

Research Space

Unpublished conference or workshop item

“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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‘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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Overview of the talk

- Brief background and rationale

Children in Care and Fostering

- Number of children looked after by local authorities in England on 31 March 2017 was 72,670. This was an increase of three per cent since 2016 (Department for Education, 2017).
- The number of fostering households is falling (Ofsted, 2015).
- Trends are also apparent in the USA and other countries around the world (Ciarrochi, et al., 2012), highlighting a concerning discrepancy between the number of children requiring foster placements and the recruitment and retention of carers.

Foster placements

- For children who have been removed from their birth families, a good quality foster placement provides a valuable opportunity for intervention and reparation (Ciarrochi, et al., 2012) and increases the likelihood of children developing secure attachments (Smyke, et al., 2010).
- Crucial to ensure that these opportunities are available and that foster carers are supported and fully understood when it comes to their motivations to offer and continue to offer placements.
- Research has highlighted the many challenges that foster carers face in caring for children who have experienced adversity and has charted a growing mismatch between the numbers of children needing placements and the availability of carers.

Impact of stress on foster carers and contributing factors

- Review Adams, Hassett & Lumsden (2018) identified systems variables such as working in a wider service framework and individual one's such as children's behaviour as impacting on foster carers
- Emerging themes from the review:
 - dealing with authorities;
 - family tensions;
 - social support;
 - child behaviours and attachment

Foster family systems

- Systemic theory provides a useful framework for understanding the processes involved in fostering (e.g. McCracken and Reilly, 1998) as it places emphasis on the way in which individuals function as part of systems rather than in isolation
- It also gives due attention to all parts of the system including wider statutory requirements.
- 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, emphasising that all levels and subsystems are interconnected.

Foster family systems

- Having a foster child in the family will affect all family members and all relationships within the family as roles, relationships and boundaries are renegotiated;
- If we adopt this systemic perspective, the involvement of the foster carers' children has to be acknowledged (Martin, 1993).
- It has been argued that it is the whole family that takes on the foster caring task.

The birth children of foster carers

- Referred to as **'quiet voices'** (Sutton and Stack, 2012: 1) and **'unknown soldiers'** (Twigg, 1994: 297) due to their limited presence in the research on fostering (Hojer, Sebba and Luke, 2013).
- The structure and roles for the family members changed when parents began fostering and this not only affected parent–child relationships but also relationships between the birth siblings, with positive and negative consequences (Younes & Harp, 2007) .
- Fostering influenced birth children's relationships with friends and partners, suggesting that the experience of fostering for these children can shape their relationships in the future (Cochran et al., 2017).

The birth children of foster carers

- But not all is negative.
- Nuske (2010) argues that the nature of the experience for birth children is varied. She found that most of the children studied were unable to talk to parents about some of the negative experiences, leading to a feeling of emotional turmoil
- Like Williams (2017) and Sutton and Stack (2012) she reported that some young people viewed themselves as a source of support and advocate for their parents and adopted a variety of strategies to make this possible.

The relationship between placement breakdown and whether foster carers have children of their own

- Some research does suggest that there is an increased risk of placement breakdown in these situations (e.g. Kalland and Sinkkonen, 2001) and that foster carers who feel that fostering is a difficult experience for their own children are more likely to give up (e.g. Triseliotis, Walker and Hill, 2000).
- However, these findings are less salient in other studies (Hojer, 2006; Poland and Groze, 1993; Twigg and Swan, 2007; Walsh and Campbell, 2010; Watson and Jones, 2002) and in some cases, the presence of birth children has proved beneficial e.g. Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson (2004) found that a perceived negative impact on their own children was a minor factor in foster carers' decision to give up.
- In a later study (2005) they concluded that those carers whose own children lived with them had lower rates of disrupted placements.

