

University of Groningen

Grasping ethnic identity fluctuations of transculturally placed foster youth

Degener, Clementine J.; Grietens, Hans W.E.; van Bergen, Diana D.

Published in:
Qualitative Social Work

DOI:
[10.1177/14733250221081758](https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221081758)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Degener, C. J., Grietens, H. W. E., & van Bergen, D. D. (2023). Grasping ethnic identity fluctuations of transculturally placed foster youth: A longitudinal study. *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(3), 537 - 552.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250221081758>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).


The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Grasping ethnic identity fluctuations of transculturally placed foster youth: A longitudinal study

Qualitative Social Work
2023, Vol. 22(3) 537–552
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14733250221081758
journals.sagepub.com/home/qsw


Clementine J Degener 

Department of Social Work, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Rotterdam, Netherlands

Department of Pedagogics, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Hans WE Grietens

Department of Youth Care, University of Groningen, Netherlands;

Parenting and Special Education Research Unit, KU Leuven, Belgium

Diana D van Bergen

Department of Pedagogics, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Abstract

Transcultural placements occur frequently in foster care, and impact the ethnic identity of ethnic minority foster youth. Studies that investigate how foster youth's ethnic identity develop over time, and what role ethnic minority as well as ethnic majority influences play, are extremely scarce. Therefore, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative study, in which we explored how transculturally placed foster youth develop their ethnic identity and what fluctuations occur over time. Results show that the ethnic identity of foster youth seems to be influenced by a sense of belonging towards foster parents, birth parents and peers, as well as by the foster youth's ability to cope with receiving contradictory ethnicity messages. Furthermore, societal movements and discussions about discrimination and racism impact the way foster youth view themselves as being an ethnic minority in majority society. In future, more attention should be paid to how foster youth can be guided by foster parents and foster care workers in safely exploring an ethnic identity of their own, and how a positive bond with both foster parents and birth parents, can further contribute to this process.

Corresponding author:

Clementine Degener, Department of Social Work, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Museumplein 40, Rotterdam 3015 CX, The Netherlands.

Email: c.j.degener@hr.nl

Keywords

Diversity, culture, foster care, ethnic identity, photography

Introduction

In non-kinship foster care in the Netherlands, an overrepresentation exists of foster youth with non-western migration backgrounds, and an underrepresentation of foster parents with non-western migration backgrounds (Day and Bellaart, 2015). As a result, foster youth are frequently transculturally placed. We refer to a non-western migration background, when people, or one of their parents, are born in in African, Latin American, Asian countries (Indonesia and Japan excluded), or in Turkey (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). The largest groups of people with non-western migration backgrounds in the Netherlands (17 million inhabitants) are people with Turkish (422,356), Moroccan (414,381), and Surinamese (358,134) migration backgrounds (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). Being transculturally placed may lead to challenges for the ethnic identity of foster youth (Barn, 2010; Mitchell Dove and Powers, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2015). These youth may be vulnerable and traumatized due to negative experiences of living in their birth family, and to a history of one or more out of home placements (Goemans et al., 2016; Mitchell 2017). This personal history may impact their identity development, including ethnic identification process, negatively (Kools, 1997). When foster youth are transculturally placed, they grow up in multiple ethno-cultural worlds: among foster parents, among birth parents, and in the school environment. They may therefore receive a diversity of socialization messages from ethnic minority perspectives (that is: from their parents and peers with a non-western migration background) and ethnic majority perspectives (that is: from their native Dutch foster parents and peers without a non-western migration background). This may cause identity challenges and ambivalence (Degener et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2008), and in the end can lead to relatively high ethnic identity fluctuations (Schmidt et al., 2015). To the best of our knowledge, no study exists that provides further insight in longitudinal changes concerning ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth. To address this gap in the empirical literature, we conducted a qualitative longitudinal study (Calman et al., 2013; Derrington, 2019; Saldaña, 2002; Taylor, 2015). In this paper, we illuminate stories of 10 Dutch foster youth about their ethnic identity development, whereby we provide a view on their ethnic identity fluctuations in 2 years of time.

Ethnic identity, national identity, bi-cultural identity

Ethnic identity is often an aspect of one's social identity in ethnically diverse societies (Williams et al., 2012) and refers to the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture in which people share an ethnic background (Phinney et al., 2007). Following Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014), we define ethnic identity as a multidimensional psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes individuals have about their ethnic group memberships, as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time. Ethnicity is created, negotiated, developed, and maintained through interaction with

