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What is This?

Against the odds: Foster carers' perceptions of family, commitment and belonging in successful placements

Nicholas Oke[1], Helen Rostill-Brookes[2], and Michael Larkin[3]

Abstract

This study examines carer attributes associated with placement stability for teenagers growing up in long term foster care, focusing on unexpected placement success. We explored experiences and perceptions relating to family, belonging and commitment in a group of foster carers providing a stable placement for a young person who had not been expected to settle. These placements showed positive outcome, despite factors in the child's history that might have predicted otherwise.

Seven foster carers were interviewed following a semi-structured guide, which covered their ideas about their relationship with the child in question, about the foster family, and the child's sense of belonging in foster and birth family. Analysis of carers' accounts of placements which had succeeded 'against the odds' revealed four major themes, described under the headings *My Child*—emotional bonding, the carers' enlarged view of family and their parental regard for the young person; *Jam in the Sandwich*—working within a 'compromised space' between Local Authority and birth family; *Repair and Rebuild*—the craft of fostering including managing the foster/ birth family boundary; *Sticking with It*—resilience, tenacity and maintaining hopefulness.

The carers' accounts offer pointers towards the ingredients of successful placements and prompt reflection on how these may be supported and promoted. They also highlight tensions inherent in the foster carer task relating to carers' parental functioning for young people in long-term foster care.

Keywords

belonging, commitment, family, foster care, placement stability

Introduction and background

This qualitative study was inspired by observations in clinical practice of foster placements with unexpected good outcome, and examines the nature of carer commitment in such situations. The young

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people looked after by the carers who participated in this study had achieved stable placements and surprisingly good levels of psychosocial functioning, contrary to indications in their earlier history. Foster carers' own reported experiences of these placements form the basis of the present enquiry.

Placement stability is widely considered central to enhancing long term educational, social and emotional functioning for children in foster care. Currently the UK Government's criteria for stable placement are that a child has been continuously looked after by a Local Authority for four years and has remained in the same placement for two years (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). The same criteria for stability are used in the present study.

The Government's own target of 80% placement stability has not been achieved. Foster care breakdown, in the form of unplanned ending of placement for a child, occurs in 19 to 40 percent (depending on placement type) of all foster care placements (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Rushton & Dance, 2004). In long term foster care, child related factors positively correlated with probability of placement breakdown include being older rather than younger at placement, disruption of previous placements, low educational achievement, mental health disturbance and delinquency (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Doelling & Johnson,1990; Minnis & Devine, 2001; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). Our target young people showed these features on entry to their present, successful, placements.

While there has been considerable research on the problematic aspects of care for children living outside their families of origin (Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodamn, & Ford, 2002), the features of placements in which a child thrives are less well explored. Of relevance are findings on carer variables contributing to positive outcomes.

Carers' commitment to children and to making a contribution in the community have been linked with better attachments with fostered children (Cole, 2005). Foster carers whose parenting styles are organized and positive during placement, and where there is consistent emotional availability and sensitivity, show fewer disruptions of placement (Chamberlain, Price, Reid, Lansvek, Fisher, & Stoolmiller, 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Wilson, Petrie & Sinclair, 2003;). Inclusivity in terms of foster family relations with the fostered child has been shown to exert a beneficial effect on placement stability (Leathers, 2006). Added to this, the quality of foster parent relationship in the foster home also affects placement outcome (Lipscombe, Moyers & Farmer, 2004; Orme, Bueler, McSurdy, Rhodes, Cox, & Patterson, 2004). Our study fleshes out some of these factors through an in-depth qualitative approach to carers' perspectives on success.

We focus on situations where young people who show features correlated with high likelihood of placement breakdown have thrived and settled. As an investigation of 'exceptions' in terms of positive rather than expected negative outcome, our perspective is informed by 'positive psychology' (Carr, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). The focus of inquiry is on human strengths, resilience and the capacity to develop, notwithstanding adversity. This accords with 'solution focused' approaches (deJong & Berg, 2001; De Shazer, 1988; Selekman, 1997), which privilege what *works* rather than what doesn't, using exceptions and 'outlying' resolutions to problems as starting points for learning and change.

Rationale and aims of the study

We approached this study with the two constructs of 'commitment' and 'belonging' as frames through which carers' accounts and concerns were viewed. They are often used in descriptions of children and foster care although under-theorized in research studies and usually mentioned as part of the 'backdrop' in discussion. In this study they are explicitly explored and brought to the fore through interview with carers. The two concepts are conceptually 'open to insight'; people can access and report on them directly in relation to themselves.

Commitment is often mentioned in the literature as an important feature of foster carer attributes (Sinclair, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2004, p. 155). It has been one focus of the work of the Infant Care Giver Project at the University of Delaware (Dozier, 2005). The project provides intervention programmes aimed at the development of a secure attachment between a child and new caregiver. Foster carers are helped to find ways of responding to the child in their care without being 'scripted' by the expectation of care-giving that the child brings to the placement on the basis of previous experience.

