

Strengthening social identities of foster youth

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Social support and diversity

During adolescence, the formation of one's social identity becomes a major task (Erikson, 1968; Meeus et al., 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Verschueren et al., 2017). A social identity concerns the relation an individual has with its social environment, and includes a sense of belonging (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Verkuyten, 2018, p. 79). In Dutch foster care, many foster youth are transculturally placed. This means that they live with foster parents who have a different ethnic, cultural and/ or religious background. For these youth, the question 'to whom do I belong', can become increasingly urgent and complex. Identity is fluid and may change over time. This means that the formation of one's identity may be a continuing process of exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1966; Phinney & Ong, 2007). This process gains complexity when an individual person has, or meets different social identities that are difficult to integrate (Roccas en Brewer, 2002).

During the symposium we will address an intersectional approach on transcultural/transreligious foster care. Based on studies conducted in the Netherlands on religious identity (Bartelink, 2022, Van Bergen et al., 2022), worldview differences in foster families (Van de Koot, 2022) and ethnic identity (Degener, Grietens & Van Bergen 2022), we will explore what challenges foster youth meet in developing a coherent social identity, and challenges foster parents and foster care workers meet to support foster youth in developing their identities.

1. Grasping ethnic identity fluctuations of transculturally placed foster youth over time

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Transcultural placements occur frequently in foster care and impact the ethnic identity of ethnic minority foster youth. We investigated how foster youth's ethnic identity develops over time, and what role ethnic minority as well as ethnic majority influences play. We conducted a longitudinal qualitative analysis, in which we explored how ten transculturally placed foster youth develop their ethnic identity and what fluctuations occur over time. Results show that the ethnic identity of foster youth seems to be influenced by a sense of belonging towards foster parents, birth parents and peers, as well as the foster youth's ability to cope with receiving contradictory ethnicity messages. Furthermore, societal movements and discussions about discrimination and racism impact the way foster youth view themselves as being an ethnic minority in majority society.

The paper discusses that in their search for belonging, transculturally placed foster youth are confronted with a mechanism of intersecting marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) and contradictory ethnic identity messages (Manzi et al., 2014; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Both themes refer to foster youth being approached as "the other." These mechanisms frustrated their search for ethnic belonging to the same or similar ethnic group, which is essential for one's ethnic identity.

Attention will be paid to how foster parents, birth parents and foster care workers can support foster youth in safely exploring an ethnic identity, and how a positive bond with both foster parents and birth parents, can further contribute to this process.

2. Religious differences in foster families

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Foster families who raise children that have a different faith background than their own, encounter dilemmas around how to navigate the reality of their own religious family lives and the necessary space for foster children to shape their own journeys when it comes to religion. Children raised in an orthodox Protestant foster families in particular, are immersed in a Christian way of living and perceiving the world.

This paper will offer an intersectional analysis of foster parents strategies to navigate these differences. It draws on insights from the academic study of religion on children's needs related to religious socialization and identity formation, taking into account how shifts in religious trajectories occur in interaction with changing relationships with parents (Smith et. al. 2020, Beekers 2015, Tubbergen 2013, Maliepaard and Lubbers 2013). Foster children are furthermore embedded in more complex networks and relationships that shape their multiple loyalties and attachments (Degener 2021). In addition, religious differences in foster placements are often overlapping with other differences, such as ethnicity, class, education, (mental) health (Van Bergen et. al. 2022).

Bringing literature into conversation with findings from qualitative research on religion in foster families, this paper will argue that foster parenting children with a different religious or non-religious background requires an approach to religion that creates space for future shifts in needs and choices to occur. It will offer suggestions what this means for foster parents and support from professionals at the start and throughout the placement.

3. Perspective of foster care workers: Worldview differences in foster families

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Children in transreligious foster care (Van Bergen et al, 2022) have a right to continuity in religious upbringing (UN, 1990; Scolnicov, 2007; Van der Zon, 2020). Furthermore, good co-parenting relationships and willingness to collaborate are important for successful placements (Konijn, et al., 2019; Hedin, 2015; Van Holen et al., 2019). For these reasons, foster care workers are entrusted with the task of supporting the triadic relationship of foster child, birth parents and foster parents in dealing with worldview differences.

Based on in-depth-interviews with foster care workers (n=16) five skills in dealing with worldview differences can be distinguished: 1) empathizing with the other, 2) inquisitiveness to discover what is essential for the other, 3) initiating worldview conversations and keeping them going, 4) fostering self-reflection in worldview, 5) manoeuvring between and monitoring all interests. Qualitative analysis of interviews with both foster care workers and foster parents (n=25) show the need for well-informed birth parents, also with regard to the impact of the foster parents worldview practices, when consenting to a placement. Differences-within-worldview can be as difficult to handle as differences-between-worldviews. It is helpful when foster parents, supported by foster care workers, are able to manoeuvre between all interests in this triadic relationship, without denying their own identity, but giving the foster child space to explore their birth family's worldview. Ultimately, the identity formation of the foster child is the priority.

4. Moral dilemmas in foster care due to religious differences

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Many ethnoreligious-minority foster children in several western countries, including the Netherlands, are placed and permanently live with ethnically and religiously non-matched foster families (i.e., in trans-religious foster care). We examine whether and which moral dilemmas exist around the issue of how religion should be weighted in trans-religious foster care to provide ethnoreligious-minority foster children with healthy identity development.

We applied a thematic analysis to 17 qualitative interviews (seven foster parent/foster child dyads and three foster parents) taken from two pre-existing datasets.

From the data we retrieved five moral dilemmas in trans-religious foster care placements, which are discussed in relation to the following ethical arguments: 1) pressure from birth parents and parents of foster children to abide by their religious praxis; 2) objections of the foster family to the faith of the birth family; 3) a switch to the faith of the foster family by the foster child; 4) challenges to the religious identity searches of foster children due to ethnoreligious boundary drawing between majority and minority groups; and 5) the impact of religious traditions on the bodily integrity of foster children.

We argue that it is in the best interest of foster children to have a foster family who, when making (some) religious choices on their behalf, is sensitive to the particular child and their developing identity with regard to their religious ideas and beliefs. Foster families need support regarding religious reflection and religious self-determinism in their foster children.