

A shared experience of fragmentation

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Abstract

Multiple placement transitions have been associated with poorer psychosocial outcomes for children growing up in local authority care. However, although there is an expanding literature examining the risk and protective factors connected with placement breakdown, very few studies have explored the quality of the move experience for those most closely involved with it. Our study considered how young people, foster carers and social workers made sense of unplanned placements' endings. Bringing together the lived experiences of these key stakeholders in the placement system added a novel dimension to existing research knowledge. What emerged from our analysis was evidence of a pervasive and shared emotional experience; all of the participants were affected by the breakdown irrespective of age, experience, or professional role. However, despite many commonalities, there was also a strong sense of fragmentation between the groups, which was characterised by discourses of mistrust and miscommunication. This meant that emotional reactions to the breakdown were often suppressed or dismissed, resentments built-up and attempts to find a solution were thwarted by silence or angry recrimination. These findings raise real challenges for practice and policy development. In particular, they stress the importance of shared and meaningful dialogue between all key stakeholders within the social care system, the need for more effective and timely support when placements are in crisis and opportunities for those most closely involved with the placement breakdown to process the emotional experience.

Keywords

breakdown, care, multiple perspectives, placement

In this article we set out to understand the shared experience of foster placement breakdown from the multiple standpoints of children in care, foster carers and social workers. We should begin,

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however, by acknowledging that placement transitions can sometimes have a beneficial affect on a child's journey through care. In some cases, they might be reunited with family, moved on to a long-term care arrangement, or simply encounter an environment where they find it easier to form satisfying interpersonal relationships. That said, when a foster placement does end in crisis, it can leave a lasting, destructive impression on the child and their carers (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003). children's experiences of placement breakdown can be unsettling and confusing, and may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with the care system (Festinger, 1983). For foster carers, the acute distress of an unplanned placement ending can engender a sense of failure and self-reproach (Minty, 1999; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000), which can ultimately result in role disillusionment and reluctance to offer future placements (Brown & Calder, 1999; Nutt, 2006). Frontline social work staff can also come under pressure during the breakdown, as they struggle to resolve the placement crisis and meet the needs of the child within the limits of available resources (Brown & Bednar, 2006).

Within the literature and everyday usage, there are many ways of labelling and describing an unexpected foster placement ending, such as breakdown, disruption, removal, crisis or unplanned ending. We purposefully use all of these expressions to reflect the language of our participants and the research community. However, within this article these terms share a common definition of an "unanticipated and untimely placement ending that is not included in the child's care plan" (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987).

The extent and nature of foster placement breakdown

The Commission for Social Care Inspection (2007) highlighted the importance of placement stability from the child's perspective. They said that although children want the decision-makers to get it right first time, resource limitations compromise placement stability and multiple placement breakdowns remain a reality of the care system. Of the 60,300 children in local authority care in England, the majority (70%) are in foster care placements. Of these, 12% experienced three or more placements in the financial year 2005 to 2006, and only 51% of foster placements met the government's criteria for stability (i.e., children who have been looked after continuously for four years or more and have remained in the same placement for at least two years). Whilst these statistics do not provide a complete picture, they do indicate that many local authorities are failing to meet the government's target of 80% stability (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Research with foster carers provides confirmatory evidence of how commonly placement breakdowns are experienced, with rates ranging between 47% (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000) and 20% (Minty, 1999) of all placements offered.

It is widely accepted that premature termination of a foster placement can be harmful to a child's development, resulting in increased difficulties in forming attachments, problems with regulating emotions and a poor self-concept (Strijker, Zandberg, & van der Meulen, 2002). Rich (1996) observed that these difficulties often form part of a self-perpetuating cycle by jeopardizing future placement stability. Given the poor outcomes associated with repeated placement breakdowns, research has concentrated on trying to elicit predictors of placement success or failure. Although many of these studies have been undermined by an over reliance on simplistic, univariate designs (Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007), factors associated with the foster child's background, problematic relationships between foster carers, foster children and biological families, and a lack of support from childcare agencies have all been identified as contributing to placement breakdown.

The foster child's background

It has been widely accepted that older children who are placed into foster care later in their development are at greater risk of experiencing a placement breakdown (Adamson, 2005; Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Rowe, Cain, Hundleby, & Garnett, 1989). This has been attributed to the accumulative affect of exposure to relational trauma on their capacity to form new and meaningful relationships with substitute carers. That said, a recent meta-analysis has shown that this age effect is moderated by gender, with older girls more likely to experience a placement breakdown than younger girls, or boys of any age (Oosterman et al., 2007). Another aspect of the child's background that has been associated with higher rates of placement breakdown is having a history of abuse, neglect and/or parental abandonment (James, 2004; Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2001). Oosterman et al. (2007) found that although all categories of abuse did have a destabilizing effect, there was a significant interaction between level of abuse and behaviour problems. Indeed, when all other risk factors related to the child were controlled for, behaviour problems remained as the strongest predictors of placement breakdown.

Foster carers, foster children and biological families

Some research has suggested that the quality of the relationship between the child and their foster carers can also be a significant predictor of placement outcome (Doelling & Johnson, 1990). However, multivariate analyses have revealed that this finding disappears when behaviour problems and the number of previous placements are controlled for (Oosterman et al., 2007).

Another dimension of the foster care environment strongly associated with placement breakdown is the presence of the foster carers' own biological children (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000). The suggestion here is that the carers' own children may feel unsupported, alienated and resentful at having to share their parents' time and affection (Hojer, 2006; Triseliotis, 1989). Ultimately, this can unsettle family dynamics and drive a wedge between the foster child and their carers.

Contact between foster children and their biological parents can also have an impact on the course of the placement (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Jones & Morrissette, 1999). In support of this, Oosterman et al. (2007) confirmed that the less contact children had with their biological parents, the more likely their placement was to succeed. Although, where co-operative relationships existed between the biological parents, foster carers and local authority staff, placement stability could be enhanced.

The placement system

The extent and nature of support available from the children's services department, and particularly social workers, has been shown to affect placement stability (Fisher, Gibbs, Sinclair, & Wilson, 2000). When tensions increase within a placement, the relationships between foster children, foster carers and social workers becomes even more critical in determining outcome (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000). When these relationships are poor, foster carers appear to be at greater risk of fatigue and burnout, which can ultimately jeopardise placement stability (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Nissim, 1996).