Rationale for the research

- With regard to the children affected, Sutton and Stack (2012) found that when they experienced a change in their relationship, such as having to share parental time, being able to have open, honest discussions with parents about this produced an overall positive attitude towards fostering.
- Consequently, exploring the meanings that children themselves make of their relationship with their parents is especially important in understanding the potential effect of fostering

Rationale for the research

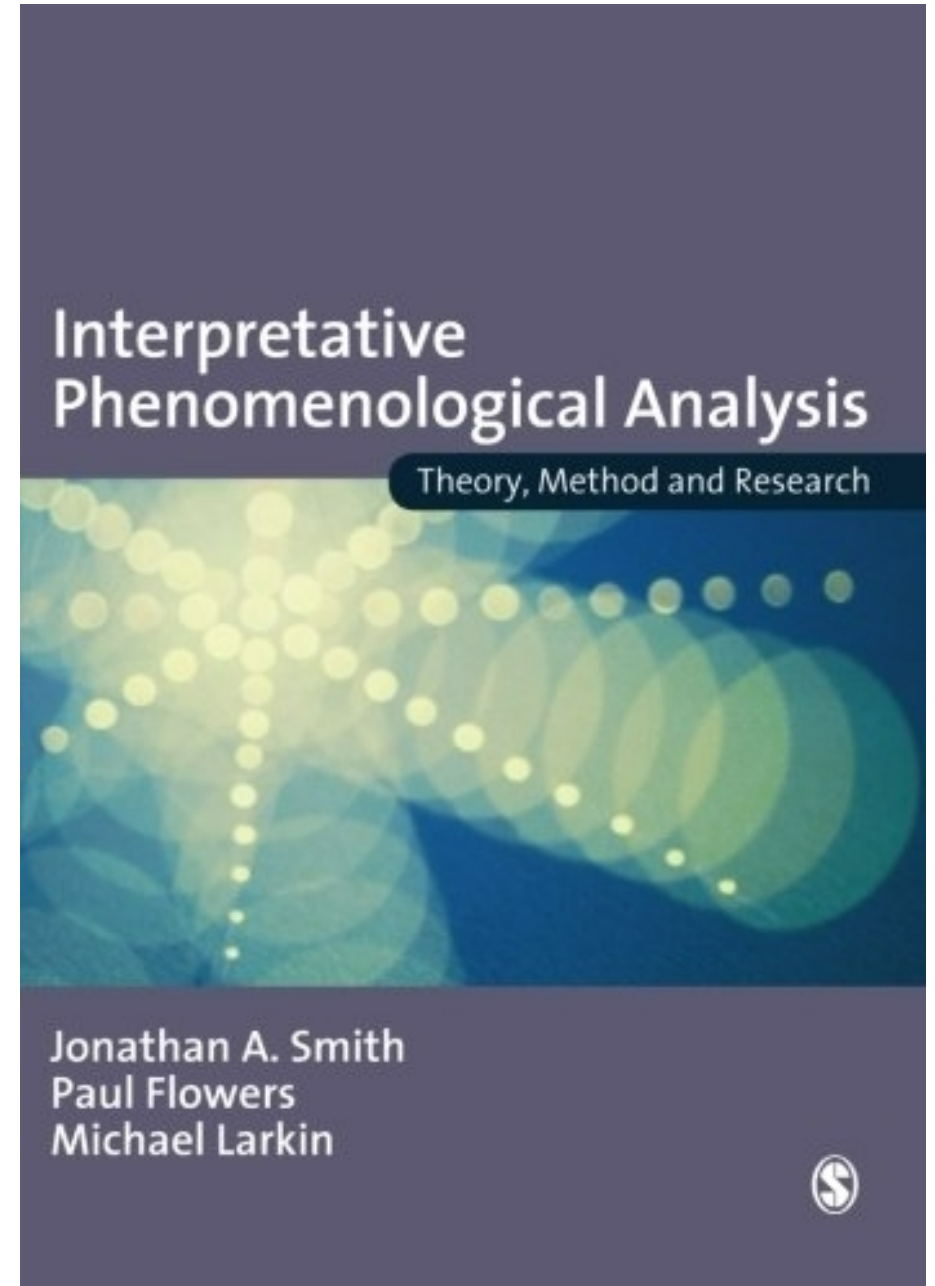
- Although some current research has begun to explore the experiences of foster carers' birth children, much of this is retrospective in design and focuses on carers or children recalling past experiences, a serious limitation to the current evidence base (Hojer, Sebba and Luke, 2013).
- In addition, while the need to focus on the family relationships experienced in the context of fostering has been highlighted, to date the only study specifically addressing the relational changes between foster carers and their birth children did not interview the children (Thompson, McPherson and Marsland, 2016).

Research Question

- To explore how the birth children of foster carers experience their relationship with their parents and how they make sense of this experience.