As part of the assessment of the foster carer's attitude and sense of connectedness with the infant they look after, the Delaware project has developed the 'This is My Baby' interview. This is a semi-structured interview designed to assess the carer's sense of emotional bond and commitment to the child, which requires the carer to reflect on their relationship with the child, on how they see this as affecting the child both currently and in the future, and on the carer's hopes for the child as a developing young person. The interview explores a carer's determination to look after their child and the extent to which they are prepared to take risks, emotionally and physically, on behalf of the child (a continuum characterized as extending from 'I do it because I'm paid' to 'I'd go in front of a bus for her'). It has been shown that this relatively simple assessment of 'commitment' by care givers of fostered infants and toddlers is a robust predictor of placement outcome in terms of the adjustment and well being of the children concerned (Ackerman & Dozier, 2006). The interview in the present study incorporates some specific elements of this schedule. Although originally designed for carers of infants and toddlers, the main thrust of the 'This is My Baby' inquiry, exploring carers' emotional bond and commitment to the child looked after, was quite applicable to the carers of older children in the present study.

'Belonging' is a word meaning literally 'in a state of yearning desire' and derives from the old English 'longen', to 'yearn for'. It refers to a sense of origin, or an emotional connection with a social or physical location. Triseliotis (2002) identifies a child's 'sense of belonging', 'emotional security' and 'general well being' as three variables that are generally more positively present in adoption than in fostering. Grosso and Nagliero (2004) consider the tension between the 'necessity of belonging' and the 'need to differentiate' as two key components in the process of identity formation and explore how this process is affected by the condition of non-biological filiation which pertains in foster and adoptive settings. They suggest that in these circumstances, adult carers are required to hold a greater awareness of 'relationship' than in biological parent-child situations. Different methods and time scales are needed for the construction of emotional bonds between child and carer.

We explored these concepts with carers and set out to address the following questions: How do the carers understand their relationship with the target young person? How do they understand the idea of belonging in the foster family? How do they make sense of their success 'against the odds'?

Approach

An enquiry of this sort, which seeks to build a qualitative understanding of transactions within and between people, lends itself to a systematic exploration of participants' first hand experiences, the assertions and denials they make, the concerns they have and how they formulate reality from their perspective. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003) was chosen as the qualitative method. As respondents in the enquiry, carers were assumed to be capable of knowing their own minds and of speaking for themselves. Within this method, '*interpretative*' refers to the stance of the researcher in considering what respondents have to say (Dallos & Vetere, 2005). Our study was particularly interested in belonging and commitment and the carers' accounts were analyzed with these in mind.

The method is idiographic in approach, being concerned with detailed analyses of one or a few cases. The 'meaning making' of participants is gathered and interpreted in a systematic, transparent and accountable way (Smith, 1995; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

Participants and criteria for selection

We recruited seven foster carers in a single Local Authority, looking after a young person in the age range 12 to 17 years old. Narrowing the focus to this age range ensured homogeneity of support arrangements, financing, training provision and other variables across the carers studied, who were all 'long term' carers of adolescents. The adolescents themselves, notwithstanding individual differences in previous experiences of care, were expected to show some broadly age related common features in terms of current social and developmental needs.

In line with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the respondents were intentionally chosen and recruited through their voluntary participation after initial approach and discussion. They were identified according to the following criteria:

1. The 'Looked After' child in question had been in placement with the carer for at least two years, and had been 'looked after' for four or more years. These criteria are in line with UK Department for Education and Skills (2006) descriptors of stable placement.
2. Scrutiny of the Looked After Child (LAC) Statutory Review forms for each child showed social worker appraisal of the placement as 'stable'.
3. The history of the child's *previous* placement/s showed at least one disruption, and difficulties in at least one of the following areas: education; mental health; offending behaviour; relationships with peers.
4. The LAC Review form showed evidence from educational professionals of current satisfactory educational attendance and progress relative to the child's abilities and needs.
5. There was evidence of ongoing satisfactory contact between the child and members of his or her original family, as rated by the LAC Review group (which may have included the child and parent/s themselves).
6. The target group of foster carers consisted of those who appeared to be offering a setting that was functioning effectively for the child, *despite previous expectations*, based on the criteria described in point 3 above.
7. The research endeavour focused on the person defined as the present *main* foster carer, the status of 'principal carer' being agreed upon by the couple, where there were two foster carers in the household.

The seven self-identified principal respondents were women carers in heterosexual couples, looking after the five boys and two girls identified for this study. Two couples chose to be present together as a pair at interview so that nine carers were interviewed in total.

All the carers were white and British, as were the seven young people cared for. This homogeneity is a characteristic of the rural setting of the fostering service from which the respondents were drawn.

