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A story of stories

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A story of stories

The impact of caring for a foster child
with a history of sexual abuse on family life

Dorijn Wubs

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A story of stories

The impact of caring for a foster child with a history of sexual abuse on family life

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you have sadness
living in places
sadness shouldn't live

(Rupi Kaur, 2015, p. 27)

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Although sexual abuse is a horror not linked to any time period, it has gained a lot of attention in the media, science, and policy in the past years. The most recent wave of attention to the topic is the #metoo movement in which many persons, mostly adult women, have proclaimed their own victimization of sexual assault or abuse. The amount of tweets, Facebook and Instagram posts marked with #metoo are alarming. However, we must realize the #metoo population is more rampant than appears from the digital platforms, as many sexual abuse victims are too young to (pro)claim their victimization. Some are not able to grasp the reality of what has happened to them. The numbers of child victims of sexual abuse are disturbingly high. The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings (2014) estimates that in the Netherlands one in three children suffer a form of sexual violence during childhood. Most of these children are abused by a family member, a friend, or an acquaintance (National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against children, 2016). A broad definition of child sexual abuse is used in this assessment of the Dutch context, meaning both hands-on and hands-off sexual acts are considered sexually abusive.

In this dissertation a similar broad definition applies: *“the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent, or that violate the social taboos of family roles”* (Kempe, 1977, p. 382). When children are suspected to have been abused by family, often they are placed in out-of-home-care such as a foster family. In 2017, 23.206 children reside in foster care in the Netherlands (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2018).

Prevalence percentages of sexual abuse victims in foster care vary, internationally and nationally, and depend on the applied research method, the usage of a small or broad definition of sexual abuse, and the source of information. Still, many victims of sexual abuse are identified among children growing up in foster care (Euser, Alink, Tharner, IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013; Grietens, Oijen & Ter Huizen, 2012; Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen, 2018; Strijker & Knorth, 2009). Additionally, many studies report how the abuse history of a child is not always known prior to placement and how foster families discover a child’s troubled past over time. For instance, in a Dutch study by Grietens, Van Oijen and Ter Huizen (2012) foster parents suspected that approximately 40% of their foster children had suffered sexual abuse in their past, however, in only seven cases sexual abuse had been substantiated.

In 2012, a small explorative study was conducted by Grietens et al., which centered foster parents of children who had been sexually abused prior to placement in foster care. In this study, commissioned by the governmental Samson Committee, several foster parents narrated

the great impact of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse on their family, as well as on the fostering process. Many foster parents voiced their ongoing need of support in this fostering experience. More importantly, in-depth research appeared to be essential to learn more about the experiences of Dutch families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. As a result, in 2013 the Iris Project was developed.

The Iris Project

The Iris Project, referring to the Greek messenger of the gods “Iris”, is a narrative study on the expertise, needs, and experiences of families who foster a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior to placement in foster care. The main goal of this qualitative study is to gain insight into the impact of a history of sexual abuse on the individuals of the family, and on the family as a unit. Therefore, foster parents, their biological children, and their foster children have been invited to participate in the study. As a result of two recruitment phases, 31 members of 11 families participated in this study. This sample consisted of 11 foster mothers, six foster fathers, 12 biological children, and two foster children. Over a timespan of two years we collected the stories of the adult participants by means of episodic interviews. In these interviews we firstly focused on a person’s life story, after which we explored the participants’ narratives on everyday life matters, as well as themes derived from literature and more general matters. The children who participated were either interviewed or completed a personal activity book containing several creative non-verbal tasks. Alongside this narrative study, several smaller studies (for example, studies on signs of sexual abuse or the available foster parent education on child sexual abuse) have been conducted to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on foster family life. On one of them, a case file study on processes of self-disclosure by foster children, we report in chapter four. Chapters five and six present some of the results of the Iris Project. Chapter three reports on the researchers’ reflections on the process of collecting narrative data.

The main objective of this dissertation

This dissertation centers narratives on the impact of fostering a victim of sexual abuse and the manners in which this impact is manifested in everyday fostering family life. In addition, the impact of studying this sensitive topic in a family context is reviewed.

Outline of the dissertation

After this introductory chapter and a short presentation of the theoretical and methodological framework in chapter two, chapter three concerns a detailed reflection on the process of collecting narratives within the Iris Project. Chapters four, five, and six provide empirical studies on several aspects of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. In chapter seven, overall theoretical and methodological conclusions are discussed. In more detail the chapters' contents read as follows:

Chapter two

Chapter two provides a theoretical and methodological framework containing insights from literature into the consequences of child sexual abuse and fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. Furthermore, an impression of the narrative approach is presented.

Chapter three

The study presented in chapter three is an in-depth reflection on the fieldwork in Project Iris. In the process of collecting narratives in the participating families, the research team faced several methodological, ethical, and emotional challenges. The researchers resolved these matters by being attuned to the individual participants, to the familial context, as well as to themselves as researchers. Excerpts of the researchers' logs on critical moments during the field work illustrate the use of meta-level sensitivity as a tool. This chapter is included in this dissertation as insights into the researchers' contributions to the Iris Project add to a deeper overall understanding why the Iris Project became what it has become.

Chapter four

The fourth chapter consists of a case file study on foster children's informal self-disclosures of previously unknown histories of sexual abuse. Insights are provided in the complex process of child sexual abuse disclosure in the context of foster care.

Chapter five

The study covered in chapter five aims at a deeper understanding of the concept of safety in families who foster a child with a history of sexual abuse. The narratives of 14 foster parents and 12 birth children were reviewed individually as well as in relation to each other. The dynamics of safety in foster families are explored from a systemic perspective.

Chapter six

Chapter six reports on women who foster a child, who was victim of maternal sexual abuse. The life stories of four foster mothers of victims of maternal sexual abuse are studied more in-depth and reveal that women who foster these children may have a paradoxical position in the child-rearing process.

Chapter seven

In the final chapter of this dissertation, the main findings are related to relevant literature. In addition, we discuss some of the strengths and limitations of the studies, as well as implications for research and practice.



with no man
then lay down
lands, if ye do
demand you.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical and methodological framework

The consequences of child sexual abuse

Several studies highlight the traumatizing effects of sexual abuse on children. In 1985, Finkelhor and Browne described four traumatizing dynamics of child sexual abuse. These trauma-causing factors (traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization) cause distortions in children's orientation to the world, the people surrounding them, and themselves. Especially suffering sexual abuse by a trusted person on which the child depends, has very negative impact (for instance, Etherington, 1997; Peter, 2006; Tyler, 2002; Young, Riggs & Robinson, 2011). The intrusiveness of the abuse (for example, fondling, oral sex, digital or genital penetration) and the use of force or humiliation also add to the experienced severity of the abuse. Although each sexual abuse experience is influenced by a child's age and gender, and abuse experiences differ in frequency and duration, it is described by survivors as a frightening, shameful, and isolating experience (Hornor, 2010; Putnam, 2003; Young, Riggs & Robinson, 2011).

Child sexual abuse impairs a child's cognitive and behavioral development, additionally, it can result in several internalizing and externalizing problems, as well as health issues. Examples of reported short-term and long-term problematic outcomes for children are: sexualized behavior, post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, dissociative disorders, drug and alcohol dependence, anxiety disorders, poor self-esteem, and conduct disorders (for instance, Dubner & Motta, 1999; Olfason, 2011; Tyler, 2002). Furthermore, children who have been sexually abused are at increased risk for other adverse life experiences (Cook et al., 2005; Dong, Anda, Dube, Giles & Felitti, 2003; Vanderfaeille, Vanschoonlandt, Van Holen, De Maeyer & Robberechts, 2014). This seems particularly evident for children who are placed in out-of-home care.

Foster parents in a study by Grietens, Van Oijen and Ter Huizen (2012), estimated that their foster children had an average of eight adverse life experiences. These adverse life experiences concentrated around loss (for example, a separation of biological parents), school (for example, failing a year of school), and interpersonal violence (for example, repeated sexual abuse). Similarly, Greeson et al. (2012) found 70% of the children in their research group to have complex trauma, meaning these children have suffered at least two different interpersonal trauma's perpetrated by caregivers. Of the foster children with complex trauma histories in this study, almost 60% was sexually abused or assaulted.

Fostering a sexually abused child

Parenting a foster or adoptive child with a history of sexual abuse has an impact on the whole family (Macaskill, 1991; Erich & Leung, 2002; Nalavany & Ryan, 2008). For example, Macaskill (1991) states that even families with a considerable knowledge of parenting experience stress due to the 'sexual component' in foster parenting a sexually abused child. The author states 'the children touched the central nerve of family life' (p.70), as they evoked strong emotions in their foster family members. In addition, parental perception of family functioning appears low for those who cared for a victim of childhood sexual abuse (Nalavany & Ryan, 2008). Several prior studies give insight into families' experiences of fostering a victim of child sexual abuse and highlight the challenges faced by all family members involved in the fostering process.

A family's experience is influenced firstly by the status of the abuse or the amount of information given to them about a child's abuse history. As illustrated in detail in chapter four of this dissertation, foster families differ strongly in terms of the information they have prior to placement of a child. Some families have no knowledge of the sexual abuse history of their foster child, even though many authors stress the importance of having full information about sexual abuse incidents in a child's past (for example, Farmer & Pollock, 1999, 2003; Hardwick, 2005; McFadden, 1989). Many authors emphasize the necessity of having information on the extent and severity of the abuse, the relationship a child has to the abuser, and the location of the abuse. In some cases sexual abuse is suspected in a child's past, however, this is not always communicated to a family (Farmer & Pollock, 2003), making it more difficult to meet these children's needs (Hardwick, 2005; Steenbakkens, Ellingsen, Van der Steen & Grietens, 2018). In addition, when foster families lack adequate knowledge of a child's past, this "can result in situations which jeopardize the safety of both foster parents and child" (McFadden, 1989, p. 96).

As described in previous sections, children with a history of sexual abuse are at risk of developing several problematic behaviors. The majority of studies focus on traumatic stress behaviors and sexualized behaviors. Farmer and Pollock (2003) illustrate how the occurrence of sexualized behaviors among victims of sexual abuse range: Two-third of their sample of foster children with a history of sexual abuse showed sexualized behavior, whereas one-third did not. Examples are: excessive and/or public masturbation, inappropriate touching of children and/or adults, indecent exposure, or seductive behavior. Hardwick (2005) argues that sexualized behavior needs to be modified 'in order for the children to develop a sense of what is normal and healthy, and to facilitate their sense of well-being.' (p.34). However, Octoman, Mclean and

CHAPTER 2

Sleep (2013) found sexualized behavior to be difficult for foster carers, as ceasing, reducing, or modifying these behaviors requires intensive interventions. Moreover, Farmer and Pollock (2003) suggest four areas of activity to effectively manage inappropriate sexual behavior of children: close supervision, sex education, modification of inappropriate behavior, and therapeutic attention for a child's unmet needs. With regard to sexualized behavior the authors urge the need for adequate preparation of foster families, as the emergence of, for example public masturbation, "could be very disturbing for caregivers" (p.107).

As a child's view is dramatically shaped and altered by traumatic experiences with sexual abuse, it is important to consider how a child relies on this knowledge to interpret everyday family life. For example, the adequate interpretation of intimacy, touch, or acts of intimate care seems to be complicated, as these everyday family life acts can easily be misinterpreted. McFadden (1989) illustrates that children with a history of sexual abuse are at risk of misinterpreting normal child-rearing behaviors, as they could "appear to involve sexual content to a child whose only physical nurturing came through sexual contact" (p. 95). Hence, several studies focus on how the risks of allegations of sexual abuse impact foster carers. In the study by Inch (1999) for example, foster fathers voice concerns about their behavior being misinterpreted by a child. Especially when men fostered an adolescent girl, they experienced a risk of misinterpretation, and thereby, allegations. Furthermore, the narratives of the foster fathers in the study of Heslop (2016) contain reflections on how showing affection and the delivery of personal care to foster children are risky activities, as a child might misunderstand the carers' intention and accuse him of sexual abuse. Gilligan (2000) illustrates how the simplest touch embodies a risk for male foster carers. A common observation is that foster fathers, as a consequence of the presence of these risks, distance themselves from certain child-rearing activities to minimize the risk of being seen as sexually interested or abusive.

In numerous studies foster carers' biological children describe the positive and negative effects fostering had on their lives. Part (1993) for instance, describes how for some birth children of foster parents, a foster child's difficult behavior was the worst part of fostering, followed by the reduction of parental attention and the lack of privacy. Similarly, Thompson and McPherson (2011) found birth children to experience tension in their family, a loss of closeness with family members, and parental time and attention. As to fostering a sibling with a history of sexual abuse, birth children mention how they would rather not have been exposed to the sexual abuse history, as they simply did not want to consider such an issue (Spears & Cross, 2003). Birth children's innocence is also reflected on by foster parents. For instance, in the study by Macaskill (1991), foster parents observed how the negative focus on sex destroyed

their birth child's sexual innocence. In addition, foster parents report their concerns of a foster child's behavior damaging their birth children. Although several studies report on the fostering experiences of birth children, very little attention is paid specifically to those who foster a sibling with history of sexual abuse. This dissertation provides some insights in this specific group of fostering birth children (chapter five).

Fostering a victim of sexual abuse impacts family life, hence many authors stress the need to create a safe place for all involved in the placement (for instance, Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Masson, Hackett, Phillips & Balfe, 2014; Pollock & Farmer, 2001). This could be achieved by adequate supervision of a child's contacts with others, setting clear physical boundaries, teaching children which behaviors are to be kept private and which are 'normal'. The majority of studies of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse have focused on individual family members' experiences or on groups of family members (for instance, Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Macaskill, 1991; McFadden, 1989). However, from the reported experiences we learn how a child's past affects not only individual family members, but also has an impact on family relationships and the family as a system.

Overall, this dissertation builds on prior studies centering foster families' stories (for example, Macaskill, 1991; Masson et al., 2014; Nutt, 2002; Spears & Cross, 2003). However, unlike prior studies, this dissertation reviews the impact of a foster child's putative experience with sexual abuse on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level, as well as the level of the family as a system. In the following paragraph some methodological considerations of Project Iris as a family-oriented narrative study will be described.

Methodological considerations

In Project Iris a narrative approach was adopted, as foster families' life stories are the main source of information. Narrative approaches are cross-disciplinary and can be defined in several manners. They can draw from various epistemologies, theories, and methods, and include different types of analysis (Riessman & Speedy, 2006). Etherington (2007) writes that a narrative study generally entails 'gathering, analyzing, and re-presenting people's stories as told by them' (p. 599). Different fields within narrative research exist, one of which operates from the framework of narratives as dialogically constructed expressions, not as expressions of internal cognitive or affective states (Tamboukou, Andrews, & Squire, 2013). According to Flick (1997), the reconstruction of experiences into narratives requires internal negotiation (within a person) and external negotiation with a storytellers' audience. This results in 'contextualized and socially

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shared forms of knowledge' (p.3): Stories are co-constructed by a storyteller and their audience (Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Salmon & Riessman, 2013). Tamboukou, Andrews, and Squire (2013, p. 18) state that 'people answer the questions which they think we are asking them, and we respond to the answers with which we think they have provided us'. Thus, the meaning of a story is never constant and invariably subject to reinterpretation.

In this dissertation, a constructivist's standpoint was adopted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), as working from the field of social pedagogy, we believe a persons' reality is a result of transactions among an individual and their surroundings (Knorth & Ruijsenaars, 2018). Thus, reality is considered to be subjective, dynamic, and contextual. Research is a joint product of researchers, participants, and their relationships, and stories are constructed by both parties within a particular social context (Finlay, 2002). Consequently, the researcher is considered as much a part of a (re)construction process of reality as the participants in a study. The family context was an important, influential and leading factor in the Iris Project.

In the Iris Project, we aimed to gain insight in the impact of foster children's putative history of sexual abuse on family members. In addition, we strived to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on the family as a system of interrelated persons. Although the shared, contextual influence on a person's experience, and consequently on their narrative of it, is undeniable, an individual's narrative was a first focus (Smaling, 2010). A family is a heterogeneous unit of individuals 'coexisting in complex and fluid relationships with each other' (Warin, Solomon & Lewis, 2007, p.122). In a family, very different individual realities can co-exist (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland & Gillis, 2003), as the family as a unit is a social construction dependent upon individual context (Pickin, Brunsdon & Hill, 2011). Moreover, an individual's experience can be marked by a person's features as age or gender, or by familial features as a person's siblings or social position (Sands & Roer-Strier, 2006). Thus, to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse, it was necessary to consider, compare, and contrast individuals' narratives, families' narratives, in addition to the narratives of certain social groups, for example birth sons and daughters.

Several authors illustrate the value and the hardships of utilizing multiple perspectives to study family life (for instance, Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003; Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003; Warin, Solomon, & Lewis, 2007). In general, the important role of the researcher is emphasized in this type of qualitative family research. For example, the bird eye view on data, or the interpretation of the disagreement and agreement among family members, enables the researcher to come to detailed understandings (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003). Comparing, contrasting, and combining several perspectives provides the opportunity to

'validate accounts as a form of triangulation', as Warin, Solomon and Lewis state (2007, p.123). Perlesz and Lindsay (2003) argue that the likelihood of dissonant findings in family research is high. It is suggested to consider the context and the research process in the interpretation of data. Moreover, researcher reflexivity throughout the research process is of great importance (Warin, Solomon, & Lewis, 2007). Chapter three suggests the use of meta-data in the process of co-constructing narratives.



CHAPTER 3

A story on collecting stories

This chapter is based on : Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. (2018)
Researcher reflections on the use of meta-level sensitivity in system-oriented qualitative research. (submitted).

Abstract

In qualitative research on sensitive topics the relationship between researcher and participant is of utmost importance. In this paper meta-level sensitivity is suggested as a helpful tool when collecting narrative data. During reflections on a project on the impact of foster children's history of sexual abuse on foster families, three types of meta-level sensitivity emerged: instrumental, contextual, and professional sensitivity. First, interviewers should be sensitive in providing interviewees the adequate opportunities to narrate. Second, interviewers should be sensitive to the contextual embedment of their research. Finally, interviewers should be aware of their professional and personal contribution in the co-constructing of participants' narratives. Meta-level sensitivity enables researchers to reinforce relationships with participants and may improve the quality of qualitative research.

Keywords: Sensitive data, narrative research, sensitivity, child sexual abuse, foster care, qualitative data collection

Introduction

'...our foster child touched my genitals... If I use that terminology, does that shock you? Should I say things like that or shouldn't I? Or should I use an euphemism?' To reassure this foster father the interviewer of Project Iris responded that the participant could use language that felt most comfortable to him. Afterwards she reviewed the situation in the interviewer log: 'His concern was quite interesting as none of the participants had asked me this before. I explained him that such terminology doesn't shock me that much (anymore).'

Project Iris was set up to study the expertise, needs, and experiences of families who foster a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior to placement in foster care. Although some studies focus on the impact of the traumatic history of foster children on family life (for instance, Farmer and Pollock, 2003; Grietens, Van Oijen, & ter Huizen, 2012; Macaskill, 1991), little is known on this issue from a systemic family perspective. In Project Iris a narrative approach is adopted to create an understanding of 'life as experienced' by members of families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse, a research topic many would call sensitive (Coles & Mudaly, 2010; Stoler, 2002).

In the literature on sensitive topics authors focus on how to establish, nurture, and maintain a research relationship (Bahn & Weatherill, 2013; Caetano, 2015; Coles & Mudaly, 2010; Connolly & Reilly, 2007; Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Lalor et al., 2006; Warr, 2004). In narrative research especially the relationship between the interlocutors is of great influence on the sensitive nature of a topic (Hydén, 2013). This relationship includes cultural and contextual features as well as the personal views of both parties on the topic. Regardless of the experience of the interviewer or how many times the teller has told a story, each time a researcher and participant come together for the first time a new relationship has to be built (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Moreover, as the behavior of a researcher affects a participant's response, each researcher elicits a unique story (Finlay, 2002). Research is a joint product of researchers, participants, and their relationship, as stories are constructed by both parties within a particular social context.

An ethical research approach is partly determined by the research relationship. According to Josselson (2007) every aspect of narrative research is touched by the ethics of the research relationship. Therefore, the author stresses the importance of the connection between researcher and researched. Issues of harm truly surface during fieldwork (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004): Potential harm to participants is rooted in the nature of interaction between the researcher and participant. Therefore, being sensitized to such possible risks in practice is the key to an ethical

research practice. In addition, Corbin and Morse (2003) argue that researchers and participants co-construct ethical realities during the course of an interview.

Often, the quality of qualitative research is linked to the nature of the research relationship (Yardley, 2000). For instance, Riessman and Quinney (2005) state that specific attention to the context of production of data, in terms of the research relationship among other things, is an important standard to assess the quality of narrative inquiry. According to Finlay (2002) it is essential to find ways to analyze how intersubjective elements influence a study in order to establish the integrity and trustworthiness of the study. Furthermore, sincerity, as one of the criteria for excellent qualitative research, can be achieved through self-reflexivity by researchers on their impact on the scene (Tracy, 2010).

Hence, existing literature discusses how much is rooted in the personal exchange between a researcher and a participant, and, therefore, how the course of research is determined during fieldwork. The majority of literature considers reflexivity on the micro-level; however, little is written on reflexivity on the meta-level of research relationships and dialogues in field work specifically. In our view, considering and reviewing research relationships from this meta-level during data collection benefits qualitative research. Therefore, in this paper we aim to illustrate how a researcher of a complex topic can apply meta-level sensitivity to reinforce the research relationship and, in that way, how sensitivity contributes to more rigorous qualitative research.

Background

The study

In Project Iris the personal narratives of participants aimed to give an understanding of what it means to foster a child with a history of sexual abuse. Such narratives, as Salmon and Riessman (2013) conclude, are fundamentally co-constructions. As this study was exploratory in nature with roots in constructivism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), we considered reality to be subjective, dynamic, and contextual. Consequently, the dynamics of the research relationship were deemed influential in the constructions of participants' narratives (Finlay, 2002; Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

Research procedure

In collaboration with a foster care organization in the northern part of the Netherlands, we recruited families who currently fostered a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior

to placement in the foster family. These foster children were referred to as index children. After a thorough selection and recruitment process of participants, our sample resulted in 31 participants from 11 families. To each of these families, two researchers were assigned. With the assigned interviewer(s) a face-to-face acquaintance was held during which more detailed information was given and further questions on either side were answered. Only those family members that were familiar with the suspected abuse history could be involved in the study. One researcher was assigned to interview the foster parents of the family, the other spoke to their children. Therefore, some researchers spoke to more than one person of the same family. All participants were interviewed two to four times, depending on their available time, energy, and their need to continue telling their story. Six field researchers conducted interviews in this study, most of whom are female. In terms of age, seniority, and experience the research team was diverse.

