USING THE THEORY OF FAMILY BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY AND AMBIGUOUS LOSS TO UNDERSTAND THE EXPERIENCES OF THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF FOSTER CARERS.

Title: Using the theory of family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss to understand the experiences of foster carers' own children.

Abstract

In England, nearly three-quarters of looked after children are cared for in foster families. Despite this, relatively little is known about the experiences of foster carers' children in families who foster. This study used narrative interviews to explore the experiences of twelve adults now aged 18 to 54 who had been brought up in such families. Their families had fostered for much or all of their childhood and growing up in a fostering family had had a considerable impact on them. Most participants viewed some of the fostered children as siblings and continued to do so into adulthood. The analysis used the theory of family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. The findings suggest that there is a need for much greater awareness of the issues that foster carers' own children face. They also suggest that a change in how foster placements are supported needs to include a greater focus on the children of foster carers.

Keywords: ambiguous loss; foster carers' own children; fostering families; sons and daughters of foster carers.

Teaser Text

In recent years much more has been learnt about the experiences of looked after children but less is known about the families who care for them. This study used narrative interviews to learn about the experiences of the foster carers' own children. The foster carers' own children disclosed that while they felt they benefited from being brought up in a

family, they also experienced losses. Most continued to view many of the children the family fostered as siblings even though the fostered child may have left the foster family decades previously. Some had attempted to find former foster siblings through social media and some had been successful. Further examples of loss include loss of parental attention and loss of their family as it had been before they began fostering. Some of those interviewed also felt they withdrew from their family as a way of protecting themselves from these losses.

Background

As of 31st March 2021, approximately 80,850 children were in local authority care in England (Department for Education, 2021). This figure has increased year on year for well over a decade. Seventy-one per cent of children who are in local authority care are placed with foster families. Although there has been an acknowledgement that fostering impacts the whole family (The Fostering Network, 2008), there is a paucity of research which considers the effect fostering can have on the wider family (Sutton and Stack, 2012; Hojer *et. al.,* 2013) with there sometimes being a decade between studies (Twigg and Swan 2007). This lack of awareness is particularly surprising since studies have shown that the effect of fostering on their own children is one of the reasons for foster carers ceasing to foster (Pugh, 1996; Twigg and Swan, 2007).

Foster carers' own children's experiences of fostering

Research that has considered the experiences of foster carers' own children acknowledges that there are both benefits and challenges to being brought up in a fostering family. The benefits can include a greater appreciation of their own family (Younes and Harp, 2007); awareness of social issues (Younes and Harp, 2007; Ranieri *et. al.* 2018), companionship (Thompson and McPherson, 2011, Hojer *et. al.* 2013), influence on their career choices

(Watson and Jones, 2002) and development of their own parenting skills (Diepstra, 2007). However, studies also highlight that the foster carers' own children can experience wide-ranging losses. One of the most challenging losses reported by the foster carers' own children is the loss of their foster siblings when they move out (Walsh and Campbell, 2010; Williams, 2017). Other losses include the loss of personal space and privacy (Pugh, 1996; Watson and Jones, 2002), loss of personal possessions (Clare and Peaty, 2006; Swan and Twigg, 2011), their changing position in the family and of status (Younes and Harp, 2007; Sutton and Stack, 2012) and loss of parental attention (Younes and Harp, 2007; Hojer *et. al.* 2013).

The losses that the foster carers' own children experience are frequently not straightforward. For example, the children of foster carers continue to be cared for by their parents, but their parents are often focused on the more pressing needs and demands of the fostered child and fostering agency. Therefore, although their parents are physically present in the family they may be psychologically unavailable to their own child/children (Nutt, 2006; Hojer, 2007). Such is the uncertain nature of how long placements will last, the foster carers' own children are often unaware of when this state of affairs will end and they will again become the focus of their parent's attention. Foster carers also report that the needs of their foster children can take precedence over those of their own children (Nutt, 2006). In one study foster carers went so far as to say that their own 'children became almost invisible' to them (Hojer, 2007:44). So, as can be seen, the losses foster carers' own children experience may be surrounded by a lack of clarity and there is often ambiguity surrounding the loss.