Understanding the experience of placement breakdown

Despite this wealth of research exploring risk and protective factors, little is known about the lived experience of moving foster placement. In a systematic review of the literature, Unrau (2007)

looked closely at the range of viewpoints that were used to frame knowledge about transitions in care. She found accounts from those most intimately affected by the experience were marginalized in favour of an over reliance on case records and psychometric measures. In some cases, foster carers and social workers were asked to verify the accuracy of information collected, but children's experiences of the move process were seldom explored. The few qualitative studies that have attempted to privilege foster children's accounts of changing placements have looked at their general attitudes towards the transition (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Fernandez, 2007) and the difficulties they encountered in forming relationships with new carers (Butler & Charles, 1999).

Unrau (2007) argues that the majority of research has failed to elucidate the quality and meaning of the move experience for foster children and others, and as such, may lead to the misdirection of resources. Likewise, Wilson, Sinclair, and Gibbs (2000) emphasise that the impact of placement breakdown cannot be fully understood without considering the perspective of all the key stakeholders. Given this, our research is informed by hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches to psychology (Langdridge, 2006), in particular the idea that any process, event or relationship can only be understood from a given perspective (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This concept privileges lived experience as a source of expert knowledge, and suggests that researchers should engage closely with people's attempts to *make sense* of those experiences, in order to better understand their relationship to, and involvement in, a given phenomena. We have therefore taken an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Eatough & Smith, 2006) approach to our data analysis, and adopted a multi-perspectival method of qualitative data collection (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Dallos & Denford, 2008). IPA has been used extensively across a range of domains in psychology. It is an approach to qualitative research which has been applied successfully in projects that have instantiated both practical (e.g., Flowers, Duncan, & Knussen, 2003) and theoretical (e.g., Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, in press) developments. Its capacity in these fields is a function of both its core epistemological commitment to insider accounts of "the human predicament", (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 5), and its integrative and dialogical relationship with other forms of knowledge. IPA's "capacity for making links between the understandings of research participants and the theoretical frameworks of mainstream psychology" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 186) thus makes it ideally suited to our purposes here.

Method

Context

This research emerged out of concerns expressed by children's services managers about the high rate of placement breakdown in their West Midlands local authority, compared to demographically similar areas. Our brief was to help them understand the reasons behind these worrying figures and to provide some operational and strategic recommendations.

Researchers

The first author is a consultant clinical psychologist, with a commitment to working with looked-after children. The second author is an academic psychologist, with an interest in phenomenological psychology. At the time of writing, the third author was an assistant psychologist in the service where the research was conducted, and the last author was a trainee clinical psychologist – both were supervised by the first author.

Sampling

IPA requires purposive sampling (the recruitment of participants who can offer a meaningful perspective on the topic-at-hand), and, within any given sub-sample, a relatively small number of similar participants who can provide rich experiential data (detailed narrative, personal reflections). We therefore aimed for a sample size of between 5 and 10 participants in each of our three sub-samples (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

Participants

Twenty-one young people involved in a foster placement breakdown between 2005 and 2006 were identified from local authority performance indicators. These young people, their social workers and the carer involved in the placement breakdown were all invited to talk about their experiences of the ending. Young people who were considered by the authority to have moved placements for positive reasons, such as reunification with parents or moving to long-term fostering, were excluded.

Based on consultation with foster carers and young people in care outside of our sample pool, our intention was to hold separate focus groups for each set of participants (i.e., young people, foster carers and social workers). Seven foster carers consented to join a group but all of the young people refused. The reasons they gave generally related to concerns about confidentiality and feeling exposed within a group. Nevertheless, five of the young people did agree to be interviewed on an individual basis. Subsequently, their social workers were approached to participate in the study. They also elected to be interviewed individually due to practical constraints on their time and availability. Within the total sample, there were four triads of participants (young person, foster carer and social worker) who had all experienced the same event. Demographic and background information were obtained from a review of children's services records, and by asking the participants directly.¹

Young people

Five young people growing up in care, three males and two females, participated in the study. At the time of the interviews, four of them were placed with foster carers and one was living in a residential children's unit. See Table 1 for participants' characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics and care histories of the foster children

Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Length of time in care (years)	Care category	Legal status	Previous foster placement
Ash	15	White British	9	Emotional/sexual abuse & neglect	Full care order	3
Ben	14	White British	12	Physical abuse	Full care order	4
Ethan	9	Dual heritage	8	Neglect	Full care order	6
Kirsty	11	Dual heritage	4	Parental illness & neglect	Full care order	2
Tanya	13	White British	6.5	Physical/sexual abuse	Full care order	3

Table 2. Demographic characteristics and fostering experience of the foster carer participants

Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Fostering experience (years)	Number of placement breakdowns
Andy	36	White British	6	1
Brenda	55	White British	12	9
Carl	52	White British	15	7
Denise	45	White British	6	3
Eddy	57	White British	6	5
Francis	39	White British	8	5
Gaynor	46	White British	4	2

Table 3. Demographic characteristics and professional experience of the social work participants

Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Professional role	Social work experience (years)	Experience of placement breakdown
Rachel	43	White British	Social worker	6	20+
Cathy	35	White British	Social worker	5.5	10+
Diane	47	White British	Social worker	3.5	10–15
Alison	36	White British	Social worker	5	12–20
Jackie	39	White British	Young person's advisor	4.5	Too many

Foster carers

There were seven foster carer participants, four females and three males. They are described in Table 2.

Social workers

Four social workers and one young person's advisor participated in the interviews. Their professional role was as the key worker for the child, rather than as a family placement worker assigned to the foster carers. See Table 3 for details.

Data collection

Written consent was obtained from the local authority before any of the young people were approached. They were then asked to give their verbal and written agreement to participate. All of the other participants also gave written consent before sharing their stories. None of the participants exercised their right to withdraw from the study.

To begin with, foster carers were invited to attend a focus group facilitated by two researchers (AT and CC) and an experienced foster carer. On advice from these participants, the group was held at a local health service clinic. A loose format was used to structure the discussion so that unanticipated topics and ideas could emerge. It began by asking each foster carer about the identified ending and how it came about, and then looked more closely at beliefs and feelings about placement breakdowns.

In the next part of the data collection procedure, the young people and their social workers were interviewed by one of three of the researchers (HRB, AT and CC) in health service

premises or at another convenient venue. This was either the current care placement or a social services department. The interviews began with the question, “Tell me about the placement with...” The accounts were then largely shaped by the participants, although the interviewers did occasionally employ prompt questions to focus and explore the respondents’ comments. Interviews and the focus group were recorded and transcribed verbatim for all semantic content.

It should be acknowledged here that interview and focus group data may differ. The former deals more closely with personal accounts, whilst the latter involves a group process of debate and dialogue between participants. However, to elicit the views of children in care and those in other marginalized groups, methods need to be sufficiently flexible and creative (Fernandez, 2007; Unrau, 2007), and take account of practical constraints that may preclude participation.