Narrative instrument

According to Riessman and Quinney (2005) narrative inquiry is a fitting approach to study topics in social work, as narrative research as well as social work centers human interaction in relationships. Thus, In Project Iris the narratives of the foster parents and the biological children older than sixteen years of age were collected through consecutive narrative interviews following an episodic structure (Flick, 2000; 2009). Similarly, a booklet containing nonverbal activities was used to elicit a conversation with the children below the age of 16.

In the interviews special attention was paid to situations or episodes the interviewee thought to be relevant to share with regard to the topic of the study. Thereby, in this cross-section between a semi-structured interview and a narrative interview, participants controlled the agenda of the interview to some extent (Corbin and Morse, 2003). We considered a series of episodic interviews a participant's personal narrative, as the multiple interviews gave an extended account of different episodes in the past, present, and future.

Following each interview, a short debriefing session was held with the main researcher. In addition, each interviewer wrote their observations, perceptions, and emotions during the interview in a log. This log facilitated self-awareness and reflective thinking (Stoler, 2002; Rager, 2005; Warr, 2004), yielded starting points for further debriefing within the team, and was helpful when preparing follow-up interviews. This paper draws on the reflections of the field researchers who collected the data of this study.

Reflections on meta-level sensitivity

Several challenges arose in collecting narratives of individuals in foster families. After examining our fieldwork experiences, it appeared that being sensitive and attuned to the context of the narration helped us in navigating these challenging situations. The following discussion presents three types of meta-level sensitivity, which were especially beneficial in conducting our sensitive narrative study. First, the interviewers of Project Iris were sensitive using the instrument and aimed to provide interviewees the adequate opportunities to narrate. Second, our study called for sensitivity to the embedment of the studies' topic in familial contexts. Lastly, we needed to acknowledge our professional and personal contribution in the co-construction of the participants' narratives. In this section we explain each type of meta-level sensitivity and illustrate them with two examples of our fieldwork experiences.

Instrumental sensitivity

To apply narrative instruments adequately, researchers are to reflect on all dimensions of a narrative before and during data collection, as narratives are built on verbal as well as nonverbal accounts. Especially when a narrative turns to a sensitive topic, nonverbal cues such as vocal features, facial expressions, eye contact and body language are very valuable to a researcher, as nonverbal communication allows 'the presentation of self' and 'expressive functions' (Payrató, 2009, p.168). Moreover, it functions in managing the context, regulation of interaction, and emotional expressions of interlocutors.

Perception of resistance

The value of nonverbal information is illustrated by the interaction between one of the interviewers and a foster mother. The interviewer experienced some resistance at the participant's

“ being sensitive and attuned to the context of the narration helped us in navigating these challenging situations ”

end answering some of the questions in the interview protocol. Because of this resistance, the interviewer felt challenged to ask non-intrusive though clarifying questions. During a debriefing session we reflected on the content of the narrative, specifically on the parts where the

interviewer felt she pushed boundaries asking clarifying questions. In these parts the interviewer explicitly referred to the index child. We came to interpret this referral of the index child as a child with a history of sexual abuse as a possible cause of the resistance. Therefore, the interviewer

was encouraged to approach the resistance as a part of the narrative of this participant and to create a meta-dialogue on the resistance if encountered again in later interviews.

During one of the follow-up interviews the interviewer indeed experienced reluctance when she asked the participant what the history of sexual abuse of her foster child had meant to her. As prepared, the interviewer started a meta-dialogue on this and in reply the foster mother clarified her narrative: she explained she was cautious to verbalize what the history of sexual abuse had meant to her and her family in order to prevent stigmatization of the child: 'She is not just her past.' The participant did not view herself as a foster parent of a child who had been sexually abused, despite of her being willing to participate in Project Iris. The apprehension of stigmatizing or reducing the child to her traumatic history was a part of her story as a foster mother. The research relationship might have been damaged if the researcher had continued the interview without paying attention to this part of the participant's narrative. Had the interviewer not started the meta-dialogue based on her perception, vital information to this participant's narrative was missed.

Discomfort as a part of a narrative

In our study, participants frequently showed several emotions during the interviews, for instance, sadness, anger, or frustration. Negative emotions were displayed in particular when the interview turned to the sexualized behavior some foster children had shown. Among those episodes that produced discomfort were situations where participants talked about having witnessed excessive masturbation or child-initiated sexual contact. A number of participants seemed to experience a level of discomfort caused by reliving and talking about these situations.

When participants felt uncomfortable to talk about sexualized behavior, they showed nonverbal signs of uneasiness and they often used indirect language hinting what might have occurred. Therefore, it was not always clear what the participant was referring to. Although we needed to respect the participants' boundaries, it was necessary to create a mutual understanding to know what the participant was speaking of. For example, during a third interview one participant spoke of sexualized behavior her foster sibling showed towards other family members. Initially, the interviewer did not understand fully what the participant was talking about, because she was using quite vague terminology. Her interviewer log states: 'It was a lively conversation, although I noticed eye contact lessened considerably when we spoke of more difficult matters.' However, since the participant had made the choice to initiate the dialogue on sexualized behavior herself, the interviewer chose to ask her tactfully to explicate her story. The interviewer logs: 'I notice, as with many people, doing this third interview is appreciated

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because at that point you have built some rapport. Therefore, I very consciously asked about difficult matters as to define certain episodes clearly.'

After creating a mutual understanding of what the topic at hand was, the interviewer consciously adopted the words used by the participant in order to prevent more discomfort by using more explicit (sexual) terminology. It was clear that the participant was somewhat embarrassed to speak of these episodes to the interviewer as her direct audience. However, after reflecting on the situation, we, again, saw how nonverbal information revealed another dimension of this participant's narrative. Her embarrassment was a part of her narrative directed towards the broader audience 'behind' the interviewer, as she made the choice to share the embarrassing episodes of her life to educate our readers.

Life as relived

The episodic interview was constructed primarily to elicit a verbal account of the stories of our participants. The protocol contains open-ended questions to give participants the opportunity and power to choose which stories to share with us and to create their 'life as told' (Bruner, 2004). However, as the reflections illustrate, attention to only the verbal 'life as told' was not sufficient, as the interviews became very personal and intimate and, therefore, one can say the 'life as relived' was essential to take into account. These two concepts, as illustrated in the examples, were not always fully compatible. The 'life as relived' adds to the verbal account delivered by the participants, and it illustrates the participants' altruistic motivation. Thus, the 'life as relived' seems to have some performative value, as participants narrate their difficult experiences in hope of changing the world for their peers for the better. The interviewer has the important role to mediate both the 'life as told' and 'the life as relived' by being attuned to the interviewee's willingness to participate, but also remaining attuned to their vulnerability.

The value of nonverbal and situational information is stressed by Warr (2004). She states that significant data is lost if only verbal information is used: data quality is enhanced by the details present in face-to-face encounters between researchers and researched. An interviewer should be processing and absorbing nonverbal information, next to performing the more general task of inviting a participant to narrate. The example of the participant who resisted to her research identity of a foster mother of a sexually abused child illustrates how a nonverbal detail became explicit by meta-communication. This meta-communication, as a result of instrumental sensitivity, helped researchers to use the elicited information to attend to the research relationship. By doing so, we constantly tried to stabilize the balance between the explicit contract (the beforehand stated relationship between the researcher and the participant), as well

as the implicit contract (the relationship between the two parties that is built on interpersonal cues), as Josselson states (2007). The recording of meta-communication in the interviewer logs added to the importance of these documents: the log transformed from a reflection-facilitating document to a vital source of nonverbal and circumstantial data.

Contextual sensitivity

We experienced how the contextual embedment of our research was important to consider on the level of individuals as well as on the level of the system to which the individual belonged: the foster family. Furthermore, we identified a second type of sensitivity needed to collect narratives of individuals to be contextual sensitivity: Researchers should be sensitive to the contextual embedment of the research.

Non-participating family members

The relationship interviewers had with the participants, as well as the system the participants were part of, was partially determined by the information given about the researchers. In every participating foster family there have been non-participating family members either due to the strict inclusion criteria, gatekeeping by the foster parents, or by their own choice. These non-participating children (some already were adults) often did not know that we were interviewers in a study centering their foster siblings, nor did they know of their foster siblings' history of sexual abuse. Hence, if they would find out who we were, they would learn about the abuse history of their foster sibling(s). Our presence created the risk of a deductive disclosure. Therefore, our position as researchers was determined by the choices the family as a system made with regard to the information shared. The interviewers became a part of the reality of the families as a system, as we as professionals 'embodied' child sexual abuse, a topic that in some families was not out in the open. The concept of 'deductive disclosure' has been addressed by Kaiser (2009). However, her discussion of the concept is limited to deductive disclosures through identifiable traits in research reports, whereas the risk of deductive disclosure in Project Iris also occurred during data collection.

This risk of a deductive disclosure during data collection was particularly present when interviews were held in the family's home. We needed to actively consider to what extent we could communicate with non-participating family members if we encountered them in their home. One interviewer logs:

During the interview one of the adult non-participating biological children walked in. He seemed to listen in on our conversation and added something to foster mother's story. I was very aware of his presence and did not continue asking questions about the history of abuse of the index child until I had checked with her if I could speak of it openly.

As the quote illustrates, sometimes non-participating family members were present at the start of the interview or they interrupted interview situations. Some even contributed to the interview, although they did not formally participate in the study. Our interviewees sometimes consciously stopped the interview when this happened. Some, however, did not appear to be affected by this.

Information shared among participants

Additionally, the position of an interviewer was determined by the information given to the interviewees. During our data collection it appeared participating family members differed what they knew regarding the history of sexual abuse of their foster children. As previously stated, some foster parents had decided to give their biological children limited information on the history of sexual abuse of the foster children. This occasionally complicated the work of the researchers interviewing more than one participant in a family.

For example, in the case of one family researchers were assigned to the adults and children that chose to participate and an acquaintance was held. During the interviews with the foster parents the interviewer learned that this family had an extensive history of fostering several children with a possible history of sexual abuse: the foster parents constructed their narrative speaking of situations with different index children. However, the participating children did not all refer to the same foster children, as became clear during the preparation of follow-up interviews. Different biological children were sometimes given different information or had remembered other things. This meant that the involved interviewers learned new information from each participant that possibly was not known to the other participants.

It became all the more clear the participants had to be given control of the agenda of the interview, for it was not acceptable to disclose new information we gained during other interviews. In each interview the narrative of the current participant had to be leading. The risk of 'data-contamination' had to be taken into consideration in the planning which interviewers prepared follow-up interviews together as different interviewers within one family could be coupled to prepare interviews together. Likewise, when one researcher interviewed more than one family member, data-contamination was a possibility.

Creating space

Thus, we experienced how the embedment of our topic within the system of a foster family influenced the narratives collected, or as Hydén (2013) suggests, we experienced how the concept of space influenced the co-construction of our participant's narrative. Hydén defines space as one of the profound factors shaping the relational circumstances in sensitive research. She divides this concept into physical space, being the location of an interview including the bigger context, and discursive space, or the openness of the discourse. Often the physical space influences the discursive space among interlocutors. When the physical space is not optimal, for instance when others are present during an interview, the discursive space can be compromised. In line with Hydén's claims, we did experience how the discursive space was influenced through the presence of others.

Holland et al. (2014) focus on similar problems. They illustrate the importance of ethical practices when researching substance abuse with parents and their children. The authors stress the use of adaptability in the field with regard to interviewing in the home environment, as they too experienced a risk of disclosing unknown personal histories. However, researching topics within the natural environment of participants has benefits, as Warr (2004) states. She argues that research that is taking place in a lived environment generates powerful and very relevant descriptive data.

“ Meta-level contextual sensitivity is sensitivity to the broader context in the moment of the narration ”

The contextual embeddedness of our research was challenging, and we felt a need to be sensitive in order to minimize the risks of damaging the reality of the individuals in the system studied. Yardley (2000) states sensitivity to context is an indicator of the quality of a qualitative study. This concept is described by her as a researcher's awareness of the theoretical context of a study topic, the socio-cultural setting of a study, the social context of the research relationship, and contrasting perspectives. Yardley's definition of sensitivity to context shows some similarities to contextual sensitivity as described in this paper. The concepts, however, do differ. More specifically, Yardley states “sensitivity to the linguistic and dialogic context of each utterance is crucial to interpreting its meaning and function” (p. 221). Meta-level contextual sensitivity, however, is sensitivity to the broader context in the moment of the narration. This proved to be of great influence on the co-construction of an individual's narrative. Our contextually-sensitive response was to follow the interviewee within his/her family dynamics. By doing so, we gained access to individual accounts of the family members and the values and practicalities that frame them (Warr, 2004).

Professional sensitivity

Starting our work in Project Iris, we imagined being exposed to child sexual abuse stories would have an impact on all interviewers. Several precautions had been taken to limit possible negative effects for all interviewers involved. Indeed, during the data collection the effects of studying this sensitive topic were manifested in many ways, the most prominent effect being our own emotions, as many qualitative researchers have experienced (Coles & Mudaly, 2010; Connolly & Reilly, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, 2008, 2009; Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Lalor et al., 2006; Sherry, 2013). However, besides the expected emotional impact, we were affected in unexpected manners by the collection of the narratives. This called for professional sensitivity: We needed to be sensitive to all aspects of our contribution in the co-construction of the participants' narratives.

Our responsibilities

Many participants showed emotions during the interviews, negative as well as positive. Many of them expressed an altruistic motivation to participate in the study and mentioned a willingness to contribute to the best of their ability. It seemed they were willing to go back and remember frustration, shock, or disgust in order to help out other families. At the same time, it was our responsibility to prevent the interviews turning into harmful experiences.

For example, in the case of one specific participant the complete set of interviews was held during a four-month time span. The family situation and dynamics of several foster placements caused a very different research context at each interview. At the time of the third interview this foster family was dealing with a variety of difficulties: between the second and third interview the foster parents had experienced problems fostering several children, also related to the sexual abuse history of some of them. These developments were very prominent in the foster mother's experience of being part of this foster family and in the third interview a new dimension to her narrative was provided caused by recent events. Besides speaking of the recent struggles the family faced, the participant showed signs of frustration, defeat, and sadness. She said: 'I really wanted to talk to you about these things.' The interviewer mentions this moment in her log; she states she felt for the interviewee and was very thankful for her doing the interview during such a troublesome time. However, this remark made the interviewer wonder what the interview had brought the foster mother, as it seemed to be rewarding while evoking emotions. The interviewer felt the interview moved into risky territory: She was invested as an eager professional to hear the interviewee's story, but was afraid to harm the foster mother by evoking more emotions than

the participant could handle. Even in later interviews this experience continued to influence the interviewer, especially when other participants became emotional, as she logs:

Since that interview I feel more vulnerable than before. When this particular participant cried, her tears moved me and I must admit I am very aware that I might harm participants by coming to their house, shake things up, and leave again.

The professional researcher

On some occasions participants anticipated on the possibility of our discomfort as people listening to their story. As illustrated in the introduction, one foster father asked explicitly if the interviewer would experience discomfort if he used sexual terms to describe his story. In this particular case it was the participant who was sensitive and felt the need to check the level of discomfort of the interviewer in order to create a mutual understanding of what could be openly discussed. However, this participant took a risk, as the interviewer could have been offended by the use of sexual terms. Professional sensitivity in this case meant the interviewer needed to consider how her reaction to the participant's question could influence the research relationship. The situation illustrates the need for consideration of the professional boundaries of the interviewer. In every research relationship new boundaries are set and maintained as two individuals develop a unique relationship. The use of sexual explicit terms challenges these boundaries, as sexual language is taboo to many. Although one can argue that in a study like Project Iris an interviewer should be able to cope with such language, this is not a given, as every research relationship is dynamic. Each time two interlocutors come together the professional role of an interviewer can be challenged by an emotion as shame.

The dynamics of professionalism

Many skills are required of professional interviewers to structure narratives adequately, one of which is a sensitiveness to one's own unique contribution to the construction of the participants' narratives. In this study the interviewers contributed to our participants' narratives through the way they carried out their responsibility of interviews on this sensitive topic. As previously mentioned, this was sometimes challenging because of the risk of a deductive disclosure through simply being present. Our responsibility to follow each interviewee within the family dynamic sometimes resulted in collecting data in a state of constant alertness. The complexity of confidentiality with regard to the family had to be reviewed constantly, as we had the responsibility to prevent a deductive disclosure. This 'burden' of our responsibilities towards each individual participant, as well as to families as a system could have made us direct the

interviews in a comfortable, less emotional discursive space to us as interviewers (Hydén, 2013). Furthermore, the heightened tendency of protectiveness towards the families or feelings of shame might have created a less open discursive space. With our responsibility questions arose: to what extent were emotions a natural part of the narratives of our participants regarding this topic and (when) should we protect our participants from their own emotions?

Although alertness or shame could be viewed as problematic, it also provided a powerful impression of how this topic is handled in the families studied. It seems our own data collection experience served as a supplement to the actual data collected (Warr, 2004). Even though one's experience as a data collector can have this function within a study, still, caution is needed: an interviewer's interpretation of an experience might prevent seeing things from the perspective of the participant. Moreover, it should not lead away from the main voice in a study: the participant's voice.

In summary, researchers should be sensitive to their contribution in the construction of a participant's narrative, as the researcher's self is the primary tool of inquiry (Finlay, 2002; Josselson, 2007; Warr, 2004), however, excessive sensitivity to the researcher's own contribution to the participant's narrative will distract attention from the participant's perspective (Finlay, 2002; Warr, 2004).

Link between the types of sensitivity

The three types of sensitivity are presented individually. However, they are very much interrelated. For example, the audience of the narrator, present or not, influences what can be said and what remains unsaid. Some narrators in our study experienced discomfort reliving and speaking of episodes in their life. Their personal account of embarrassment was not always clearly expressed in words, therefore instrumental sensitivity was needed to create a mutual understanding that their embarrassment was 'allowed', as it was a part of their narrative. However, one should also recognize the personal influence of the researcher in such a situation: As professionals we needed to discuss possibly embarrassing episodes openly with the participant, in a manner that was most comfortable. Our responsibility was to create the appropriate discursive space in which the participant could narrate his or her shameful or painful reality, regardless if this meant the narrative of a participant might raise emotions in the researchers.

Concluding remarks

No one can foresee how a research relationship will develop and collecting narrative data on a sensitive topic can be a challenging task. In this paper, meta-level sensitivity was presented as a tool to support researchers when collecting narratives on sensitive topics and to structure narratives during complex fieldwork. The three types of sensitivity that were presented as a result of our reflections can be utilized in the process of qualitative data collection to establish, nurture, and utilize the research relationship with participants, as well as the systems they belong to. One can argue that sensitivity of this type is epistemologically relevant, or even essential, during narrative data collection, as the link between narrative data, the researched, and the researchers collecting narrative data on sensitive topics is undeniable. In addition, for us detecting and acting on meta-information during data-collection has proven to contribute to more rigorous research.

Although this paper focused on sensitivity on the meta-level of narration, sensitivity is also needed in other phases of a research process. For example, similar to what Mauthner (2000) experienced in analyzing and reporting on results of inter-related participants, contextualizing our interpretation of participants' narratives is not without risks. Still, decontextualizing our results is also problematic (Corbin and Morse, 2003; Hydén, 2013; Josselson, 2007; Riessman and Quinney, 2005), as results may be reinterpreted (wrongly). Hence, qualitative studies of systems and/or interrelated participants require more than attention to sensitivity during the data collection: sensitivity is also needed when analyzing the data and reporting and disseminating the results.



CHAPTER 4

Stories with and without words

This chapter is based on: Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. W. (2018).

Speaking with and without words—An analysis of foster children's expressions and behaviors that are suggestive of prior sexual abuse.

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Abstract

This exploratory study reports on foster children's informal self-disclosures of previously unknown histories of sexual abuse. Data was collected from 40 children's files and an inductive thematic analysis of verbal and behavioral expressions was conducted. Findings suggest that foster children's self-disclosures can be fragmented, spontaneous, narrative, or triggered, and often occur during everyday activities in the foster family. The children disclose their past by referring to the perpetrator or the severity of the abuse, or by acting out, mostly by reenacting sexual abuse experiences. Additionally, some children use childish vocabulary focusing on genitals or sexual acts they were involved in or want to be involved in. Lastly, some foster children seem to be linguistically challenged to disclose that a female person abused them, or that they were forced to reciprocate sexually. This study adds to the understanding of the complex process of child sexual abuse disclosure in the context of foster care.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, disclosure, children, foster care, case file research, trauma, foster parents

Introduction

A child's statement like "at mommy's house we kissed each other on the penis" shocks most people, makes them wonder to what the child is referring and leaves them at loss as to how to respond. For a number of foster family members hearing such a statement is reality, as many victims of sexual abuse are identified among children growing up in foster care (Grietens, Van Oijen, & Ter Huizen, 2012; Euser, Alink, Tharner, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013). In some cases, foster family members are the first to actually learn of the child's past sexual abuse during their fostering experience. Yet, although the complicated process of child sexual abuse disclosure has been centered in previous research and many features of this process in a variety of contexts have been explored (see for instance, Anderson, 2016; Katz, et al., 2012; Ronai, 1995; McElvaney, Greene & Hogan, 2014; Sorensen & Snow, 1991), little empirical research has been done on the initial, informal disclosure process in the natural context of everyday life in a foster family.

An informal disclosure or a 'self-disclosure' of child sexual abuse can be done over a longer period of time as it gradually unfolds (Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005; McElvaney, 2015; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Author citation (2015) stress the perspective on child sexual abuse disclosure in everyday contexts "as a fluid, ongoing and interactional process" (p.2). Similarly, Gries et al. (2000) report that disclosure of child sexual abuse is a dynamic event. Overall, research suggests that an informal disclosure by children is in most cases not an isolated, singular event. However, the development of the disclosure process is not always clear, since a disclosure needs to be interpreted as such. Jensen (2005) explores this possible interpretation problem in her study on signs of sexual abuse. She states that words, expressions, tokens, and even the lack thereof can be signs of sexual abuse. However, these signs need to be singled out as meaningful, upon which they require the right interpretation. Interpretation is particularly challenging when a child discloses by means of behavior instead of words.