The theory of family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss.

It is the nature of families that they change and develop over time (Boss, 1988) but the membership of fostering families changes more frequently than other family types. One way

of understanding the impact of this movement is by considering how the theory of family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss applies to fostering families.

The theory of family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss was developed by Pauline Boss in the 1970s and has its roots in family systems theory (Stewart, 2005). Originally used within the interdisciplinary research area of family stress it is:

> *a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system.* (Boss and Greenberg, 1984:536).

The theory was originally developed with families who had experienced traumatic loss but has also been applied to more normative life cycle events, such as children leaving home (Boss, 1999) and living in a stepfamily (Stewart, 2005). It has also been used to understand the experiences of foster carers (Thomson and McArthur, 2009) and children who are or have been fostered (Lee and Whiting, 2007). Family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss is increasingly being used in family research to describe and predict the effects of family membership loss and change over time. It has been found that the greater the level of family boundary ambiguity, the higher the level of stress experienced by the family, and the 'greater the individual and family dysfunction' (Boss, Greenberg, and Pearce-McCall, 1990:5). The theory of family boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss is predicated on a series of assumptions one of the most significant assumptions is that a psychological family can exist and that this may differ from the legal definition of family (Boss 2006).

Family boundary ambiguity is experienced through loss, inclusion and intrusion. However, there are two main 'types' of family boundary ambiguity (Carroll *et. al.,* 2007). The first (Type I) is created because of psychological presence within the family but physical absence and the second (Type II) is where the family member is physically present but

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psychologically absent. More than one type of ambiguous loss can occur at any one time and this can be doubly stressful (Boss 2006).

Boss and her colleagues (1990) also suggest that incidents of boundary ambiguity can be resolved if there is the time and space to reach a new equilibrium. However, within fostering families, there is frequently only a short period between one child leaving the family and another joining, resulting in family boundaries that change frequently. Furthermore, many of the losses the foster carers' own children experience appear to go unseen and unacknowledged (Targowska *et. al.* 2015).

Methodology

This study was undertaken as part of a PhD. (Tatton 2020) that explored the experiences of the foster carers' own children who were brought up in foster families. The research adopted a qualitative approach and used narrative interviews to gather data. It sought to consider how adults, whose parents fostered when they were children, now perceive and describe their family and its structure, how they talk about and understand their experiences of living in a family that fostered, what they perceived were the positive and negative elements about their experiences and what meaning they ascribed to key events during fostering, such as allegations of abuse, placement disruption and sequential experiences of loss.

Sample and sampling strategy

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowballing sampling strategies. Working in a Higher Education Institution provided the opportunity to talk to students and colleagues informally about my interest in the topic and proposed study. Several colleagues and students put me in contact with their family members, friends or acquaintances who they knew had been brought up in foster families. Further participants were recruited by

presenting at conferences and meetings. There were several potential interviewees who at first offered to participate but who, when contacted, declined. Reasons given for not participating were concerns about recalling childhood experiences and/or their families were still fostering and experiencing difficulties. Some of the individuals felt that their accounts would be predominantly negative, and it may be that the study recruited participants who generally felt they were more positive about their fostering experiences. The opposite is also possible, that is that some participants were interested in participating because of difficulties they had experienced.

In total, twelve participants were recruited who were between the ages of 18 and 54. Nine were female and three were male. Seven identified as white British, five were of dual heritage with two being white and black African, two white and Asian, and the final participant was white and black Caribbean. One of the participants had been born into a fostering family and the others were aged up to 15 when their families began fostering. Four of the families were still fostering and the other families had fostered for between five and fifteen years.

Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are terms that are associated with an essentially positivist epistemology (Watling cited in Winter 2000:7), with some researchers believing that the terms reliability and validity within a qualitative study are irrelevant and terminology such as credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability and trustworthiness more applicable to qualitative research. (Golafshani 2003).

Two of the ways in which above attributes were enhanced in this study was by maintaining a careful audit trail throughout the data collection and analysis and by peer scrutiny of the project (Shenton 2004). Throughout the process, my research supervisors were fully cognisant of the research design and regular debriefing sessions throughout the data

collection and analysis process were undertaken and will be further described in the analysis.

Data collection

Potential participants were first contacted by email or telephone. If they were willing to participate, they were sent an information sheet that detailed the nature and purpose of the research along with a written informed consent form which was completed before the interview took place.

Interviewees were given the choice of where interviews were conducted as it was important that they felt comfortable. The interviews took place either at the participant's home, their workplace or another public place local to the participant. All of the interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

At the start of the interview basic demographic data was collected, for example, age range, the sex they identified with, ethnicity, and the area in which they had lived when their family was fostering. Following the collection of the demographic data, the interview adopted a narrative unstructured style, which allowed the participant to take control of the content of the interview. As a narrative unstructured interview style had been adopted, participants were simply asked to talk about their experience of being brought up in a fostering family. There were no set interview questions although a list of prompts and areas for discussion had been developed in case a participant preferred more structure. However, prompts were not needed as once participants started talking about their experiences they discussed a wide range of topics.

Interviews typically lasted around two hours. Initially, it had been planned to conduct more than one shorter interview but the initial conversations with participants indicated they would prefer one longer interview. All of the participants were offered the opportunity to

have the transcript of their interview returned to them, so they could read it and if they wished and add in any additional details or further information but only one participant took up this offer.

Recollections

The study adopted a retrospective design and asked participants to recall events which had often occurred many years before. One of the challenges of using a retrospective design is that participants may have inaccurate memories that could affect the quality of the data collected (Elliott 2005). However, research has shown that around 80% of young adults recalled memories from their childhood accurately (Bruce, Dolan and Philips-Grant 2000). When recalling childhood memories, there appears to be a tendency for participants to recall a greater proportion of negative events compared to those which were positive (Howes *et. al.* 1993) albeit this phenomenon diminishes when recalling events that took place between the ages of 16 and 18 (Collins *et. al.* 2007). As the participants in this study were often recalling events that had occurred in their early and mid-childhood or early adolescence it might, therefore, be that they were more likely to recall events that had evoked more negative emotions than positive ones.

Analysis of data

Analysis was predominantly inductive there was an element of deductive analysis in that I was aware of Boss's theory. Braun and Clarke's (2006) original six-phase process of data analysis was adopted, which began with personal transcription of the audiotapes and several readings of transcripts to become fully immersed in the data. Initially, NVivo was used to undertake the initial coding of data, however, I then switched to pencil and paper methods as I found it easier to physically group codes to begin searching for initial themes (Braun and Clarke 2006) rather than working on a computer screen. One of the ways in which credibility was enhanced was to make use of my supervisory team. Several anonymised

transcripts along with my initial coding were sent to both of my supervisors so that they could check that the coding was consistent with the data (King and Horrocks 2010). Discussion around the initial codes produced no major differences.

The next phase of the analysis involved finding themes from the list of codes. This involved transferring all of the codes onto post-it notes, physically grouping similar codes, and looking for associations between themes and sub-themes. I also drew 'mind map' type diagrams to help me make associations, make links and refine themes.

As mentioned earlier this research was part of a wider PhD (Tatton 2020) study. Following initial coding of the data seven overarching themes were identified, these were later refined and merged into five themes with the losses experienced by the participants being one of these themes.

Ethical issues

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the University of Bristol and Newman University Birmingham. All participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous and used solely for research. However, it was also explained to them this could only be partial confidentiality as, should a safeguarding issue arise, the concern would be discussed with them and with my PhD. supervisors and an appropriate course of action taken.