Data analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is grounded in the idiographic accounts of the participants’ lived experiences. The analyst looks for emerging patterns of experiential claims expressed within the data, before moving to a more interpretative standpoint that aims to contextualise and make sense of the participants’ personal stories (Smith, 2004). The procedure adopted in our analysis is outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Description of the IPA analysis

Level of analysis	Description
<i>1st order codes</i>	HRB, AT, & CC produced a close textual analysis of the interview and focus group data by studying and discussing the individual claims and concerns evident in each transcript.
<i>2nd order codes</i>	Conceptual ideas were developed and recorded through discussion (between HRB, AT, & ML) of the interviewees’ experiences. These second order codes moved our understanding beyond the text by capturing more of the meaning and context of individuals’ unique life experiences.
<i>Within-group analysis</i>	In each participant group (young people and social workers), attention was given to commonalities and differences within individual interviews and across interviews. Emerging patterns or themes were organised according to meaning and context, and recurrent themes across the transcripts were interpreted as a shared understanding amongst the participants
<i>Focus group analysis</i>	An IPA focus group protocol guided the analysis (see Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, in press). As above, this involved developing 1st and 2nd order codes, but also directed our attention to the function of statements made by the participants, the way they made their experiences meaningful to one another, issues of consensus and conflict, as well as the group dynamics and processes. All of these factors were important in organising emerging patterns of meaning and understanding within the group.
<i>Across group analysis</i>	Commonalities and differences across the groups were organised diagrammatically into overarching themes. This structure was reviewed by the research team (HRB, AT, & ML), and shared on an opportunistic basis with representatives from each of the participant groups. The comments generated through these processes moulded the final shape of the analysis and write up. Through triangulation of the analysis (between HRB, AT, & ML) and through reflection on our own responses to the participants’ stories, we endeavoured to retain a focus on the essence of what it means to experience a placement breakdown.

Results

We have chosen to describe three main themes that emerged from the analysis, all of which reflect placement breakdown as an experience, rather than an event. These are

- Making meaning: defining and understanding placement breakdown;
- An emotional and isolating process: how it feels when placements breakdown;
- The buck stops here: the struggle to situate culpability and responsibility.

Our aim is to explore shared understanding in the accounts of young people (YP), foster carers (FCs) and social workers (SWs), and to highlight areas of difference. For us, one of the key features of this data is the way in which the participant groups describe common experiences, yet retain very distinct standpoints. In the following section we will illustrate interesting aspects of the three principal themes with supporting extracts from the interview transcripts.

1. Making meaning: Defining and understanding placement breakdown

In looking at the way our participants understood placement breakdown, we identified two sub-themes that explored conceptual similarities and differences, as well as uncertainties and value judgements assigned to the ending process.

1a. Breakdown or ending: Bridging the conceptual divide. At a conceptual level, foster carers and social workers appear to share a common understanding of what constitutes a placement breakdown and what constitutes a positive ending. Typically a “breakdown” communicates something about the timing and quality of the placement ending and is used as short-hand for an “unexpected crisis move” that disadvantages young people, as Rachel illustrates:

Rachel: Prior to that umm ninety percent of her moves was not planned and were crisis umm moves which err always has a negative effect on young people (SW).

Going a bit further, Eddy gives an example of what a crisis might look like.

Eddy: But the second child I talked about was a breakdown, I think. I'd phoned out of hours because I'd had a kid kicking me and thumping me for 3 hours and I couldn't just keep sitting there letting her. (FC)

Whilst the damaging effects of unplanned placement endings are emphasised across both sets of accounts, the two participants take a very different standpoint on the same event. For the social worker, concern rests with the impact on the child, whereas for the carer it is more about the personal risk involved in enduring the onslaught of abusive behaviours. This difference was evident in many accounts across the two groups, which may suggest that in practice conceptual similarities do not always translate into a shared understanding or experience of the breakdown.

It should be noted here that a breakdown is seen as distinct from a “proper or good” ending, which denotes a period of notice and preparation that ultimately produces better outcomes for the child. For example,

Cathy: [Client T] Err she had a lot of placement moves but the last one, the last one was really well planned. So it was really well planned ... and I worked really hard with the carers to make it a good ending and there was a little bit of contact afterwards so it wasn't like a rejection sort of thing. (SW)

Cathy's comments illustrate a point of consensus between foster carers and social workers; that planning and working together can mitigate the distress of the ending and bring about something positive for the child. However, based on the next excerpts, it seems that the distinction between a "good ending" and a "breakdown" is not as clear-cut as it might first appear.

Denise: Well I didn't think it was a breakdown because we sort of moved him on. To us anyway, maybe not to the social workers. To me he moved on to somebody who's got teenagers and he's growing up with older children and he's doing very well I've heard. So to me that was a positive move. (FC)

Gaynor: Yeah, well we had a trainee social worker and erm, in the end the placement just broke down. To me she [client] needed help but the social worker said she'll have to go back to her dad's. That's the last we heard of it. To me that's a breakdown because she's still in danger, no one's done much to help her. (FC)

From these examples, it seems that the meaning of the ending can be shaped by the degree of agency which foster carers claim within the decision making process. For Gaynor, being unable to influence the care plan and safeguard the child is fundamental in defining the ending. These differences in interpretation were emphasised more broadly within the informal discussions between carers and members of the research team (AT and CC) that preceded the focus group. Several of the carers insisted that the placement ending we had contacted them about had been misidentified as a breakdown, despite the information provided to us by the children's services department and individual social workers.

Interestingly, terms like "placement ending" or "breakdown" did not filter into the young people's accounts; instead they referred to "moving", "leaving" and "not being wanted". This is exemplified in Ash and Ben's descriptions of their placements coming to an unplanned end. Ash was moved into temporary respite care when his long-term placement began to go "pear shaped", as he put it. He described telephoning his carer within the first week of respite only to be told, "He [carer] didn't want me back anymore". Similarly, Ben's account of his last placement ending gives a sense of a rather brief and impersonal dismissal: "They told me sorry but you've got to leave". Here the young people portray the endings as unexpected and unwelcome. (See Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008, for parallels in the experiences of adult care leavers.)

1b. Indecision and uncertainty: The best laid plans. To allow the local authority adequate planning and preparation time, the general expectation is that carers should give one month's notice of their intention to end a placement. The following extract shows how fragile this notice period can be and how a planned ending can deteriorate into a placement breakdown.