The carers identified all had considerable experience of fostering in terms of years in this role. Records for each of the identified young people showed that placement with the carers had been based largely on the need to find a suitable foster setting quickly, following previous placement breakdown. The matching process was related to geography and the need for reasonable proximity to birth family, and consideration of children already in the placement. Beyond these factors the

Table 1. Carer and child characteristics, with pseudonyms

Carers in Household	Participant/s in Interviews	Age of Participants	Years Fostering	Child / Young Person Cared For	Age	Years in Care Full Time	Time in Current Placement	Number of Previous Placements
Jess David	Jess	53	27	Karl	16y 2m	5y 1m	2y 6m	3
Helen Ed	Helen Ed	57 58	30	Vincent	17y 2m	6y 6m	4y 1m	4
Aileen Frank	Aileen Frank	59	21	Chris	16y 6m	9y 0m	4y 1m	3
Natalie Matt	Natalie	48	9	Louise	17y 6m	9y 5m	5y 6m	5
Marie Colin	Marie	61	35	Sim	16y 1m	10y 3m	5y 0m	7
Yvonne Sean	Yvonne	65	37	Ricky	14y 7m	6y 2m	2y 4m	5
Diane Greg	Diane	55	23	Becky	17y 7m	10y 1m	5y 7m	4

willingness of the carers to take on a child with a known history of previous placement break-downs, and the likely concomitant adjustment difficulties this would present, was paramount.

A table of characteristics of foster carers and young people is given above.

Interview schedule and procedure

The interview schedule was inspired and informed by some of the same interests embodied in the 'This is My Baby' interview (Dozier, 2005). It is modified to the extent that the section on the meaning of 'family' and 'belonging' are additional. The questions were carefully considered and pared down to allow the respondents as much room as possible to develop their own descriptions.

The interview was divided into five main sections as follows:

1. Reflections on the experience of being a foster carer: motivations, rewards and challenges.
2. How childhood experiences might have affected the respondent, as a foster carer now.
3. Reflections on the meanings of 'family' and an examination of the degree to which the fostered child is experienced as 'belonging' in their family.
4. The carer's experience of their relationship with the target child/young person.
5. Reflections on the carer's ideas about the young person's future, and what the carer has learned in retrospect about 'family' through looking after the target child/young person.

The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Interviewees and process considerations

The University of Birmingham Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study in May 2007. Participants were provided with full information on the research and options for participating, as well as consent forms and written feedback afterwards, summarizing the findings.

The interviews were undertaken at the carer's convenience at a venue of their choice and were of between an hour and a half and two hours in duration. The interviewees were all known to the interviewer (NO), in his role as clinical psychologist working alongside the Local Authority fostering service.

The person self-described as the main carer was invited to take part in the interview. In two cases the main carer's partner was present and answered questions additionally, or at times instead of the principal respondent. These contributions were included in the analysis on the basis that they further enriched the quality of the narrative in the interview.

Treatment of the data

The carers' transcribed accounts were analysed in line with IPA practice, moving from individual descriptive detail to interpretive general pattern (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The first author (NO) made detailed initial codings of the seven transcripts; themes were subsequently developed by the three authors together.

A qualitative analysis needs to demonstrate rigour and trustworthiness (Sandelowski, 1986). The systematic and repeated re-readings of all seven texts promoted consistency of analysis. Credibility was upheld through the authors' three-way verification of findings at both the phenomenological and interpretative stages of the analysis.

Results

Four major themes were identified through the method described. They are:

- 'My' child—'clicking', belonging in the family and parental regard;
- Jam in the sandwich—working alongside Local Authority and birth family;
- Repair and rebuild—the craft of fostering;
- Sticking with it—tenacity and hopefulness

The themes represent the main elements that emerged through the textual analysis and are each considered below, with representative examples from the interviews. All names are fictionalized to maintain anonymity.

'My' child—'clicking', belonging in the family and parental regard

What emerges from all respondents is a sense of parental commitment to the children they cared for. This was claimed as particularly strong in relation to the target child of the investigation and was manifest in the carers' accounts of viewing themselves going *beyond* the call of duty and reasonable foster care for these children. There is a common feature of the respondents having 'fallen for' the child at an early stage in the placement. This is presented as a special liking or love for the child, who appears to have called forth a parental dedication or selflessness in the carer. The quote below from Jess is included in its entirety as it usefully sets the tone for all the findings, across the themes.

Jess: We had a placement for a young teen. Karl was the 'bad boy' of the choice we were offered. We met him and we really liked him and he moved in here. For Karl this really is his home now. I think that does impact a lot really umm [pause] you do feel a lot more sort of responsible for him and umm you just know that umm [pause] it's funny with Karl

> because I think he has sort of touched us more than what a lot of children have. With Karl it's almost as if I don't think even / I could let go of him if you know what I mean. I think he would always be part of this family. I suppose it / it's [pause] he's made me aware that you can actually have quite powerful feelings for somebody like Karl that has come into the family quite late but has this / umm power over you to say that he's changed your feelings and that you can actually feel that strongly for somebody that isn't part of your own flesh and blood. I suppose because I must admit / I suppose we've liked lots of children but I don't / I don't think any of them have had the impact that Karl has had on us [pause] how you think about that umm somebody else if you see what I mean. Umm / I don't know whether it's his vulnerability or whether it's what he gives back to the family I don't know but it / it is quite a powerful thing with him …

As Jess made a quick preference for Karl, so each respondent indicated a compelling and sometimes almost instantaneous connection with the target young person. Their descriptions were imbued with a sense of inevitability and even passivity, in a process of what seemed to be experienced as a particular kind of 'falling in love'. This appeared to sustain setbacks and challenges presented by the child as the placement proceeded:

> Marie: It is very difficult when they first come in because you don't know them and they don't know you / the whole house not just the child. It's the foster carer as well / it's a whole different routine because we don't know the person and they don't know us. But the click thing is a special liking for them I think, taking to them as soon as they come in [pause] like the one we're thinking about today. Umm I love Sim to bits and he drives me crackers.

