to the fostering process. Some participants expressed that they were not able to attend events organised for the foster children. This seemed to evoke a sense of unfairness and perhaps an enforced separation by services, whilst also the expectation that they be 'together' in the foster family. Not involving them in rewarding experiences could be detrimental to this continuing, which could affect their ability to manage the impact.

Participants expressed a wealth of experience and knowledge, and one participant suggested it would be helpful to meet with other birth children of carers in order to share this knowledge and learn from each other. A practical implication of this finding could be to formalise avenues by which the birth children of foster carers could share their insights with families who are beginning the fostering process. The would have the benefit of making good use of the information but also ensuring that birth children of foster carers feel valued for their contribution.

The results also highlight the need for young people feeling valued in their relationship with their parents and the importance of services taking a role in supporting this. This includes increasing awareness amongst foster carers of the ongoing needs of their birth children whose needs may be less apparent than those of a foster child; emphasising the positive impact of a strong relationship with their birth child on the wider foster family

system; and ensuring that carers are adequately supported in order to do the above. The research also highlights the need for ongoing monitoring (e.g. by fostering social workers) of the impact of fostering on the relationship between foster carers and their birth children in order to identify any potential 'threats' to this. This could involve specifically asking young people about the extent to which they feel valued in their relationship and in relation to fostering. This could be an important move towards promoting positive placement outcomes.

Finally, given the apparent benefits for the birth children of foster carers of being able to see situations from the perspective of another (e.g. parent, foster child), it may valuable to use techniques such as systemic circular questions that elicit the perspectives of others as part of introducing birth children to fostering and a means to attempt to resolve any difficulties as they arise.

Future Research

Future research could expand on the current study by exploring the views of service professionals and investigating the ways in which they could support the relationship between foster carers and their birth children. If children are motivated to take an active role in fostering through experiencing a sense of value, future research could also explore ways of providing this and evaluating outcomes for both carers and young people. It would be beneficial to explore the perspectives of the whole foster family, including children who are fostered and birth children, in order to further explore how positive placement outcomes can be supported.

Further research could seek to explore the views of young people of different ages to investigate whether the ways they make sense of their relationship with their parents fits with the themes identified in the current research. Research could also benefit from utilising

designs such as focus groups. This may encourage those young people who were reluctant to meet for one to one interviews to contribute to the evidence base.

It may be of use to incorporate ways of measuring the factors identified in the current research, such as impact of threats compared to feeling valued within the fostering process. These factors could be measured across different time points to further explore their interaction. This research could develop the model in order to further understand the processes experienced by the birth children of foster carers

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the ways that the birth children of foster carers experienced and made sense of the relationship with their parents. The findings suggest that these young people actively participated in complex processes that enabled them to manage the impact of particular threats that fostering posed to this relationship. These processes included making sense as a way of managing the threats and experiencing value in their relationship with their parents as well as in the fostering process as a whole. The research provides the beginnings of a model for understanding these processes for the young people, which could be used to inform the way both foster carers and their children are supported by services. However, this study provides a detailed account of the experience of a select group of young people at one time and thus, further research is needed to expand these ideas and potentially develop the preliminary model of managing threats within the parent-child dyad within the wider foster family system. It is also vital to continue to acknowledge the role and contribution of the birth children of foster carers.

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