Rachel: Well we've got this thing about where foster carers are supposed to give 28 days notice so planned moves can go ahead but quite often you know that's not the case. foster carers will turn around and say, "We want them out today", or "We want them out in a week". Umm so you have to move that

young person on, which puts you under a lot of pressure because they're not ready to move on. It's not a positive ending for the child. So, the 28 days notice doesn't really mean anything, whereas it really could. (SW)

There is an implicit sense of frustration in this account, suggesting that carers' decisions are sudden, impulsive and self-serving, which is counter-productive for the young person and places an additional burden on over-stretched resources. These themes were commonplace across the social workers' descriptions of placement disruptions. Rarely did they find understanding in the foster carers' urgency to end placements; instead their perspectives were immersed within their own experience of having to respond to the crisis.

However, from the carers' standpoint, caring for other people's children can be unpredictable and volatile. Within the focus group, they referred to being disillusioned and burnt-out by the unremitting destructive and rejecting behaviours exhibited by some of the young people. In some cases, giving 28 days notice promised a return to normality. Even so, there seems to be a risk that once given, notice can act as a catalyst which exacerbates the child's insecurities and intensifies their challenging behaviours. In turn this places intolerable strain on foster carers to terminate the placement even earlier than planned. The relationship between carers' decision making and the child's spiralling negative behaviour is illustrated in the next extract.

Brenda: Me and my husband had sat down and told him [client] we didn't think we could have him anymore because we felt we'd lost it with him. He then lost total respect for us. He started basically saying, "Talk to the hand". I mean [pause] he, like he, just had no respect for us at all and if he'd stayed err, we'd have just been on the same roller coaster. (FC)

2. An emotional and isolating process: How it feels when placements breakdown

To reflect the uniquely "disconnected" nature of our participants' emotional responses to the placement breakdown, we have organised this section around the individual standpoints of each group.

2a. Suppressing shock, fear and worry: The young people's emotional reactions.

Irrespective of placement satisfaction, all of the young people participating in our study expressed some level of distress about the eventual breakdown.

Ash: I was quite shocked actually but I went to school and I was then and umm [pause] and when I was just, after sandwiches, I was just stood in tears. (YP)
 Kirsty: Umm, it was very scary and I was scared. (YP)
 Interviewer: What was it like at the end of your placement?
 Tanya: Sad because I didn't think I would see her [foster carer] again. (YP)

These relatively narrow emotional descriptions leave a powerful impression of the vulnerable and passive position that young people occupy when a placement ends prematurely. They seem unprepared for the ending or what to expect next. Their bewilderment is probably amplified by the multiple losses incurred when a placement ends in crisis. For the child, moving placements is not simply about physically relocating but involves severing many other ties:

Ethan: Well I start getting nervous kind of thing cos I've got to go to a new home, new school and stuff and I don't know anyone. (YP)

Here it is evident that a placement breakdown can involve leaving behind everything that is familiar. Naturally, this can be a particularly unhappy and anxiety-provoking experience for young people (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; McAuley & Trew, 2000; Unrau et al., 2008). In Fernandez's (2007) longitudinal research looking at growing up in care, foster children expressed their fears about placement instability and their vulnerability when moving to a new home. In particular, they lamented the loss of old friendships and described their anxieties about forming new ones.

Whilst all of the social workers acknowledged that placement disruptions were generally very distressing and damaging for young people, foster carers made no mention of this. It is difficult to explain this omission but it may have a self-protective function; making the ending more tolerable. Alternatively, it may be that the children are so adept at disguising their feelings that the foster carers underestimate how difficult they find the experience. As illustrated below, the young people we spoke to frequently drew on strategies of avoidance, distraction or minimisation to cope with their emotional reactions.

Interviewer: And what were those last four days like?

Ben: Upsetting, because I didn't want to go. Umm I just tried to enjoy myself. (YP)

Tanya: I had to come to terms that I wasn't going back, so I said, "Fine I don't wanna go back", and didn't. So I got to terms with it. If they don't want you there, they don't want you there, so you get used to it don't you? (YP)

Irrespective of the length of time in placement or the quality of the relationship with carers, a common thread of stoical acceptance binds these children's accounts together. In coming to terms with the unexpected transition, emotions are silenced or disguised. There is an impetus to move on and not look back, which Ethan (YP) sums up in his description of a crisis ending after two years with the same carers: "You have to live with what's happened, past is gone, future is here". For most of our young participants, it may be that more adaptive or emotion-orientated coping strategies are beyond their developmental grasp, or perhaps articulating their feelings simply seems futile and unproductive. In fact, other researchers have found that young people in care often believe that adults misunderstand or ignore their attempts to communicate their feelings, and so they resort to denial, diversion and confabulation (Leeson, 2007; McLeod, 2007; Unrau et al., 2008).

2b. Expressing doubt and regret, guilt and loss: Foster carers' emotional reactions. It was not only young people who were distressed when the placement ended in crisis. Nutt (2006) describes how carers can be so intimately connected with their foster children that they invite a heavy emotional burden into their lives. Indeed, the high emotional cost of placement breakdown emerged as a dominant theme amongst the carers in the focus group. The following discussion illustrates the level of distress and self-recrimination that they feel when a placement ends abruptly.

Brenda: Yes I have got a really close attachment with [young person], umm you could use the word love, I do love this kid, I really do but she can't come back and its really hard dealing with the emotions.

Carl: Because you know, you do go through feelings of err that I've let this child down.

Francis: Grief, it is grief. (FCs)

Loving or developing a close emotional bond with a young person appears to deepen the carers' distress and remorse when the placement ends. Francis labels this emotional experience as grief,

implying that the loss is so acute that it renders the carers bereft. Managing such overwhelming feelings can be particularly arduous. Our carers constructed a narrative in which they struggled to hold back painful emotions in the aftermath of the breakdown. For example, Francis (FC) described herself as, “Battling against heart breaking feelings of loss and guilt”. She was not alone amongst our participants in feeling responsible for letting the young people down:

- Gaynor: Now that was moved on in an emergency and I have felt like I’ve failed this child and you know that is horrible for a carer. Feel you’re another person in this child’s life that’s let this child down. That’s, that’s the really upsetting part for this one.
- Eddy: Umm, I don’t want [young person] to think that I’m another person that’s had her and pushed her away. (FCs)

Here self-doubt, regret and guilt are bound up with a sense of having failed to make a difference. Positioning themselves as actively contributing to the children’s distress seems to strengthen the carers’ sense of personal failure and potentially challenges their identity as sources of security and agents for positive change. Wilson, Sinclair, and Gibbs (2000) found this sense of failure was commonplace amongst carers who had experienced a fostering disruption.