According to Alaggia (2004), behavior is highly problematic as a disclosure type, partly because the child's disclosing behaviors might not be interpreted adequately, as the observing adults attribute the behaviors to everyday stressors in the children's lives and not to their sexual abuse history. For example, in Alaggia's study the participants disclosed using non-verbal behavior intentionally to alert people that something was wrong. Examples of disclosing behaviors are temper tantrums, angry outbursts, clinginess, or avoidance of certain situations. Similarly, other studies reflect on behavioral cues as part of a disclosure. According to McFadden (1989), foster parents managing the behavior of a sexually abused foster child should bear in

mind “that the behavior may be a form of communication about earlier sexual abuse” (p.99). In addition, Author citation (2015) suggest to consider emotional and behavioral signs as a part of the development of a disclosure discourse, as an isolated interpretation of these signs can be challenging.

Another problem is that of over-interpreting behaviors as signs of sexual abuse. Before placement, many foster children had several adverse life experiences, in addition to experiences with sexual abuse (Cook et al., 2005; Dovran, Winje, Arefjord, & Haugland, 2012; Greeson et al., 2012; Vanderfaellie, Vanschoonlandt, Van Hoken, De Maeyer & Robberechts, 2014). These traumatic life experiences can cause behaviors similar to the disclosing behaviors children with a history of sexual abuse may exhibit. Furthermore, as Lowenstein (2011) stresses, some sexual behaviors are normal at a certain age. Some children, for instance, explore their sexuality through sexual play, and therefore, this behavior is not always a sign of prior experiences with sex (Honor, 2004). Hence, we need to be cautious when interpreting behavior as a disclosure of sexual abuse.

The context in which the disclosure is embedded seems to be of major importance to interpret behavioral disclosures adequately. For example, Jensen et al. (2005) and Jensen (2005) note how the context of a situation frames the child’s cues to disclose sexual abuse and how the significance of signs of sexual abuse alters within different contexts. Reitsema and Grietens (2015) emphasize the importance of a careful consideration of the context of a behavioral disclosure in order to interpret the manifestations adequately. However, Jensen (2005) argues that words or verbal utterances could also be misinterpreted when the context does not provide enough information to understand the right connotation. For example, a child’s usage of the word ‘hair’ could refer to facial hair or pubic hair, dependent on the contextual embedment of the dialogue. Hence, challenges can also arise in the interpretation of verbal disclosures of child sexual abuse.

More specifically, several studies highlight the problematic dialogical component of a disclosure, thereby stressing the crucial role of the interaction partner or the interpreter (see for instance, Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones & Gordon, 2003; Herskowitz, Lanes & Lamb, 2007; Jensen, 2005; McElvaney, Green & Hogan, 2012; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). As illustrated by Flâm and Haugstvedt (2013) in their study on the first signs of sexual abuse, difficulties arise “to what can be said or asked about, by whom, where, when and how utterances can be understood” (p. 639). This study shows how children test whether the person they turned to is willing and able to explore what had happened to them. The trusted person’s response to these sometimes indirect, initial, minimal disclosure attempts, so-called “test balloons”, is suggested to be pivotal to the continuation of the verbal disclosure. In a like manner, Jensen et al.

(2005) argue that children are more inclined to disclose when they feel there is an opportunity or purpose to talk, and when both parties share a focus on sexual abuse or a topic closely linked to sex or sexual abuse. Jensen et al. as well as Flåm and Haugstvedt (2013) state that the interacting partner has a major influence on the process of disclosure, as children use the interlocutor's response as a reference point to continue, delay, or cease the disclosure process.

The main caregiver seems to play a significant role in the functioning of a child after a disclosure. For example, a positive reaction to a disclosure, specifically full support of a foster parent following a disclosure, is key in the child's positive emotional functioning (Gries et al., 2000). However, the interacting partners, especially caregivers or peers of the disclosing child, may have specific needs following a disclosure like support in managing the child's behavior or adopting functional coping strategies and managing their own emotions (Toledo & Seymour, 2016).

As previous research suggests, it is to be expected that foster family members are of major importance in their foster child's disclosure process, as possible first interlocutors in an informal disclosure dialogue. An adequate interpretation of the initial disclosure attempts and a supportive response is mostly dependent on them. However, the context of a foster family might cause additional challenges to the disclosure process. For example, when a child's behavior is not as expected "it became a sign to be interpreted", as Jensen illustrates (2005, p.471). Yet, foster families and their foster children, not including children in kinship care, often do not know each other at first, hence, mutual expectations have not been established. Many behaviors or verbal expressions can be unexpected according to one's own normative perspective. As both parties do not have a shared past, they need time to attune to each other's verbal communication, behavior, and personality. Moreover, as conversations about sex, sexuality, and sexual abuse are embedded in cultural values and beliefs on a macro-level of a society as well as on a the micro-level of a family (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Jensen, 2005), again foster family members and their foster children need to adapt to each other.

As illustrated, there are several challenges in the interpretation of a foster child's verbal and behavioral cues that may indicate sexual abuse. The present study is on reports in foster children's case files regarding possible informal disclosures of sexual abuse. More specifically, we aim to explore verbal expressions and behaviors by which foster children possibly disclose a previously unknown history of sexual abuse. We want to answer the following questions:

1. Which verbal expressions of foster children possibly indicating sexual abuse are documented in their case files?
2. Which behaviors of foster children possibly indicating sexual abuse are documented in their case files?

Method

Selection of cases

We conducted our study in one foster care organization in the northern part of the Netherlands. This organization operates in various regions of the Netherlands and offers services comparable to other Dutch foster care organizations. All foster care workers in the agency were asked to review their past and present caseload and identify suspected and substantiated cases of sexual abuse in foster children, previous to placement in the current foster family. As this study was aimed to understand processes of disclosing sexual abuse to foster carers and the coding of data proved to be time-consuming during a pilot study, the first 40 files meeting the inclusion criteria were studied. Only two files contain reports of foster parents who were informed about a child's sexual abuse experience prior to placement in their family.

The data collection

A coding scheme was developed based on relevant literature on child sexual abuse signs (for example, Friedrich, 1998; Hall, Mathews, & Pearce, 2002; Jensen, 2005; Putnam, 2003) and in a preliminary study a pilot with this scheme was conducted. Some modifications to the original coding scheme were made after this pilot and a supplement document was written to clarify ambiguous terms or categories. The scheme consisted of following categories: sexualized behavior; internalizing behavior; externalizing behavior; physical problems; verbal expressions of the abuse; features of the child's development; unexpected reactions to everyday situations. The latter category contains all behavior not specified or fitting the other categories of problem behavior. With the approval from the Ethics Committee of our Department, the case files were coded and all relevant verbatim clauses were noted in the coding scheme per child. The categories could contain multiple phrases or parts of phrases from a child's case file, for instance, the category "unexpected reactions to everyday situations" for one child could read: "has a strong reaction when picked up by men" and "wets herself when stressed". All researchers involved discussed ambiguous information in order to guard the intersubjectivity of the data.

Data-analysis

All verbatim clauses in two relevant categories ("verbal expressions of the abuse" and "unexpected reactions to everyday situations") were coded inductively by two researchers separately, using principles of open coding (Bazeley, 2013). Consequently, the data from these categories were classified as the "verbal disclosure group" and the "behavioral disclosure group". A third

independent rater was also asked to identify codes. The three interpretations of the data have been discussed thoroughly and differences in interpretation were resolved by seeking consensus. A final codebook was created based on these discussions and by merging the interpretations of the raters. This codebook contains four clusters of codes: “content of the verbal expressions”, “linguistic features of the expressions”, “type of behavioral reaction” and “context”.

Results

The sample

The group of 40 files was equally divided in terms of gender. Three children resided in kinship care and the majority (82,5%) was between ages 8 to 15. In ten files legal actions concerning the sexual abuse were reported: Either the abuse was proven in a court of law or the perpetrator was prosecuted. The allegations of abuse in the remaining cases (75,5%) have not been substantiated. Twenty-one case files contained information on biological parents being the alleged perpetrator, more specifically, 13 fathers and eight mothers. The children’s files contained information of 27 possible care-giving perpetrators. Six children were sexually abused by three or more people, and 16 children were abused by one or two people. In the remaining 18 files no information about the alleged perpetrator was recorded. The documented severity of the abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to being prostituted. However, for the majority of the children this information remained unknown (65%).

Demographics of the disclosure groups

We found verbal expressions indicating a history of sexual abuse for 23 foster children. However, we only included the files of 22 children in the analysis, as one child’s file reported that the history of sexual abuse was known prior to placement in foster care. In 15 files we identified possible behavioral disclosures. Both groups consisted of mostly girls: in the verbal disclosure group 13 files were of girls (59%) and 10 girls’ files were included in the behavioral group (67%). The average age of the disclosing children was 10 years, with the youngest being 3 years old and the oldest 16 years at the time of the data collection.

The disclosure data were not presented in a chronological manner, therefore, the timing of the disclosure remained unknown. Thus, we had no knowledge whether the information in the files was recorded and then the sexual abuse suspicion arose, or whether the information was documented as to support an existing abuse hypothesis. Yet, we observed that for none of the children in the disclosure group, the primary reason for out-of-home-placement was sexual

abuse. One file contained ambiguous information on a pregnancy and stated “abuse of child”. We understood this as the abuse of the foster child’s child. As the files only covered a child’s foster care trajectory we presumed the disclosures occurred after placement in a foster family.

It appeared that for those children who verbally disclosed, more information about the abuse was reported, as opposed to the children who remained silent or communicated via behavioral signs. For example, in eight of the 22 files reporting verbal disclosure the perpetrator was either charged or prosecuted. In addition, it seemed that for the majority of children who verbally disclosed, the suspected severity of the abuse was documented. The files gave accounts of the following severity of abuse: exposed to sexual stimuli, abuse without active involvement of the child (n=2), sexual touch (n=3), penetration, oral, or anal sex (n=3), and forced intercourse (n=4). For five of the seven children who have been sexually penetrated, it is reported that the abuse started prior to their fourth birthday. For six verbally disclosing children data about the alleged perpetrator missed, however, in the case files of the remaining 16 children the perpetrator was known. Most files of the children of both disclosure groups mentioned biological parents as the perpetrator.

The extent and type of disclosure

Singular or multiple disclosures. In general, the amount of documented disclosures differed per child. In 26 individual files we found disclosing expressions and behaviors. In 11 of these files we identified either one verbal disclosure or one behavioral disclosure. Only two of these 11 singular disclosures held actual references to the past: Both were verbal expressions of a child about the abuse. The rest of the disclosures centered around present events. For example, two children invited a care-giving person to engage in a sexual situation: “asked her foster father to lay on top of her”. Three files, which reported a singular behavioral disclosure, described how the child manifested behavior in a location where the child was partially unclothed, for example, “the child hides behind a towel in the toilet”. Another singular behavioral disclosure was a response to a biological father: “during the contact with birth parents, the child tried to please father and looked at him in a romantic way”. None of these 11 files contained information on the severity of the sexual abuse. In the remaining files we observed a large number of utterances. In most of these case files the level of detail in the utterances was notably higher, for example, “during play time with her foster sister, her sibling kissed the child on her back. The child responded by saying: you can kiss me on my pussy”.

We found that the number of disclosures reported and their level of detail needed to be reviewed together. For example, when a child “pressed her legs together when she was wiped

down after a shower”, this would be notably rejection of touch of the child’s private body parts, possibly indicating a previous negative experience. Yet, this isolated situation might not automatically support a suspicion of sexual abuse, although the child’s reaction might have made foster parents alert. For this child, however, the case file mentioned more possible behavioral and verbal disclosures and it contained more details creating a clearer picture of the child’s past: This was the child that said “at mommy’s house we kissed each other on the penis”. This statement, explicitly referring to a sexual act, helped to interpret the child’s hesitance during the wipe-down.

A narrative, a spontaneous, or a triggered disclosure. Two types of utterances emerged from the data: a narrative type and a more spontaneous type. The narrative expressions, used by ten children, all concerned a narrative on sexual acts performed on the child or by the child. The use of the word “told” (in Dutch “vertelt”) was the common feature in these phrases. The files of six children recorded these narrative disclosures in general words, however, often the case files included more details of the narrative. Although the verbatim sentences were written by social workers, their use of the verb “tell” implicated the child to be telling a story, unlike some children that had spontaneously “said” something. Thirteen files showed records of such spontaneous remarks, which mostly included the verbs “said” or “asked”. For instance, “while showing his penis, the child said his dad squeezes and rubs him there”.

In 18 files we observed triggered behaviors. For example, most children reacted to people (n=9) or to touch and/or physical intimacy (n=7). Three children responded to nude people: “froze when other small children walked around naked in the campsite”. In addition, two files described a reaction to visual stimuli, for instance, a kissing scene in a movie. We identified other patterns in the details in the reports of a disclosure and in remaining parts of this paper we will explore these patterns further.

Content of the disclosures

The children appeared to either disclose information about past experiences, or by commenting or behaving in a certain way in the present.

Disclosure of the past

Reference to the perpetrator. Ten children’s files contained 25 disclosures regarding alleged perpetrators. These ten victims said they were abused by their father (n=4), mother (n=4), brother (n=4), both parents (n=2), and/or other males outside their family (n=4). One child stated he “was forced to reenact a (sex) movie on his sisters”, making him a forced perpetrator.

All children who disclosed their father’s involvement, identified him as an active perpetrator in multiple occasions. Either the fathers touched the child or the child witnessed sexual acts involving their father. For example, “the child said: just rub it until it’s stiff, that’s what dad does”. Thrice a child disclosed being actively abused by his mother, as they “kissed with the tongue”, “touched a child’s pussy”, or “did things with boys”. One mother seemed to consent to the abuse as she “was present, but did not stop the abusing men”. In addition, two children stated that something happened “at mommy’s house”.

The severity of the abuse. The disclosed severity of abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to suffering penetration. Four children expressed they saw pornography (n=3) or people having sex (n=3): “the child stated he watched parents having sex”. One child stated he saw his mother being sexually abused, but “he, at that time, thought it was normal and

“ *The disclosed severity of abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to suffering penetration* ”

he did not know how to help”. All children who disclosed being exposed to sexual stimuli also disclosed being actively abused. The accounts of the actively abused children, with the exception of one child’s file, contained details about the abuse they suffered. Seven children disclosed explicitly what

happened to them: Three children spoke of undergoing digital touch, three children disclosed oral-genital contact, once the making of “photographs” was mentioned, and another child “had to reenact sex movies”. Although this last child might have been referring to it, none of these children spoke of suffering or performing genital or anal penetration. Yet, one child disclosed in detail how he witnessed his little sister being penetrated. The seven children who are reported to have been sexually penetrated, mostly spoke of witnessing sexual acts or suffering digital touch, or they have disclosed their past in general terms. The average age of these seven children is 12 years, with the youngest being nine years old (the witness of penetration) and the oldest 15. For several children, the files only contained a disclosure in general terms, therefore, we could not determine the severity of the abuse that occurred.

Disclosure through present events

Invitations for sex, interest in nudity, and a focus on genitals. Several children made possibly disclosing comments on present events, most of which indicated a reenactment of sexual abuse experiences. Firstly, seven children invited foster siblings (n=3), peers (n=3), fostering adults (n=2), or others (n=3) to engage in sexual acts. One boy “asked his foster sisters if they wanted to have sex” and another told his peers to “put your genitals in someone else’s mouth”. Secondly, three children actually seemed to reenact a sexual situation: “when her diaper was changed, she

turned to lie on her stomach and lifted her bottom”. Furthermore, six children’s files contained observations of heightened sexual interest, as they made sexualized comments, for instance, “when seeing nude people, he makes remarks and keeps on looking”. Lastly, several expressions of children remained uncategorized, as they neither refer to sexual acts nor indicate a heightened sexual interest. These not otherwise specified expressions (n=11) had one thing in common: All, in some way, centered genitals. For example, one child pointed at her genitals and “asked her foster mother what she taught of her middle part” and another child stated “he is his mother’s little willy’.

Drawing back, freezing, or becoming distressed. The children’s unexpected responses to everyday life events appeared to be behavioral disclosures. For instance, six children drew back from everyday activities concerning body care, sex education, or being lifted: “after reading a book about sexuality in class, she crawled away” or “the child refuses to be lifted”. In addition, several children showed anxious behavior as a response to events, for example, one child “peed her pants when a boy draw a picture on her stomach”. Other children froze as a response or became distressed. Examples of this are: “child becomes paralyzed in the presence of people in swimming trunks” and “the child is upset while taking a shower, yanks her own breasts”. Some files simply stated that a child had a strong reaction: “strong reaction to kissing scenes in a movie”.

Features of the disclosures

Where and to whom the child disclosed. In the case files many reports of disclosures, verbal or behavioral, were embedded in contextual details, for instance, the location of the situation. The majority of the disclosures (n=12) took place in the bathroom or in a location where the child was partially unclothed. The following excerpt illustrated such a situation: “when her diaper was changed when she was a baby, she became as stiff as a board”. Three times the disclosure occurred during bedtime or in a bedroom.

The interaction partner was mentioned in 19 files: The majority of the children disclosed to foster family members (n=10). For example, one boy “tells the foster family a detailed story about the sexual abuse”. Furthermore, some foster children disclosed to their peers (n=5) or a biological family member (n=3). One file mentioned how a foster mother prompted the disclosure by asking a child directly if “someone ever touched her pussy”, when she saw the child’s genitals reddened. This was the only record of a verbally prompted disclosure; the other records suggested the previously described types of verbal disclosures.

The language of children. As expected, some children disclosed in a child-like manner. Although it required some translation, typically the meaning of this child-language was easily

understood. Numerous children referred to sexual acts, nudity, or genitals in child-language, for example, “the child told that a boy touched her peepee”. Some children created a visual image of a sexual act using child-like vocabulary. For instance, one boy stated “that boys start to pee when they see naked buttocks”. The verb “pee” seemed to be adopted by this boy to describe an ejaculation. Similarly, another child mentioned seeing “pee came out of a penis into her”.

Other victims used child-like vocabulary inviting others to engage in sexual acts. Seven of these invitations included juvenile synonyms for genitals, for instance, one child “asked his foster brother to draw a little poophole on the Barbie, so he could lick it”. Four children’s invitation concerned oral sex, of which two children offered to perform it and two offered themselves to perform on. Two boys invited someone to help them to get an erection: “the child asked foster mother would you tighten my penis?” One child requested to perform a sexual act on an adult: “the child said to her grandfather she wanted to fidget around his penis”. Next to these invitations, seven of the eleven ‘not otherwise specified’ expressions have been coded being “child-language”, and again almost all children referred to their own or someone else’s genitals. For example, “pulls up foster father’s shirt and said: daddy has penis”.

“ One boy stated boys start to pee when they see naked buttocks ”

Active or passive part in the abuse. When reviewing the children’s files, we found that they mostly express or reenact sexual abuse as a passive party. For example, as some children witnessed sexual acts, they had an inactive role in the abuse. The verbally disclosing children often referred to what they suffered in the past by centering the actions of the perpetrator in their expressions. Other children expressed their willingness to engage in sexual acts in the present, yet, they adopted a passive role in the experience: “do you want to lick my penis”. In total, 20 disclosures suggested, either explicitly or implicitly, a child’s passive part in the abuse. Yet, nine disclosures suggested a child’s active performance in a sexual act, either in the past (n=3) or in the present (n=9). For example, one child “lies on top of dolls, rides them, and asks is it nice and does it hurt”. In three files the active or passive role of the child remained ambiguous, because their expressions indicated either having suffered digital abuse or being present while a man masturbated.

Discussion

There are several challenges in the interpretation of disclosures of sexual abuse by children. For instance, a disclosure tends to be dynamic, often existing of ambiguous references, while depending strongly on the receiver in order to develop. Because the interpretation process is

so complicated, especially for foster families, more knowledge is instrumental to optimize the care for sexually abused children. The present study aimed to explore verbal expressions and behaviors by which foster children disclose a previously unknown history of sexual abuse.

Significance of the major findings

The results of this study indicate that verbal information of a child leads to a more detailed report of the sexual abuse in a child's file, yet, the extent of the reported disclosures varies strongly, as singular as well as more elaborate disclosures are described in the children's files. Similar to what Author citation (2015) suggest, our results reflect the trouble of foster families interpreting a child's singular isolated behavior or verbal expression as a disclosing manifestation, while multiple disclosure attempts can alert an interacting partner to 'see' and 'interpret' disclosures as such. Jensen (2005) even states that signs of sexual abuse accumulate meaning, as their meaning changes upon use. Furthermore, as the development of a child's disclosure is strongly dependent on the interaction partner (Flåm & Haugstvedt, 2013), the variety in reported information can also be due to the fact that the foster family members do not have a long history together. For example, Jensen (2005) stresses that a parent and a child know each other and 'lean on these experiences in new interpretations' (p.475). Hence, it is not unexpected that in our data for almost half of the children in the disclosure group only one verbal or behavioral disclosure was found, as other disclosing attempts of a child may not have been noticed or interpreted accordingly.

When reviewing the content of the disclosures, we found implicit as well as explicit references to past experiences. The explicit references to the children's past are mostly verbal and contain details about the sexual acts they suffered or about the perpetrator of the abuse. Although in the files of seven children penetration is reported, only one witness account of penetration was found. For five of these children the abuse started in or around the preverbal stage and continued to the verbal memory stage. Therefore, our results indicate that they could have memories of penetration. This lack of disclosures concerning sexual penetration is in contrast to the study by Jensen et al. (2005), who describe how some initial alarming utterances of children in the ages of three to 7 years contain clear descriptions of penetration. It is possible that we found less reports of disclosure of penetration, because the children in our study were older at the time of disclosure, than the children in the study by Jensen et al. According to Leach, Powell, Sharman and Anglim (2017) age influences the likelihood of disclosure of penetration in a forensic interview. The authors argue that younger children are more likely to disclose penetration, as they are more likely to recognize this as abusive, compared to other sexual incidents.

