

SUPPORT REGARDING STAKEHOLDERS (I)

Contents

Nº1 – “No one call me mom again”: the use of family language for people in non-kinship family foster care (Wulleman, L., Grietens, H., Noens, I. & Vliegen, N.)	1
Nº39 – Foster care family: The boundary between public and private space (Cojocaru, D.) ...	3
Nº11 – Experience of foster care guidance by foster mothers: a Q-stydy (Vanderfaeillie, J., Verheyden, C., Wouters, O., Gypen, L. & Van Holen, F.)	5
Nº37 – The “cost” of regulations and love: A theoretical model on the role of foster carers (Salvador, V. & Luke, N.)	7
Nº21 – Images of the foster family from the perspective of Swiss professionals in foster care (Reimer, D. & Van Oordt, N.)	9

Nº1 – “No one call me mom again”: the use of family language for people in non-kinship family foster care

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Objectives

Our contemporary family landscape is littered with diverse and sometimes complex family structures, all of which employ certain means to create a family identity (Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010; Miller-Ott, 2017) and to demonstrate that they are family (Miller-Ott, 2017). One way to construct and maintain this sense of family is through the use of family language or discourse (e.g., mom, brother) (Docan-Morgan, 2017; Thomas et al., 2017). Although all families use family discourse to construct and maintain their family identity, the more complex the family form, the more communicative strategies members must develop to address their belonging within the family group or to outsiders (Galvin, 2014). Research on the topic of names and labels in non-kinship foster care is sparse and focuses exclusively on fostered individuals and their foster carers. Therefore, drawing on Galvin’s (2006) theoretical lens of discourse dependency, this study examines how various actors involved in non-kinship foster care (1) discursively construct and maintain their family identity and (2) what influences their use of family language.

Method

Based on focus groups and interviews with 27 participants in Flanders (fostered individuals, n = 5; birth parents, n = 4; foster carers, n = 10; birth children of foster carers, n = 4; foster care workers, n = 4), this paper demonstrates the complexity of naming and labelling in foster care.

Results and conclusions

This paper discusses how discourse provides ways to create, strengthen, affirm, equate, protect, and refute family ties within one family system, but also serves as a tool to display people’s belonging and the normality of these relationships to outsiders. These internal and external practices need not coincide, such as, foster children who addressed their foster

carers by their first names at home but referred to them as their fathers at school, making them feel “normal” and “like other children.” Disagreements among the various actors centered on whether these designations functioned as titles that could be inherited or acquired, and thus, who deserved these titles, especially when individuals felt their own position was threatened. Participants who emphasized that they had no difficulty sharing these terms did so primarily in terms of their position as a “real” family member (“As long as they know who their real father is,” “they still see a difference between their real children and the foster children”). However, all naming and labeling practices appeared to be dynamic, moving back and forth for a variety of reasons. These included the length of placement, sudden changes in family situation(s), cross-pollination of family terms between foster siblings, and the influence of how outsiders referred to an expected family member. Specific areas for practice development and research that can help people involved in non-kinship foster care navigate family discourse are discussed.

Some takeaway points:

- Sharing family terminology proved to be a complex issue for all involved in non-kinship foster care relationships (i.e., parents, foster carers and biological children of foster carers).
- Both the biological family and the foster family are discourse dependent.
- These families are not just “foster families” or “birth families,” but often also stepfamilies, adoptive families, same-sex families, intercultural families, etc., all of which position them in a particular way regarding family identity and language.

Nº39 – Foster care family: The boundary between public and private space

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Objectives

- 1) Exploring how the foster care job changes the family environment.
- 2) Understanding how public and private boundaries work in the family space of the foster family.

Method

The research design is qualitative about the foster family and surrogate parenting practices in the foster family. The qualitative approach explores the ways in which professional foster carers relate to the child being cared for, to the profession of foster carer and to the organization of the family environment in the conditions of his / her deprivatization. At the same time, in order to ensure the diversity of data sources, to increase the completeness of the data and to have reflected the opinions of several members of the foster family, we interviewed, where possible, nursing partners (spouses) and biological children of them. 30 interviews were conducted, of which: 21 interviews with female foster carers, 4 interviews with male foster carers, 5 male (spouse) of foster care parent.

Results

Foster Care is a social service for children in need who, for a limited time, are placed in foster care, specially employed to care for these children at home. Like any profession, maternal care was concerned with the development of skills and attestation, the development of skills and the delimitation of responsibilities and responsibilities in relation to the child in care and the institution of protection. In order to transmit the values, norms, prescriptions and institutional requirements of care, those who want to become professionals in this activity must obtain a formal recognition of the stock of knowledge, the level of skills and competences in raising, educating and caring for children. In order to promote institutional culture, public and private providers of social services for children organize training courses

for foster carers, disseminating the prescriptions generated by the need to ensure the rights of the child, to serve the best interests of the child and to promote family care.

The reception of a child in foster care essentially changes the way the substitute family organizes and functions. Located between local and institutional values promoted by the child protection system, the foster family suffers a profound process of deprivation of the family environment. In order to adapt, the family identifies a series of strategies meant to save, however, private space by changing the boundary between public and private, by dissociating the results according to its status (private person or employed person).

Conclusions

The foster family, which is an institutional construction, which adapts its border between public and private, trying to delimit its responsibilities as an employed person from those of another person caring for a child, being in a permanent role ambiguity: parent or professional.