Given the emotional fallout for the foster carers, it is perhaps understandable that making decisions at the point of crisis is associated with much ambivalence and many changes of heart. Despite trying to normalise their emotional reactions, the carers in our focus group constructed the ending process as one in which they were isolated and left to fend for themselves.

- Eddy: I think everybody, absolutely every carer goes through the same emotions but you just do feel very isolated.
- Brenda: Yeah, I think I’m not going to phone social services because I’ll just get a bad name for myself.
- Carl: I suppose in some ways it does impact because you get to the stage where you just deal with things for yourself and you think what’s the point in ringing a social worker? (FCs)

Whilst foster carers often feel marginalised when a placement disrupts (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000), what is striking here is that the carers seem to actively cut themselves off from support, either due to the fear of being judged or based on a belief that children’s services are ineffective. This self-imposed isolation may also result from a need to maintain a professional demeanour of coping. For some, previous experience of asking for help during a placement crisis was also a disincentive:

- Andy: I was made to feel by the reviewing officer and social worker that, it was, it was impounded on me even more, that I’d let this child down. And I guess err that didn’t help. (FC)

From this perspective, it is perhaps easy to see how foster carers could get locked into a vicious cycle, where their fear of being judged makes them reluctant to ask for help when placement difficulties arise. This means that difficulties are more likely to manifest into crises, and carers, in turn, are more likely to be labelled as unprofessional for failing to alert the local authority earlier.

2c. Absorbing pressure and stress: Social workers’ emotional reactions. For the social workers in our study, the emotional impact of placement breakdowns was characterised by the theme of “being under pressure”. They position themselves at the vortex of the emotional and

practical crisis, having to contain the fallout on all sides. In the next quotations, Diane and Jackie describe what it means for them when placements disrupt.

- Diane: You get pressure of all sorts, from everyone really. And they like put everything down to us. Then we're the bad guys all the while. (SW)
- Jackie: But it is a lot of work and pressure put on just you when there is a placement breakdown. With everyone involved you know. It is too much. (SW)

These accounts conjure up a sense of ubiquitous and isolating pressure. Diane and Jackie's use of the passive voice creates an impression of being put on or held unjustly accountable for the unravelling placement crisis. Indeed, metaphors like "shouldering the blame" and "picking up the pieces" were commonly referred to by all the social workers.

3. The buck stop here: The struggle to situate culpability and responsibility

At an experiential level, the next two sub-themes explore the participants' explanations of who is accountable for placement breakdowns, whereas at a strategic and institutional level they consider wider issues of role identity and decision making.

3a. Blame and recrimination: It is all your fault. Themes of blame and recrimination around placement breakdown are dominant in the majority of participants' accounts. The most salient feature of these narratives is the way responsibility is actively distanced and passed between participant groups like the proverbial "hot potato".

3a.i. Blame and social workers. For foster carers and young people alike, poor communication with social workers is central to their construction and description of placement breakdowns:

- Brenda: I had one [foster child] that the box was ticked for drug abuse on it and when I said what drugs, they [social worker] said, "Sorry, I ticked the wrong box".
- Eddy: Information does not get passed from social worker to social worker as it should. I've been at Reviews where there has been a brand new social worker and they turned round and said, "Oh I'm glad you've come because I've not had time to read the files", and you're thinking, "Well, hang on a minute".
- Denise: Yeh, this kid had diabetes and when we asked them they said, "Oops, sorry we meant epilepsy", and he didn't have either. (FCs)

Here a common discourse of mistrust emerges, as social workers are constructed as inept and unprofessional. The foster carers see themselves as having to compensate for these failings and take the lead in safeguarding children. Similarly, most of the young people in our study also take the position that social workers could do more. They repeatedly refer to not being told enough about what is happening with their placements or what to expect next.

- Ash: Well [pause] they should tell me simply or plain that I'm moving cos then I could go, "Ok, what have I done wrong" and probably correct it before they put anything in and I could probably go fine. (YP)

Kirsty: Could have like told me what the placement was like so that I could have like expected what to find there cos like I didn't know if the place was nice or nasty what I was gonna move to. (YP)

For these young people, being placed in a position of "not knowing" makes it difficult to repair damaged relationships, and intensifies their vulnerability and powerlessness within the ending process. Being kept in the dark is a common complaint of foster children who have experienced multiple placement disruptions (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995; Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005). However, being more open about the process, even when little information is available, may actually empower young people and facilitate a more positive transition for all involved. As Ben says, "Knowing what to expect makes moving somewhere new less nerve wrecking".

3a.ii. Blame and foster carers. In contrast to the critical stance adopted above, all of the social workers in our study portray themselves as actively supporting placements in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for carers and young people. Where difficulties had arisen, this was commonly blamed on the carers' reluctance to ask for help.

Jackie: I think foster carers contact you when its virtually broke down to be honest. Not in all, not in all cases but I'd say about 70% its like that when they're at the end of their tether and they're basically shouting at you because they're frustrated. (SW)

Here the frustrations and pressure of trying to support placements are clearly expressed by Jackie. All of the social workers implied that untimely and poor communication from foster carers was responsible for placement breakdown and they felt scapegoated in this process.

Likewise, all of the young people positioned foster carers as the active agents in the ending process. Within their accounts, the context for the majority of placement breakdowns involved carers using physical interventions or setting unnecessarily restrictive boundaries. Attributing blame and responsibility to carers, whilst minimising their own actions, emerged as an important feature in most of the young people's narratives. This splitting is clearly evident in the following example.

Interviewer: Right, ok. Umm, tell me a bit about you know when it ended then.

Ethan: Cos she lost her temper. She used to throw me on my bed and then shut the door and lock it.

Interviewer: Alright and why do you think that happened?

Ethan: I slapped her in the face by accident but I didn't slap her, I scratched her in the face by accident cos she picked me up and she was about to put me on the steps and I moved my arm and I scratched her. (YP)

Here Ethan's description of his "accidental" behaviour serves to downgrade his responsibility in the placement ending and creates an impression that his actions have been misinterpreted. Placing this in context, it is not unusual for children to deny responsibility; especially those who have experienced neglectful or abusive early lives, where issues of underlying shame and poor moral development may be critical (Hughes, 1997).

For the three oldest children in our sample, curfews and limits imposed by carers were integral to their constructions of the placement breakdown. Here, Ben illustrates how these restrictions created an emotional conflict in his relationship with the carers.