Furthermore, although the disclosing children report to be abused by males and females, their disclosures mostly refer to males, specifically fathers. These men are clearly described as active perpetrators, whilst the abusing females (all mothers) are reported as perpetrators less frequently. Additionally, the mothers are described as active or passive abusers. This finding is in accordance with other studies that point out the “passively consenting mother” as a common type of female abuser (Wijkman, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2010), whereas men are barely described as passive abusers in the literature. Although some children have identified a female as their abuser, it is interesting that so little is disclosed about the abuse by these women. Young children sexually abused by a female might not know what to refer to in their disclosure, as sex with a woman might be harder to ‘understand’ than sex with a male. For example, as our data reveal, some children used urinating as a synonym to a male’s physical release, indicating they applied their knowledge of the bodily function of a penis to explain what they have witnessed. Furthermore, children often referred to (male) genitals in their disclosure: Genitals too are perceptible. Conversely, sex with a female is elusive, for example, a female’s orgasm is not tangible, yet a male’s orgasm can be witnessed, tasted, or touched. Therefore, there is less specific, tangible information a child can use to describe sex with a female. Consequently, a child’s attempt to disclose abuse by a female could also be more difficult to interpret.

When solely reviewing the linguistics of the verbal disclosure, we found that children mostly disclose their passive role in the sexual acts: They refer to themselves suffering the abuse, not performing sexual acts. Yet, often perpetrators force children to reciprocate sexual acts or to perform sexual acts on adults. Sexual acts involving a female abuser more often require a child’s active performance than sexual acts involving a male. Mossige, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Rechelt and Tjersland (2005) conclude that children struggle attributing meaning to their sexual abuse experiences through their stories, resulting in less elaborate, more disorganized and less coherent narratives than narratives on other stressful events. Furthermore, studies have shown how strong feelings of shame, blame and guilt arise in sexually abused children. Specifically, boys tend to become confused about their own contribution in the abuse situation as they experience physical arousal. These traumatic effects of sexual abuse in particular can cause delays in the disclosure process, or even cause a full discontinuance of the disclosure (for instance, Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Hershkowitz, Lanes & Lamb, 2007; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Our results imply that children disclose their past, but limit their own actions linguistically, possibly to re-construct the abuse they suffered as well as their forced contribution in the abuse.

Interestingly, the social workers responsible for the report in the children’s files have thought it to be relevant to report child-like language, as our data reveal numerous reports of disclosure

in a child-like vocabulary. Most of the disclosure in child-language center genitals or sexual acts the children were involved in or want to be involved in. These results correspond to the findings of Brilleslijper-Kater and Baartman (2000) and Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn (2015). As in these studies, the children in our study used numerous names for male and female genitals. Moreover, Brilleslijper-Kater and Baartman (2000) state that children until the age of 6 have limited knowledge of sexuality, especially with regard to adult sexual behavior and body parts in relation to their sexual function. The non-sexually abused children in their study interpreted physical intimacy between adult and children in relation to their own experiences. Therefore, it is to be expected that (possibly) sexually abused children in the same age category interpret physical intimacy in relation to their own experiences similarly, as appears from the study by Jackson et al. (2015). These authors noted how children used sexually graphic language to communicate abuse experiences and had sufficient understanding of what had happened to them, yet, as appeared from their innocent vocabulary, they lacked in more general sexual knowledge. Similarly, in the present study some children disclosed the abuse graphically, adopting their own language.

The children's disclosures through present events are mostly directed at members of their foster family or at their peers in a location where physical intimacy or partial nudity can be expected, for instance during bathing. This suggests such everyday life activities could offer a shared frame of reference for the child to disclose, as noted by Jensen et al. (2005). It can also be argued that the context of nudity triggers the children to recall their past, as McFadden (1989) states that the 'three most likely places for sexual abuse to have occurred are bathroom, bedroom and car' (p. 96). In addition, next to a triggering nature, our results suggest that children often disclosed in locations where a certain amount of privacy was possible (Jensen et al., 2005). Thus, we can conclude that certain everyday activities entailing physical intimacy can contain triggers for a child, yet, the location of these activities can enable them to disclose prior negative experiences in a similar situation in private.

Strengths and limitations

It is important to consider the implications of using case file data, as certain restrictions in interpretation must be calculated. Firstly, we assume the described situations and quotations in the children's files to be noteworthy to the foster parents, as they have reported the occurrences to their social worker. In addition, we assume that these social workers considered this information to be of interest and, thereby, an official report in the children's files was needed. However, we cannot be sure that this record of the children's testimonials is complete. For instance, as we could only rely on the information filed, we were to consider a singular sentence as context.

Evidently, foster parents will have more context to interpret their foster child's disclosure. Secondly, we must consider the implications of the social worker's decision when to report an incident. Often sexual abuse allegations remain unsubstantiated, yet, social workers must choose what to report. It is possible that social workers hesitate to report unsubstantiated, very vague suspicions in order to protect the child being stigmatized. Additionally, a social worker's belief in a disclosure also influences the documentation process.

Furthermore, several problems can arise concerning the validity of sign or disclosure interpretation. Firstly, if we review the chronological development of a suspicion of sexual abuse and the timing of a disclosure thereof, we distinguish two directions. On the one hand, either signs, disclosures and report thereof can direct to a suspicion. On the other hand, when people suspect a child has been sexually abused, this can lead to an increase in the reports of disclosure in a child's files. Secondly, personal experiences may influence the validity of sign interpretation. For instance, foster parents who were victims of sexual abuse themselves or had prior experiences with abused foster children, may interpret disclosure and disclosing behaviors differently than those who are novices in this area. Lastly, even though we continuously aimed to make our interpretations intersubjective through thorough discussion of the analysis and we critically reflected on our personal interpretations of the data, interpretation of signs is a dialogical process and the outcome is dependent on both interlocutors. Therefore, we as researchers influence the interpretation process.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study gives some important insights in the complex process of sexual abuse self-disclosure by foster children. Although each disclosure dialogue, or an attempt thereto, is situated in a unique context and relationship between the interlocutors, we found several patterns within our data. This suggests that the results are not completely idiosyncratic. Consequently, our interpretations are thought to be transferrable to similar cases in other foster care organizations. In addition, several of our findings are consistent to other international studies, therefore, they seem to reach beyond the Dutch context.

Conclusion

The results of this study strengthen the perspective that children's self-disclosure of sexual abuse is a fragmented process, as through disclosing they also re-construct their experiences. Therefore, it is understandable that children mostly structure their disclosure not by presenting themselves as active participants as this would strengthen feelings of guilt and self-blame. Furthermore, it is possible that children are linguistically challenged to disclosing sexual abuse by females as

they have less specific (sensory) information to refer to and know fewer words to describe female sexuality. Everyday activities in foster families can be threatening to a child as they may trigger memories of sexual abuse experiences. On the other hand, these activities can also create a shared frame of reference that facilitates a child to disclose.

Future directions

This study contributes to the knowledge on fostering a sexually abused child, as it lists possible verbal and non-verbal disclosure of sexual abuse and their features in everyday life activities. As a part of their training foster parents should be informed of the range of possible disclosures, as to raise awareness in detecting them. Specifically, foster families should be informed that next to disclosure in the form of stories, disclosures also come in the form of a reaction to triggers, a spur-of-the-moment remark, or a question. As the contextual embedment of a disclosure can add to the interpretation of a child's behavior or utterance, foster families should be informed of the triggering nature of locations as the bathroom, the toilet, and the bedroom. Additionally, foster parents should be aware of the pressing (emotional) dynamics of disclosing sexual abuse, for instance, when a child was forced to actively perform in the abuse. Also the (lack of) skills children have to disclose certain sexual acts (e.g. those committed by females) is of importance.

An open response or attitude is needed in order to invite a child to continue disclosing. Furthermore, a helpful response is one of sincere interest in a child's story or behavior, even though a confrontation with an abuse history can cause strong emotions in a foster parent. Foster parents should acknowledge the emotions inflicted by disclosures of sexual abuse, yet, a recipient of a disclosure should not overburden a disclosing child with these emotions. Thus, for social workers an important task is to guide foster families through the disclosing process and reflect on what the disclosure evokes.

Further research on the disclosure of sexual abuse including both the foster child and the foster family perspective needs to be conducted in order to provide additional knowledge to improve the everyday life of victims of sexual abuse in foster care. Especially research in young foster children will add to our understanding of care-specific challenges in the disclosure process.



CHAPTER 5

Stories on safety

This chapter is based on : Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. (2018).

The rippling effects of unsafety in foster families - A narrative study.

(submitted)

Abstract

A number of safety issues arise when fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. This qualitative study examined narratives on (un)safety from multiple members of eight foster families. The narratives from 14 foster parents and 12 birth children were coded inductively, after which the data were reviewed from a bird-eye view. Two social positions dominate unsafe experiences. The first is that of being a threat, the second is that of being a protector. Foster families highlighted the relational aspects of (un)safety, as unsafety in any relationship has consequences for the other members of the family. This study strengthens the view on unsafety as a social construct as families move between and beyond risk and safety.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, foster care, foster families, narrative research, qualitative research, unsafety

Introduction

Safety is a dynamic concept and is mostly defined as the absence of danger, or being out of harm's way. Still, especially for children who were sexually abused by their caregivers, a difference may exist between being physically safe and feeling safe. For example, foster children, who have suffered abuse prior to placement in foster care, learn who is safe for them and who is not, and, therefore, often develop an insecure attachment style (Cairns, 2002). More specifically, a disorganized attachment is observed in children who have been sexually abused, as they 'can find no strategy that enables them either to feel safe or regulate their emotionally hyperaroused states' (Howe & Fearnly, 2003, p. 373). Finkelhor and Browne (1985) noted that sexual abuse alters children's views of themselves, people, and the world. Especially when abused by a family member, children are betrayed in their trust, as they learn that someone on whom they depended knowingly hurt them. In addition, children are severely disempowered as their personal boundaries are invaded forcefully. As a child's perception of the world is strongly influenced by having suffered sexual abuse, help is needed from trustworthy people in restoring this (Janoff-Bulmann, 1992). However, as McFadden (1989) concluded, a child's previous experiences with sexual abuse colors its perception of a foster family being trustworthy too.

Fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse raises some safety issues for a foster family too, as some children show complex behavior, for example, sexualized behavior (Dubner & Motta, 1999; Hardwick, 2005; Greeson et al., 2011; Tarren-Sweeney, 2008). Sexualized behavior, like excessive public masturbation, inappropriate touching of others, or sexual advances, is often reported to be source of concern for foster parents. First, these behaviors can cause "uneasy feelings in foster carers and evoke unresolved issues about their own experiences and sexuality" (Hardwick, 2005, p. 34). Second, foster parents report concerns of a foster child's sexualized behavior damaging their birth children. For instance, in the study by Macaskill (1991), foster parents observed how the negative focus on sex destroyed their birth child's sexual innocence. In addition, a foster child's sexual behavior directed towards other children in the family caused "nagging thoughts about the likelihood of these incidents escalating into more serious sexual episodes" (p. 86). Lastly, several studies highlight the fear and impact of sexual abuse allegations against foster family members (Biehal, Cusworth, Wade & Clarke, 2014; Farmer, Lipscombe & Moyers, 2005; Macaskill, 1991; Minty & Bray, 2001). Foster fathers mostly fear being accused of sexually abusing a foster child, consequently, they often distance themselves in anticipation of this. For example, some foster fathers engage little in intimate, caregiving activities (Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999).

Many foster parents of a child with a history of sexual abuse feel the urge to set clear rules and boundaries to create a safe environment for themselves, their birth children, and the children they foster (Hardwick, 2005; McFadden, 1989). Furthermore, foster family members seem less vulnerable when they are adequately forewarned of possible risks when fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse (Macaskill, 1991; Martin, 1993; Younes & Harp, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to include these children fully in the fostering experience, as foster parents feel the need to stop their fostering experience when they feel their birth children's safety is not guaranteed (Thompson, McPherson & Marsland, 2016).

As safety is a relational and systemic concept, one person's feelings of unsafety impact others in the same system, for example a family system. Therefore, safety is as much a concern for each fostering individual, as it is for a family as a unit. Each individual's experience of unsafety, however, is unique, as these feelings develop under certain circumstances, within a certain context, and they are influenced by a person's history. In this study, therefore, we aim to explore the dynamics of safety in families who foster a child with a history of sexual abuse from a systemic perspective. The central question of our narrative study is: How do families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse experience and establish safety for all family members?

Method

Selection

This study is part of a larger study on the experiences, needs and expertise of families who foster a child with a putative history of sexual abuse. We conducted this larger study in the northern division of a nationwide foster care organization in the Netherlands. All foster care workers in this division were asked to review their past and present caseload and identify suspected and substantiated cases of sexual abuse in foster children, previous to placement in the current foster family. These foster children were considered the leading index children. Two families on this list were selected by the agency to participate in a pilot of the study. When this pilot was successfully finished, we set on to recruit other foster families. Initially, 12 information packages were sent, however, we received little response. Only three families agreed to participate. The declining families declared that they had no time left to invest, whereas others did not want to relive memories regarding the topic of the study.

In a second wave we chose to also recruit foster families where the foster child was excluded from participation, for example, due to age or legal guardianship. Of the eight families we approached, six consented to participation. Only those family members that had knowledge of

the index child's abuse history could participate. Our recruitment process resulted in a sample of 31 members from 11 families. In eight families we collected the narratives of multiple family members. In this paper, we focus on the experience of these eight families, as we set out to study the experiences of different family members. In four families we spoke both foster parents, and their birth child(ren). In two families only the foster mother participated, in addition to some of her birth children. Lastly, in two families only the foster parent couple participated.

Data collection

The narratives of the foster parents and the adult biological children were collected through multiple consecutive in-depth interviews following an episodic structure (Flick, 1997, 2009). We interviewed all adults two to four times, with one exception, depending on their available time and their need to deepen their story. In the first interview we introduced the interview goals and principles, followed by an open exploration of the narrative of the participant starting at the time of the placement of the index child (i.e., the child with a putative history of sexual abuse). The following interviews concerned present daily events as well as more general areas regarding fostering the index child.

In addition, to collect the narratives of the minor children, we created a booklet containing non-verbal narrative eliciting activities. After each interview the interviewer wrote a log containing field notes, observations, emotions, and reflections. This log was used to prepare the consecutive interviews and later it was used in the data analysis.

Analysis

In the larger study, we aimed to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on everyday life. Therefore, we first reviewed this topic from the perspective of the individual family members. As each family member develops an individual narrative, including stories on safety and unsafety, an inductive analysis was chosen (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Our study finds roots in constructivism, as we view each person's narrative a construction of a subjective and dynamic reality. With our participants we co-constructed a reality through story-telling. The topic safety was not an explicit part of the questions in our interview protocol, however, in certain questions safety was an underlying concept. Still, many family members spoke of unsafe experiences at their own accord and it seemed a key theme in the fostering experience of many of them. To create the family narratives, we compared and contrasted the personal narratives of family members.

Coding individual narratives. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim taking nonverbal behavior into account as well. Descriptions of critical occurrences during the

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interview were added in the transcript, for instance, emotional moments for the participant or interviewer. For each participant an NVivo10 project (QSR International, 2015) was created containing transcripts and interview logs. We considered the multiple interviews of a participant as their personal narrative.

Using the NVivo software, the involved interviewer conducted an inductive thematic analysis per participant. This process started with reading and re-reading the transcripts, followed by inductive, open coding of the interviews. The analyst made notes regarding possible patterns during this iterative process. These notes became the starting point of the creation of clusters of open codes referring to similar themes. Subsequently, the analyst discussed the coding process with another team member. Differences in interpretation between both researchers were resolved by seeking consensus and the analyst wrote a synthesis of the story of a participant, which was based on the clusters of open codes. This synthesis was presented to the participant as a means of member check. After the analysis on the level of individuals, we reviewed the syntheses of the members of the same family together.

A bird-eye view on foster families. Inspired by Ribbens Mccarthy, Holland and Gillies (2003), we approached each family as a case study, following three steps to create a family narrative. First, we reviewed the syntheses of the different family members and determined how far the different individuals were concerned with similar and different themes. We also looked at the linguistic and structural components of the narratives, for example, similarities in word choice. Second, we interpreted similarities, gaps, or contradictions by going back to the original transcripts. Since differences in the interpretation of experiences can be rooted in one's social position within a family (Sands & Roer-Strier, 2006), our final step was to review position-specific themes, which are stories explicitly told from a certain position within a family, for example, a male's, a daughter's, or a teenager's position. This process of comparing and contrasting the multiple perspectives of a family was dynamic and iterative, as the three steps were often intertwined. However, to keep the interpretation process transparent, we documented each theme on a family level in a structured worksheet, which also included the clusters from the individual narratives. Therefore, each decision we made was recorded. Additionally, we created a family NVivo10 project (QSR International, 2015).

This comparative process resulted in a family synthesis. We explored the multiple perspectives on themes important to a family unit, which appeared from the family members' and the families' own narratives. Many of these themes centered around safety or unsafety, either for individuals or the family as a unit. To deepen the knowledge of this complex topic, we studied passages of the family narratives referring to the topic as such or those containing linguistic

indicators pointing to (un)safety. Examples of such linguistic indicators are words referring to fear, risk, or protection. Again, the analysts documented which passages were included.

The families and their foster children

The eight families studied provided non-kinship care and differed in terms of fostering experience. Six foster fathers participated, in addition to all of the foster mothers, two minor birth children and 10 birth children of age. All families were having the Dutch nationality and consisted of two parents. Most of these families identified as Christian. Additional birth children and foster children of seven families did not participate in the study.

The family members explicitly referred to their experience with 14 children with a putative history of sexual abuse, the youngest of which was 3 years of age and the oldest 18 at the time of the interviews. Some of these index children did not live in the foster family anymore, whereas others lived in the foster family for a great number of years. As some families have fostered a great number of children, they also reflected on previous fostering experiences.

As to the information on the abuse, most foster children had been abused by a parental figure prior to placement in the families interviewed. Fathers, mothers, partners of mothers, and grandparents were referred to as the abusers. In two cases the abuser remained unknown, and in two other cases there was an unknown number of perpetrators as the children were prostituted for periods of time. Only a few cases of abuse allegations have been substantiated. The reported severity of the abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to being forced to have intercourse.

Results

Two social positions seem to dominate unsafe experiences as told by the foster families. The first position is that of being a threat to someone, the second is that of being someone's protector. In some families both positions were narrated, whilst in other families one social position dominated the fostering experience, and the narrative thereof. Firstly, the position of being a threat seems to be related to the gender and seniority of a family member. The experiences of threatening and threatened family members appeared to have consequences for the others. Secondly, the position of being a protector is mostly narrated by foster mothers, who spoke of the need to protect the foster child as well as other (young) family members. In the following sections we will describe the social positions with regard to unsafety, as we illustrate some

patterns in the families' narratives. In addition, we review some counter-examples of these patterns, all of which do not dominate the family narratives.

Foster family members as a threat

Five family narratives, all including the perspective of foster father and some the perspective of a birth son, revealed a gender-based experience of unsafety, as some family members perceived the males in the family being a threat to their foster child. For example, some families saw and experienced how a child avoided foster fathers and focused strongly on their foster mothers.

“ *Five family narratives revealed a gender-based experience of unsafety* ”

Many of these families link this to the fathers being senior males. One foster father, for instance, recalls how his foster son would deny him access in the shower: “In the beginning, when he had to shower, I wasn’t allowed to be near him. Being a man.

Meanwhile, my wife was allowed. He just didn’t want me there.” Still, even when a foster father was approached as a threat and the child focused more on the care-giving female, most families review how this would change over time, as one foster father stated: “We have crossed over to a stage where he does not have to be afraid of me anymore.”

Similar to the threatening foster fathers, two teenage sons, having fostered throughout their teenage years, noticed their foster siblings perceived them as threatening. They experienced being actively avoided by some female foster children, as they saw happening to their fathers: “Some children just really did not respond to me or my father.” This experience led them to postpone developing a bond with the foster children. “I have to be honest, I think I kept some emotional distance, because they distanced themselves from me, because I was a boy.” One younger brother of these threatening teenagers also participated, and, interestingly, he did not refer to a similar experience. On the contrary, he explicated not noticing anything abnormal in his interaction with foster children, as he sensitively focused on gaining children’s trust and building a relationship with them.

Overall, the male fostering figures approached being a perceived threat differently. The teenage sons seemed to distance themselves from activities with their foster sibling, and any responsibility in fostering them, as the teenagers positioned themselves as merely “a son of foster parents.” They appeared reluctant to incorporate being a threat in their identity as a foster sibling. The foster parents, however, narrated their focus on developing a safe interaction between the child and foster father, as they expected a foster child’s growth in this area. The adults seemed to acknowledge being a threat to a child more easily. For instance, one foster father spoke of how he explored the threatening nature of his presence actively, by assessing his every move and

the child's response to it: "We have to continuously observe and attribute meaning to signs of unsafety."

Two families' narratives stand out with regard to familial threats to their foster child. Firstly, in contrast to the other four families, in the fifth family, the threat position did not dominate, yet, foster father was thought to be threatening to the foster child. More specifically, this foster father's threatening position was established even prior to placement as the family "was selected because I wasn't the dominant male type." Consequently, this family made the choice of foster father's limited role in intimate care activities. Similar to what occurred in the other families, this foster father noticed how the child grew attached to him, and did not experience being a threat to his foster daughter in later stages of their fostering experiences.

In the second family, the threatening position of foster father was even more complex, as the family members noticed how this position was somewhat 'functional'. That is, several family members referred to a specific foster child's fear of men. One birth child stated: "Previously a man was someone who...who she needed to please or who did things to her." Consequently, all family members observed the child's fear of her foster father. Still, when the child displayed intense anger, which sometimes led her hurting others or herself, foster father seemingly was the only one to "snap her out of it." Foster father reviewed this complex part he played in the child's anger issues, as this girl was thought to have been abused by several men: "It's really complex because on the one hand I know why she listens to me, on the other hand me calming her down was the safest way to do it."

Although mostly males were perceived as threatening, a number of female participants described how their foster child behaved sexually towards them as females, and how they as females triggered children to act sexually. For example, a foster mother and her two teenaged daughters mostly interpreted their foster child's behavior as an exploration of (sexual) safety: "He tries stuff in order to figure out who I am and how I'm different than her (i.e., the perpetrator)." Nonetheless, one birth daughter narrated her struggle to integrate being a threat into her identity of a care-giving foster sibling. She illustrated this with a story of the boy dissociating during toilet training, in which she, as one of his trusted persons, actively helped: "He looked so sad and frightened to me. As if I held a gun to his face. This shattered me, as I felt I was hurting him. He was so scared."

