

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

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ALL IN THE FAMILY HOME: The Biological Children of Parents Who Foster

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Introduction

Foster families intend to provide children at risk with a secure environment. But how secure is this environment for the biological children of that foster family? While foster parents may feel drained by the needs of the foster children in their homes, the biological children may feel neglected by their parents. How do families function -and perceive themselves- when a foster child is introduced?

Although there are copious amounts of information on fostering which focus on the foster parents and the foster children, there is a gap in the literature regarding the biological children of foster parents. Parents are naturally concerned for the welfare of their biological children, but may feel incompetent as foster parents if their own children experience difficulty. Parents have suggested that the "bottom line" for them was the welfare of their biological children. Therefore, if the entire family, and particularly the biological children, are not supported during the experiences of fostering, the foster placement may fail.

The research presented here includes the subjective and individual reflections of the biological children as well as the communal and critical response of the foster parents (both regular and treatment foster parents). Five children and four adults who had experience growing up in their biological family with foster siblings were interviewed individually. These participants described their personal experiences as well as their perceptions of the relationships between the biological and foster members within their homes. Children were interviewed separately from parents and therefore should not have felt the necessity to answer as their parents would desire. Focus groups granted the parents an opportunity to contribute their experiences independently of their children as well.

Methodology

As a qualitative study, this research focused on the subjective meanings that the participants attributed to their experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted in order to provide data that reflected the unique reality of each respondent. "If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people, the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours" (Boas, 1943; in Patton, 1980, p. 307). A qualitative study using in-depth interviews is an appropriate method for

understanding how individuals have experienced sharing their families with other children.

As indicated earlier, very little information is available regarding how families as a whole (including the biological children) adapt to fostering. Due to the lack of literature on this topic, it was appropriate to conduct an exploratory qualitative study to become familiar with the basic issues and concerns. It is not the purpose of this study to imply causality. However, it is expected that this exploratory approach would serve to identify important variables for subsequent descriptive and explanatory research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Nine interviews were conducted, including the participation of five children still at home and four adult children. Two of the child interviewees were from the same family. Although I did not intend to duplicate families, it was difficult in this case to choose who would participate and who would not. Therefore, both were included. It also enhanced the data by allowing for a comparison of experiences between siblings of the same family.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, children of varying ages were included. Although adult children were not asked their age, the approximate average age was twenty-five. The ages of the biological children at home ranged from ages seven to sixteen. Of the child interviewees, three were boys and two were girls. Three female adults and one male adult also participated as interviewees. The number of years of fostering which the children still at home had experienced ranged from three years to seven years, with an average of four years. The adult children had four to fifteen years of experience (average of eight years) of growing up with foster children participated.

Finally, five of the eight sets of parents of the interviewees were able to participate in a focus group. Two separate focus groups were conducted to meet the needs of the parents. The purpose of these groups was to have parents reflect on the general themes which the interviewees highlighted.

The interviews were based on non-directive, open questions which allowed the respondents to answer in their own words, rather than to respond to pre-set categories (Foddy, 1993). This procedure of in-depth interviewing has been referred to by Kahn and Kannell (1957) as "conversation with a purpose" (in Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82). The questions were designed to explore a few general topics, but otherwise the participants were free to frame and structure the responses with respect to their reality (p. 82).

The methodology was based on a grounded theory approach, which inductively constructs theoretical concepts based on the emergent data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). "Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 1980, p. 306). Conceptualization and operationalization occur simultaneously with data collection. Such an approach allowed flexibility in the research as data and theory interacted.

The constructs presented here emerged from my understanding of the meanings that the participants attributed to their experiences. While reading through the transcripts of the individual interviews, I drew several diagrams to assist myself in depicting the situations which several of the interviewees described. As I continued to read and reflect on the scenarios in the transcripts, it became apparent to me that the participants were describing several alternative conceptions of their families. I continued to depict these pictorially in order to enhance my ability to conceptualize their realities. These diagrams were presented to the parents during the focus groups who subsequently reinforced the