Ben: I liked the foster carers and I didn't like them because they didn't give me enough freedom. Like all the my age people they all went to parks and like miles away in the countryside and I wasn't allowed outside the street or anything past the houses. So I didn't really like it cos I thought they were too strict. (YP)

Although teenagers commonly complain that parental or carer expectations are unfair and exclude them from engaging in peer-related activities, most of the social workers also suggested that carers' setting unrealistic boundaries contributed to placement breakdowns.

Alison: What I've found is that the older the young person gets, the more they want to try out new situations and have a bit more freedom, umm the foster carers are [inaudible] it seems to be easier to manage them when they're younger and foster carers are saying, "You can't do this and you can't do that." I don't think they try so hard to get a young person to work through the problems associated with being a teenager and wanting a bit more independence umm. (SW)

Alison represents carers as unprepared and ill-equipped to manage the developmental challenges presented by adolescents. However, the reality may be that looking after an adolescent brings with it distinct demands that will challenge the placement system. Certainly, the older the child is at placement, the more likely they are to display behavioural problems and pose an increased risk for placement disruption (Oosterman et al., 2007).

The characteristics of carers failing to adjust their parenting style to meet the challenges of adolescence was only one dimension in a broader narrative depicting a mismatch between carers' expectations and children's needs. This is illustrated in social workers' claims that placement stability is jeopardized by the carers' naïveté.

Cathy: And I think that they seem to forget that these kids are damaged in one way or another, that's why they're in the system. (SW)

Jackie: [carer B] felt that she couldn't do anything with him. Her words were that they kept repeating everything they was doing with him and he wasn't listening but really I don't think they really realised he has got a learning disability and he you know, so there was a placement breakdown there. (SW)

Reference to the carers' inability to attune to the complex behaviours of children in their care characterises them as unskilled and ineffective. Yet many foster carers would argue that they have an in-depth knowledge of the care needs of children they look after, and that it is actually the local authority and their staff who fail to take action and meet need appropriately (Nutt, 2006; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000).

3a.iii. Blame and foster children. Rather than seeing the problem as a clash of expectations, the carers in our study presented an alternative reality, where the demands of caring for children are actually becoming more onerous and demanding.

Carl: And erm, I don't know if you all think it but in my years of experience, in the last 4 or 5 years the children that we are getting now are far, far more damaged. There's a lot more stuff at the younger end, a lot more stuff to do with drugs.

Francis: But this year and last year we've ended three placements. It's because the kids are more damaged. They've got more problems. (FCs)

The progressive rise in children's complex and dysregulated behaviour is used here to explain the repeating pattern of placement breakdowns. In support, empirical research has identified the presence of challenging and violent behaviours as highly predictive of placement breakdown (Oosterman et al., 2007). This was reflected in the group discussions of the carers. For example, Andy described being stabbed by one child, while Gaynor said she had been thumped, kicked, bitten and headbutted. Caring for these children can be a "risky business".

social workers also characterised the young people as powerfully subversive within the ending process, although they did not refer directly to an increase in violent behaviours. For example, Alison describes how the young person she had been involved with was complicit in ending her placements.

Alison: Umm [young person] prior to that had a lot of placement breakdowns and I guess she instigated quite a lot of the breakdown and she would be fully prepared to pack her stuff up in a weeks notice and go. (SW)

Despite constructing young people as instrumental within the breakdown, there was a competing narrative that served to distance them from responsibility and blame. Sometimes this was implicit through the language that carers and social workers used to talk about young people like "damaged goods" and "tennis balls being batted about". At other times, it was more explicit, with young people being directly excused or extricated from taking responsibility.

Denise: I think she [young person] loved us but I think she was intent on breaking the placement down. I honestly don't think she could help what she was doing. (FC)

Diane: She was quite nasty to the foster carer. She did say some terrible things. I don't think she meant them. So that was terminated by the foster carer. (SW)

It is hard to make sense of the dichotomous positions of power and powerlessness attributed to young people within the ending process. Interestingly, while it is acceptable to complain about their acting out and emotional avoidance, holding them accountable seems strictly taboo. Early traumatic life experiences are typically offered in mitigation by carers and social workers alike.

Carl: He [young person] is going to be another child that's in the system and because there is so much damage been done to him, not through any fault of his, all the way through it was never his fault, the damage he'd you know, the damage that's been caused to him but he is going to be another child just going to go from one carer to another. (FC)

Alison: Umm, she [young person] knows it is because of her behaviour but she can't stop in one place. When she starts building a relationship with somebody, she ends it all of a sudden. She can't, [pause] her background you know. She starts building up a relationship and then she breaks it so she doesn't, so they don't hurt her. (SW)

The justificatory relationship between the "damaged child" and responsibility for placement disruption is clearly illustrated by these excerpts. Perhaps absolving young people from responsibilities legitimises foster carers and social workers tendency to blame each other (Nutt, 2006).

3b. Strategy and planning: Decisions, decisions. Across the participants' accounts of placement breakdown there was a shared experience of marginalization within the decision making process. The participants believed that their views were unsolicited or silenced by the institutional

hierarchy within children's services and, as a consequence, planning and policy developments were distanced from their experiences. The following extracts highlight these commonalities.

- Carl: I do feel social services let him down. When you give them an opinion as to what you think would be alright for this child and what have you....
- Eddy: ...No-one listens to you.
- Francis: No, so why did they bother asking you in the first place?
- Brenda: Exactly because we're foster carers, not qualified.
- Carl: They like us to behave like professionals and do stuff professionally but they don't look on us as professionals. (FCs)
- Cathy: One of the things that could be done is that the social worker has a lot more input into where children are placed, whereas we just sort of get given, you've got this, and yeah you do have to play up sometimes and say, "Absolutely no way is that child going there". We could have a lot more input in that. The children could also have a lot more input. (SW)
- Interviewer: Hmm and how did it feel when they said that your placement was going to be ending and you'd be moving back to [area]?
- Ben: Not very nice.
- Interviewer: And did you tell anyone how you felt about the situation?
- Ben: Yeah. They don't listen.
- Interviewer: Who doesn't?
- Ben: Social services.
- Interviewer: And what was that like for you?
- Ben: Crap, really upsetting and confused. (YP)

Clearly, there is a consensus of opinion that dialogue with children's services is fruitless. Not being heard by the dominant system seems to result in a sense of powerlessness and frustration. It is also bound up with uncertainties about role identity, prompting the foster carers' to question their professional status and the social workers to "play up" like children vying to be heard. As the silent stakeholders, foster carers, social workers and young people appear to mistrust the power that children's services wield and are wary about the way placement decisions are made. The impression from all the participants is that decisions are impersonal, unrealistic and do not take account of individual care needs. In the next extract the carers illustrate how these decisions can leave them feeling ill prepared and having to improvise.