Thus the 'click thing' appears to carry the carer through the initial adaption period in the household. At the same time the participants reported their perception of the development of a reciprocal sense of commitment to the carer and foster family from the young person, which also appeared to be linked with an emotional distancing from birth parents, or a definite decision on the child's part to put all, or most, of their eggs in the foster care basket for the time being. Children were reported as wanting to 'belong' and the carers wanted to offer that. What Yvonne reports is a good example:

> Yvonne: Well Ricky said it / he said it to us: he is perfectly happy / he sees us as his mum and dad. He doesn't want anybody to know otherwise / it is nobody else's business umm [pause] and that's it. What more can he say / he sees us as his mum and dad and he says he belongs here.

These carers also gave evidence of understanding that the commitment from the child may not be forever. They appeared to be able to accommodate a 'provisional' arrangement and hold on to uncertainty about future relations, including the young person revisiting their relationship with birth family. This is illustrated well in this quote from Natalie:

> Natalie: Um well Louise quite often says 'this is my life and this is my home and this is my family'. She says she doesn't want to keep being reminded of her history / I think at some time in her life she probably will want to go back over that. Perhaps it won't come till she has children of her own / I don't know but right now she seems to have committed herself to being here in this family.

Given the growth of the emotional bond, all respondents referred to the target children as 'theirs'. This claiming of the child was also described as an illicit process that created tensions with social workers, who, from the carers' perspective, were presented as uneasy about the use of the possessive pronoun in this way. The following is typical:

Yvonne: We love them unconditionally. I think that is the thing isn't it? My only / my only hope for anybody but particularly for the kids I bring up is that they will be reasonably happy [pause] whatever they do and I think that's what most parents who care about their kids will say. I *do* see them as *my* kids and social workers sometimes pull a bit of a face when I say 'my kids' but they are.

A corollary of this parental 'claiming' was that the fostered children were construed as 'family' while in the household. Each respondent made claims eliding differences between genetic and fostering relationships. This was particularly so in connection with the young people targeted in this research. Again, the child being part of the foster family was an idea that carers experienced as subversive in relation to what they imagined social workers might want from them in looking after other people's children. These strands are combined well in this quote from Aileen:

Aileen: The fact is that [pause] we don't think about ourselves a lot of the time as foster carers. Social Services would probably *die* if we said that because you have to be aware of this, have to be aware of that for the Department, but day-to-day I don't feel aware of being a carer. I feel like we are parents. We are a family aren't we / a big family? The family is everyone in the household we are looking after, our own and fostered.

This inclusive sense of family also appeared to apply to future projections of relationship. All seven respondents, in thinking forward to a time when the young person might have children of their own, claimed an expected grandparental position. Diane's comment is to the point and typical:

Diane: My foster children related to my mother as nanny / she was nanny to all of my kids. They all still call her nanny. Becky's children would be *my* grandchildren.

At the same time, the participants were equally emphatic about promoting and maintaining the target child's links with birth family members. Helen, in the following excerpt gives an account that encapsulates a theme presented across the study by all the carers:

Helen: We try very hard not / to let them forget that they do have family and that we are substitutes. We talk about their family and we listen to what they have to say but we don't accept absolute criticism / of their family because all children are placed in care for whatever reason and it may well be that their family are good people but they just *can't deal* with that person at that stage in life and therefore you shouldn't / be / tunnel-visioned.

Helen was as insistent as the other carers about the foster children being 'hers'. At the same time she speaks for all participants in claiming the necessity of accepting the *whole* child, their history and birth family included. As carers they appeared to be able to tolerate the ambiguity of the child belonging in two families at once, without this diminishing their own sense of emotional commitment to the child.

So, from the early 'clicking' with the child, to the development of parental commitment and concern, these carers demonstrated what might be viewed as a quasi-adoptive stance towards the particular young people who had done well with them. Unlike adoptive parents however, the foster carers could not have 'full charge' of their situation. This fact called forth concerns about the constraints and conflicts in their role, which are discussed next.

Jam in the sandwich—working alongside local authority and birth family

Foster carers are independent practitioners, paid an allowance by the Local Authority to care for children who 'belong' in another family and whose birth family members may be unsupportive or suspicious. The Local Authority sets guidelines and limits to a carer's involvement and shares the legal responsibility for the child with birth parents. A major set of themes reflected the 'compromised' situation of foster carers in relation to their own judgments and decisions about children, which Helen described as being like 'the jam in the sandwich'. In the case of the targeted young people in this study, it was clear that part of the carers' commitment involved them in advocacy for the child over aspects like education and schooling, friendships, limits and rewards.

All respondents spoke of acting on behalf of the child as an autonomous parent would. In this respect, they saw their success with a difficult child in placement as requiring some 'disobedience' towards Social Services. This appears to have applied as a generality over the course of their fostering history but especially so in connection with the young people who were the focus of our study.