It was not intended that the study would place participants in stressful situations but on recalling the past most of the participants became distressed at some point. If a participant was distressed, they were offered the opportunity to take a break and the interview was stopped for a short while. Once the participant has regained their composure they were asked if they wished to continue, and all of the participants were happy to carry on.

All participants were provided with a list of local and national counselling services that provided counselling either free of charge or at a low cost.

Findings

The findings revealed that there were three main areas of ambiguous loss experienced by participants. Each will be described beginning with the loss of foster siblings. The second considers how interviewees withdrew from the fostering family possibly as a coping strategy and the third was how parents were often preoccupied with the needs of the foster children so that they were psychologically and sometimes physically unavailable to their own children.

Ambiguous loss of foster siblings

Physical absence but psychological presence is when someone or something is seen or felt as still being part of the family but they are physically no longer there. Interviewees talked about the loss of foster siblings who remained psychologically part of the fostering family, sometimes for decades after they had physically left. Most participants in the study reported building positive relationships with at least some of their foster siblings and referred to them as 'my sister' or 'my brother' (occasionally this was prefixed with 'foster'). Almost all of the participants reported feelings of grief and loss when some of their foster siblings left the family. One participant said of the final separation from her foster sister:

> *Oh God! I cried and cried for God knows how long and I remember the journey really vividly. I remember saying goodbye to her in that beautiful garden and you could see her around the corner and we pulled away and I was just waving in the back window and she was waving and we were both bawling* [crying].

What made matters worse, was that they often hid their feelings and grief in an attempt to protect their parents from additional stress/distress. One participant said she lost contact

with her former foster sibling for many years but continued to view her as her sister. Similar to other non-typical sibling groups she continued to search for her in adulthood, eventually, re-establishing contact. She said of their current relationship:

> *I've got a brilliant foster sister you know. I have got that. She's still in my life and I'm really lucky to have that.*

Three of the participants had photographs of former foster siblings on their Smartphones which they showed me and clearly valued. Another participant, who was interviewed in the family home, pointed out photographs of past foster siblings still around the room.   Three of the four families had stopped fostering many years earlier. It did not appear that these photographs had been uploaded especially for the interview, as participants had to look through other images to find the ones they wanted.

One participant told the story of how there were still photographs of two of her former foster siblings on the wall of the family home. She said:

> *They are still up on the wall. A few times Mom has been like… Shall we take them down? We say 'No' because they are part of our life. They were our brothers. They should have stayed with us and they should have been our brothers forever.*

Continuing to view children with whom they have been brought up as siblings resonates with other studies of children who have been brought up together but are not biologically related (Angel, 2014). It was clear from this study that many former foster siblings were still viewed as members of the family even though they had moved on decades earlier. Almost all of the participants claimed to have tried to find some of their foster siblings through social media. When asked if she ever thought of her foster siblings, one almost whispered:

> *All of the time.*

Coping strategies

Several of the foster carers' own children in this study indicated that while they remained physically part of the family and lived in the family home, they consciously or unconsciously distanced themselves from their family and/or the fostering role. One participant whose family had been fostering for many years and who it had been anticipated would provide respite care for the children her parents fostered, said:

> *I remember feeling quite drained by the whole process. I no longer do any respite or have anything to do with the foster children in their care. I would say that over the last 10 years I have pulled back and back and back from it and I have a very distant relationship with my parents. They will tell you we're close, I will tell you it's quite superficial because there's always somebody else [foster child].*

This participant said she felt guilty about no longer being willing to provide the respite care that supported her parents but she was no longer willing to be involved. Other participants described withdrawal from the family as a form of anger or to protect themselves from the experiences of loss. One interviewee described how, at the age of about eight, her brother had become an elective mute for approximately 12 months following the loss of one of his foster siblings. She claimed the loss of this foster sibling had caused ongoing issues with her brother's behaviour. She said:

> *He went completely silent for a year. He just wouldn't speak. He was so angry … He was so cross that he'd lost his friend. Then eventually [he] became vile and he started taking weed and stuff. Hanging out with the wrong people. Being picked up by the police on street corners smoking weed. He was just horrible … He needed somebody. But the thing was my Mom and Dad were in a state over this* [the removal of the fostered child]*, so it can't have been them. They needed help too*

> *quite frankly … I think it made him a vile teenager … He's brilliant now but he went through hell. I think most of it came from this [loss].*

Another participant said of her birth sibling:

> *My sister left home when I was eleven - she was seventeen - under a bit of a 'black cloud' … I don't think she was ever particularly happy with our parents fostering. I think she was probably at a much more vulnerable age. A teenager and a lot of emotions and things and she found it very difficult.*

Another participant learned to cope with her feelings of loss by withdrawing to her room and taking refuge in books. She said:

> *Obviously, it was difficult if you got attached to them and then they left. That was always quite hard… I played quite a bit on my own at the end, you know, used my imagination quite a lot and I used to read quite a lot. I hid away in my books and things.*

While withdrawal from the family can be a normative event for children growing up and developing independence. Whether withdrawal might have occurred anyway is a matter of conjecture but participants attributed their withdrawal from the family or that of their birth siblings as being due to fostering. Physical presence but psychological absence could be seen in relation to the foster carers' children and also in respect of their parents.

Ambiguous loss of parents

Participants also reported times when although their parents were physically present in the home, such were the demands of the foster children that they felt their parents were psychologically unavailable. One said:

> *Actually, I spent my entire childhood running away from home. Having thought*
>
> *about that it was probably attention seeking because I didn't feel as if I got very*
>
> *much attention at all.*

She justified the perceived lack of attention by describing herself and the long-term foster sibling as being 'ok', whereas the other foster children had needed much more attention. It was only during the interview that she realised she had stopped running away at the same time as her parents had stopped fostering and the two things might have been connected. While most interviewees did not go to the extreme of running away, feeling that they received less attention and that their parents were focused on the needs of their foster siblings, was a common experience.

The interviewees also had mixed feelings because they generally admired their parents who they felt were often very stressed and worked hard for the foster children they were caring for. Eight of the participants highlighted specific periods when time available to them and/or the attention of their parents had been reduced or had almost ceased, such were the profound needs of a fostered child. In one instance the participant said that the reduction in time was connected with a very serious impending court case where her mother was required to give evidence. It was unclear exactly how long the mother was unavailable but the participant said:

> *It was a long court case. It went on for a long time actually … It was huge. As it was*
>
> *coming up to the court case and they were prepping and during it and even a little*
>
> *bit afterwards. There was lots of things … life was very different … It was a terrible,*
>
> *horrible time! We didn't get our Mom as much during that time.*

As previously noted, several participants explained that they felt their parents had thought they or their siblings were 'OK' so they were able to focus their attention on their foster children. One interviewee claimed:

> *I think they probably felt that me and my sister were sorted. We were OK. … My*
>
> *sister is quite an outgoing type of person and she's always surrounded by friends*
>
> *and I think they thought she was fine, that there were … no problems. I think it was*
>
> *only afterwards that they realised that she was having this huge problem at school.*
>
> *So I think it was more that they were not blinkered but they were you know…*

The participant said that her sister was being badly bullied at secondary school and craved some of the support and attention she saw her foster sibling receiving. However, her parents appeared to be oblivious to what her sister was experiencing.

Discussion

Being part of a fostering family can bring rewards but also brings challenges. As children, the participants in this study experienced non-normative events and challenges during which they frequently felt unsupported. They also experienced losses which were ambiguous and not straightforward. Many were reluctant to discuss their feelings with their parents at the time and some continue to keep their feelings to themselves.