Method:

- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse semi-structured interviews of eight young people (four male and four female) aged between 14 and 16 about their experience of their relationship with their parents in the context of fostering



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)

Findings

- Three superordinate themes that emerged captured their overall experience.
- These reflected the threats that fostering posed to the parent–child relationship, the processes that enabled the participants to manage them and what ensures that they continue to feel valued in their role within the family.
- Eight subthemes were incorporated under these three superordinate ones

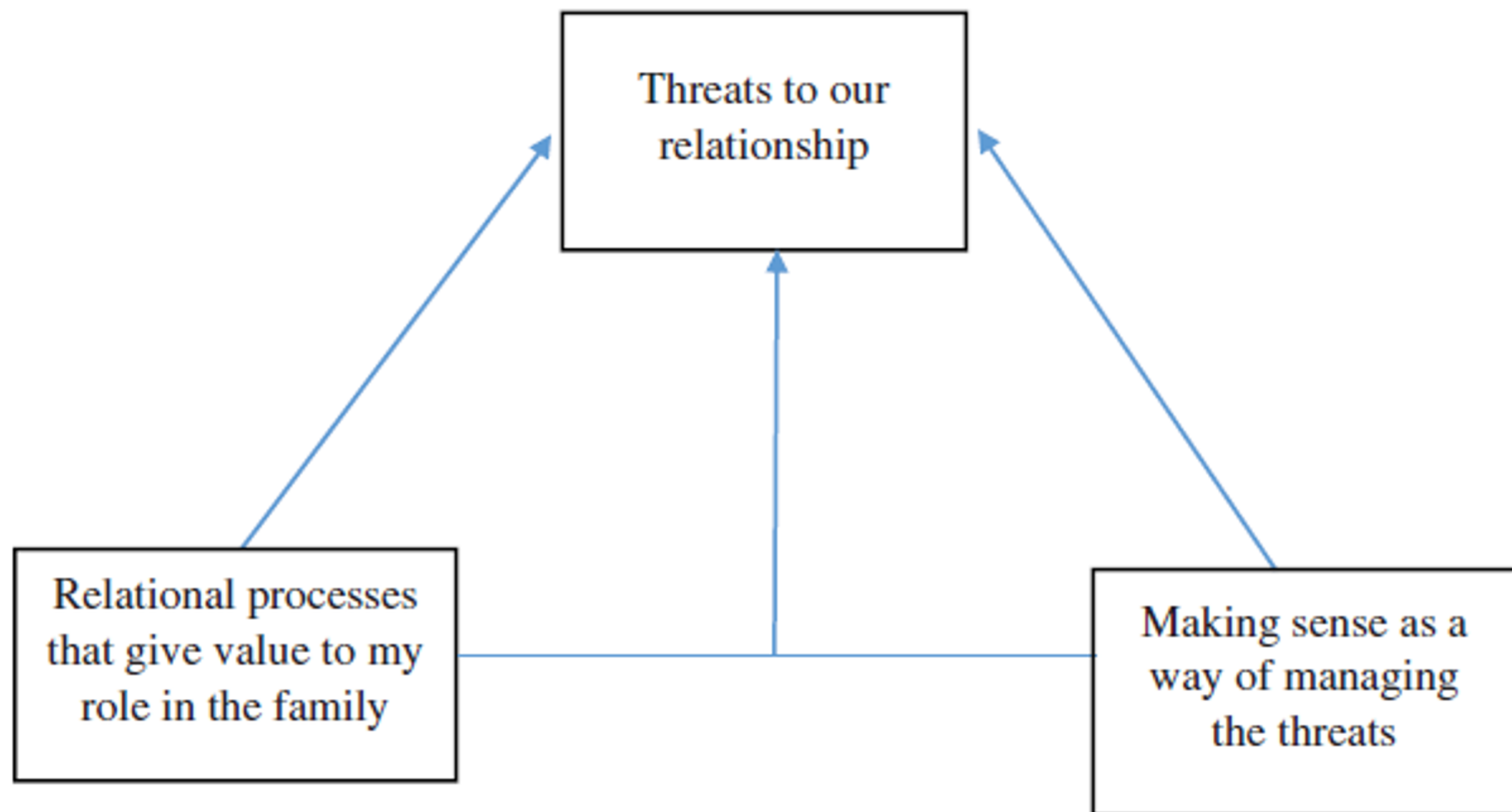


Figure 1. A preliminary model of managing threats to the parent–child relationship.