In their relations with birth parents and family members, carers' accounts were marked by what could be described as 'critical empathy'. Here for example is Diane, who can identify with Becky's mother's emotional pain, while having previously indicated that she is well aware of her lapses of parental responsibility for her daughter:

Diane: I would imagine she [birth mother] felt very, very rejected umm because her children didn't want her and they openly told her so / that you know she / they told her they were going to a family that did want them. Imagining how Becky's mum feels helps me understand what Becky goes through when she sees her mother.

The carers had managed to hold on to positive attitudes about the young person's birth family, or had established a working relationship with birth parent/s that was largely independent of Social Services' brokerage. The carers indicated that if necessary they were willing to put the young person's well-being to the fore, at the expense of their own needs. While this was not expressed in any of their accounts as a complaint—it appeared to be a task voluntarily undertaken for the sake of the child—there were nevertheless indications of the extra burden, unacknowledged by the professional network, which this entailed.

As in Diane's account, above, the emphasis from the carers' perspective was not related to helping the birth family member as much as *understanding* what their foster child experienced in their contacts with them, and of keeping the child in touch with the birth family, in a manner safe and controllable for the child. This was presented as a form of unofficial social work, concerning the delicate day-to-day business of maintaining the boundary between birth and foster family. It appeared to be undertaken as a very necessary extra to their caretaking role for the child and the narratives about this embodied the notion of willing sacrifice—of time, attention, preparedness to put oneself out—on behalf of the young person.

The trust of social workers in allowing carers to 'get on with the job' was claimed as very important. Social workers who were perceived by carers to be 'solid' emotionally, knowledgeable in practical terms, and veteran in the sense of being 'an old hand', were highly valued:

Aileen: We had [name of social worker] for years and when she left it wasn't the same and Chris had known her for 10 years. There was something about the fact that she kept going for him / with him that was important. I think when she went / and Chris's mum especially when [social worker] went, mum couldn't cope because / [name of social worker] was a bit like me / one of the old school. She would really put herself out for mum / would go and fetch her to bring her to meetings which the newer ones don't seem to / because the relationship had grown up I think over the years, you get that you know. Chris's mum couldn't get used to it when she left and Chris himself *really* felt the loss.

Given the intensity and complexity of the fostering task, support and practical help and guidance were understandably claimed as vital. The contributions of partners and spouses as well as the support provided by birth children and other, older, foster children were experienced as at least as important as input from social workers. Five of the seven respondents cited another carer with whom the foster carer had a personal friendship as a valued buttress and source of routine and emergency emotional sustenance. At the same time, the descriptions of asking for help were nuanced by a claim of self-sufficiency, which may reflect these carers' idea of themselves as principal welfare providers.

The interview opportunity with the researcher gave these carers a chance to give accounts of their own special expertise and proficiency in looking after other people's children in foster care. The theme cluster that follows summarizes this.

Repair and rebuild—the craft of fostering

A striking feature of the carers' accounts was their interest in communicating *how* they do the job. This was presented through the metaphor of 'rebuilding' and 'repair'. There was a common theme of 'starting where the child is', with a recognition of the damage that the children's previous care experiences had brought about. Natalie described this as 'having open eyes' in terms of the level of expectation of the child's 'recovery'. There was an understanding of starting a job with compromised materials or of repairing a building with shaky foundations:

Natalie: But you have to think that they are quite damaged children and if they weren't they wouldn't be here with you [pause] and the longer times go on you think / you can forget about the problems that they've got until / they have an up or down in their life and you *have* to keep remembering that they *do* find it difficult to cope with certain situations. Sometimes / some of the basic building blocks are just not there.

The rebuilding metaphor seems to suggest that their task as they experienced it was quite different from ordinary parenting. In the light of their accounts it would be better described as 're-parenting'. They seemed to be able to use the 'possessive' stance ('my child') as a position for undertaking their craft, which they understood as salvage and reconstruction, while they have the chance. As part of this, the carers identified the fact that they maintained high educational and social aspirations for the young person in the 'rebuilding' process. In the next excerpt, Yvonne exemplifies this in relation to educational opportunity for Ricky:

> Yvonne: Yes I've really encouraged them even though it means them going beyond what they might have done if they'd stayed with their family, which is hard for them. Ricky wants to go and do a degree. At least he is thinking about it which is great because I don't think / you know, certainly in the natural family, he would never have got as far as he has now / so he is happy that he's got that option there.

As in Yvonne's interview, the carers seemed mindful that in applying their own blueprint for the young person's development, they were also promoting potential access to opportunities that the young person would not have gained had they remained within their original family. This was presented as making the best of a compromised start and, while remembering and respecting the child's origins, their attitude was of not letting a child's earlier life circumstances hold them back.

In terms of the work of looking after and parenting the young person, the foster carers identified and described 'proactive skills' like limit setting, rewarding, and teaching children new ways of behaving and responding. Natalie's comments about Louise's behaviour are a good example of the recognition shared across the seven respondents of how the children in their care seek to reproduce old established patterns of parent—child relationships:

> Natalie: When Louise came to us we were told she would try and break the placement down because / they explained that she had been let down by so many people she would want to try and be in control of things and she would expect it to break down. She went to great lengths to break it down. So that was a *real* challenge for us / we had to respond to her positively and firmly and differently to how *she* wanted us to. It was saying to ourselves 'right lets start again as we do / keep sticking with it'.