The family home as a workplace

A child's home doubling as their parent's workplace has become commonplace for many children as the COVID 19 pandemic has necessitated large numbers of parents having to work from home (Dawes *et. al.* 2021). The family home also being a parent's workplace is something that foster carers' children have always experienced and it has been taken for granted that they will adapt.   However, unlike children whose parents are undertaking their work from home, fostering involves every member of the family and foster carers' children are an integral part of the fostering process. The family home becomes part of the public domain and is subject to rules laid down in legislation, by Local Authorities and fostering agencies (Nutt 2006) changes to which birth children have to adapt. These rules and

regulations may mean different sleeping arrangements, the need for locks on doors including bedrooms, changes to household rules, practices and displays of affection. It may also result in extra responsibility for the foster carers' own children, as well as the loss of parental attention.

All of these changes can leave the foster carers' own children in a situation where, although they are living in the same house as before, their home, family and role is very different to how it was before the family began fostering. Furthermore, when there are no foster children in the home, the family can revert to how things were previously leaving foster carers' own children needing to switch between the two states and in a state of uncertainty. While most participants welcomed and enjoyed foster children being part of their family, some appeared to regret the loss of the family as it was before and the levels of attention they had enjoyed from their parents.

Foster carers' lack of availability to attend to their own children's needs

The needs of foster children frequently consume a great deal of the family's resources and foster carers' time and attention. It is quite common for foster carers to be engaged in meeting the more pressing needs of foster children at the expense of their own children, thus becoming physically or psychologically unavailable to them.   Due to the many stressors experienced by foster carers, their children often felt uncertain as to whether or not their parents would be available when they needed them. This lack of availability has also been acknowledged by foster carers (Hojer, 2007; Nutt, 2006), with the recommendation they set specific time aside to focus on their own children. However, foster carers need to be mindful that they are available to their own children at the point the child needs them, rather than at specific times when foster children are elsewhere.

A paradox revealed during the interviews was that whilst the foster carers were using their, often exceptional, parenting skills to help foster children, sometimes their own children felt that the parenting they had received had been compromised. These losses evoked a mix of complex feelings, in part, because the loss was not always clear cut, as in the case of parental loss of attention and lack of parental psychological and emotional availability. However, while there was regret at the loss of parental attention, there were also feelings of guilt as participants were well aware that the work their parents were undertaking was doing good for others and therefore felt they could not speak out about their feelings.

The loss of fostered children who are seen as siblings

The foster carers' own children are often the family members who are closest to foster children and spend the most time with them. It is therefore unsurprising that sibling type relationships develop between children who are fostered and the foster carers' own children.

In the UK it is relatively unusual for children to lose a sibling. When such a loss does occur, other agencies such as schools, mental health services or charities can be valuable in providing support for the bereaved child. However, the experience of losing a foster sibling for foster carers' own children is a common occurrence (Serbinski 2014), yet no support networks or services are in place for them. There is usually no acknowledgement of their loss either publicly or within the family, yet the foster carers' own children might experience such losses time and time again (Sumner-Mayer 2006; Serbinski 2014). Disenfranchised grief has been noted previously in relation to foster carers (Lynes and Sitoe, 2019), but the grief and loss experienced by their children can also be seen as being disenfranchised (Doka 2002; Riggs and Willsmore 2012). Over twenty-five years ago Pugh (1996) argued that foster carers' own children could suffer emotional harm as a result of the grief they experience at the loss of their foster siblings. This study suggests that these losses may be compounded as the lost foster sibling(s) can remain psychologically present within the

family, with the foster carer's own children clinging to the possibility that one day they might be reunited. Boss (1988) claims ambiguous losses can be more challenging than experiencing a straightforward bereavement with which people can eventually come to terms. She also points out that families can come to terms with ambiguous losses when they have time to adjust (Boss 2006). However, time to adjust to loss is a luxury not often afforded to fostering families as there can be very little time between one foster child moving out and another replacing them.

