Settling into a new home as a teenager: About establishing social bonds in different types of foster families in Sweden

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a glimpse into young people's experiences and understandings of everyday life during their initial stages of placement in various types of foster families. The way family interactions strengthen or weaken the social bond between foster youth and foster family is focused upon. In this study the young people in *kinship foster families* reported the strongest social bonds to their foster families and the adolescents in *traditional foster families* the weakest. This is in line with previous research. However, youth in *network foster families* with whom they were not so close prior to placement also reported rather strong social bonds to the foster family, which is not well known. Including network foster families in the study sheds light on the importance of adolescents' active involvement and agency in choosing their foster family. Examples of family interactions which seem to be crucial in strengthening social bonds, also in traditional foster families, are e.g. fair treatment by other family members, mutual family activities, negotiating to find solutions, and, which is not so well known, humorous joking and laughing together.

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1. Introduction

The family's role for adolescents in general is often underestimated (see Johansson, Brunnberg, & Eriksson, 2007). Children are active participants in the process of making family connections, just as families also connect children, more or less successfully (Brannen, Heptinstall, & Bhopal, 2000). Inclusive conceptions of family are matched by inclusive practices. For many young people in foster care the foster family will be of critical importance, even when birth-family members are also providing support to the young person (Schofield & Beek, 2009). The situation for foster children may be especially critical since they might have experienced traumatic changes of family life (Brannen et al., 2000). However, many young people coming from traumatic childhoods can benefit from active and sensitive foster care. The greater maturity of adolescence can help them to reflect upon their commitment to the foster family (Schofield & Beek, 2009). This connection to the foster family may be different in different types of foster families. According to most national and international research, placements in kinship care are more stable than placements in non-related, so-called "traditional" foster care see (e.g. Chamberlain et al., 2006; Sallnäs, Vinnerljung, & Kyhle Westermark, 2004; Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009). This difference brings stabilizing and non-stabilizing processes in foster care

to the fore. Research about everyday life in foster families is rare, particularly from the young people's point of view.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on everyday family interactions that strengthen or weaken the social bond between foster youth and foster family after placement, from the young people's perspectives, and to ascertain whether there are differences in their experiences that correspond to various types of foster families.

The three types of foster families presented in this paper are as follows:

Kinship foster family, which is a family related to the foster child.
"*Network*" *foster family*, which is a non-related, previously known, but not very close family chosen by the adolescent and usually also by his/her birth parents. It can be a former contact family, a sibling's former foster family, a friend's family, or just a family one has got to know.

"*Traditional*" *foster family*, which is a previously unknown family, recruited through the social services.

Research questions concern how family interactions influence the adolescents' emotions and attitudes to the foster family, and how these family interactions function in the kinship, the network, and the traditional foster families.

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1.1. Theoretical perspectives

The underlying perspective of this study understands children as social agents shaping and shaped by their circumstances. The young people are seen as active participants and subjects in cooperation with the surrounding world. They are not only active in the construction of their own social lives, but also in the lives of people around them, in their social relationships (James & Prout, 1997). Children are to be seen in their present state of being, as capable of agency and choice, not only as future adults. They have needs but also resources (Davis & Hill, 2008). Mayall (2008) discusses family relations, particularly between child and parent, and considers mutual child-adult respect to be important, as well as children's right to participate in decisions.

The focus on everyday life in this paper is directed towards actions, events, and flows that take place in the various relations within the family, and in which both adults and children participate. Routines, rituals, and actions are negotiated and renegotiated among the members of the family (Bäck-Wiklund, 2001). The importance of specific emotions, such as joy, love, fear, shame, guilt, and pride, for human behaviour and interactions is theorized by Scheff (1994, 2006). He sees these feelings – for example of shame and pride, that is to say primary emotions – as connected with an individual's social ties and as influencing the individual's self-esteem. Scheff (2006:142) uses a relationship concept, "social bonds", by which he means "deep mutual understanding and identification" between persons or groups. This is also called "attunement", which Scheff regards as a cognitive/emotional concept connected with solidarity. Shame is the opposite of pride. Shame shows there is a threat to the social bond, even in disguise or hidden from oneself and others. Pride signals a secure bond. Scheff (2006) suggests that if there is mutual understanding and identification, then genuine love is possible. In this context, foster children's feelings about themselves and their birth parents, and especially the foster carers' attitude towards birth parents, might be of special importance. Whether the young people's feelings are closer to shame, particularly if not acknowledged, or pride, may be important to the process of adapting to the foster home. This is particularly the case as the foster parents' attitude may diminish or strengthen these emotions.