Relational processes that give value to my role in the family

The relational processes that enabled participants to experience a sense of value and importance within their family.

Feeling valued within fostering/being the carer.

- 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 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*

Relational processes that give value to my role in the family

The relational processes that enabled participants to experience a sense of value and importance within their family.

Feeling valued within my relationship with my parents/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, thus softening the impact of any difficult experiences
- This seemed to be reclaimed after an initial loss

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

The negative aspects of fostering that have the potential to threaten the parent–child relationship.

Missing out.

- experiences that they were not able to have or things they could not do with their parents due to fostering

Loss of attention.

- a loss of attention from their parents as a result of fostering, particularly when the children first moved in

Taking it out on each other.

- recognising that they would often take their annoyance or frustration out on their parents rather than expressing negative emotions to the foster child. This was not necessarily an overt action but was a negative aspect that they had noticed.

Superordinate theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quotation
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

Approaches the young people took in order to make sense of the potential threats to the parent–child relationship.

They were able to utilise different ways of managing these, which served to buffer the impact of the difficulties

Rationalising/positive reframing.

- Several young people explained or justified difficulties by rationalizing 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).

Making sense as a way of managing the threats

Staying attuned to parents' needs.

- The participants also showed 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)*

Making sense as a way of managing the threats

Negotiating working together.

- Some spoke of explicitly negotiate working together with their parents: *'Yeah, we all talked about it and we all talked find or*

Superordinate theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quotation
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)

Managing the impact: Discussion

- Although some effects of fostering were identified that threatened the parent–child relationship, the young people were able to utilise processes that served to buffer their impact.
- Participants were able to make sense of the threats as a way of managing these.
- In addition, they experienced a sense of value in their role, both in their relationship with their parents and in the family as a whole.

Managing the impact: Discussion

- These processes, both individually and combined, may enabled the young people to maintain their parent–child relationship.
- The variation revealed in this study might help explain why research has found it so difficult to reach clear conclusions about the effects of birth children living in the foster home.

Caution about coping: Discussion

- Although these adaptations can be viewed as positive in enabling the young people to 'cope', Hojer, Sebba and Luke (2013) urge caution in that the children of foster carers can put their own needs behind those of the foster children and view them as less important.
- They also found that the children put the needs of their parents before their own.
- It is perhaps surprising, given their age, that so many of the young people in this study were able to skillfully acknowledge and consider the perspectives of others as well as attribute reason and rationalise their own and their parents' responses.
- An important finding was that the impact of threats appeared to be buffered by relational processes that gave the young people a sense of value and purpose.

Parental subsystem

- The experience for these young people was that by taking on the caring role and feeling some value from this, they were 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 network.
- It is a means of protecting the parent–child attachment as the caring role aligns participants with their parents in a positive way, which, together with feeling value in their relationship, enables them to consistently manage the impact of negative experiences.

Limitations

- Small sample
- Stable placements
- Only the children of carers who put themselves forward for the research took part. Thus, it is possible that the sample represented young people who were more outgoing or confident.
- Limited age range (14–16 years)

Messages 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 ways of managing some of the threats.
- Supports the value of a systemic approach and application of attachment theory for understanding the processes of fostering; they not only provide illuminating frameworks but also lend weight to the value of therapeutic practice that '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: 21) and how these meanings can act as protective buffers.

Messages for practice

- The finding that participants experience a sense of value from fostering point to the significance of events that promote the importance of the whole foster family system and recognise the contribution of birth children to the foster care process.
- Some participants explained that they were not able to attend events organised for the foster children, which seemed to evoke a sense of unfairness and exclusion, despite an ethos that they be 'together' as the foster family.

Messages for practice

- The usefulness of meeting with other birth children of carers in order to share experiences and learn from one another was raised by the young people.
- 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.
- They would have the benefit of making good use of the information but also ensuring that carers' birth children feel valued for their contribution.

Messages for practice

- Given the clear need for young people to feel valued in their relationship with their parents and the importance of services taking a role in supporting this, foster carers must be sensitive to the developing needs of their own children, which may be less apparent than those of the foster child.
- The research also highlights the need for social workers to monitor the impact of fostering on the relationship between foster carers and their birth children in order to identify any potential difficulties.

As Williams concluded in a recent article (2017: 1394):

. . . 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.

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The article can be downloaded at:

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