Recognising and addressing the issues affecting the children of foster carers

Relationships between foster carers' children and foster children were acknowledged in the ministerial response to the Fostering Stocktake Report (DfE, 2018) which acknowledged that fostered children may build positive and sibling-like relationships with other children within fostering households. It was recommended that foster children can ask to keep in contact with the family and their foster siblings, but there is no acknowledgement that the foster carers' own children might wish to remain in contact with their foster siblings, nor do they have the right to request that they maintain contact. A positive step might be that foster carers' children could also request to keep in contact with their foster siblings, something which might be facilitated by supervising social workers, if it were prudent to do so.

It has also been acknowledged that some foster carers are so distressed by the loss of their foster children that access to counselling has been recommended (Herbert. *et. al.* 2013). However, there has been no acknowledgement of the impact that the loss of foster siblings can have on foster carers' children. This may be partly because they have been reluctant to share their feelings with their parents for fear of causing them additional stress or distress. Perhaps during their training thought needs to be given to how best to make foster carers

aware that their own children may be reluctant to share their feelings with them openly and
how to actively encourage the children to talk to them about any worries they may have.

Withdrawal from the fostering family was seen on the part of the interviewees and also
reported by participants in relation to their birth siblings. By either physically or
psychologically withdrawing themselves from the family they protected themselves from
further experiences of loss. Withdrawal was also seen as a way of avoiding some of the
expectations of support and additional responsibilities that came with caring for foster
children. It might be useful if foster carers were advised to observe and consider what help
or support their own children may need and to ensure they do not put the responsibility
onto the shoulders of a child who does not want to carry it or on other ways of protecting
their own children.

The role of the supervising social worker is primarily to support foster carers. However, if
their role could be extended to adopt a more holistic family-based approach, they could
engage with and support the whole family. They could acknowledge the role that foster
carers' children play in the fostering process and build positive relationships so that the
foster carers' own children feel confident to discuss any concerns with them. Supervising
social workers could also signpost foster carers' children to other services where such as
advocacy services commissioned by local authorities or organisations such as ChildLine who
are available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.

School counsellors and support staff are becoming increasingly prominent in schools in
supporting the wellbeing of children and young people. It would be helpful if local
authorities, schools and social workers were made aware of some of the issues experienced
by foster carers' children and also the losses they may experience.

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study was the relatively small sample and gender imbalance which limits the possibility of generalisation albeit these were similar to other comparable studies. A further limitation was that the participants recruited tended to be from more traditional nuclear families (when they were fostering). As fostering families become increasingly diverse (Brown, Sebba and Luke 2016) it may be that some of the issues change. As highlighted earlier, the study adopted a retrospective design where participants were drawing on their memories and recollections of experiences that had occurred often many years previously, therefore, it may be that the recollections are not always wholly accurate. It should also be acknowledged that in some areas, social work practices have moved on however, many of the issues participants raised, particularly concerning their feelings of loss and grief, were similar regardless of when their family fostered.

Conclusion

In recent years there has been a broader acknowledgement that it is the whole family who fosters and not just the foster carers (The Fostering Network, 2008; Hojer *et. al.* 2013). However, often in policy and legislation, the foster carers' own children appear to be seen as an extension of their parents rather than a separate group in their own right, with specific needs and challenges. Given the findings of this study, the voices of foster carers' children need to be heard nationally to inform policy and practice so that any negative effects of fostering on them are minimised and not ignored. It also needs to be acknowledged that some children may find voicing any negative views, especially challenging since they have high regard for the good their parents are doing for other children.

Becoming a fostering family changes how the family functions and adults want to believe that children will simply adjust to the changes and challenges (James 2012). Listening to foster carers' own children might also improve the outcomes for foster children and help the

prevention of placement breakdown (Farmer *et. al.* 2004) but over and above this, foster carers' children need to be heard because they are important and deserve to be listened to in their own right.

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