Foster family members threatened

In three families where the males were approached as unsafe persons, the child was perceived to be unsafe to the males too. The central cause of this was inappropriate sexual behavior of the

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child. For example, one foster father was very determined to procure his own safety and that of his sons when the family fostered girls who showed sexualized behavior: “With those girls I remain in the background. I have to explore what the girl is like and what she could mean to me. I mean, when a girl shows sexualized behavior, this automatically has implications for me.” Another example was given by a foster father who narrated his nightmares of finding his foster daughter next to him in the bed instead of his partner. Both foster parents felt threatened by this girl’s behavior: Foster father recalled taking protective measures to ascertain his personal safety, whereas foster mother described their vulnerability as a couple in this fostering experience. Underlying these threats, or anticipation of threats, are the risks of allegations, which are amplified by a child’s sexualized behavior.

Another different type of threat was rooted in a foster child’s sexualized behavior, as this seemed to cause confusion in some teenaged birth children. Suddenly a negative connotation was attached to sexuality. Several siblings (male and female) explicitly linked this struggle to puberty, as one stated: “When you are not really comfortable with your own sexuality, it is really difficult to provide safety for such a girl.” Additionally, one teenager recalled how she felt somewhat threatened by a child’s affectionate behavior, as this nine-year-old boy had sexual experience she did not have. She stated:

“...when he put his hand on my leg, I thought what are his intentions? You really don’t want to think that, but he experienced really unusual things for a nine-year-old. To me it felt like a random strange bloke, an adult man, put his hand on my leg.”

In contrast to some of the foster fathers and birth children, foster mothers rarely described the child’s behavior as threatening to them personally. This is interesting as some of these women did narrate similar experiences as their male peers. For example, one foster mother described how her foster son is triggered by her as a woman, and often masturbated as a response to her aiding presence in the shower. However, both foster mother and her partner did not describe this to be threatening to them, whereas the occurrence or even the anticipation of sexualized behavior in other families was often labeled as threatening. Nonetheless, as this boy had a strong reaction to foster mother, she was the person to limit her role in the intimate caregiving of the boy. In contrast to other cases, for this particular foster child, foster father became the main caregiver in intimate situations: “It’s odd, but he doesn’t do it when my husband helps him in the shower. So, since then my husband has helped him to shower.” Interestingly, foster mother’s limited role in caregiving activities with regard to this specific foster child even is out of the ordinary

for this family's normal routine, as both foster parents stated foster father was generally having limited part in caregiving.

Another contrasting example was narrated by one foster mother who is personally threatened by her foster daughter's sexualized behavior. That is, she feels threatened by the child's physical contact: "When she was much smaller, she sat on my lap and we hugged all the time. I never found that unpleasant. But now she is older, I sometimes... I don't know...sometimes she feels threatening to me." This foster mother too noticed how the child was not focused on her husband. Furthermore, she did not relate her experience of unsafety to a risk of allegations; instead she related her feelings to a violation of her personal physical boundaries. More specifically, her narrative is not dominated by the girl's threatening behavior to herself, but by foster mother's felt responsibility to protect the other children in her family from the girl's behavior.

As the families reported foster fathers' experienced or anticipated unsafety, or that of their foster children, most of the care-giving tasks seemed to fall upon the foster mothers. Yet, in some families this task fell upon the other females when the foster mother was not present: foster parents' birth daughters. Interestingly, in several families the birth daughters reported how being involved in these activities out of protection of their male relatives caused unsafe experiences for themselves. This experience seemed rooted in their position of being a female. For example, one teenage birth daughter positioned herself explicitly as a playmate of her foster siblings, as she did not enjoy caregiving activities. However, when her mother was absent, she recalled how her parents asked her to put a foster sibling to bed as her father could not do this: "It felt weird... Usually my dad did things like this, or my mother." Furthermore, a birth daughter in another family remembered how she was shocked by what she experienced: "Every time I gave her a bath, she literally offered herself to me. Seriously, it was really awful! And I didn't want to do that every night." Interestingly, her brother recalled the following: "My parents decided that my oldest sister, and later on my younger sisters as well, could help during bath time or bed time, but we as boys were not helping in this under any circumstance." Caregiving activities as such were perceived risky for the birth sons.

Additionally, other examples did not include a birth daughter's active responsibility of caregiving activities. Nonetheless, they did reflect a birth daughter's role in protecting her threatened male relatives:

“My husband was never alone with our foster daughter in the car. Even when she lived with us for some time. Because we didn’t want the girl to feel threatened and we wanted to avoid something being said by the child. Of course, sometimes children are abused by their mother, so you can never be certain. But we want to fully avoid misinterpretations. So, the couple of times I couldn’t drive the girl, my daughter went along.”

The birth daughter, centered in this quote, voiced her opinion as it comes to fostering children with a history of sexual abuse: “I don’t like it when children are abused or need a lot of help, because you have to spend a lot of time on them.” Not all birth daughters seemed to favor their involvement to indirectly protect their male relatives.

Several foster parents reported that besides sharing some caregiving responsibilities with their teenagers, talking about threats, risks or unsafe experiences with their teenagers was beneficial to their fostering experience. For example, one foster mother reviewed how her teenage daughter enjoyed helping her mother out in fostering a boy. However, when this 16-year-old helped their foster child during bath time, she was asked if she would touch his erected penis. She stated:

“The first time it happened, I went to my parents immediately and told them what had occurred. They took it from there. When it happened later on, I told him myself: This isn’t appropriate. Still, every time it happened me and my parents talked about it.”

Her mother emphasized that her daughter’s age was crucial to the success of their fostering experience, as this allowed her to talk to them more easily about possible threatening experiences:

“You have to face so many things, and that starts with showering him, dressing him, physical contact. I think it wouldn’t have worked if our children were young. With older children you can talk about things far more and explain why he behaves the way he does.”

Protecting foster family members

In three family narratives the protection side of unsafety dominated. Mostly foster mothers felt that protecting a foster child from triggers of sexualized behavior also meant protecting the other children in the family from a confrontation with this behavior. It seemed these three families

have something in common: The index foster child had the same age or was slightly older than some children in the family.

The foster mothers and one foster father of three families highlighted how many things in everyday life were triggers to their foster child. Several examples of triggers were given: objects (for example, furniture, advertisements, and books), activities (for example, witnessing a diaper change, rough play, and sex education), and people (for example, school instructors or people resembling the perpetrator). The foster children were mostly described as being aroused or afraid because of these triggers. One foster father stated: “Just expect the unexpected.” According to him and his partner seemingly trivial things triggered sexual arousal or a disclosure of sexual abuse in their foster child:

“A few weeks ago he held a kiwi against his cheek and said ‘wow, this is hairy’. Then he started to pant. Seriously, we were completely stunned...aroused by a kiwi. Yes, the memories of the abuse are still very present.”

The excessive sexual behavior of the foster children was troubling in these three families. For instance, when a birth daughter (in the same age as her foster sibling) once mentioned to her mother that her foster sibling kept panting continuously at night time, foster mother was alerted. “When we realized what this meant, we gave my daughter her own room, because I felt she shouldn’t be confronted with that behavior”, as foster mother referred to the foster child’s excessive masturbating. For the same reason foster parents made sure their foster daughter had her own room or slept in their room during family vacations: “We made sure she was not around the others, because you know, she makes noises like some adult woman four times at night. The kids really shouldn’t be exposed to that.” Because she felt their foster child’s behavior is damaging to others, mostly to the younger children, this foster mother went out of her way to not burden the other family members and she voiced her everyday task to be to “remove all sexual incentives.” Possibly this foster mother was very effective in protecting her children. Her children’s narratives do not reflect any perceived sexual threats or unsafe experiences, even though they were aware of their foster sibling’s history.

In contrast to this story, another foster mother reviewed how a nine-year-old’s excessive masturbation was a method for him to release stress and she reasoned that this and other sexual behavior was caused by his past. However, a clear turning point in her fostering experience was when the boy pulled a small child on his lap and he was found rubbing the child on his genitals, while moaning and panting. After discussing this situation with him, this foster mother learned he had waited until the chaperoning adults left the room for a minute. This changed her view of

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the boy. She felt he made a conscious choice and held some accountability for his behavior, and, because of this, she could no longer guarantee the safety of other young foster children in the family. This incident led to an increased sense of risks in their everyday life. Still, both parents of this family narrated they were confident their 13-year-old birth daughter did not need protection from the boy. Their daughter agreed:

“Girl: Because he was abused, he thinks it normal to do stuff like that. Sometimes he does those things at school too. So he shouldn’t play with girls, because then that stuff happens.”

Interviewer: You are girl too.

Girl: He doesn’t act like that around me. Only around girls his age. I’m kind of normal to him.”

Similarly, the foster mother of a third family reviewed the age being crucial in the degree of protection needed: The older children in this family seemed merely annoyed by their foster child’s sexual comments and behavior, whereas foster mother felt the younger children to be endangered by this. In addition, she explained how she would not feel comfortable in fostering a boy older than her birth daughters: “You want to protect your own children.” Still, she was very conscious in creating an emotionally safe space for her older children by discussing what someone might have seen or heard: “It is important they have an outlet, because to them too it can be very shocking.”

The foster mothers of these three families seemed to act as a human shield between the foster child and other young children in order to prevent harm done to all children. For example, all of them felt the need to monitor the child’s every move. As a consequence of this, they all felt the strain of being in a high state of alertness, especially when this task was not shared with others. For instance, one foster mother explained her husband preferred to not validate the sexual past of a child, in addition, he wanted to prevent any risk the girl posed. He had voiced his feelings of unsafety in the fostering situation. As a result, he stopped contributing to intimate caregiving activities and he distanced himself from his child-rearing role. This led to an isolated position for foster mother: “At some point you are just going through the motions. You stop being yourself at some point. Your only worry is to not let the others suffer from her behavior.”

Discussion

The narratives of foster families in this study contain accounts of their experiences of unsafety, and two social positions dominated their stories. In our bird-eye review of the family narratives, the relational aspect of unsafety becomes clear.

Significance of the major findings

Our results indicate that both foster family members and their foster children explore personal safety simultaneously. More specifically, foster families seemingly try to assess the safety of their family system in a fostering experience, whereas a foster child simultaneously tries to figure out if the new people in their life are to be trusted. Building safe relationships seems to be a process, which develops in a wave pattern. New phases in the development of a foster child or in a family system, and anticipation thereof, can be new sources of an individual's feelings of unsafety. Hence, this may impact the relationships built. Similar to literature, foster families narrated facing or anticipating on new challenges in the upcoming phases (Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger & Piel 2016).

Our study, similarly to the study of Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004), strengthens the view of (un)safety as a dynamic, social construct: Families, as a social system, negotiate, create, and recreate risk and safety. More specifically, our results show that one family member's feeling or experience of unsafety has a rippling effect within the family as a unit. For example, firstly, we found that risks in the execution of child-rearing tasks are assessed to be higher for one family member, and in some families these tasks are explicitly transferred, or explicitly not transferred to other relatives. As this transfer can create new unsafe situations to the newly involved relatives, one person's experience of unsafety can also shift to someone else. One unsafe experience is solved, while also being recreated. Secondly, triggers of unsafe memories and behavior of a foster child have an impact on family management, as removing or controlling the triggers of a foster child in order to keep them safe, also means keeping others safe from a confrontation with the foster child's history. One unsafe experience is prevented, while another is too. Consequently, it is important to be aware of the impact of this rippling effect, for literature suggests that an accumulation of stressors in foster families increases the risk of poor familial outcomes (Julien-Chinn, Cotter, Piel, Geiger & Lietz, 2017).

“ Families, as a social system, negotiate, create, and recreate risk and safety ”

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The family narratives revealed the influence of unsafety on the involvement of the foster parents. As similarly reported in several studies (e.g., Brown & Calder, 1999), foster families in the present study report their fear and awareness of the risk of abuse allegations. Consequently, several foster fathers reported to be limited in performing (intimate) care-giving activities, again similar to what literature on this suggests. However, as in these studies (e.g. Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999; Newstone, 2000), our results suggest that a relationship with a paternal fostering figure may provide opportunities of growth for the foster child. More specifically, as we found unsafety to be a dynamic concept, it should also be viewed as a reversible unwanted state. Therefore, is it necessary to move beyond a binary perspective of (male) family members as either threat and threatened or not. Fostering males, adult or under aged, should be considered as helpful partners in a foster child's development (Masson, Hackett, Philips & Balfe, 2013).

This study illustrates that foster mothers are mostly perceived as non-threatening, nor are most of them personally threatened. This is interesting, as several children are reported to have been abused by a female figure. Nonetheless, in the families studied most foster mothers identify as the primary care-giver, as most of them are stay-at-home-moms. However, parallel to the foster fathers' isolation of not care-giving, we found foster mothers' experience of isolation as well. Their experience mostly was characterized by being one of the only 'safe' persons in the family able to perform certain tasks, in addition to feeling highly responsible to procure everyone's safety. For example, similar to other studies (Macaskill, 1991; Masson, et al., 2013) these foster mothers narrated they felt the need to constantly monitor the child's contact with the other children. It appears that the foster mothers' protection of foster father by undertaking the extent of care-giving activities, and their instinct to protect their children from harmful experiences, add to the strain of their fostering experience. Although some studies suggest a foster father's limited part in intimate caregiving (for instance, Macaskill, 1991), the consequences of this advice are not considered, for example for their female partners. Yet, in our study these have become very apparent at the family level. Thus, the importance of respite and some relief of everyday caregiving tasks of foster mothers seems key in similar fostering situations.

With regard to the birth children two groups stood out in this study: the threatening and threatened birth sons, and the caregiving or protecting birth daughters. The first group, the older sons of foster parents, reported how the emotional distance of a foster child caused them to be less engaged in developing a sibling-relationship. Furthermore, as their parents anticipated on unsafe situations, some boys were required to maintain physical distance. These results suggest that keeping the teenaged boys safe by minimizing their role makes them possibly less engaged

in the overall fostering process. This is in contrast to the study of Sutton and Stack (2012), who found that when birth children viewed themselves as active participants, this added to the young person's ability to adjust, 'and their willingness to remain part of a fostering family, in spite of challenging events' (p.12). As the present study revealed a marginalized sibling role of some teenaged sons, it is important to consider the possible isolating consequences of this.

Subsequently, several teenage, care-giving daughters in our study appeared to gain an important role in the fostering system, yet, inadvertently they were themselves exposed to unsafe experiences. More specifically, they reported having unsafe experiences because they were thought to be less of a risk to foster children; therefore, they executed caregiving tasks whereas their male siblings were explicitly excused from these tasks. In our study, as in the study by Serbinski (2017) most of these caregiving teenage daughters discussed their experiences with their parents in order to process them. However, this specific group of teenagers should not be overlooked by social workers, as they gained profound role in the fostering process.

Lastly, Thompson et al. (2016) found the age of birth children was an important factor in their involvement in a fostering experience, as younger children were often less involved than older birth children. However, it seems that birth children of all ages may be equally vulnerable. Firstly, foster parents in our study felt they could discuss unsafe experiences with their birth children, because they are teenagers. Some birth children, however, experienced complications in fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse, as sexuality was suddenly seen in dark light. Our results imply some loss of sexual innocence does not just concern younger children, moreover, sexualized behavior seems to evoke some issues in teenagers. (Hardwick, 2005; Macaskill, 1991). Secondly, some teenaged birth children struggled incorporating a newly gained dimension into their growing identity: Being a threat simply by being present or by acting altruistically seemed challenging. The consequences of this should be considered.

Strengths and limitations

With regard to the results of this study, we have to consider the influence of the design and selection of families and participants. Firstly, we have chosen to review safety on the level of families by creating family narratives. Despite our efforts, we have not been able to add the foster children's perspectives in the family narratives. Learning from their personal stories of unsafety and safety would greatly help to optimize out-of-home-care for them. Secondly, we have to consider the influence of the composition of the families in our study, in addition to the actual participants per family. For instance, most of these families could be considered quite conservative and traditional in terms of religious beliefs, culture, and gender identity. This may

influence their attitude and thoughts on sexuality and the execution of familial roles. Moreover, it is possible that in two family narratives in which the protector position dominated, this was caused by the lack of participation of foster father.

These limitations notwithstanding, reviewing the family narratives allowed us to gain insight in the relational aspects of unsafety. Through this complex and time-consuming process we learned about the dynamics between threatened, threatening and protecting family members. Our study has highlighted that to some degree fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse is fear-based work, in which risks, and anticipation of risky situations, influence everyday life. More specifically, our study showed that fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse requires much knowledge and skills of foster families.

Implications for practice and research

Although feelings of unsafety seemed to be a current issue to some foster fathers, their teenage birth sons, and their foster children, this could also be viewed as an opportunity. In particular, our results suggest that certain relationships between foster family members create feelings of unsafety, as well as an opportunity to grow. Moreover, it seems that other foster familial relationships can facilitate the safety needed to grow in threatening relationships. Therefore, it is important to all foster family members and their social workers to firstly discuss emotional, physical, and sexual safety. In addition, it is important to reflect on how foster family members position themselves. For example, do they see themselves merely as a threat or threatened and are they disengaged, or do they see the opportunity to grow from this? When unsafe feelings are a topic of conversation, plans for safe care can be made in order to minimize the experienced or anticipated risks of abuse allegations.

Secondly, the rippling consequences of one person's unsafety need to be considered. Social workers can actively work on establishing safety for all family members by an open discussion of the topic and shaping appropriate activities together or apart from each other. With conscious choices of investment, family members remain or become more engaged in the fostering process, which is essential to lessen the impact of unsafety on everyday fostering life.

Furthermore, future research on this topic is needed to broaden our knowledge and awareness on the features pressing on family systems with regard to unsafety. For instance, it would broaden our view to study the experiences of (un)safety of same-sex fostering couples, as they establish a safe living environment that moves beyond gender roles. In addition, when reviewing unsafety in the everyday life of foster children from their perspective, this would give insights that are essential in improving their care.

Conclusion

Finding out who is safe and reliable is a complex process, as one family member's unsafe feelings seemingly impact the family system. Many foster families highlighted the relational aspects of (un)safety, as unsafety in one relationship, or anticipation thereof, has consequences for the other members of the family. Our results indicate that creating a safe living environment for all family members is a continuous, yet, sometimes implicit task. Furthermore, this study shows the importance of the underlying dynamics of unsafety in families. We deem it necessary to take note of all family members' experience of unsafety, as this has been proven to be impactful on everyday life.



CHAPTER 6

A story of motherhood

This chapter is based on : Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. (2018).
Balancing between caregiving and professionalism - Women's narratives
on fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse.
Child & Family Social Work. (in press). doi: 10.1111/cfs.12597

Abstract

The impact of sexual abuse on children is enormous, particularly when a child is abused sexually by a mother figure. In order to gain insight into the experiences of this rarely studied group, the life stories of four foster mothers of victims of maternal sexual abuse were collected. The narratives were coded inductively and several topics concerning foster motherhood were studied more in-depth. Four key themes emerged in the women's narratives: their attitude towards the abusing female, the foster child's sexual behavior towards the foster mother, the emotional and physical distance of the foster mothers towards their foster child, and lastly, their sense of responsibility. The four foster mothers continuously balance between fostering their foster child as a parent and responding as a professional caregiver. The consequences of being a foster mother of a victim of maternal sexual abuse should be more socially acknowledged.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, maternal sexual abuse, foster care, narrative research, professional identity, parental identity.

Introduction

“Because she reacted to me like that, I always felt that she learned that behavior from her mother”, a foster mother told us, reflecting on her foster child’s behavior. As this girl, 10 years of age, showed sexualized behavior to her as a female, this foster mother believed the girl had been abused by her biological mother. Her comment illustrates the complicated position women may have in fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse.

According to McLeod (2015) female offenders are far more likely to abuse their own children than men, as almost 80% of the offending women in his study were listed as the victim’s parent. Also, women seem more inclined to offend against young children than male offenders. Although the consequences for all child victims of sexual abuse are grave, the abuse is experienced as severe particularly when victims are strongly familiar with the perpetrator, for example when the offender is a child’s mother (Young, Riggs & Robinson, 2011). Next to physical intrusiveness, force by someone well known to the victim makes child sexual abuse ‘a frightening, shameful and isolating experience’ (p. 384). Tsopelas, Tsetsou, Ntounas and Douzenis (2012) note that children are overwhelmed with conflicting feelings of hate and love, especially when they hold a close (familial) relation to the abusers. When a child is sexually abused by a mother figure, the child is denied the feeling that their mother, one of the most important primary attachment figures, is safe (Etherington, 1997; Peter, 2006). Consequently, as a child’s abuse experience colors the perception of people in their world being trustworthy (McFadden, 1989), a foster child with a history of maternal sexual abuse may perceive a foster mother as potentially threatening.

In general, foster mothers hold a traditionally gendered role in the fostering process, meaning they are considered to be the homemakers or main carers (Heslop, 2014). This seems especially true when a family fosters a child with a history of sexual abuse, as several studies review the complications for men fostering a victim of sexual abuse. Foster fathers seem to distance themselves from certain child-rearing activities in order to minimize the risk of being perceived by a child as sexually interested or even abusive (for instance, Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999). Thus, foster fathers oftentimes position themselves as secondary carers supporting their female fostering partner.

In fostering victims of maternal sexual abuse, however, it is the foster mothers’ position that may be complicated. A woman’s active involvement in fostering a victim of maternal sexual

abuse may be paradoxical. For example, foster mothers perform the majority of the child-rearing activities. A foster child might interpret these caregiving acts as sexually laden due to their prior experiences with an abusing mother figure. Literature on female sex offenders, for instance, suggests women often commit crimes while engaging in normal child-rearing activities such as bathing and dressing (Groth & Birnbaum, as stated in Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Elliot (1994) even classifies sexual abuse by women as subtle, as the abuse takes place during everyday activities.

The current study explores the stories of women who foster a child who was sexually abused by a maternal figure. As far as we know, this specific group of foster carers has not been studied before. We aim to answer the question: What does it mean to be a foster mother of a child with a history of maternal sexual abuse?

Method

Design

A narrative study was designed to gain insight into the experiences, needs and expertise of families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. This study was exploratory in nature with roots in constructivism, as we set out to understand the subjective and dynamic reality of families fostering these children (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Through story-telling we co-constructed the reality of each fostering individual, in order to understand the reality of a family as a unit.

