



Is it that we are afraid to ask? A scoping review about sons and daughters of foster parents



Sarah Serbinski*, Aron Shlonsky

University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V4, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Research on foster care focuses almost exclusively on maltreated youth and, to a lesser extent, on foster parents. There is very limited information about the experiences and outcomes of the sons and daughters of parents who choose to foster. The objective of this scoping review was to systematically identify and describe existing empirical research on sons and daughters of foster parents as a beginning effort at understanding this large but understudied population of children and youth. A comprehensive search was conducted that included four key sources: scholarly databases, hand-searches of reference lists, Google Scholar, and personal communications with key foster care stakeholders from North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. All empirical studies within samples that were comprised of sons and daughters of foster parents were included. Over 5500 articles were screened for inclusion. After removing the studies that were not about sons and daughters of foster parents, articles that did not match the inclusion criteria, articles that could not be located, and duplicates, there were 46 articles that met the inclusion criteria describing 39 different studies. An analysis of these indicates that: this literature is in the early stages of knowledge development; interviews/focus groups dominate data collection methods; nonprobability samples are almost always used; even basic demographic data is scarce; and the relationships among and between all participants in the fostering process likely to affect the quality of the fostering experience. As the first scoping review on sons and daughters of foster parents, this study describes much of the known research about this sub-population within foster homes. The results indicate that, more than a century after the first foster homes were established, we are still in the dark ages with respect to the experiences of this sub-population. This article provides a resource for researchers and practitioners to further develop this neglected area of child welfare services.

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1. Introduction

Knowledge development and practice interventions in foster care tend to focus on birth families, kin parents, foster parents, child welfare workers/supervisors, and the structural mechanisms that support the child welfare system (e.g., Sutton & Stack, 2012). Areas of inquiry predominately explore motivations for fostering (e.g., Daniel, 2011; Mauro, 1985; Rhodes, Cox, Orme, & Coakley, 2006), training (e.g., Cooley & Petren, 2011), and recruitment, retention, and support (e.g., Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006), connection to the agency and workers (e.g., Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001), satisfaction (e.g., Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999), and the increase in complex needs of foster children¹

(e.g., Trocmé et al., 2010). Missing from the research and practice knowledge are the experiences of sons and daughters of foster parents.

A major challenge in this area is that there is no consistent terminology used to identify sons and daughters of foster parents. These individuals have been referred to as many things, including: *adopted children*, *biological children*, *biological children within a therapeutic foster family*, *birth children*, *careproviders' children*, *children who foster*, *foster parents' own children*, *home grown children*, *natural children*, *sons and daughters of foster parents*, and *unknown soldiers of foster care*. Irrespective of the terminology used, much of the research has lumped together both biological children and adopted children of foster parents into one category. Each of these categories of children may have experienced fostering differently; however it is difficult to tell based upon the evidence to date. Acknowledging these limits, this study will use the terminology sons and daughters of foster parents, which includes biological, adopted, and step-children of foster parents (herein sons/daughters).

Relative to the knowledge about foster children, sons/daughters have received minimal empirical attention. Ellis (1972) and Wilkes (1974) initially raised concerns about the impact that fostering may

* Corresponding author at: Factor Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada. Tel.: +1 647 385 7115 (mobile).

E-mail addresses: sarah.serbinski@utoronto.ca (S. Serbinski),

aron.shlonsky@utoronto.ca (A. Shlonsky).

¹ The term 'foster children' will be used to denote children and youth placed in out-of-home care as a result of child maltreatment or parental incapacity.

have on this sub-population, but there has only been sporadic research over the past 40 years (Swan & Twigg, 2011). Children in foster care have taken the spotlight when talking about child welfare issues, and rightly so. Child maltreatment is a serious and often harmful experience that is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes that can last a lifetime. The main reason for foster care is to provide what amounts to a corrective experience for children who have been maltreated by offering a safe, nurturing, family environment (Wolins, 1963). In order to increase the likelihood that the fostering environment can provide an optimal experience, quality standards are required and support, in the form of training and other services such as respite care, are often given to foster parents (Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001). However, mention of the sons/daughters is noticeably missing from quality standards and support efforts. There are some isolated examples of efforts being made within child welfare practice, including the “Sons and Daughters of Foster Parents Fostering Week” (e.g., recognized by *The Fostering Network*), support groups (e.g., Bartlett, 2005), and recent development of a training curricula for sons/daughters (e.g., Mills, 2013). Overall, though, inquiry remains limited about sons/daughters.