Recommendations

Reflections on the way in which the *overlapping of the professionalization of parenting* can be managed (in the form of a substitute family), over a process of instrumentalization of the value of the child in the protection system, in relation to the care family.

Understanding how the *ambiguity of the institutional discourse* in relation to role expectations vis-à-vis foster families can be reduced, which induces an ambivalent self-identification of them, as professionals and parents; this ambiguity is sometimes reported in negative terms by foster care or their partners, in relation to their right to suspend temporary care responsibilities during the rest leave.

How can the instrumentalization of the child in the foster family be influenced because the child cared for in the foster care family is an important economic contributor in this family.

Nº11 – Experience of foster care guidance by foster mothers: a Q-study

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Objectives

Although many research is available on the support needs of foster parents as well as on the related tasks of foster care workers, insight into the implementation of foster care guidance and how this is experienced by foster parents is lacking.

Method

With an exploratory Q-study, it is examined with what frequency tasks are done by foster care workers according to the foster mothers and whether different profiles of guidance can be distinguished. 28 foster mothers in long-term foster care from one out of five foster care agencies filled in the Q-sort. They sorted 36 tasks of a foster care worker regarding the frequency on an 11-point scale ranging from "not often performed" (-5), to "very often performed" (+5).

Results

“Monitoring the development of the foster child through conversations with the foster mother and the foster child” was most frequently performed task. “Monitoring the foster child's development through questionnaires and observing parenting” was the least frequently performed task. Using factor analysis two profiles of guidance were distinguished. They differ regarding supporting cooperation between all parties involved, supporting the biological parents, promoting the well-being of the foster parents and the parenting of the foster child.

Conclusion

Foster care workers are focused on the development of the foster child. In order to promote the development of the foster child, guidance of participants (foster child, birth parents, foster mothers) is adapted to their needs.

Takeaway points

- Monitoring the development of the foster child through conversations with the foster mother and the foster child” was most frequently performed task.
- Two groups of foster care guidance could be distinguished.
- Guidance is adapted to the needs of stakeholders in the foster care placement.

Nº37 – The “cost” of regulations and love: A theoretical model on the role of foster carers

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Background and objectives

The role of foster carers has been described in the literature as similar to the role of a parent, however with some additional tasks. This presentation intends to focus on the perspectives of experts by experience on the role of foster carers, in England and in Portugal - countries with comparable legislative definition of foster care but with different welfare states and structures of children’s services.

Method

This presentation draws on qualitative data from a mixed-methods research project. Young people who were in foster care, young adults who had experienced being in foster care, foster carers who had at least one child in placement, and social workers who were working with foster carers, in England and in Portugal, took part in focus groups and shared their views. More specifically 99 participants across 19 focus groups discussed what makes a good foster carer and how placement success can be measured.

Results

Participants focused on foster carers promoting children’s development and permanence, while also supporting children’s relationships with their families. They also recognised the influence of children’s services and social workers on the role of foster carers, but also of foster carers’ family and social network.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on these findings it was possible to develop a theoretical model on the role of foster carers, which can influence practice and policy in these countries. This model highlights strengths and areas of development in each country, namely the need to support the sense

of belonging between children and foster families in England, and between children and birth families in Portugal. In a future piece of research, this theory will be tested in countries with different welfare states and structures of children's services.

Nº21 – Images of the foster family from the perspective of Swiss professionals in foster care

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Throughout Europe, foster families are increasingly seen as the preferred placement model for children and adolescents (Reimer 2021) who cannot grow up with their parents. This also applies to Switzerland with its complex federal system. At the same time, society is undergoing subject to major changes, which reflects in the socially accepted images of family, and an apparent trend towards more diversity (Bauer and Wiezorek 2017; Waterstradt 2015). This raises the question of how Swiss professionals in foster care deal with societal pluralism and the heterogeneity of the children and adolescents for whom they seek and accompany suitable foster families. What mental representations of foster families are currently emerging in the professional field of foster care?

In our project at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), which is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, we are using grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to examine the mental representations of foster families that professionals in foster care display. The analysis is based on nine group discussions with a total of 47 professionals in foster care from German and French-speaking Switzerland.

The results of the study so far:

1. Our findings show a relatively homogeneous image of the foster family: Traditional, middle-class family models in which the foster mother does most of the family work and the foster father has paid work. Furthermore, the foster family owns a home or farm in a rural area and keeps pets. The foster parents are communicative, "open" and actively engaged in many ways. They provide a well-structured daily routine and have an impeccable reputation.
2. We demonstrate that the professionals in foster care often base their images of foster families on their own needs. Among other things, communication skills and a structured approach facilitate cooperation with professionals and authorities.

3. We explain how this self-interest is concealed by rhetorical strategies: For example, our research shows that the term "openness" actually stands for a sense of compliance towards the authorities.

Based on these findings, we observe a discrepancy between the requirements of a pluralistic society and the heterogeneity of foster children on the one hand, and the ideas of professionals in foster care on the other. Moreover, we observed a conspicuously low level of self-reflection on the part of the professionals.

Recommendations:

- Mental representations of the foster family shape professional action.
- Mental representations of the foster family by professionals in foster care (in Switzerland) do not correspond to the needs of a pluralistic society.
- Mental representations of the foster family by professionals in foster care (in Switzerland) do not meet the needs of children.
- A greater self-reflection could lead to more diverse images and strengthen the child-centredness of foster care.

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