Sampling

In collaboration with a foster care organization in the northern part of the Netherlands, we recruited families who currently fostered a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior to placement in the foster family. All foster care workers reviewed their past and present caseload in order to identify cases of sexual abuse in the foster children's history. These children were a prime determinant in the selection of families and were named "index children". In the first phase of recruitment, an information package was sent to 12 families. The index child residing in these families met the agreed inclusion criteria, thus, they could participate if they so desired. Unfortunately, the non-response was high, as only three families agreed to participate. While awaiting the result of recruitment phase one, a further two families were successfully included in a pilot study.

In order to increase the number of participating families, we sent an information package to eight additional families in phase two. In contrast to the families of phase one, the index foster

children in families approached in phase two were excluded from the study due to, for example, age or legal guardianship. In this second phase six families consented to participate, resulting in a total sample of family members from 11 families. From these 11 families we interviewed 11 foster mothers, six foster fathers, 12 biological children and two foster children.

The circumstances of the index children's sexual abuse varied but in the current paper we focus on the narratives of the four foster mothers who fostered a child who had been sexually abused by a maternal figure. We excluded the narrative of a fifth woman who cared for two children who had been prostituted by their mother, as it remained uncertain if the biological mother had been physically involved in the abuse as offender. The remaining nine women fostered either victims of male offenders, or victims of unknown offenders.

Ethics

Prior to recruiting the foster family members, an ethical protocol was written in which we reviewed matters of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant and researcher well-being among other things. Ethical approval was provided by the Ethics Committee of our department.

Interviews

We developed an interview protocol based on the principles of episodic interviewing (Flick, 1997, 2009). In several stages we explored the narratives of our participants, starting by asking them to share their story since their foster child had entered their lives. Latter stages concerned a focus on everyday life, themes derived from literature, and more general matters. From the very beginning we communicated that participants could share those episodes they thought to be relevant to the topic of the study. Hence, to some extent the interviewees controlled the agenda of the interview. The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours, depending on the available time and energy of the participant and interviewer. After each interview, the interviewer wrote a log containing reflections on the conversation, observations, and preliminary interpretations. These logs were used to prepare for following interviews and were considered as additional data.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed ad verbatim, and incorporated in a NVivo project (QSR International, 2015), after which each narrative was coded inductively. Next, codes representing similar themes were clustered and per individual a schematic map of themes was

created, indicating possible patterns and relationships between clusters of codes. To ensure the intersubjectivity of the coding process, the main analyst and a second member of the research team discussed the coded narrative and schematic map thoroughly. After the two researchers reached consensus, the analyst wrote a synthesis of the story of a participant, explicitly referring to each cluster. This synthesis was presented to the participant as a means of member check. During a final face-to-face meeting, the participant and interviewer/analyst reflected on the interviews and the process of analysis. After a thorough read-through, the participant reviewed the synthesis in terms of accuracy and clarity. The suggestions of the participants were incorporated in the synthesis, and if needed in the analysis.

In the present study, we review the four foster mothers' narratives by using results of the inductive analysis, the syntheses, and the thematic maps. This within-case analysis per individual is followed by a search for cross-case patterns, as we explore differences within and between the narratives of the foster mothers in order to gain insight into what it means to foster a victim of maternal sexual abuse (Yin, 2003). In particular, we reviewed those parts of the foster mothers' narratives, which focused on (foster) motherhood, the biological mother of the foster child, and parenthood in general.

Results

The foster mothers and their families

Of the four women, one had fostered a large number of children, two had fostered several children, and the fourth had fostered two children. For one foster mother, the index child was her first foster child. Another woman had a prior experience fostering a victim of maternal abuse. All four women had raised multiple birth children and several foster children. Furthermore, all families were of Dutch nationality and consisted of two parents. In addition, all women identified with the Christian faith. One foster mother had herself been sexually abused in her youth.

The women narrated their experiences with three boys and one girl. Two of these children were diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome. Two boys had been abused by their biological mother, in addition to other family members. One of them had also been forced to have intercourse with his younger sibling, therefore, he was identified as a forced perpetrator. The third boy was abused by a previous foster mother. Two boys disclosed the mother figure's active part in the abuse, while their male partners remained inactive but present during the abuse. The girl was suspected to having been abused by her biological mother. One of the boys was a

teenager (13 years of age), the other children were nine or 10 years old. The severity of the abused ranged from being touched inappropriately to being forced to perform cunnilingus or genital penetration. All children verbally and/or behaviorally disclosed their abuse experiences.

The narratives of the four foster mothers included several accounts of how being a mother of their foster child shaped their lives. Four key themes emerged: attitude towards the abusing female, sexualized behavior towards foster mother, keeping distance, and the responsibilities of being a (foster) mother.

Attitude towards the abusing female

The four foster mothers narrated their thoughts on the actions of the abusing maternal figures. More specifically, they reflected on the culpability of the abusing mother figures. For example, the foster mother, who is quoted in the introduction of this paper, suspected her foster daughter to have been abused by her biological mother, as the girl behaved sexually inappropriately towards foster mother. However, this girl's foster family had no information on what exactly had happened to the girl, as she had come to live with the family at a very early age. The quoted foster mother assumed the abusing mother was abused herself: "Of course she is very damaged too." Additionally, she felt the biological mother did not abuse her children "intentionally":

"She didn't know what is normal. She never learned herself what is appropriate; she was moved from home to home and possibly was abused herself. I imagine that she just taught her daughter, feel this, this feels really good."

It seemed that this foster mother did not hold the biological mother fully accountable, as she related the biological mother's actions to a generational problem. Additionally, she feared continuation of the generational transition of sexual abuse, if her foster daughter was not taught good values. Specifically, she feared her foster daughter would act like her biological mother and possibly abuse her own children in the future. Therefore, to this foster mother, it was of great importance to teach her foster daughter 'normal' sexual values and behaviors.

Two other foster mothers mentioned the generational aspect of the abuse, however, they did hold the biological mother responsible. One foster mother even explicitly protested against using an abuse history as an excuse for becoming an abuser. "This story is so bizarre, I couldn't have made it up. I know that mother probably was a victim herself... Well that's awful, but it did not give her the right to do this herself." This foster mother's worldview was changed dramatically when she learned of her foster son's abuse history: "It is truly unimaginable that someone would do those things to her child". She held both biological parents accountable for their actions,

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whereas her foster son mostly saw his biological mother as the guilty parent. This foster mother recalled a conversation with her foster son in which she tried to convince the boy of his father's guilt: "Mommy acted and dad really was not ok with it. But where was your dad? Ehmm...dad just sat there and watched. Well... then he is equally guilty". Still, this boy seemed to blame his mother more for what happened: "When we were trained to be a foster parent, the trainers spoke of how the bond with a mother is truly unbreakable. Well, in this case the mother broke so many things...broke things beyond repair". This foster mother felt very strong in her need to protect her foster son from further harm, more specifically, from his mother.

The third foster mother was conflicted about holding the abusing mother accountable. She too linked the abuse of her foster son to the biological mother's own abuse history: "The relationship with her child just became sick in the course of time. I don't think she... and she was abused herself, so I don't think that, in that sense, it happened in an atmosphere of threat." The foster mother stated that for the intellectually impaired biological mother and her son, sex with each was just a part of everyday life. However, she stated:

"But when you see him reliving things in his sleep, screaming, or you come in his room and he is penetrating his stuffed animal, at that point I despise his mother. She crossed every line when it comes to sex. I get really, really angry, but when I'm with her, that dissolves. When I'm there, I don't see a perpetrator, I just find her really pitiable".

Although this foster mother was conflicted to hold the biological mother fully accountable for her actions, she emphasized her drive to protect the boy from his mother: "We've fostered him for three years now, so now I feel like he is my son. And I'm glad she isn't around anymore."

The fourth foster mother did not mention any possible "excuses" for the abuser, and spoke only in general terms about how abusers are responsible and guilty. She related an abuser's guilt to her own experience with sexual abuse:

"What I see in him and always experienced myself, is that you are the guilty one. That's what I've been telling him for over a year now: You are innocent. The adults are guilty. You can't say it often enough."

Sexual expressions towards foster mother

Three foster mothers narrated how their foster child showed sexualized behavior towards them, while one foster mother described her child as "a-sexual". This latter foster mother recounted

how her foster son did not allow himself any pleasurable sexual experiences: “According to him, it should not feel good.” His aversion towards sexuality worried his foster mother. The narratives of the other foster mothers contained accounts of sexualized behavior towards them, specifically, to them as women.

One foster mother, for example, noted how her foster son tried to figure out if he was safe in the beginning of the placement. She recalled him asking “why are you never in the shower with me... naked?”. In addition, he would try to touch the foster mother’s breasts. She reflected on this behavior as follows:

“Child experiences and adult experiences have been mixed so badly, he doesn’t know what is for adults and what is for children (...). This is what he was taught (...).”

This foster mother did not feel threatened by the boy’s behavior. One of the other foster mothers, however, expressed strong negative emotions about her foster child’s behavior, especially with regard to a child’s expressions of physical affection:

“She hugs me in the most inconvenient moments. For example, when I’m doing the dishes and have wet hands, she stands behind me and strokes my breasts. ‘By accident’. And then she apologizes for touching me there at least three times. It isn’t accidental, I always feel it is intentional.”

This foster mother struggled with the negative emotions the child’s behavior evoked, as she felt she should respond to the girl’s need for physical affection. This internal conflict was rooted in her view on what kind of (foster) mother she wanted to be:

“...she can’t help it, but it doesn’t feel natural, it feels very unpleasant (...) And I struggle to be pleasant to her, because at that particular moment I just want to push her away. But you can’t. She is your child too and she has the right to get attention and affection.”

In contrast to this experience, another respondent mentioned her foster son’s sexualized behavior specifically directed at her, however, she did not report feeling threatened by it. She narrated a memorable situation, early in the placement, in which the boy started masturbating in the shower. “It was very clear he wanted me to come back and do something with his penis (...). It’s odd, but he doesn’t do it when my husband helps him in the shower. So, since then my husband has helped him to shower”. Her husband’s active role in intimate care activities was out of the ordinary, as foster parents generally choose to limit the father’s part due to the risk

of abuse allegations. What shocked this foster mother most was how normal this seemed to the boy. This shock of normalcy had an ongoing emotional impact on her.

Keeping distance as a foster mother

The four women narrated their need to find a balance between keeping physical and emotional distance on the one hand and being an affectionate and caring mother figure to the children on the other. More specifically, some of them considered distance to be a part of their professional identity as a foster mother. However, this distancing aspect of foster motherhood was in contrast to the women's predisposition to be an unconditionally affectionate mother. Three women spoke of their professional identity as a foster mother explicitly. As they considered foster motherhood to be a profession, they cared within a framework in which creating physical and emotional distance was done consciously. In particular, the framework allowed the women to explain their need to maintain some distance, while also staying an affectionate mother figure.

One of the foster mothers described the evolution of her view on foster parenthood, as a certain amount of distance was not always evident:

"We visited the zoo and we saw a group of people in wheel chairs, and I said to my husband: 'those people have a right to a dignified life, and they need help in creating that'. That's what we need to do for her. Just making sure she has a good life. And that's it."

However, a difference between being a professional and being a foster mother remained: "Those people [professionals] get off around five o'clock, and they leave. They only have to be professional during office hours. But because I'm human I'm not always my professional self".

A second foster mother voiced her difficulty in balancing between professional distance and emotional investment in her foster son, as she feared professionals would condemn her for being too invested. "You don't want her to say 'I'm not sure if they are able, foster mother is very emotional". Particularly when children disclosed sexual abuse, this foster mother was very conscious of creating enough space for the child to speak freely. However, her natural reaction would be to comfort a child: "That's the most difficult, the balance between caregiving, giving attention, and wanting to comfort... and still maintaining a certain amount of professionalism". She compared this experience to a hypothetical situation concerning her biological children: "In that situation I would hold them and comfort them instantly, and act upon demand. Because then I'd have the authority to act immediately, then I would be allowed." This foster mother also

struggled with regulating the amount of physical affection she offered as any form of physical contact or intimacy could quickly become sexually laden.

In the narrative of another foster mother, the foster child identified her as a perfect mother, creating a complex dynamic. More specifically, the boy had come to the conclusion that foster mother had to be his “true” mother, as his biological mother had failed to protect and care for him, and he had been sexually abused by his first foster mother:

“Sometimes you have to teach children what a father and a mother are. A mother is not the person in whose tummy you grew, but a mother is the one who sticks up for you and cares for you. Who clothes you, guides you, and keeps you safe. So then he realized: you are my true mother”.

However, the boy came to identify her as a perfect individual: “I told him that I’ll try to help him and that I love him very much too. But that I also make mistakes”. This foster mother recognized this idealization of a trustworthy person, as she did the same in her youth as a means of coping with abusive experiences. Furthermore, because of what she experienced herself, this foster mother explained she always had a desire to care for foster children. She consciously created a happy home for her family, and expressed her wish to keep investing in this. To be able to maintain this, she choose to ‘not be a foster mother’ on certain days: On those days, this foster mother very consciously invested time, attention, and energy in her spouse, her biological children, and herself.

The last foster mother reported creating some distance between herself and her foster son, however, she did not link this to a professional identity.

“Some days the arguments begin at breakfast. And sometimes I check out: I’m not going to do this today. I’m not going to monitor his every move continuously and check what he is doing and if everything is all right.”

This foster mother differed strongly from the other foster mothers, as she did not maintain an emotional distance towards her foster son. In contrast to the others, this foster mother stated how her emotional commitment to the boy helped her through difficult times: “Once my husband said to me, ‘how far will you go?’. And my reply was ‘that’s my child, and I will not put my child on the streets. That’s not what I’d do with my children.’”

Feeling responsible and being held responsible

The four women all shared their thoughts on the tasks of motherhood in general, one of which was to protect both foster and birth children from harm. Additionally, all women felt they have been held accountable for their way of child-rearing by persons close to them. Lastly, they reported feeling responsible for failures.

Three foster mothers spoke of having to explain themselves or their actions to people in their immediate surroundings. For instance, one foster mother described how she, in the past, had felt the need to explain everything to others, so they fully understood what it meant to foster a child. However, she had stopped doing so: "It's frustrating, as no one has a clue what it is like to be her foster mother." She recalled how her experience, as stay-at-home foster mother, even differed from that of her husband: "He saw her at dinner, in the evenings, and at the weekend (...). And I told him what the days were like, and he had no idea (...). He truly thought things weren't that bad."

Similarly, another foster mother recalled reflecting on her parenting style, when her husband's parents said to her "You are really, really strict when it comes to him". However, when bystanders would judge her similarly, this impressed her less. For example, when she received comments from a stranger because she was quite stern in reminding her foster son to maintain boundaries: "I saw her talking to her husband until we were out of sight (...). Nowadays, I don't feel the need to explain myself anymore".

The third respondent differentiated between people to whom she felt she did or did not owe an explanation. This foster mother opened up more to 'true family friends'. For example, when people visited, she sometimes had to clarify why the timing of the visit was not good for her foster son. "Sometimes I have to say, he isn't capable of handling this right now. I've noticed that people don't understand why he reacts the ways he does, and they don't visit anymore. I feel I have to explain everything constantly."

The women also seemed to hold themselves accountable, mostly, when they felt they failed one of their children. One foster mother narrated her way of coping with these feelings of failure: "You have to realize, it's not me, it's not him...or her. It's the situation." She remembered some situations in which she had acted as she did with her other children, but in doing so, had unknowingly failed to act sensitively towards her foster son: "He had lived with us for three or four weeks. And I was on the couch and pulled him on my lap. He was as stiff as a board. So much resistance. I really had no clue back then..." Another foster mother felt, as she made the choice to foster, it was her responsibility to limit the negative impact of fostering for others. As a consequence, she isolated herself in the fostering experience so as not to burden anyone

but herself with the child's traumatic behavior. Moreover, she questioned her efforts, as she sometimes felt she fostered without positive result: "I don't really feel this is doing her some good, even though she deserves a place to live".

A third foster mother questioned herself throughout the placement of her foster son. For example, after an incident in which her foster son had touched a young child, she had had many questions: "At that point you go through everything in your head. (...) Should I have done things differently?" This foster mother mentioned how she had struggled to speak to her social worker about this incident. More specifically, even though this foster mother was shocked by the boy's behavior, she feared the boy would be taken away from them due to her failure: "She [the social worker] said, but I spoke to you before. And I told her that I just couldn't tell her (...). I thought that because I let this happen, he had to leave our family." Still, the foster mothers also voiced how they felt they were not fully responsible for the care of the child, as they remained dependent on legal guardians for some things. One foster mother was particularly frustrated with this, as she felt her foster son was harmed by "the system".

Discussion

The narratives reflect how the four participating women, each in their own way, sought a balance between being a professional carer and an affectionate (foster) mother, while being sensitive to their foster child's needs and history. Similar to the findings of several earlier studies (e.g., Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2010; Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes & Jackson, 2012; Kirton, 2007; Schofield, Beek, Ward & Biggart, 2013; Wozniak, 2002), our results indicate that the professional and the parental dimension of fostering are interrelated. More specifically, one dimension can help in shaping the other, while at the same time hindering it.

A first complicating feature was the foster mothers' attitude towards the abusing mother figure, and consequently towards the child. Peter (2006) reviews how the culpability of the abusing female is oftentimes marginalized, as her agency and choice are not considered. Additionally, the labels given to abusing mothers as 'mad', 'bad' or 'victims' are considered as stable or fixed traits. In our study, however, the narratives of the four foster mothers reveal how they held the abusing mothers to some extent accountable for their actions. Still, two foster mothers limited the accountability of the abusing female, as they suspected the abusing mothers were not consciously abusing or harming their children, but were victimized themselves. In addition, intellectual disability was mentioned as a partial excuse for the sexually aggressive behavior. The generational aspects of the abuse complicated the women's fostering experience:

They saw how having sex seems ‘normal’ to these young, abused children. However, some of our respondents felt that, despite continuous efforts in teaching the child otherwise, their foster child made a conscious choice to behave sexually towards others. Intentionality of actions seems to be key as to whether to hold a person accountable for their actions, adult or child. More specifically, the foster mothers’ view on the abusing mother figure as both victimizer and victimized (Peter, 2006) appears to influence their views of their foster child.

Secondly, the women’s accounts of situations in which their foster child behaved sexually towards them as females, illustrate the need for a balance between the parental and professional

“ *Our results indicate that the professional and the parental dimension of fostering are interrelated* ”

dimensions of foster motherhood. Only one of the foster mothers narrated experiencing the child as potentially sexually threatening to her as a person. Hence, the narratives of the foster mothers seemed to differ from literature on males who foster (e.g., Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch,

1999). These studies show that fostering males oftentimes experience and anticipate personal risks and distance themselves from parenting activities to prevent allegations. Furthermore, even though male foster carers might enjoy being involved in caregiving, they get less chance to incorporate their male parental identity in their fostering experience. For instance, Newstone (2000) illustrates how societal attitudes and cultural pressure do not acknowledge men’s role in fostering, as fostering is still regarded a primarily female activity. Thus, while male foster carers may struggle incorporating their identity as father in the everyday practice of fostering, the females in this study seemingly were able to do so.

‘Keeping a distance’ may be part of all foster mothers’ professional approach. Similar to what several other studies report, all the foster mothers in our study approached foster motherhood as their profession (e.g. Blythe, Wilkes, & Halcomb, 2014; Kirton, 2007; Vanderfaillie et al., 2016). This enabled them to keep an acceptable distance. In accordance with this, Kirton (2007) suggests detachment as a dimension of being a fostering professional. However, the four women also identified as warm, affectionate mothers to their foster child, or they felt they should be. Thus, foster motherhood, according to these women, should not be viewed from a binary perspective of either being a “distant” professional or a fully invested warm mother figure. In general, our results indicate that, similar to what Newstone (2000, p. 43) suggests of fostering men, we need to realize that fostering women ‘model different facets of their sex at different times’, especially when fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse. Still, in accordance with some of the results of Schofield et al. (2013), the four women did not seem to experience a conflict between the ‘carer’ or ‘parent’ role. Although they deem fostering to be work, they seem

to primarily identify as parents, not as carers. Nonetheless, fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse especially influenced the “warm caring mother figure” part of fostering. Our respondents narrated how they had to adjust child-rearing practices, given their foster child’s history of sexual abuse. For example, they referred to differences in expressing physical affection to the child. Similarly, Broady et al. (2010) state that “the foster parent’s self-identity as a warm, loving and kind parent figure becomes threatened”, when the anticipated relationship with a foster child is not matched in everyday life (p. 569). Thus, the foster mothers seemed to keep some emotional (e.g., being a carer) and physical distance (e.g., reframing the role of being a parent in their work) .

Lastly, the women’s sense of responsibility reflects the balance between the professional and the personal dimension of foster motherhood. Kirton (2007) notes that ‘the ‘work’ of fostering is carried out in and through the family’ (p.12). This means that the family is managed within the care system. This is illustrated by foster mothers’ feeling of being held responsible for their foster child’s behavior. This responsibility is similar to that of professionals who work in care settings, for example, in residential care. However, foster mothers also hold themselves responsible for situations where they feel they have failed as a mother. Lastly, they feel responsible for preventing harm being done to any of their children, mostly their birth children, as they have chosen to foster. Thus, fostering a child with a history of abuse impacts everyday life as pressure not only builds from within, but also from the care system surrounding the child.

As the four participating foster mothers reflected on specific experiences with their foster child, as well as on foster motherhood in general, our study presents similar and additional themes. Some themes, for example “the attitude towards the abusing female’ and “sexual expressions towards the foster mother” seem more linked to fostering a victim of sexual abuse by a female carer, while the professional dimension of fostering is observed in foster parenthood more commonly. Nonetheless, fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse does seem to have a distinctive influence on the women’s everyday fostering experience. Being the foster mother of a victim of maternal sexual abuse proves to be a particularly complex endeavor.