There is a conceptual, policy, and practice value in differentiating between sons/daughters and foster children. Sons/daughters are part of the fostering family yet minimal policies govern their involvement in fostering beyond being occasionally required to complete a police check (if age appropriate) or to formally acknowledge the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of experiences within the fostering home. The child welfare field should be more inclusive in its thinking about all of the relationships that are developed for foster children while in the care of the child welfare agency. The impact of fostering on sons/daughters can affect whether foster parents continue to foster, and some will terminate placements should they feel that the foster children are having a negative impact on their own children (e.g., Heidbuurt, 1995; Mauro, 1985; Swan, 2002; Wilkes, 1974). Sons/daughters may also influence placement stability for foster children (e.g., Ingleby & Earley, 2008), facilitating or inhibiting the match between foster child and foster home.

There is also reason to consider the well-being of sons/daughters. Concerns from foster parents and social workers have been raised about the potential disruption of family roles and birth order, impacts of behaviors presented by foster children, the effects of separation and loss between sons/daughters and the foster children, and adjustments to changes in discipline (e.g., Lemieux, 1984; Poland & Groze, 1993; Swan, 2002; Wilkes, 1974). Sons/daughters may have similar emotional reactions to the experiences of fostering as their parents (Swan, 2002) because it is the whole family that fosters, not just the parents (Fox, 2001).

Before researchers can conduct outcome studies on sons/daughters, it is important to know the basic demographic information about this sub-population. The most important question: how many sons/daughters are there? Without knowing this information, there is no data on prevalence, quality standards, or outcomes.

The first step toward developing a new research area is to systematically take stock of what has been done and to contextualize this information within current practices and policies. Scoping reviews, to a greater or lesser extent, use systematic review methods that are transparent and replicable to map existing evidence across potentially relevant questions within a given content area (Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, there exists no scoping review about sons/daughters. The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive summary of research involving sons/daughters as study participants. In particular, three guiding research questions are broadly explored: (1) What are the demographic characteristics of sons/daughters?, (2) How and to what extent are the needs, feelings, and opinions of sons/daughters considered as part of the fostering process? and (3) What are the experiences of sons/daughters?. This review lays the groundwork for emerging research in this area by systematically identifying the known research and identifying the gaps in the literature. In doing so, it builds a foundation for the design and implementation of future research with sons/daughters.

2. Methodology

Methods for this review generally followed the guidelines proposed by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010). These include clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria; a detailed accounting of the search, study selection, and data extraction processes; and a narrative synthesis of findings that maps the literature in a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable manner.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion

All English language empirical studies that incorporated sons/daughters in their sample were included in this review. Sources were excluded if they were literature reviews, non-empirical policy-based documents, conference abstracts, non-English studies, training materials, or were not accessible.

2.2. Search strategy

The search strategy included four key sources: scholarly databases, hand-searches of reference lists, Google Scholar searches, and personal communications with key foster care stakeholders from North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. Due to the limited indexing likely available for this less mainstream sub-population, an inclusive search strategy was undertaken in order to increase sensitivity (the likelihood that existing studies would be located). While this approach was less efficient, resulting in a large number of irrelevant studies, it provided greater certainty that relevant articles were found. All screening and data extractions were conducted by the first author (SS).

Twenty-two key social work scholarly databases were used within this review. No restrictions were used during the searches with respect to date limits, research design, source (e.g., article, dissertation, report), peer review status, geographical location, or language. The databases used were: ASSIA, Campbell Collaboration, Child Development & Adolescent Studies, CINAHL, Cochrane Library, Directory of Open Access Journals, EMBASE, ERIC, FRANCIS, Gender Studies Database, Humanities and Social Sciences Index Retrospective: 1907–1984, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, MEDLINE Ovid, OpenSIGLE, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, PsycINFO (Ovid), Scopus, Social Science Abstracts, Social Science

Table 1
Example of search terms.

Source	Search terms
PsychINFO (Ovid)	(biological children or son* and daughter* of foster carer* OR son* and daughter* of foster parent* OR foster carer* own child* OR foster carer* child* OR impact of fostering on everyday life OR children who foster OR influenc* placement outcome OR carers child* OR birth child* OR bio* child* OR impact of foster care on natural child* OR careprovider* child* OR natural child* OR within a therapeutic foster family OR unknown soldiers of foster care) AND (foster car* OR resource* OR contact with natural parent* of OR foster sibling* OR family based care OR family-based care OR foster famil* OR foster parent* OR blended famil* OR split famil* OR parent–child relation* OR parent child relation OR out-of-home care OR out of home care OR family life OR family influence OR family relationship OR father involvement OR sibling relation* OR child welfare OR child maltreatment OR child protection OR societ*)
Google Scholar	("son* and daughter* of foster carer*" OR "son* and daughter* of foster parent*" OR "foster carer* own child*" OR "foster carer* child*" OR "impact of fostering on everyday life" OR "children who foster" OR "influenc* placement outcome" OR "carers child*" OR "birth child*" OR "bio* child*" OR "impact of foster care on natural child*" OR "careprovider* child*" OR "natural child*" OR "within a therapeutic foster family" OR "unknown soldiers of foster care")

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