others, and is therefore a social construct. Especially for people who identify with ethnic minority groups, and are aware of ethnicity differences between themselves and ethnic majority people in society, ethnic identity becomes increasingly important (Lesane-Brown, 2006). People tend to understand their ethnic position in relation to their social environment and the context they live in (Veerman and Platt, 2021). Although ethnic identity can be fluid and may change over time, in the Netherlands, the context of this study, ethnic majority identity and national “Dutch” identity often go hand in hand. Ghorashi (2003) describes Dutch national identity as a ‘thick’ identity, which means that there can be a ‘common’ understanding of ‘Dutchness’ among ethnic majority groups in Dutch society, based on white color, non-migrant roots and certain codes of behavior. This national identity thus divides “The Dutch” and “the others,” underpinning exclusionary mechanisms and a conflation of Dutch national identity with Dutch ethnicity. Furthermore, in the Dutch context, religious and ethnic identities are perceived as overlapping identities. According to Ghorashi (2003), Dutchness also requires having Christianity (and its consequences) as the frame of reference for norms or values, rendering it difficult for a Muslim person to pass as Dutch. Vice versa, when youth in the Netherlands with Moroccan backgrounds are asked to reflect on their Moroccan identity, they often refer to being Muslim, underpinning the significance of overlapping identities among migrant groups in the Netherlands (Azghari et al., 2015).

The ethnic identity formation of children and youth is not only influenced by discourses on national identity but also by parental ethnic socialization (Hughes et al., 2008; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Hughes et al. (2008) defined parental ethnic socialization as the range of parental efforts aimed at transmissions of messages about ethnicity to children, both about their ethnic minority group membership and mainstream society. These messages include (a) transmitting traditions, customs, cultural pride, and language, (b) preparing for experiences with racism and prejudice, (c) promoting diversity and equal treatment across groups, or (d) fostering a sense of mistrust to other ethnic groups.

Individuals who grow up between different ethnic and cultural backgrounds might try to integrate and negotiate these backgrounds in their lives, and develop a bi-cultural identity (Benet -Martinez & Haratitos, 2005). These backgrounds can be compatible and integrated vs. oppositional and difficult to integrate (Benet, -Martinez & Haratitos, 2005), and impact individuals’ psychosocial adjustment such as self-esteem and life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2008). A study about bi-cultural identity conducted in the field of trans-cultural adoption (Manzi et al., 2014) shows that adolescent adoptees’ ethnic minority identity is related to ethnic (minority) socialization of the adoptive parents, and adolescent adoptees’ ethnic majority identity is related to their sense of being part of the ethnic majority adoptive family. Adoptees who perceive both ethnic backgrounds as conflictual, show more externalizing behavioral problems (Manzi et al., 2014).

Similar to adoptees, foster youth may develop a bi-cultural identity. In contrast to birth parents of adoptees, it is not uncommon for birth parents of foster youth to keep the (shared) authority over their children, and stay in contact with them (Burns et al., 2016). This enables birth parents to continue providing their children with ethnic minority socialization, which influences and might enrich the possibilities for foster youth to explore an ethnic minority identity (Mitchell Dove and Powers, 2018).

Ethnic identity fluctuations of transculturally placed foster youth

We assume that foster youth's ethnic identity, which may include ethnic majority and/or ethnic minority influences, fluctuates over time. The formation of one's ethnic identity is a dynamic process which develops through a reciprocal relationship between an individual and his or her social context (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney et al., 2007). International evidence exists showing that being placed from one's birth family to transcultural foster care impacts the ethnic identity of foster youth (Barn, 2010; Brown et al., 2009; Mitchell Dove and Powers, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2015; Tyrell et al., 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2019; White et al., 2008). These studies observed disconnection from ethnic cultural backgrounds and ethnicity losses (Barn, 2010; Brown et al., 2009; Clark, 2000; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Tyrell et al., 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2019), (re)connection with ethnic minority backgrounds through birth parents (Mitchell Dove and Powers, 2018) and awareness of minority ethnicity because of differences in physical appearance between foster youth and their foster parents (White et al., 2008). These studies however did not focus on how foster youth might integrate both majority and minority identities into their lives. Furthermore, studies investigating how ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth fluctuates in time are extremely scarce. To the best of our knowledge, only one study in the US (Schmidt et al. 2015) examined ethnic identity fluctuations of minority foster children, and showed relatively high ethnic identity fluctuations over time of ethnic minority foster youth compared to non-foster youth minority populations. However, this study (Schmidt et al., 2015) did not investigate how and why ethnic minority foster youth showed relatively high ethnic identity fluctuations, and what role foster parents, birth parents and/or peers play in these processes. To further investigate these issues, we will address the following research question: What ethnic identity fluctuations are present in Dutch transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth's narratives, and how did their ethnic identity fluctuate during a 2 year time period?

Methods

Design

We conducted a qualitative longitudinal study. In order to discern meaningful changes in ethnic identity, we approached foster youth twice over a period of 2 years (Balmer and Richards, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2013). A longitudinal qualitative approach enabled us to clarify ethnic identity development, change and process among ethnic minority foster youth (Holland et al., 2006). Our goals were to assess ethnic identity change through time (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003), and to understand ethnic identity changes within and across foster youth (Balmer and Richards, 2017).