Strengths and limitations

The accounts of the four participants in our study illustrate what it means to foster a child with a history with maternal sexual abuse. However, several limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the study was not designed as a multiple case study. In the data collection and the data analysis process in the broader study we came across

four women with similar experiences and chose to study their narratives more in-depth. We did not purposefully select such foster mothers. Secondly, only the content of the four narratives was analyzed. We did not study the structure or the discourse of the narratives, for example, we did not analyze story lines or word choice. Lastly, we need to consider some of the characteristics of the sample. For instance, two women fostered a child with fetal alcohol syndrome. This could have influenced their foster experience significantly. These limitations notwithstanding, this study revealed some interesting parallels and differences to previous studies on the experience of foster carers.

Future directions

More research on fostering victims of maternal sexual abuse is needed to deepen our knowledge of this understudied topic. Multiple case studies with a larger sample may add to our knowledge on the topic. The parental identity of foster carers is an interesting feature, which should be examined more thoroughly. For example, how do foster parents, male and female, position themselves as parents, while sexually abusive biological parents are also in their foster children's lives? Additionally, the results of this study imply that in foster care practice, social workers should be aware of the complicated and demanding role of foster mothers caring for a child who has been victim of maternal sexual abuse.

Conclusion

This study begins to illustrate how caring for a foster child with a history of maternal sexual abuse influences foster motherhood. More specifically, the narratives of foster mothers illustrate how they sought to maintain a balance between the professional and parental dimensions of parenting a foster child. Our results give some insights into the complexity of fostering a child with a history of maternal sexual abuse, as foster mothers' responsibilities, expectations, and ambitions are continuously challenged.



CHAPTER 7

General Discussion

The overall aim of this dissertation was to get a better understanding of the impact of caring for foster children with a history of child sexual abuse on everyday fostering family life, as well as the process of collecting data on this sensitive topic. To reach this aim, we studied foster families' life stories, social workers' reports on children's self-disclosure of sexual abuse, and researchers' logs.

Theoretical reflections

This dissertation illustrates that foster care is a complex, dynamic, and unique endeavor. It suggests that fostering a victim of sexual abuse impacts vital relational features of family life. More specifically, fostering a victim of child sexual abuse not only impacts individual family members on an intrapersonal level, it also affects the manner in which individuals relate to other family members and the family system. The relational features of fostering family life are suggested to be helpful and healing (for example, in disclosing abuse experiences or speaking of confrontational fostering situations), as well as possibly threatening (for example, in care-giving or intimate activities). Achieving a balance between the good and the bad of relationships seems an ongoing, ever-changing, dynamic process. Theoretical reflections on the relational features of fostering a survivor of child sexual abuse are presented in this section.

The intimacy of fostering

Several studies, including the studies presented in this dissertation, highlight the precariousness of the balance between a caregiver's needs, a foster child's needs, and a family's needs, a balance for which the caregivers are responsible (for instance, Hardwick, 2005; Pickin, Brunsdon, & Hill, 2011). Families face challenges in fostering children due to personal and systemic difficulties (Geiger, Piel, Lietz & Julien-Chinn, 2016). These personal and familial challenges cause foster parents to consider giving up fostering children (Brown & Calder, 1999). Moreover, placement success seems largely dependent on the interpersonal bond between foster family members and their foster child (Boushel, 1994; Hojer, 2004; Samrai, Beinart, & Harper, 2011; Southerland, Mustillo, Farmer, Stambaugh, & Murray, 2009).

“ Unsafety is a highly relational concept in the context of foster family life ”

This thesis illustrates that unsafety is a highly relational concept in the context of foster family life. Safety and unsafe feelings in foster families can occur in several family members simultaneously and may exist latently. Three types of unsafety were narrated: 'actual' unsafety,

experienced unsafety, and apprehended unsafety. These three types indicate that in experienced as well as less experienced families safety issues may arise in fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. A source of unsafety in the process of caring for a child with a history of sexual abuse appears to be intimacy, either psychological (having a relationship) or physical intimacy (for instance, affection or intimate child-care). Pickin, Brunsdon and Hill (2011, p.72) state that caring for a foster child is 'unavoidably intimate' because this process requires the formation of a relationship between carers and child. Additionally, our findings suggest that living with a foster child with a history of sexual abuse evokes unsafety issues in carers, as well as in non-caring family members.

When reviewing unsafety from an attachment perspective, foster families can be viewed as the necessary 'secure' base from which children explore the physical and social world (Bowlby, 1973; Bacon & Richardson, 2001). However, the foster care relationship, or in other words, the relationship between a child and its 'secure base', is also a part of a child's exploration, especially in the case of children with sexual abuse histories. Steenbakkers, Ellingsen, Van der Steen and Grietens (2018) argue that foster youth with a history of sexual abuse first need to feel safe and be confident that their relationship will not be abusive, before a close relationship can be established. Several foster families, centered in our safety study, narrated their foster child's exploration process similarly, in terms of exploring psychological, physical, and sexual safety.

Family members' safety concerns mostly root in a foster child's current behavior or apprehended risky behavior. For instance, respondents narrated to be shocked because some foster children viewed behaving sexually as normal. These behaviors reveal how foster children remain dependent on the mental representations, ideas, and expectations about themselves and other people they have built in their abusive past (Bacon & Richardson, 2001; Kelly & Salmon, 2014). Kelly and Salmon (2014) argue the importance for foster parents to consider how the child's abusive past affects their current behaviors in relationships, as this can aid foster parents in attuning to those strategies a child needs in order to develop positive expectations of future relationships. Geiger, Piel Lietz and Julien-Chinn (2016) also describe how foster parents adapt their parenting approach more easily, when they understand the reasons behind a child's behavior, feelings, and thoughts. Similarly, in the process of relational recovery, male survivors of child sexual abuse described needing to learn what relational limits were and how to set them, as their own personal boundaries had been invaded so forcefully in the past (Kia-Keating, Sorsoli, & Grossman, 2010)

Although the narratives of participants in this dissertation highlight the value of experience-based learning, creating a safe living environment for all family members is a continuous task as

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each developmental phase of each individual family member affects the interpersonal relations. Moreover, family units also evolve. Thus, it seems family members' awareness of others' unsafe experiences as well as the awareness of dynamics underlying this unsafety could be beneficial to foster family management. This awareness improves interpersonal relationships.

Relationships as triggers

In addition to verbal disclosure, chapter four also illustrates the behavioral manners of disclosing a history of sexual abuse, as numerous children reacted unexpectedly to everyday life events. Allagia (2004) highlights the problematic nature of behavioral disclosures of sexual abuse, as interpreters might attribute disclosing behaviors to everyday stressors in a child's life. This dissertation illustrates the communicative value of behavioral cues in the context of foster care, as foster parents report the amount of triggers to traumatic behavior in everyday life to be 'infinite'. Briere and Lanktree (2012) state that many problems arise in trauma-exposed youth when stimuli and situations in their environment trigger traumatic memories. It can help children and youth to 'maintain internal equilibrium in his or her daily life by teaching him or her how to identify and address triggers in the environment that activate posttraumatic reliving' (p.98). A problematic feature in fostering victims of sexual abuse, however, is that triggers often are strongly embedded in daily life. For example, foster children seem to be triggered to recall their past in the context of nudity, still some caregiving acts require nudity to some extent (McFadden, 1989).

Physical intimacy is highly likely to trigger all child victims of sexual abuse. Briere and Lanktree (2012) identify a series of trauma-related triggers, some of which correspond well with the results presented in this dissertation. Firstly, people with physical or psychological characteristics that are similar to a past perpetrator can trigger children. Secondly, Briere and Lanktree discuss the triggering nature of sexual situations. This dissertation adds to this type of stimuli, more specifically, that of acts, objects, or persons being perceived as sexual. Sex as a trigger is vastly different from an act, object, or person being perceived as sexual. For example, our participants reported children being sexually aroused by kiwi fruit, advertisements for bathing suits, or pieces of furniture.

The relational approach to a conversation

As presented in chapter three, the process of disclosing past sexual abuse experiences is strongly dependent on the relationship between the teller (the foster child) and the listener or interpreter (oftentimes a foster family member), as some disclosures are more explicit than others. Victims

of sexual abuse test whether their choice of interlocutor is willing to explore what happened to them, thus, making the interlocutor an important feature in engaging in the disclosure dialogue (Flâm and Haugstvedt, 2013). However, recognizing an expression or a behavior as being a disclosure is a complex process. The complexity of this dialogical component (for instance, Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Herskowitz, Lanes & Lamb, 2007; Jensen, 2005; McElvaney, Green, & Hogan, 2012; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005) becomes apparent throughout chapter four.

A beneficial component in problematic dialogues emerges from chapter four (on self-disclosure) and chapter five (on safety): dialogical safety. This type of safety moves beyond prior explicated concepts as rapport, as it implies more than a mutual understanding or a harmonious relationship. Dialogical safety is a social, relational construct, which implies an interlocutor to feel safe enough to engage in an open dialogue concerning sensitive issues. The need of this type of safety is apparent to foster children (in self-disclosing sexual abuse experiences) and birth children of foster parents (in sharing emotional, unsafe, or intense experiences with their parents).

The importance of dialogical safety to foster children is illustrated in our study, and can be linked to other studies. The results of our case file study imply that children do disclose their past, but struggle to re-construct their abuse experience as well as their forced contribution in the abuse, as this would strengthen the traumatizing effect of feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame. Similarly, Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn (2015) describe that although children challenged the secretiveness surrounding sexual abuse, as well as “the stigmatized discourses of sex and sexual abuse that make it difficult for people to talk openly about it” (p. 325) by disclosing strikingly explicit, they did describe feeling ashamed of the abuse, as well as of disclosing the abuse. These results are in line with several other studies suggesting how children’s feelings of shame, blame, and guilt can hamper the disclosure process (for instance, Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Herskowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

In addition, traumatized children struggle to organize a coherent account of their traumatic experiences (Mossige, et al., 2005; Van der Kolk, 2014). Steenbakkers, van der Steen and Grietens (2016) found that foster youth ‘...wish to know a person for a longer period before disclosure, which gives them time to build a relationship and to decide if it is safe to share their story’ (p.7). Thus, to foster children, especially those with a history of sexual abuse, safety seems conditional to verbally disclosing or sharing their personal story. Children need adequate opportunities to explore the verbal accounts of their traumatic past, without feeling judged for the content or disorganized form of their narratives.

With regard to their birth children, foster parents narrated how dialogical safety was created explicitly in order to discuss shocking behaviors of their foster sibling. This seemed an easier task to foster parents, when birth children were in their teenage years. Wozniak (2001) reports similar experiences of foster mothers who, for example, described feeling concerned about the impression a foster child's behavior had made on their biological children. Some foster parents even deemed their biological children's maturity to speak about threats, risks or unsafe experiences necessary to continue fostering. Creating an emotionally safe space for all children to have an outlet seems important to many foster parents.

How to relate to the family system

The impact of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse becomes apparent in the way birth children relate and remain connected to the family system. More specifically, this dissertation emphasizes the importance to consider, position, and support birth daughters and sons in their newly gained role or social position in fostering a sexually abused foster sibling. Firstly, the narratives of foster mothers and their birth daughters, as illustrated in chapter five, indicate they as females are perceived and positioned as safe. In many families they are positioned as risk-free persons, consequently, they are involved in specific caregiving activities to protect other family members. Chapter six illustrates foster mothers' great sense of responsibility, however, little is said by the birth daughters concerning the weight of their newly gained responsibility. Several daughters report being confronted with the sexualized behavior of a foster child in situations in which they were actively caring for the child. Generally these daughters seemed to consider their newly gained role a priority, making their own feelings secondary. The impact of the birth daughters new role, as well as the applied coping strategies should be considered.

Secondly, contrary to female family members, male family members narrated being perceived as unsafe. In addition, some experienced unsafety themselves in fostering certain children with a history of sexual abuse. These results indicate that fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse impacts the identity of all foster family members, as new dimensions to each member's identity are developed in relationship to each individual foster child. Foster parents' sons narrated struggling to accept being a threat to a family member. In addition, as their active involvement in the fostering process was perceived risky, very little means and psychological space remained to reform their identity actively. Their fathers, however, negotiated their role with the children actively: They foster within a more professional, distant framework. This facilitates the inclusion of the negative 'threatening' dimension in their identity as a foster carer, as this is 'simply' a part of being a carer. Birth sons, however, are denied the professional distance, as they are not put in

the position to carry out caregiving responsibilities. Thomsson, McPherson and Marsland (2016) describe how birth children attribute importance to their position in the family, moreover, this is a key element of the way in which they relate to their parents. Furthermore, the parent-birth child relationship can be stretched if the amount and weight of alterations are not taken into account. Having a foster sibling with a history of sexual abuse proved to impact birth daughters and sons, as their sibling's past or behavior required alterations of the original family roles, relationships, and ways of relating (Sulloway, 2007). Furthermore, in confrontation with their siblings' traumatic past, birth children involuntarily had to alter their view on people and the world.

Fostering partners

Similar to Heslop's (2014) observations, our findings suggest that traditionally gendered relations are reproduced in foster families, as in most families the foster mother was determined the most safe and risk-free, and, oftentimes she was the main carer of the child with a history of sexual abuse. Few exemplary experiences were narrated which challenged this view on the foster mother. However, the relationship of a foster child and its foster mother seems to be affected by the child's mental representations (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000). Our study in chapter six shows that fostering a child with a history of maternal sexual abuse is complex, as foster mothers' responsibilities, expectations, and ambitions are continuously challenged. Although the foster mothers did not narrate feeling threatened, they often are confronted with direct sexualized or sexually explorative behavior of their foster child. Moreover, as they feel great responsibility to keep every other family member safe, their position becomes risky.

With regard to the foster mother's expectations and ambitions, we found the women to be challenged in reframing foster motherhood due to a child's specific behavior towards them. Similar to what Hojer (2004) reports, these women viewed themselves as capable, warm, and affectionate mothers. Although they desired to foster the victims of maternal sexual abuse similarly to other foster children, or even their biological children, they narrated how they had to adjust child-rearing practices and felt the need for a balance between the parental and professional dimension of foster motherhood. This intrapersonal challenge adds even more pressure to this type of motherhood, especially when others are not aware of these females' complex reality (Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2010). In being the most safe, yet isolated, person in a family system lies the risk of significant system stressors, for instance, foster carer burnout and social isolation (Boushel, 1994). It is important to reflect

and assess each fostering partner in a system, as family members can grow into or be forced into a role or position they did not expect or want.

Shifting between identities

Another relevant relational feature to be addressed concerns both fostering adults and researchers studying fostering family units. Foster parents as well as researchers within the Iris Project narrated struggles in executing their role as “a semi-professional foster parent” or “a personally involved researcher”. Firstly, foster mothers and fathers narrated how a certain amount of distance, a characteristic of professionalism, allowed and enabled them to care for their foster child with a history of sexual abuse. The studies presented in this thesis suggest fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse even requires some relational distance. This duality of foster parents’ identity is similarly described in prior studies (for instance, Blythe, Wilkes & Halcomb, 2014; Kirton, 2007; Nutt, 2002; Schofield, Beek, Ward & Biggart, 2013). Secondly, in studying these families systems, the researchers needed to be sensitive in establishing a research relationship to the individual participants as well as the family system participants belong to. In this process of attuning, however, the researchers were challenged to integrate professional and personal aspects in the research relationship, as is illustrated in chapter three. Studying the impact of a child’s history of child sexual abuse required the researchers to consider the balance of power in the research relationship (Hydén, 2013). Additionally, the persona of the researcher brought a unique aspect in each research relationship. Each interview challenged researchers to balance their professional roles, while not neglecting their personal emotions and values. Overall, foster carers and researchers are challenged in balancing professional and personal aspects while relating to the topic of child sexual abuse.

Methodological reflections

The stories of individual members as a part of a foster family system brought us insights in the impact of fostering a child with a putative history of sexual abuse. As illustrated in this dissertation, foster families are highly dynamic, ever-changing, and unique systems. Each chapter of this dissertation leans upon the constructivist’s conception of reality as a (co-) creation of an individual person. Thus, the results are not to be carelessly generalized, considering their contextual embedment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, this section provides a methodological reflection on the context in which the studies were designed, executed, and ‘translated’ into manuscripts.

Quality control

In the case file study and the narrative interview studies, attention was paid to various quality standards, among them internal coherence and transparency, intersubjectivity, and credibility. First, as the studies were explorative and descriptive of nature, the processes of data collection and analysis had an iterative nature. We considered and reconsidered the data collected, our influence on the data, and the preliminary interpretations, in order to come to a coherent, overall understanding of our data. In this iterative process, all researchers wrote logs and memos containing details on the data collection and analyses in order to achieve transparency (Yardley, 2000).

Second, intersubjectivity (Steinke, 2004) was an important quality standard. In the case file study both the data collectors and the analysts thoroughly discussed differences of opinion or interpretations in order to reach consensus. In the narrative studies the process of reaching intersubjective agreement was more comprehensive. More specifically, each interviewer wrote a log after an interview containing reflections on the conversation, observations, and preliminary interpretations. These logs were used to prepare following interviews as the interviewer and the main researcher reflected on the interview process. After completing a series of interviews, and a verbatim transcription of the conversations, the interviewer firstly conducted an inductive thematic analysis of all interviews per participant (Bazeley, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This iterative process of reading, re-reading, and coding of the transcripts, was followed by a discussion of the analysis by the main analyst and a second member of the research team. In these ‘intersubjectivity-meetings’ specific attention was paid to the accuracy of coding and the coherence of the analyst’s chain of thoughts. Additionally, the researcher’s assumptions, prior knowledge, and persona were considered in the process of analysis. The logs of the interviewer and analysis memos were also incorporated in these discussions. As a result, a book with synthesized narratives was written and discussed in the research team in order to grasp the realities of our participants.

Lastly, the participants of Project Iris were asked to check our synthesized interpretations of their narrated reality. This process of member-checking was designed to verify whether the constructions collected are those that have been offered by the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), thus establishing credibility of the study.

Narrative research: the work of humans

Overall, in valuing results of narrative research, either studies centering oral narratives or written information, it is of importance to not frame conclusions in terms of causality, instead, results

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should be presented as certain perceptions of reality. Thus, as every person involved in a study, participant or researcher, is considered an active party in constructing the outcome of a research process, we need to reflect on the involvement of the visible and 'invisible' persons in the various studies.

In the case file study, we analyzed information from foster children's files assuming each piece of information to be noteworthy to foster parents. Additionally, we assumed that the reporting social workers considered information to be worthy of describing in the children's files. In contrast to the study by Jensen et al. (2005), our study revealed that foster children rarely disclosed being genitally penetrated. Still, several files do report that some children had actually suffered this: The severity of the abuse as reported by the social workers, did not match the children's self-disclosure. One explanation of fewer disclosures describing penetration in our study can be found in the social workers' involvement in writing the case file. For example, could it 'simply' be too confronting to report or describe a child being genitally penetrated? Are the social workers withholding this graphic information out of fear of stigmatizing a child? Or is a self-disclosure on genital penetration not deemed a necessity to report, because a child's sexual abuse history is fully acknowledged already? The social workers, although they remain in the background, influenced the outcomes.

Although we are grateful to the 31 people who shared their story with us, it is necessary to consider the implications of the composition of the sample of Project Iris. For example, in our sample foster children are underrepresented, as only two foster children participated in the study. This could also be viewed as a result: Very few children wanted to be involved in a study regarding their traumatic past. Especially with regard to the themes safety and unsafety, their stories would have provided new leads to optimize and relieve their care, as the experience of safety and interpretation of behaviors have been proven to be highly personal.

Further, Fontes and Plummer (2010) state that persons' ethnic background, religion, and culture affect the process of child sexual abuse disclosure. Most of our participants are considered to be conservative and traditional in terms of beliefs about religion, culture, and gender. This may have influenced their attitude and thoughts on sexuality and the execution of familial roles. For example, literature reveals how sexual abuse confuses young male victims as to their sexual preference (for example, Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli & Epstein, 2005; Lisak, 1994). Homosexuality is a complex topic when it comes to religion.

Weighing the outcomes

One could argue that one of the overall conclusions of this study, that a child's history of sexual abuse mostly affects interpersonal relationships, is strongly influenced by our epistemological stance. Chapter two describes how this dissertation is written from the view on reality as a person's contextually and interpersonally constructed truth. This standpoint influenced the research design, the collection and the interpretation of data. Thus, we should wonder: Are we verifying our own assumptions or view on reality?

Literature on fostering a victim of sexual abuse, similar to our findings, reports several relational challenges (for example, Farmer & Pollock, 1999, 2003; Hardwick, 2005; McFadden, 1989). Although these studies mostly do not describe their view on reality, the studies do center foster family members as their main informants. Moreover, we found several similarities between different families or members of different families. Thus, it is very reasonable to assume our findings are not completely idiosyncratic. Additionally, the importance of relationships has been illustrated throughout the literature on foster care. For example, attachment is one of the most explored topics in foster care literature. Especially in victims of sexual abuse attachment issues arise (Cairns, 2002; Howe & Fearnly, 2003). Relationships, however, also have healing powers, as Southerland et al. (2009) and Wells, Farmer, Richard and Burns (2004) argue.

In conclusion, we found that foster family relationships can be both healing and triggering for foster children, a result which corresponds with prior studies. The ambiguity of relationships is manifested in everyday life in both positive and negative manners. As individuals grow and evolve, relationships also need to evolve. However, this process of growth involves many strong, complex emotions, such as rejection, guilt, and shame.

Strengths of the study

Vanderfaillie, Van Holen, Carlier and Fransen (2018) found that foster care placements of sexually abused children broke down more often than placements of physically abused or neglected children. Various elements can lead to unwanted breakdowns, for instance, a foster child's challenging behaviors or allegations of abuse (for instance, James, 2004; Oijen, 2010; Vanderfaillie et al., 2018). The foster families centered in the current study narrate similar challenges, and highlight what they mean in their unique system. Thus, limitations to our studies notwithstanding, listening to foster families' stories on disclosure, safety, and parenthood, allowed us to gain some insights into their complex and challenging world in which placement breakdown is a common outcome. Creating awareness of the path towards a foster care breakdown is the first step in avoiding this negative outcome of placement. It is of the utmost

importance to value each foster family member and their stories to reveal those forces pressing on everyday family life. Still, as our findings are not idiosyncratic and show resemblance to other studies, we expect the findings to be of high ecological validity, as they can be generalized to real-life settings and to foster families outside the Netherlands.