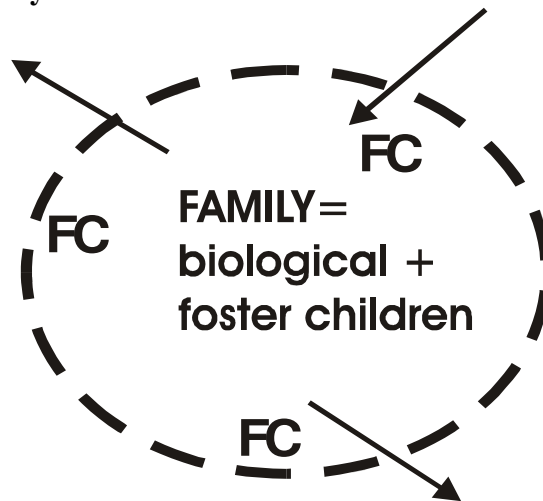
centrality of these constructs. Because of the importance which participants placed on their view of family, more attention was focused on this aspect of their experiences.

It is important to note the limitations of this method. The interviews were based on personal interaction. This requires cooperation on the part of the respondent and good listening skills on my part. Assuming the respondents are willing participants, the questions may not have been appropriate to their reality. Careful consideration had been made to keep the questions simple and flexible enough to be relevant to each participant's reality. During the interviews, the language of the questions was adapted to meet the verbal comprehension level of the interviewees.

Conceptualizations

One of the most intriguing dynamics presented by the participants of this study was the way they viewed their family's organization and the role that interviewees felt various family "members" (including foster children) had within that structure. The interviewees also revealed that the manner in which they viewed their family was not always the same as the way they felt their parents expected them to.

Figure A.1: Open Boundary



This diagram depicts situations where individuals felt that the entire family had integrated the foster children (FC) completely into their concept of 'family.'

Elements included:

- Standards/ expectations and rules applied the same to every child (biological or foster)
- Unquestioned acceptance of foster child (often called "unconditional love")
- When foster child leaves the home, they leave the 'family' as well

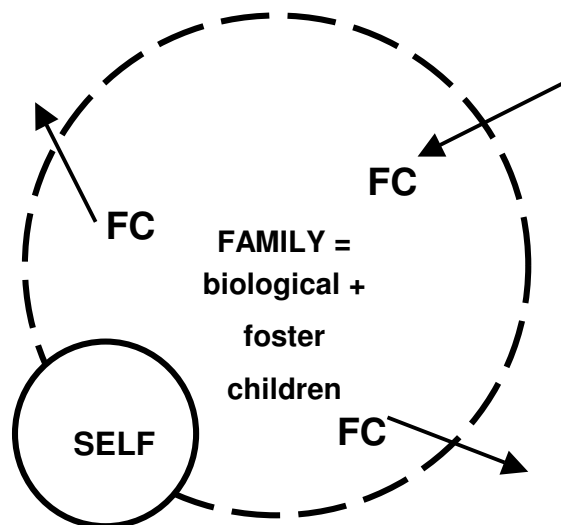
Challenges:

- Some biological children found themselves unable to generate the feelings necessary to support this model, despite parents' urging
- Some foster children resisted the emotional adoption into the foster family
- Some biological children resented the foster children talking about having their "own" family
- Some biological children noted strong feelings of being less important to their parents because their needs were perceived to be less great

Survival Technique in an Open Boundary Family: Partial Seclusion

Several interviewees disclosed that while acknowledging the expectation to live as an integrated unit with the foster children, they felt that their own needs and abilities were not recognized. Therefore, they described their presence in the family as separate from the rest of the members in their household. This response for survival is depicted below:

Figure A.2: Survival: Partial Seclusion



The "SELF" represents the biological child. Some individuals felt that they could not invest emotionally in the foster children and therefore separated themselves from them.

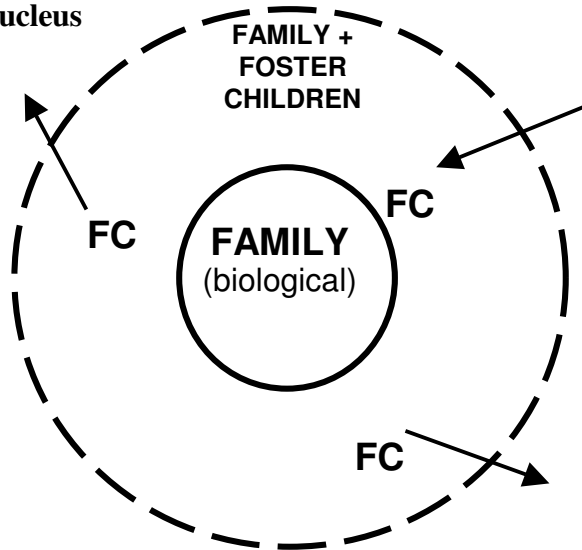
Contributing Factors:

- Appeared to occur when the biological child was older, in adolescent years
- Seemed to be triggered in part due to the behaviour of the foster child
- Interviewees identified a contributing factor to be the pressure they felt from their parents to feel differently toward the foster children than they did

Solid Nucleus

Some interviewees depicted a very different description of their family:

Figure B: Solid Nucleus



This diagram depicts the experiences of respondents who felt that their ‘family’ was comprised solely of the biological family. Foster children were taken into their home (the dotted circle) but did not become part of the family nucleus.

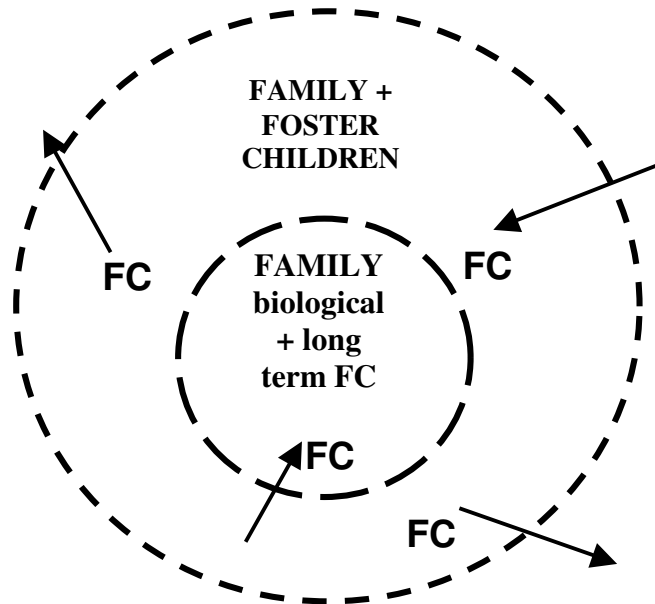
Factors:

- Foster children could come and go with minimal emotional trauma to the biological children
- Foster parents reported feeling compelled to operate this way to protect the biological children and to compensate for the amount of time and energy that they and the system focussed on the foster children
- Foster parents and biological children sometimes reported that this family system was a result of feeling “burnt out”
- Both interviewees and the parents reported feeling some guilt with this model as felt both the system and their own beliefs preferred a more unified family model that included the foster children
- Other interviewees and parents felt the foster children were more comfortable with this type of foster family arrangement because of their own attachment elsewhere

Contingency Model

Some biological children gave a clear description of a family arrangement that neither ruled out nor ruled in the importance of foster children in their experience of family.

Figure C: Contingency Model: Selective Integration



Several of the interviewees did include some, but not all, of the foster children in their concept of "family". They demonstrated a selective approach towards which foster children qualified.

Factors:

- Long-term foster children were much more likely to be considered "family"
- This model appeared to alleviate pressures to feel emotionally tied to relatively new-comers
- Not all family members would necessarily agree on who was "family" and when

Attempting a Consensus

While some interviewees and parents seemed comfortable accepting and maintaining a distinction between the foster and biological children, others stated that they had "mixed emotions", and still others professed that they were most happy when the foster children were completely integrated into their family. Among the parents there was considerable debate concerning which approach would be most suitable for families who choose to foster. The depiction of a solid nucleus has the obvious benefit of being an emotionally secure place for the biological children. Some of the participants felt that this was the most appropriate diagram for them because the foster children also make that distinction. Other parents felt that the perception of a solid nucleus was important because it demonstrated a healthy family boundary to the foster children.

Another parent espoused the incorporation of each one of the figures:

This [solid nucleus] is what our biological kids see and I want them to see it as this, but I want them to be able to buy into [selective integration], and I want the foster kids to buy into this one [open boundary] in hopes that they might get here [selective integration].