While the 'proactive' aspects of parenting were claimed as important, they were in fact less often mentioned than the 'receptive skills' of listening and understanding, observing and tolerating behaviour, and accepting the sometimes unpleasant aspects of the child or their experiences. Yvonne speaks for all the respondents in noting this aspect of their job, which sometimes entails hearing about things that are almost unbearable:

> Yvonne: Some of the things that Ricky could tell you, things that he's told us about his abuse, would make your blood curdle but you have to listen to that and take it for them, no matter how uncomfortable it makes you feel.

Diane emphasizes a common theme expressed across the carers' interviews of their crucial role in facilitating a young person's trust in them. In this context, Diane emphasizes the need to think before saying or doing anything in response to what is communicated:

> Diane: She tells me *everything* [pause] good and bad. We sit and we talk / again I've learnt through Becky not to be judgmental umm in some cases but just to listen and rather than umm sparking up when you think something needs correcting oh you know umm [pause] to sit and listen and take it on board and then analyze what you are going to say rather than getting in there with two feet.

The frequency and ubiquity in the transcript analyses of the carers' claims about the need to persevere for the young person in providing repeated experiences of reliable care-giving is covered in the final section.

Sticking with it—tenacity and hopefulness

All respondents spoke of stubbornness, determination, or of a strong desire not to be beaten, in a way that conveyed the foster care task as a struggle, a battle or a long and arduous journey that had to be completed to the satisfaction of the carer for each target child:

> Aileen: We stick at things don't we? We stick at things and see them through. We don't like to give up either of us and I think I'm a little bit worse than Frank (partner) because I don't want to give up on Chris. I don't like [pause] I don't like giving up; I don't like being beaten. I like to keep going and yeh in a way it's sort of big-headedness perhaps it / you think that you will get there eventually / you will. You know 'I can do this; it *will* work' [pause] Obviously it doesn't always but you don't give up.

Aileen's use of the word 'worse' in the above excerpt is interesting. It seemed to reflect a commonly expressed tension around the idea of being hard headed enough to give up on a child, in contrast to being a committed parental adult who never admits defeat or abandons a child. Aileen may construe her determination to keep going as a weakness—albeit one which paradoxically requires true grit. That this may be the best thing a foster carer can do for a child is explicitly recognized by Jess in the following quote:

> Jess: Yeh the challenges is I think just living day to day and remaining in place even if you can't do anything about changing / changing their lives too much. We see it's important to just *keep going* for children. That's one of the best things you can do for them.

So, keeping going is construed as a service in itself. Generally the respondents revealed a common theme of overwhelming positivity in the face of the fostering task, the setbacks experienced with the child and the difficulties of working with the Local Authority and with the birth family. Although none of the interviewees used the word, the idea of 'hopefulness' was forcibly present in what they said. This will already have been apparent as a thread running through some of the previous quotes. All the participants referred to the theme of 'holding on to the good', as Helen puts it here:

> Helen: Yes no matter how muddled their lives are, if you look at them long and hard you will *see* there are / there's this *specific* goodness / and *that* is what you latch into and when you feel like going in your bedroom and *screaming* to the top of your lungs because yet again they've done something really bad / you latch on to that one bit left and it brings you back to sanity [pause] it's like a circle isn't it?

The tenacity and positivity of these carers seemed to represent a personal quality that they had imported into their fostering, and which in turn had been fed by success in their capacity to engage with the young people in their care. Their experience offered pointers to features that could be highlighted in the recruitment, assessment and training of new carers, which will be elaborated in a final section below.

Analysis and discussion

This study aimed to explore the experience of foster carers who were providing a successful placement for a young person, with a view to understanding their perceptions of this. In line with the

authors' interest in the concepts of belonging and commitment, the interview paid particular attention to these constructs, prompted by the findings of Dozier and her colleagues (2006) and the This Is My Baby Interview (Dozier, 2005). The principles and methods of IPA used in this study offered a sufficiently open framework for eliciting the experience and concerns of the foster carers. Four predominant theme clusters emerged. These were:

- The carers' enlarged view of family and inclusive sense of belonging shown towards the young person looked after;
- Reflections on working within a 'compromised space' in relation to exercising parental authority;
- The craft of fostering including managing the foster/birth family boundary;
- The importance of resilient tenacity and a hopeful stance.

The study certainly demonstrates the high levels of commitment these carers make to the target child. This was particularly marked over responses to questions exploring carers' expectations for the child post-placement and for their future relationship with them. There was an unqualified confirmation by all respondents of the notion of emotional claiming ('this is my child') and of the child belonging in their family.

At the same time it was evident that these carers could allow and promote the child's belonging in their birth family. This enlarged sense of family is outside the usual 'nuclear' arrangement and shares some similarities to step-parenting, in which the management of adult ambivalence and children's divided loyalties are common features. On the evidence of studies of fostered children's contact with their birth family, the requirement to promote this link is enshrined in legislation (Cleaver, 2000). As well as the benefits, the delicacy and difficulties for all parties are widely recognized (Mackaskill, 2002; Sinclair, 2005). While adolescents can be more independent in managing contact with birth relatives, they still require support and mediation in the process to maintain placement stability alongside it (Lipscombe, Moyers, & Farmer, 2004). The carers' accounts exemplified this.