Another strength of this study was the adopted narrative approach. Through collecting foster families' narratives we gained unique insights into the lives of an understudied group and

“ Through collecting foster families’ narratives we gained unique insights into the lives of an understudied group and an understudied topic ”

an understudied topic. All participant evaluated their involvement and our work during and after completing the interview. In these moments of evaluation we learned the value of conversing reflectively on multiple occasions. Following our

participants' lives during a number of months, we saw firsthand the continuous changes in everyday life. These influential occurrences were logged thoroughly. Meeting our participants multiple times was also beneficial in creating the necessary dialogical safety to discuss the sensitive topic of child sexual abuse and the impact of caring for a foster child with a history of sexual abuse on everyday life. Participants greatly valued the time we took to listen, and reported feeling respected in narrating the complexity of their lives.

Implications for future research

As illustrated in chapter two, narrative research can be defined in many ways, drawing from a variety of epistemologies, theories, methods, and types of analysis. In the Iris project, we focused on the content of the narratives, thus, our findings were constructed by a process of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We did not, however, perform a narrative analysis. Due to practical challenges of time management and the great amount of narrative data, we choose to merely focus on the content of the participants' stories, instead of reviewing their structural components systematically. Still, the use of NVivo10 (QSR International, 2015) enabled us consider contextual factors (Bazeley, 2013) and “latent” themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thus, attention was paid to nuances in the narrative data.

Various scholars (for example, Hammack, 2010; Murray, 2002; Murray & Sools, 2015; Phoenix, 2013) argue how personal narrative accounts interconnect with larger societal, cultural narratives, or social representations. In narrative studies as the Iris Project this is important to consider as the thematic focus of the narratives is of sensitive nature. Moreover, conversations about sex, sexuality, and sexual abuse are always embedded in the cultural values and beliefs

on a macro-level of a society, as well as on the micro-level of a family or a persons' own views (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). Thus, moving beyond the contents of the narratives and analyzing their structural, interactional, and dialogical components could provide deeper insights into the social, cultural, and societal context of foster families' narratives.

Implications and recommendations for practice

Strong and safe relationships with trusted adults can help survivors of child sexual abuse to recover (Kia-Keating, Sorsoli & Grossman, 2010; Marriott, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Harrop, 2014; Southerland et al, 2009). With regard to healing from trauma, Van der Kolk states that “restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being” (2014, p.38). The development of a strong relationship between a foster parent and a child can improve interpersonal functioning of the child and initiate a developmental catch-up, helping children to develop more adaptive behavior (Southerland et al., 2009). Still, Hardwick (2005) argues that when physical and emotional intimacy is discontinued, the potential of a foster family member's therapeutic relationship with a child is impaired. Thus, similar to what this dissertation illustrates, it is necessary to balance between keeping everyone physically and emotionally safe while engaging in a fostering experience.

A reflective stance is useful in fostering children with a putative history of sexual abuse. During our interview process with the 11 families we, together with our participants, experienced the value of looking back and forward. Thus, a first recommendation to the practice of foster care is that of reflecting and communicating on past challenges, current issues, and apprehended trials. Bessel van der Kolk (2014, p.38) recommends language as an important tool: “language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning”. However, as discourses of sex and sexual abuse are stigmatized (Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn, 2015) making it difficult to speak openly, meta-communication could be helpful to all concerned. This means fostering adults or those guiding them, actively work on creating dialogical safety by giving each other, as well as the children to be raised, the message that an open dialogue always is possible (Hardwick, 2005). In meta-communication, for example, expectations, feelings, and worries can be addressed. However, this joint reflection requires time and undivided attention, which in the current societal and political environment is not always provided or possible. Awareness of the lack time and energy to intensively counsel foster families should be an incentive for politicians and policy makers to make the necessary changes.

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The relationship a foster child has with (temporary) carers and trustworthy persons has the potential to change previous attachment patterns (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsi, 2016). However, past experiences of apprehended unsafety in foster family members can disturb the fostering process, thereby possibly limiting the change of a foster child's mental representations. Thus, it seems of importance to take appropriate measures to establish physical, emotional, and relational safety in foster families caring for a child with a history of sexual abuse. Again, a first step in families is to become aware of each person's experiences of (un)safety, and the effects of these experiences on familial relationships, as on the family as a unit. These experiences should be discussed with all family members, adults, as well as minors. Even the youngest family members should be asked to review their experiences of safety. In addition, social workers can aid in reviewing the 'hot zones' of actual, experienced, or apprehended unsafety from the perspective of all individual family members. Again, each fostering individual deserves time and attention to express feelings of unsafety or perceptions of being unsafe for another family member.

In foster children with a history of sexual abuse unsafe memories can be triggered by everyday life activities. Foster family members should be prepared with the knowledge that a child can have a strong reaction to everyday life aspects, as many things are known to trigger sexually abused children. An analysis of the triggering nature of activities, persons, locations, or objects is helpful in preventing, reducing, or ceasing a child's exposure to them. In addition, when everyday life aspects are known to trigger a child, a foster family can decide which member is the designated person to handle a situation or help a child reduce stress. Moreover, understanding the impact of traumatic events on a child, and their manifestations in a child's behaviors, will help foster family members to handle situations more effectively for all. Dealing with a foster child's traumatized behaviors, however, can evoke strong (negative) emotions in foster family members. Awareness and acknowledgement of these feelings can aid family members in planning to handle future situations.

Profound intrapersonal, relational and familial changes take place in or due to the fostering process of caring for a sexually abused child. Some of these changes remain latent, as priorities lie elsewhere. Still, these changes will manifest in due time, for example in disengagement or isolation in the fostering process. Hence, it is of great importance to reinforce families and provide opportunities of relationship-building among individuals (i.e. fostering partners, parents and biological children/foster children, and biological and foster siblings).

Lastly, our participants illustrated the need for respite, as everyday fostering life sometimes takes a toll. As fostering individuals are at risk of secondary traumatization, as well as foster care stress and burnout (for example, Banyard, Rozelle & Englund, 2001; Boushel, 1994; Brown &

Calder, 2000; Hannah & Woolgar, 2018; McLain, 2008) respite will provide a time to relieve stress and to invest in self-care strategies.



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Summary

Samenvatting

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List of publications

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Summary

The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings (2014) estimates that one in three Dutch children suffer a form of sexual violence during childhood. Many victims of sexual abuse are identified among children growing up in foster care. In 2013 the Iris Project started: A narrative study on the expertise, needs, and experiences of families who foster a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior to placement in foster care. The stories of 11 foster mothers, six foster fathers, 12 biological children, and two foster children were collected. This dissertation centers foster families members' narratives on their experiences, needs, and expertise of fostering a victim of sexual abuse, as well as the process of collecting these narratives. In addition, a case file study on self-disclosure of sexual abuse by foster children is presented. Unlike prior studies, this dissertation reviews the impact of a foster child's putative experience with sexual abuse on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level, as well as the level of the family as a system.

Chapter one and two provide a brief theoretical and methodological framework of key aspects of this dissertation. Suffering sexual abuse by a trusted person on which the child depends, can have a very negative impact, as these experiences cause distortions in children's orientation to the world, the people surrounding them, and themselves. Child sexual abuse can impair a child's cognitive and behavioral development and result in several internalizing and externalizing problems, as well as health issues. As a child's view is dramatically shaped and altered by traumatic experiences with sexual abuse, it is important to consider how a child relies on this knowledge to interpret everyday life in the foster family. Parenting a foster or adoptive child with a history of sexual abuse has an impact on family life as a system.

In Project Iris a narrative approach was adopted, as foster families' life stories are the main source of information. A constructivist's standpoint was adopted, as we consider reality an individual's construct. Furthermore, as working from the field of social pedagogy, we believe a persons' reality is a result of transactions among an individual and his or her surroundings. Thus, we strived to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on individual family members, as well as on the family as a system of interrelated persons. In this process of comparing and contrasting the family members' narratives, the important role of the researchers is emphasized, as their unique bird eye perspective on data, and the interpretation of the dis-/agreement among family members, enables them to come to detailed understandings.

Chapter three highlights the continuous reflection on challenges in relationships between the researcher, participants, and the familial system to which they belong, that is required when studying the impact of a history of sexual abuse on foster families. As Project Iris roots

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in constructivism, the researchers were considered full-fledged members in the research process. Additionally, each participant's narrative was considered a co-construction between the researcher and the researched, thus, making it necessary to acknowledge all aspects of the research relationship influencing the overall outcome of the research project. Three types of sensitivity are presented by means of meta-level reflections on fieldwork in Iris. The researchers' narratives suggested researchers 1) to be mindful in shaping the research relationship by providing interviewees the adequate opportunities to narrate, 2) to be sensitive to the contextual embedment of a topic, and 3) to acknowledge their personal contribution to the narrative data.

Chapter four centered the theme of informal self-disclosure of child sexual abuse by foster children. This exploratory study reports on foster children's informal self-disclosures of previously unknown histories of sexual abuse. Data on foster children's self-disclosing expressions and behaviors was collected from 40 case files. All foster care workers in the agency were asked to review their past and present caseload and identify suspected and substantiated cases of sexual abuse in foster children, previous to placement in the current foster family. An inductive thematic analysis of verbatim excerpts containing verbal and behavioral expressions was conducted. The results of this exploratory case file study suggested that children's informal self-disclosure takes different forms (verbal disclosures and behavioral disclosures), contains various illuminating details (for example, references to the past or sexual references through present events), and is timed in several ways differently (for example, some children only seemed to disclose the abuse once, some disclosed on multiple occasions). Moreover, the study illustrates how children seem to be less inclined to disclose certain types of sexual abuse. Firstly, the lack of sensory reference points of what happened may hinder children to disclose abusive experiences. Secondly, the results imply that although children do verbally disclose their past, they limit disclosures of reciprocating sexually. Overall, this study outlines the challenge of understanding the nature of a foster child's stories and behaviors for foster families, as a supportive response appears mostly dependent on them.

In **chapter five** a study on feelings of safety and unsafety in foster families is presented. A number of safety issues arise when fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. This qualitative study examined narratives on (un)safety from multiple members of eight foster families. The narratives from 14 foster parents and 12 birth children were coded inductively, after which the data were reviewed from a bird-eye view. Two social positions dominate unsafe experiences. The first is that of being a threat, the second is that of being a protector. The participating family members narrated how safety and trust remained dynamic and relational concepts,

moreover, it appeared each breach of a bilateral relationship impacted the family as a system. The different family members seemed to move between the realities of being a threat or threatened, as well as being a protector of someone in the family. Unsafety, whether it is apprehended or experienced, caused ruptures on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic level. This study strengthens the view on unsafety as a social construct as families move between and beyond risk and safety.

Chapter six reported on women fostering a victim of maternal sexual abuse. The impact of sexual abuse on children is enormous, when a child is abused sexually by a mother figure. In order to gain insight into the experiences of this rarely studied group, the life stories of four foster mothers of victims of maternal sexual abuse were collected. The narratives were coded inductively and topics concerning foster motherhood were studied more in-depth. Four key themes emerged in the women's narratives: their attitude towards the abusing female, the foster child's sexual behavior towards the foster mother, the emotional and physical distance of the foster mothers towards their foster child, and lastly, their sense of responsibility. The narratives of the foster mothers revealed the complexity of this type of motherhood, as they approached this particular fostering experience as professionals on the one hand and affectionate mother figures on the other.. These two interrelated identities both shaped and hindered each other. Maintaining a professional relationship with the child seemed to enable the women to care for the victims of maternal sexual abuse within a framework in which a certain degree of emotional distance to the child or to the fostering process was (psychologically) acceptable. However, this need to maintain distance collided with the women's prior adopted identity of being a warm and affectionate mother. They deemed it necessary to be warm, even if this meant having to adjust their parenting behavior to their foster child's specific needs. For example, the foster mothers seem to limit the amount of physical affection in order to prevent the child to act sexually. The four foster mothers advocated not viewing foster motherhood from a binary perspective of either being a distant professional or a fully invested warm mother. Finding their balance incorporating both identities appeared necessary for themselves, their foster children, and their families.

Chapter seven comprises a general discussion of the results reported in this dissertation. We summarize the main findings on the impact of a foster child's history of sexual abuse on fostering family life. This dissertation illustrates that fostering a victim of sexual abuse impacts vital relational features of family life. More specifically, fostering a victim of child sexual abuse not only impacts individual family members on an intrapersonal level, it also affects relationships with other family members and the family system. The relational features of fostering family

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life are suggested to be helpful and healing as well as possibly threatening. Furthermore, some methodological reflections are presented, as well as future directions for research and practice. These recommendations concern further narrative analysis of foster families narratives in order to gain insight into the social, cultural, and societal context of foster families' experiences. We emphasize the great importance of supporting and counseling families, as profound intrapersonal, interpersonal and familial changes occur in fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse.

Samenvatting

De Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen (2014) schat dat één op de drie Nederlandse kinderen in hun jeugd te maken hebben met seksueel geweld. Ook veel pleegkinderen hebben voor plaatsing in een pleeggezin te maken gehad met deze vorm van mishandeling. Project Iris zet deze pleegkinderen en hun pleeggezinnen centraal. Deze narratieve studie focust op de behoeften, ervaringen en expertise van gezinnen die zorgen voor een pleegkind met een verleden van seksueel misbruik. In totaal zijn de verhalen van 11 pleegmoeders, zes pleegvaders, 12 biologische kinderen van pleegouders en twee pleegkinderen verzameld. Deze dissertatie heeft inzicht in de zorg voor pleegkinderen met een verleden van seksueel misbruik en de impact die dat kan hebben op pleeggezinnen gegeven, alsook in het proces van onderzoek hiernaar. Daarnaast is een dossierstudie gepresenteerd naar informele disclosure van misbruik door kinderen tijdens hun verblijf in een pleeggezin. Anders dan eerdere studies naar het zorgen voor een pleegkind met een verleden van seksueel misbruik, belichtte deze dissertatie ook de impact van de zorg voor pleegkinderen met een misbruikverleden vanuit een systemisch perspectief.

Hoofdstuk een en twee omvatte het theoretisch en methodologisch raamwerk van deze dissertatie. Het meemaken van seksueel misbruik heeft een negatieve impact op een kind, met name als de pleger iemand is van wie het kind afhankelijk is. Misbruikervaringen hebben impact op het zelfbeeld van een kind, en op hoe een kind zich verhoudt tot de mensen om zich heen en de wereld in het geheel. Verder heeft seksueel misbruik een negatieve invloed op de ontwikkeling van een kind. Het is van groot belang stil te staan bij de cognities en kennis waarmee een kind door de misbruikervaringen de wereld beschouwt: deze zijn van grote invloed op hoe een kind het leven in een pleeggezin ervaart.

Project Iris sluit aan bij het constructivistische paradigma, wat betekent dat de werkelijkheid bezien wordt als iets wat subjectief, dynamisch en contextueel is. Als orthopedagogen gaan we daarnaast uit van transactionele modellen van ontwikkeling en opvoeding van kinderen. Daarom onderzochten wij de impact van een verleden van seksueel misbruik niet alleen vanuit het perspectief van de individuele familieleden, maar ook vanuit het systemische perspectief van een familie als geheel. In het vergelijken van de narratieven van verschillende familieleden, en integreren van alle individuele perspectieven hebben onderzoekers een zeer belangrijke rol gespeeld: zij konden vanuit een meta-positie informatie beschouwen waardoor zij tot diepere inzichten kunnen komen.

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Het proces van narratieve dataverzameling in Project Iris stond centraal in **hoofdstuk drie**. Het bestuderen van de impact van een verleden van seksueel misbruik op het leven in een pleeggezin vroeg voortdurende reflectie op moeilijkheden in de relaties tussen de onderzoekers, participanten en het systeem waartoe zij behoren. Omdat Project Iris een constructivistische visie volgde, werden de onderzoekers gezien als invloedrijke actoren in het ontstaan van de narratieven van participanten. Daardoor was het van belang alle aspecten te onderkennen die de bovengeschetste onderzoeksrelaties beïnvloeden. In dit hoofdstuk werden drie vormen van sensitiviteit gepresenteerd aan de hand van reflecties op het proces van data-verzameling. Uit de onderzoekslogboeken blijkt dat onderzoekers sensitief waren 1) in het creëren van genoeg ruimte voor een participant om alle vlakken van hun narratief te bespreken, 2) voor de systemische inbedding van het onderzoek, en 3) in het erkennen van hun eigen bijdrage in het narratieve proces. Sensitiviteit op een meta-niveau kan ingezet worden om onderzoeksrelaties te versterken.

In **hoofdstuk vier** stonden informele disclosures van misbruikervaringen van pleegkinderen centraal. In deze exploratieve studie is gebruikt gemaakt van data uit de dossiers van 40 pleegkinderen, die (vermoedelijk) slachtoffer zijn geweest van seksueel misbruik voor hun plaatsing in een pleeggezin. Data uit de dossiers met betrekking tot mogelijke verbale disclosures en onthullende gedragingen werden inductief, thematisch gecodeerd. Uit de resultaten bleek dat kinderen op verschillende manieren misbruikervaringen onthullen, verbaal of via gedrag, en dat het niveau van details en de timing van onthullingen verschillen. Verder illustreerde deze studie hoe kinderen mogelijk minder makkelijk bepaalde typen misbruik onthullen. Ten eerste is het mogelijk dat kinderen minder onthullen door een gebrek aan sensorische informatie over een misbruik ervaring. Daarnaast onthullen kinderen minder misbruik waarin ze zelf seksuele handelingen dienden uit te voeren. De studie illustreerde de moeilijkheden voor pleeggezinnen bij het adequaat interpreteren van mogelijk onthullende uitingen van een pleegkind.

Hoofdstuk vijf presenteerde de resultaten van een studie naar ervaringen en gevoelens van onveiligheid in pleeggezinnen die zorgen voor een pleegkind met een verleden van seksueel misbruik. Deze studie maakte gebruik van de verhalen van 14 pleegouders en 12 biologische kinderen van acht pleeggezinnen. Hun verhalen zijn eerst op inductieve manier gecodeerd, waarna de gecodeerde transcripten werden bestudeerd vanuit een overstijgend perspectief. In de verhalen van de verschillende pleeggezinsleden stonden twee sociale posities centraal als het gaat om ervaringen van onveiligheid: die van het zijn van een bedreiging en die van het zijn van een beschermer. De studie illustreerde dat veiligheid en vertrouwen dynamische en relationele concepten zijn. Veel onveilige ervaringen hebben een breuk in bilaterale relaties veroorzaakt, die

vervolgens invloed hebben gehad op de families als systeem. Daarmee bleken onveilige ervaringen of gevoelens gevolgen op het intrapersoonlijke, interpersoonlijke en systemische niveau te hebben. De studie verduidelijkte dat onveiligheid een sociaal construct is en grote invloed heeft op pleeggezinnen die zorgen voor een kind met een verleden van seksueel misbruik.

In **hoofdstuk zes** stonden de narratieven van vier vrouwen centraal die zorgen voor een kind dat is misbruikt door een moederfiguur. De verhalen van deze vrouwen werden inductief gecodeerd, waarna de belangrijkste thema's uit de cases met elkaar werden vergeleken. Vier kernthema's kwamen in de verhalen van deze pleegmoeders naar voren: hun houding ten opzichte van de vrouwelijke misbruiker, seksueel gedrag wat een kind naar pleegmoeder liet zien, de emotionele of fysieke afstand die de vrouwen innemen ten opzichte van hun pleegkind en het verantwoordelijkheidsgevoel van de pleegmoeders. Uit de narratieven van de pleegmoeders bleek de complexiteit van dit type ouderschap. De vrouwen benaderden hun rol van pleegmoeder als professionals, maar ook als warme moederfiguren. Deze twee identiteiten konden elkaar versterken, maar ook belemmeren. De professionele relatie tot het kind maakte het voor de moeders mogelijk te zorgen voor hun pleegkind waarbij een bepaalde mate van emotionele afstand legitiem voelde. Deze emotionele afstand botste echter met de identiteit van de vrouwen als warme moederfiguur. Deze identiteit wilden ze graag behouden, ook al ervoeren ze dat het nodig was om bepaalde opvoedingstaken anders in te vullen dan ze gewend waren (bijvoorbeeld het beperken van het knuffelen van een kind om geen seksueel gedrag te ontlokken). De vrouwen beschreven dat het vinden van een balans tussen beide opvoed-identiteiten, niet alleen voor het pleegkind, maar ook ten behoeve van zichzelf en hun families was.

Een discussie van de belangrijkste resultaten van deze dissertatie is te vinden in **hoofdstuk zeven**. Eerst presenteerden we onze conclusies over de impact van een verleden van seksueel misbruik van een pleegkind op het alledaagse leven van een pleeggezin. Zo beschreven we welke belangrijke relationele aspecten in het pleeggezin worden beïnvloed door het misbruikverleden van een pleegkind. Relaties in het leven van een pleeggezin bleken helpend, maar konden ook als bedreigend voelen voor pleegkinderen met een verleden van seksueel misbruik. Daarna werden enkele methodologische reflecties gepresenteerd samen met aanbevelingen voor verder onderzoek en de praktijk. Verdere narratieve analyse van de verhalen van pleeggezinnen zou meer inzicht kunnen geven in de sociale, culturele en maatschappelijke context van hun ervaringen, expertise en behoeften. Tot slot hebben we het belang benadrukt van het ondersteunen en versterken van deze pleeggezinnen door ze te begeleiden in de intrapersoonlijke, interpersoonlijke en familiale veranderingen die plaatsvinden door het zorgen voor een pleegkind met een verleden van seksueel misbruik.

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Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. (2018) The use of meta-level sensitivity: reflections on research relationships in narrative research. (submitted).

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Dorijn Wubs was born in Leeuwarden in 1987. In 2005, she received her gymnasium diploma from the Christelijk Gymnasium Beyers Naude. She holds bachelor degrees in Communication and Information Sciences, and Pedagogical sciences, both at the University of Groningen. In 2012, she earned a master degree in Orthopedagogy (cum laude). During this final year of study, she focused on subjects related to foster care, childhood trauma, and qualitative research. Additionally, she conducted a clinical internship in a foster care organization. In 2013, she was introduced to the ideas of Project Iris, which she developed over the following years. Under the supervision of prof. Hans Grietens and dr. Laura Batstra she studied the experiences, needs, and expertise of families fostering a victim of child sexual abuse prior to placement in foster care. As part of her PhD she taught bachelor students and master students, and she was the founder and chair of the faculty's PhD council. Currently, she works as a child and family therapist. She still sees value in each clients' story, big and small.