There is not a clear consensus from the participants in this study whether one particular model of perceiving family members is more appropriate than the others. The open boundary configuration appeared to be the most favoured by parents when considering the needs of the foster children. However, others have argued that the foster children may not regard themselves as members of the foster family and may even benefit from experiencing a "normal" or "healthy" biological family. The biological children were not in complete agreement on which arrangement was the most favoured, either. The solid nucleus perspective afforded the biological children with a secure position in the family, but did not necessarily dictate that they would appreciate their family's involvement in fostering. The selective integration approach is presented here as a contingency model which allows family members to choose which members they want to invest in, reducing the stress of treating everyone equally when they did not feel the same emotional ties to all the individuals in their household. The inclusion of particular foster siblings was contingent on their behaviour in that family, the length of their stay, and the probability of remaining a part of that family in the future.

Conclusions

Implications:

There are several implications from this study. It has been noted that information and training for foster children has often over-looked the importance of the biological children. Yet the introduction of a new person into the family creates stress for everyone.

It is very important that the [social or case] worker convey to the family from the beginning of their contact that these children will inevitably create stress when coming into a family, and the issue is whether the family is comfortable with stress, the degree of stress they can tolerate, and what they do to deal with it (Cohen & Westhues, 1987, p. 28).

One parent stated "If a couple with kids decides they're going to foster you don't have foster parents, you have a foster family. Everyone's involved." This was a truism both for parents and children in this study. Fostering agencies need to be aware of this fact when assessing families as potential foster carers. They should also give support and training to foster families on how to deal with the stresses associated with fostering, including specific suggestions for parents on how to balance the needs of the foster children with their biological children.

While a clear consensus regarding familial structures was not reached, some families described feeling pressure from their respective agency to conceptualize their family in a manner different from their personal preference. When assessing families who indicate an interest in fostering, social workers may rate a family higher if they indicate a structure resembling an open boundary. However, from this study, that particular perception may not be the most appropriate one. Participants indicated the importance of other factors including the ability to participate in decision-making, alleviation of

pressures to be good role models, and open communication as more indicative of whether or not a family demonstrated healthy functioning. There was also an implied desire for families who preferred an arrangement other than the open boundary model to be supported in this preference. By pressuring a family, agency personnel may be doing a disservice both to the parents, the biological children, as well as the foster children as it is presumed that a healthy family is the best alternative for children at risk.

Summary Points for Consideration:

- Fostering places biological children in a unique position which requires a response from them
- Parents need to be cautious in assuming they understand the reality of their biological children. Many biological children insisted their parents' perceptions of their feelings were inaccurate
- Children's experiences of fostering may change with age- as biological children reached their adolescent years, some professed feeling more negatively about the presence of foster children
- Children often feel compelled to give the "right" (correct) answer when asked how they felt about sharing their parents and homes with foster children
- Several biological children claim to be unaware of their negative feelings until they were adults
- Biological children particularly resented the role of being an example or role model to the foster children
- Biological children cited that participation in family decision-making was critical to feeling a valued part of the family
- Parents felt one-on-one time with the biological children was critical to mitigate the children's feelings of being less important
- Ambiguity and disagreement about family boundaries caused biological children to feel stress

Further Study

As the purpose of this research was to explore some of the experiences which foster families face, it is certainly not conclusive. Some preliminary suggestions are mentioned above, but they are not definitive in their scope. A limitation of this study is that it remains unclear whether one model is more helpful in meeting the needs for all concerned. Further study is necessary to determine in more depth the implications of the varying family constructs both on the family as a whole, but also on the individual members including the biological and foster children. The perception of how foster children view themselves in relation to the family organization and the interaction between biological and foster siblings also need to be investigated in order to better understand the impact of specific dynamics such as age and gender.

Finally, to reiterate a point made many times, this topic is important to study further because it is an important issue for families. Cohen and Westhues debunk a popular myth that parenting is a natural and simple task which humans become involved in. "We know that to parent a child is probably one of the most difficult and complex tasks any adult can undertake" (1987, p. 14). Fostering a child who brings with her many different experiences and often values can make this task even more challenging. As one participant observed, this aspect of fostering affects the parents, the family, the foster children

and the fostering agencies: "As soon as you start sacrificing your own family you've gone too far. Which is in fact what will ruin your job". Alternatives for how to strengthen and support *the entire family* are necessary to increase the effectiveness of fostering and the well-being of the families involved.

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