1.2. Everyday life in a new foster family

Previous research about family interactions that may influence the social bond between youth and foster family, mostly consisting of small-scale qualitative studies, will be described in the following section.

In a Canadian study, foster children give advice about the transition into foster care (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010). Getting information about foster care, being familiarized with the home, pets, routines, and responsibilities, and building a personal relationship through "getting to know you" conversations, activities, etc. are seen as important (Mitchell et al., 2010). In a US study, adults with previous experience of being in foster care are interviewed about how foster carers have influenced their self-esteem. To be loved and to have one's needs listened to and acted upon are important (Luke & Coyne, 2008). It is also important to give children time and attention on a daily basis (Brannen et al., 2000; Luke & Coyne, 2008; O'Neill, 2004), and to provide security and set boundaries (Brannen et al., 2000). An Australian study of foster children and their foster families suggests that children want structure and rules, and to be helped with strategies for dealing with things that worry them. Older children point out their right to make choices for themselves (O'Neill, 2004).

Feeling different from the other children is negative, but such feelings can be reduced by making foster children feel like part of the family. This can be done by assigning them a well-defined role with their own responsibilities, by taking them on family outings and holidays, and by treating all children in the household equally, especially concerning discipline (Luke & Coyne, 2008). Foster carers have noticed that other children in the foster family can welcome new foster children by "educating" them (Riggs, Augoustinos, & Delfabbro, 2009). However, biological children in foster families can have ambiguous feelings towards their foster siblings. In a Swedish study (Höjer, 2007), teenagers think that their parents have had less time for them since becoming foster parents. In addition, being part of an extended permanent family, the informal network, is appreciated (Gilligan, 2006; Messing, 2006; O'Neill, 2004). Calling foster parents Mum and Dad can create a sense of family (Luke & Coyne, 2008; Riggs et al., 2009). Riggs et al. (2009) suggest that this naming symbolizes connection and can be seen as a healing process in establishing parental relationships.

Andersson (2009) reports that a tolerant and supportive attitude on the part of the foster parents facilitates foster children's possibility to work through their feelings about their parents' shortcomings. This corresponds with foster children emphasizing the importance of parents and siblings (Brannen et al., 2000; O'Neill, 2004). Foster children can also benefit from foster parents' and foster siblings' support in other contexts, like managing school and having access to peers (Hedin, Höjer, & Brunnberg, 2011).

Negative experiences mentioned in previous research are lack of power, which can result in challenging behaviour (O'Neill, 2004), and having to ask for a drink or to take a shower (Luke & Coyne, 2008). Narratives from e.g. Ghana also tell of not being treated the same as foster parents' own children (Gardner, 2004; Kuyini, Alhassan, Tollerud, Weld, & Haruna, 2009), being hit or insulted by their caregivers, or not being able to ask for things they need for fear of being beaten (Kuyini et al., 2009). Some children experienced helplessness and frustration when their foster carers did not take their opinions and ideas into consideration (Mitchell et al., 2010).

In short, foster children in different countries want to be treated like anybody else. They want to communicate in the foster family and take part in mutual activities, to be listened to, and to be able to influence their situation.

1.3. Similarities and differences between different types of foster families

In many studies, "kinship carers" means both relatives and friends/network (see e.g. Farmer & Moyers, 2008). Hence, it is difficult to find studies also focusing on non-relative network families as foster families. The closest examples that we found are from Sweden. A national study of breakdowns of teenage placements reports lower numbers of obvious breakdowns in kinship foster homes (17%), network foster homes (38%), and former contact families (31%) compared to traditional foster homes (41%) (Sallnäs et al., 2004). A follow-up report on former foster children, produced by the social services in one municipality, also suggests that if the young people are familiar with the foster home before placement, whether it be a kinship or non-relative (network) home, their placements are more likely to turn out happily (Hansson & Knutsson, 2000).

Many studies are focused on outcomes. In a review concerning kinship care and traditional foster care, Winokur et al. (2009) conclude that children in kinship care do better than those in traditional care with regard to behavioural development, mental health, and placement stability. The results indicate that children in kinship care are less likely to re-enter out-of-home care than children in traditional foster care. Furthermore, another review finds the evidence that kinship families are less qualified to foster than non-kinship families to be inconclusive (Cuddeback, 2004). Cuddeback also reports that kinship foster families have fewer resources and receive less support. Hegar and Rosenthal (2009) suggest that kinship or sibling placements may be especially beneficial to children already at risk in the child welfare system. Farmer and Moyers (2008) conclude that kinship placements last longer than traditional foster-care placements.

Results from a US national study of mental health of adult alumni of kinship care indicate that kinship care alone does not result in more positive mental health outcomes (Fechter-Leggett & O'Brien, 2010).