Of significance was the extent to which the carers were involved in contact, beyond what might be expected of them, apparently helping the young person in their care to deal with the 'two families' factor in their lives. The carers' all expressed some sympathy for the position of birth parents. Systemically, their idea of 'foster family' appeared to be closed ('this child is ours and belongs in our family') and open ('this child belongs in another family') at the same time. They seemed able to thrive with the role ambiguity often noted as a feature of foster care (Thomson & McArthur, 2009). Their 'critical empathy' stance towards birth parents would seem to be one important factor in the placement successes.

The theme of going beyond the call of duty with respect to the target child and his or her birth family was common to each of the respondents, in different ways. All of them indicated the lengths to which they went to keep the idea of the birth family alive for the child. The carers overlapped in function here with the child's social worker. While the carers wanted to know that the 'authority' of the Local Authority was present as a long stop, they seemed prepared to undertake these things for the general welfare of 'their' child. This manifested itself through the interviews as an attitude of 'sacrifice'; there was a cost both financially and emotionally although the carers saw this as part and parcel of their commitment to the child.

By and large, these particular carers, in relation to their 'successful placement', appear from their own reports at least to have achieved the four kinds of permanence suggested by Sinclair, Baker, Wilson and Gibbs (2005): objective (placement will last through childhood), subjective (child feels he or she belongs in the family), enacted (child fully included and treated as one of the

family) and uncontested permanence (child does not feel a clash of loyalties between foster and birth family). The latter characteristic in particular would nevertheless warrant further exploration with the young people themselves.

It is perhaps no accident that the carers were all experienced (each with between nine and 35 years fostering), although they had not been identified for this reason. Lengthier fostering experience is associated with increased placement stability (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004) although causal connections for this are difficult to establish. Commitment itself may be a linking variable, beyond the gathering of more knowledge and skills over time. In this study all participants spoke of their general tendency over the years to mobilize more patience and tolerance in relation to children's behaviour, with an acquired understanding about how and when best to intervene to retrieve difficult situations with a child.

Allied with this was a very clear message through the responses about the importance of a long-term relationship with a family placement social worker. Carers valued a social worker's experience and knowledge in relation to childcare skills. Paramount however, was the sense of being thought about by the same social worker over a long period of time, and of experiencing their *own* needs as reliably represented in the minds of both their support social worker and the child's social worker.

As illustrated, the respondents held views about 'seeing a job through'. Their tenaciousness, and persistence in 'not being beaten' by setbacks with children cared they for, were claimed by them as traits established through growing up in their own family of origin. In this connection all respondents spoke of either themselves or their partner having experienced some difficult circumstances in childhood. These were presented as a motivation to do something different or better for their own and their foster children; in each case this 'corrective script' (Byng-Hall, 1995) was described as developing through the carer's relationship with their spouse. This could be described as a state of 'earned-security' in attachment terms (Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Phelps, Belsky, & Crnic, 1997). The fact that the self-described principal carer in each case was the woman in the foster couple is noteworthy. A separate study might enquire further on couples' understandings of fostering, their experience of how the task is divided between them and how this may become institutionalized in the wider network of support around them.

The carers' self-reported emotional strength was portrayed by them as providing a foundation for the resilience and toughness necessary to their role; indeed this characteristic is recognized as a requirement for placement stability in long term fostering (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Fonagy, Steele, Steele, & Higgitt, 2004). The same reported toughness was mobilized by these particular carers in their advocacy for the child and in being prepared to challenge or side-step some of the requirements of the Local Authority. There was evidence that this led to conflict; respondents held the perception that the child's social worker sometimes had misgivings about carers' exercise of autonomy and control, founded on the carer's parental dedication to the child. This may be an inevitable part of the foster carers' 'claiming' process, apparently vital to the child's sense of belonging and emotional security. The pressures of alliances and exclusions make 'triangulation' phenomena common within substitute care networks (O'Brien, 1999). The four identified themes in this study relate to a crucial paradox for the carers of how to uphold their determination to help a young person belong in the foster family, in the context of *legal* parental responsibility being held outside it, and shared between Local Authority and birth parents.

The young person's developing attachment to the carers was reported as an important part of the success story. However, comments like 'he calls us mum and dad but not in front of his social worker' seemed to be emblematic of the tension the carers experienced in supporting the child's sense of commitment to *them*. The ambiguity of being a 'carer' and of being a 'parent' meant having to accept a 'provisional' relationship with the child, even if long term, with the concern that at

some stage the young person might walk away, leaving the carer bereft. The implicit contradictions inherent in the role evoked expressions of sadness, frustration and impatience, an enduring theme in explorations of foster carer experiences (Nutt, 2006).

The professionalization of foster care is double edged (Wilson & Evetts, 2006). Foster parental love and obligation are not easily bureaucratized commodities and the fostering allowance in any case cannot reimburse for the sacrifices carers make on behalf of the children placed with them (Nutt, 2006, pp. 30–32.).