- Denise: I don't think there's any assessment on the child and the background.
- Eddy: You get the kids first and then...
- Brenda: Make it up as you go along.
- [laughter] (FCs)

Social workers also saw poor decision making and a lack of collaborative planning as being responsible for impoverished care experiences. For example,

- Rachel: They have to go in the placements and end up playing up and then are shipped out at a minutes notice, and it is a massive impact. And of course you know it is not the best outcome for

children. You just ship in and ship out and they're just expected to just go into a family and just fit in straight away. (SW)

Here Rachel uses a powerful metaphor of cargo to describe how reactive and impersonal decision making can overshadow and dehumanise the needs of children, reducing them to the status of a commodity that can be move around at a whim. Added to this, the social workers in our sample complained that many decisions were resource- rather than needs-led, which placed them under pressure to compromise their ideals of best practice.

Diane: We're told to look at the best outcomes for children and you know what placement to meet their needs but that's so unrealistic because when you go to fostering you can only have what they've got, whether that's the best move for the child or not, that's all you have to play with. (SW)

The mismatch between need and resource is highlighted further from a young person's perspective in Ben's account of an unplanned placement ending.

Interviewer: And how about details on perhaps where you were moving?

Ben: Well they didn't know so they couldn't tell me. I didn't know until I was half way there, cos then she [social worker] told me. She had a phone call in the car saying they've got me a place and that was it. So, umm cos that was nerve wracking cos it was seven o'clock at night and I had nowhere to go. (YP)

The image here of a race against time places Ben and his social worker in a very stressful position. It is easy to see how these anxieties could spill out and disrupt the next placement. Indeed, Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, and Gibbs (2005) argue that to feel safe and to increase the likelihood of placement stability, children need time to get to know new carers and to adapt to their environment before making the transition. Despite these recommendations, all the young people in our sample recounted experiences of having to move under pressure, which did not allow for any preparation or planning.

Interviewer: All right, so when did you know that you were going to have to go?

Tanya: On the same day, on the night.

Interviewer: On the night. Ok and who told you about that?

Tanya: Umm, this man that came. I don't know this man. He was umm, begins with e-d-t or something like that. (YP)

Interviewer: So when you say your foster carers didn't tell you?

Ash: I just moved one day. I woke up and all my bags were packed. (YP)

Here the speed of the placement transition seems shocking. It's hard to imagine the impact of waking up to find all your possessions packed or being told by an unfamiliar member of the emergency duty team (Tanya's reference to e-d-t) that you will be leaving your home straightaway. Nevertheless, these experiences of being uprooted and moved on are presented in a dispassionate and detached style, which is often present in other accounts of displacement and migration (McCarthy, 1999). What can perhaps be understood from this is that these young people do not seem to have any sense of belonging or ownership over decisions that govern their lives. Having no power over personal destiny was a common theme for care leavers looking back on their experiences of growing up. Several of them referred to placement moves as a "journey into the unknown" (Unrau et al., 2008; p. 1259).

Summary and further discussion

Using hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches to inform our analysis has allowed a rich narrative to emerge that illustrates something of what it means to young people, foster carers and social workers when a placement breaks down. Our intention here has not been to provide an empirical explanation of placement breakdown, but to explore the way in which those most directly affected by the unexpected ending make sense of it. This adds important experiential and systemic dimensions to the majority of existing research, which has been criticised in the past for de-contextualising and isolating the views of key stakeholders in the placement system. We have attempted to explore both the shared and distinct claims made by our participant groups. However, we acknowledge that concentrating on the group level analysis may be at the expense of interesting individual variation. In attempting to privilege the viewpoints of so many stakeholder groups, we did encounter some logistical constraints and necessities. So, compared with most other published IPA studies, more people have been involved in data collection and analysis than is normally the case. This has obvious advantages for triangulation but it has been difficult to retain the overview of all perspectives and to prevent fragmentation within the research team. Also, although there are considerable benefits to viewing a process from the perspective of everyone involved, compromises have to be made when working with highly complex systems, like those surrounding young people in local authority care. That has meant that views of other influential groups such as birth families, foster carers' own children and social work managers have not been included here.

A shared experience of fragmentation

What is evident from our study is that all of the participants are affected when a placement ends in crisis, irrespective of age, experience, or professional role. However, despite their many commonalities, a strong sense of fragmentation and detachment dominates many of the accounts. The participants typically adopt conflicting group positions, characterised by discourses of mistrust and miscommunication. This means that reactions to the breakdown are suppressed or dismissed; resentments build-up and attempts to find a solution are thwarted by silence or angry recrimination. Division and splitting between the participant groups appears to limit opportunities for shared emotional processing, and consequently the experience of the breakdown remains unacknowledged. Denying or avoiding the many losses, disappointments and anxieties that surround an unexpected placement ending may actually compromise the ability of all stakeholders to cope with the transitions that follow. That said, there appears to be an implicit acceptance at an organisational and policy level that young people and foster carers can move on quickly and make a "fresh start", and that social workers will somehow contain all the emotional fallout and stabilise the system. Our participants' accounts, however, suggest that a placement breakdown leaves a lasting and corrosive impression. Recent research has applied a framework of complex trauma (Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2005) to explain the potential long-term impact of multiple placement breakdowns on young people aging out of care. Unrau et al. (2008) argue that unexpected placement transitions expose "already damaged" children to repeated levels of distress, which can have a detrimental impact on their ability to form relationships, regulate emotions and process information in adulthood. Our research indicates that the accumulative pressure and emotional demands of a placement breakdown can also have an adverse affect on foster carers and social workers, which may ultimately lead to stress and burnout, role dissatisfaction and high turnover rates (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000; Brown & Bednar, 2006; Fisher et al., 2000; Nutt, 2006).

The practical challenge arising from our participants' lived experiences of placement breakdown is how to balance the desire for self-protection against the need to create a culture of greater openness. Unrau (2007) suggests that the starting point in promoting greater transparency is to generate a common language to describe the ending that distances those involved from blame and stigma. However, even at this fundamental level, differences emerged between our participant groups in the way placement breakdown was conceptualised and defined. Nevertheless, by opening a dialogue between key stakeholders to reflect on the meaning and impact of the breakdown, it may be possible to move towards a common understanding. As part of this process, the precedent of "suffering in silence" will need to be challenged by validating the emotional distress and disenfranchisement concealed within our participants' experiences of placement breakdown. Establishing an actual or virtual discussion forum between young people, foster carers, frontline social workers and senior managers may offer a vehicle to shape policy and practice. This could be instrumental in reducing the negative impact of placement disruption by encouraging early identification of placement instability, legitimising crisis support and facilitating physical and emotional transitions when placements do breakdown.