Perhaps a re-evaluation of the term 'carer' is due, especially in long-term permanent placements such as those central to this study. The term 'foster parent' may need reclaiming, as it embodies better the fact that parenting—or re-parenting—is absolutely critical to the welfare and recovery of children placed away from birth parents in an alternative substitute family.

The central question of why *this* particular child succeeded in *this* particular placement is not clearly elucidated through the study. It is clear that the carers showed many or all of the features mentioned in the introduction that are known to be generally associated with successful outcomes in foster care. However the young people in the target group were identified as having a history that would more than likely predict further placement breakdown, challenging the best of carers. The 'click factor'—an early sense of connection with the child that seemed to call forth and reinforce emotional commitment and positive parenting—remains rather mysterious. In each case the child appears to have caught into the attachment history of the carer in some unspecified way, such that it was more than usually difficult for the adult to let go of them, and which also reciprocally brought forward a commitment from the child to the carer. A more wide-ranging study could include the perspectives of other stakeholders in the process, such as social workers, birth family members and the young people themselves. As it was, for the majority of the carers, the unfolding attachment and bonding was experienced as something of a surprise and took them unawares, much as the course of 'falling in love' might do in other circumstances.

A sub-theme running throughout each interview was the carers' sense of wanting to understand the children they looked after. The participants showed both within and across interviews 'reflective functioning'—the capacity to ascribe underlying mental states in considering their own and others' behaviour (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele, & Higgitt, 1991; Slade, 2003). There was a clear indication of particularly high reflective functioning in describing the young people who had succeeded against the odds. Claiming and commitment appeared to be intimately intertwined with an attempt to go below the surface of presenting difficulties with the child.

As noted previously, the matching process for these placements was largely serendipitous. Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) distinguish between 'matching' (child suited to foster family in terms of location, age range approved for), 'fit' (how the child adapts and mutual accommodation between child and foster family) and 'affinity' (based on bonding and 'click-factor'). In the case of these unexpectedly successful placements the 'affinity' element seems to have been crucial, with the child themselves also being prepared to contribute to the process of fitting in.

Our study highlights the possibility that 'you never can tell' in making predictions about outcomes, given the inherent complex chemistry of placing a child with a compromised early history within another family. In some respects the identified elements for the positive individual outcomes concur with those gathered by Brown (2008), in a study of foster parents' perceptions of general factors needed for successful foster placements. These however related to the availability of external support systems and resources. In the present study, carers stressed their *own* learnt and internalized parental capabilities and their preparedness to take risks emotionally in the context of their commitment to the child.

Messages from the research—pointers for foster carer training

In thinking about how this study might give pointers for the training and support of foster parents, an obvious but not always heeded slogan might be 'Support the Click Factor'. Given the unpredictability of child/carer bonding, a placement relationship that *does* 'click' or 'take off' needs to be overtly recognised, respected and supported through the various functions of the Local Authority.

Interventions which target the *relationship between* carer and child would seem to be paramount—and, when things go well, allowing the foster carer the space and authority to build on this, by facilitating without abandoning. Much is written about empowering foster carers and working in partnership (Quinton, 2004; Utting, 1997). Another message from this research would be 'Trust the Carer'. Taking risks is part of parenting and 're-parenting': as far as possible foster carers' ideas about the child and what they need should be woven into planning.

The carers interviewed seemed able to understand emotional states related to overt behaviour, particularly in relation to the child they had succeeded with. This was claimed as helpful in regulating their own as well as the young person's behaviour and was a state of mind that they presented as coming with experience. 'Reflective Functioning' could also be specifically taught and promoted through carer support from the beginning of placements.

We were struck by the way the carers spoke unanimously about their proactive recognition of the birth family on behalf of the child in care. Foster carer preparation might particularly emphasize this aspect of the task more than is generally the case presently. What appears to have contributed towards success in the cases studied is the carers' acceptance of the birth family system and a willingness to engage with it. With the proviso that contact with birth family is not always good or useful in itself, it appears in these cases that some sort of trusting accommodation by the carers with birth family members was helpful for the young person who succeeded with them in foster care.

Finally, in connection with the idea of commitment to children over a long period and of the value of 'sticking with it', these carers have also stressed the importance for their own needs of an enduring relationship with social workers who can maintain continuity and reliability. Given the high turnover rates in social work in many areas of the UK this is clearly problematic, but certainly one may argue against the practice of moving cases around, especially difficult ones, within a team, even when members are not leaving the service. Carers' own desire to keep a continuing link with young people, as described by respondents in this study, is not helped by systemic demarcation between 'in care' and 'after care' for vulnerable young people. Given this, it seemed a testament to the tenaciousness of those interviewed that they had apparently kept a link with all or many of the young people who had left them.

Concluding remarks

The study highlights the benefits of both this kind of qualitative investigation and the focus on the positive, which seems to have provided a real opportunity for the carers to reveal their own strengths. In repeatedly sifting through the meanings of what the carers were saying, the methodology has allowed us to spend time in their shoes. The research has left us with reinvigorated respect for their dedication to the task, and their resolve to embrace family life on a bigger canvas than we suspect most of us could manage.

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