Positioning young people at the centre of decision-making

It is clear from consultation and research that young people growing up in public care want their experiences to be taken into account (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor, Pithouse, & Sellick, 2004). The government's new agenda for children's services set out in *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children in Care* (DfES, 2006) attempts to do just that by promoting greater participation of children in decision making. However, despite a broad acceptance that children's voices can make a valuable contribution to strategic planning, their views about placement transition and breakdown are rarely sought (Unrau, 2007). Young people in our study generally felt disenfranchised and indicated they had little ownership over the decisions that were made about their lives. They described being "unheard" and left in a position of "not knowing". Our findings are consistent with other research illustrating how bewildered and disempowered children feel when placements disrupt (Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005).

Despite this, it should be recognised that empowering some young people in the process of care planning presents a significant challenge. Typically, placements breakdown at very short notice, leaving little opportunity for consultation and planning (Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005), added to which, the complex psychosocial needs of many children who experience multiple placement breakdowns may make them a particularly difficult group to engage (Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 2000). Wilson et al. (2004) urge local authorities to recruit more carers who can offer respite or short-term emergency placements to provide a "breathing and thinking space" for those in crisis. However, given a current national shortage of foster carers (DfES, 2006), this recommendation seems rather untenable. That said, young people have a right to be involved and informed about key decisions affecting their lives. Our young participants clearly wanted the breakdown process to be more transparent and inclusive; being informed was important in helping them prepare emotionally and practically for a transition. Social workers and foster carers have a crucial role to play here by promoting greater openness and modelling effective emotional coping. This may require them to develop new skills in helping young people to manage "bad news" and facilitating emotional debriefing after the crisis has passed.

Competent professional and nurturing parent: The challenge for foster carers

Foster carers in our sample complained of feeling inconsequential within the broader system. Dissatisfaction with the level of support received, consistently being given inadequate and

inaccurate information on which to base decisions and feeling excluded from the professional team are all reasons that foster carers cite for giving up their role (Kirton, 2001; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000; Nutt, 2006). Proposed government policy outlines the need for more out-of-hours support for foster carers and the introduction of a tiered, competency-based training programme, with clear opportunities for career progression and financial reward. The level of training and qualifications achieved by foster carers would then determine the type of placement they could offer, meaning that children with the most complex needs would be matched with the most highly qualified carers (DfES, 2006). While these suggestions may go some way to increasing the professional standing of foster carers and increasing placement stability in the long term, there are significant resource implications. Also, when placements breakdown, the ending can come very quickly which may not allow for placement planning and an adequate match to be found between carer and child. Without a large reserve of highly trained respite carers, children with complex behaviours who are more likely to experience multiple transitions may be placed with inexperienced carers who do not have the skills to meet their needs. Thus it is difficult to see how these proposals will prevent repeated placement breakdowns for a small number of children and carers.

Introducing a clearer career pathway and enhancing training for foster carers addresses some of the concerns raised by our participants, and theoretically, may enhance their credibility at an organisational level within children's services. However, it may not help them to negotiate a balance between their roles as "professional carer" and "nurturing parent", which presents a perpetual dilemma for many foster carers (Nutt, 2006).

Responsibility without power: The role of social workers

There is some evidence to suggest that continuity of social worker and greater involvement in a placement has a beneficial affect on stability and is viewed positively by young people and foster carers alike (Nissim, 1996; Fisher et al., 2000; Ward & Skuse, 2001; Wilson et al., 2004). Wilson, Sinclair, and Gibbs (2000) argue that social workers need skills in engaging with children and foster carers when placements start to disrupt, which includes communicating difficult news and containing emotional distress. However, some social workers may feel ill equipped to take on these roles and/or have little capacity due to the pressures of managing large caseloads. The need for ongoing support, supervision and mentoring of frontline social workers is seen as central to improving staff retention, job satisfaction and the delivery of high quality services to young people (DfES, 2006). However, opportunities and mechanisms for professional support may be limited in some cases. In our sample, feeling isolated, scapegoated, and under pressure were dominant themes amongst the social workers, yet none of them referred to using supervision or other support structures to help them to reflect on practice and manage stress.

Using standpoint theory as a framework for understanding the source of power and influence in the placement system, Unrau (2007) positions social work practitioners within the dominant group because of the degree of influence they wield in shaping how placement moves are understood by more marginalized groups like foster carers and foster children. However, just like the foster carers and young people we spoke to, our social worker participants presented themselves as disempowered, overwhelmed and blamed when a placement ended in crisis. For them the dilemma was between the ideal of providing a needs-led model of best practice and the reality of working within a resource-driven system.

Thinking systemically

Fragmentation is perhaps the most dominant theme to emerge from this research, both in terms of the content and process. Differences between our participant groups seemed to amplify the negative impact of the placement breakdown and limit opportunities for reconciliation. These experiences emphasise the need for a shared dialogue and greater understanding of each other's positions before change can be achieved. Similarly, we need to ensure that emerging policy and practice does not begin to mirror or parallel the splintering within the placement system. To be effective and meaningful to those most closely involved when placements breakdown, the needs of young people, foster carers and frontline social workers should not be considered in isolation from each other. Somewhere within the broader organisational structure of government and children's services a systemic overview needs to be retained and used to inform future developments.

There are methodological implications here, too. Our study is one of handful of IPA projects (e.g., Clare, 2002; Dallos & Denford, 2008; Larkin & Griffiths, 2004) that have drawn upon a multi-perspectival design, in order to capitalise on the integrative benefits of a systemic view of a given phenomenon. Our experience has been that this has been an extremely useful (and also challenging) way of synthesising the complex processes and relationships involved when a placement breaks down.

Conclusion

Growing up in a consistently enriching and protective environment is the right of every child and is fundamental to achieving good developmental outcomes. Establishing a stable home life is particularly important for those children whose lives have been transformed by early family adversity and their eventual journey into local authority care. However, for a small number of these children, frequent changes in placement arrangements remain commonplace and can have a long lasting impact. Multiple foster placement moves are remembered by care leavers as experiences of profound loss that continued to affect attachment relationships, emotion regulation and social information processing well into adulthood (Unrau et al., 2008). Given this, it is essential that we begin to listen closely to those experiencing stressful placement transitions and develop more effective and timely crisis support.

Notes

1. All identifying features have been anonymised to protect the participants' identities.

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