Participants

The foster youth were recruited using purposive sampling via nine Dutch foster care agencies. We thereby used snowball sampling, a call put out on social media and on

websites for foster parents. We firstly interviewed 20 adolescent transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth. After the first interview, we asked participants whether we could approach them for a second interview. One foster youth responded negatively to this question, so we re-approached 19 youth after approximately 2 years. Three foster youth did not respond to our second call, and six youth could not participate because of negative psychosocial wellbeing ($N = 3$), lack of time ($N = 1$), or not being interested in participating a second time ($N = 2$). So, for the second interviews, we could interview 10 foster youth, of which 6 were female, and four male. These 10 participants were between 12 and 18 years of age during the first interview, and between 14 and 20 years of age during the second interview. They had Northern-African (2), Eastern-African (4), Southern-American (1) or bi-cultural (minority-minority (2), and minority-majority (1) backgrounds. In the selection process, their ethnic minority backgrounds were based on their parents' or grandparents' countries of birth. Foster parents had ethnic majority western-European backgrounds.

Research procedure

We used the method of photo-elicitation, whereby photos were inserted into the interviews to encourage talk and to bridge cultural differences (Harper, 2002). We also used a topic-list, which consisted of topics such as ethnic pride, and having friendships with same-ethnic peers (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney et al., 2007). Foster youth were asked to take photos that showed people, objects, events or places, which were meaningful for them in advance of the interviews. Most photos revealed little information about ethnicity, but led to a discourse about ethnicity. A photo of a music-box for instance led to a conversation about musicians as ethnic minority/majority role models. Before the second interviews started, the first interviews were analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Calman et al., 2013; Holland et al., 2006). The second interviews were guided by the same methods as the first interviews. Thereby we referred to quotes or narratives from the first interview, and asked the participant to reflect on his or her "former self" (Balmer and Richards, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2013).

Analysis

We based the steps of our analysis on the international literature about longitudinal qualitative research (Calman et al., 2013; Derrington, 2019; Saldaña, 2002; Taylor, 2015).

Step 1 Analysis of data of the first interviews (N = 20). This qualitative longitudinal study built on a thematic analysis which was based on interviews with 20 foster youth. The analysis showed that transculturally placed foster youth could experience ethnic identity ambivalence, ethnic identity losses, and/or ethnic minority connection (Degener, Van Bergen & Grietens, 2020).

Step 2 Longitudinal analysis of the first and second interviews within ten cases (N = 10). We coded the second interviews, by using the codes we derived from our thematic analysis

(step 1). Some refinement was carefully added to our existing codes. An example was that hair texture and color as an aspect of foster youth's ethnic minority identity emerged more clearly during the second interviews. Therefore, we split the code: differences in ethnic appearances into two codes: hair texture and color *and* skin color as distinguishing ethnicity aspects. When finished, we compared the codes of both interviews within 10 cases, and analyzed differences and similarities in 2 years of time (Calman et al., 2013).

Step 3 Longitudinal analysis of interview one and interview two between cases (N = 10). As a last step, we compared differences in time, whereby we tried to derive main themes of change from the data (Calman et al., 2013). As a tool, we used Saldaña's (2002) list of framing, descriptive and analytic questions, and adapted these questions to our study. We asked for example the following questions to the interview data: What are the preliminary assertions concerning ethnic identity development? (framing question, Saldaña, 2002)? In relation to ethnic identity development, what increased, or emerged through time (descriptive question, Saldaña, 2002)? Which changes concerning ethnic identity are interrelated through time (analytic question, Saldaña, 2002)? To create an overview of changes in time, we used the method of concept mapping (Derrington, 2019). In this way, we analyzed how the outcomes of the first interviews had changed over 2 years, and interpreted differences and similarities between cases. The main outcomes of the concept mapping process (Derrington, 2019) and the aforementioned steps by Saldaña (2002), are shown in our five main themes of change:

1. Connection with ethnic majority backgrounds of foster parents
2. Connection with ethnic minority backgrounds of birth parents
3. Coping with contradictory messages youth receive about ethnicity
4. Sensing to be different in an ethnic majority environment
5. Exploration of an identity other than ethnic identity

In presenting the results, we were aware of increased potential recognizability because data were collected and represented over an extended period of time from the same participants (Taylor, 2015). We thus balanced between preventing recognizability versus presenting authenticity, by carefully choosing fragments from the interviews, which did not expose specific features of the participants. The names are pseudonyms.

Results

Theme 1: Connection with ethnic majority backgrounds of foster parents

Related to a sense of belonging to their foster parents, foster youth's ethnic identity could fluctuate into the direction of strengthening a Dutch identity. Some foster youth for example expressed no identification with Dutch ethnicity during the first interview and relatedly considered themselves to be different from their foster family. During the second interview, they had moved in the direction of self-labeling as "Dutch," next to labeling themselves in terms of ethnic minority identity. Their explanation was that they sensed

they belonged to the foster family, and/or they said that it was their foster family who took care of them. Vivian for example, who mainly showed pride of her Antillean background during interview one: "I would like to live there! Beautiful sea, beautiful country, beautiful language," 2 years later made a shift to adoption of a Dutch ethnic identity: "I am proud on being Antillean, of course, but I am also just Dutch, and I am proud of what I have achieved." She thereby connected "being Dutch" to her foster parents' efforts to help her succeed with her studies. According to her, the foster parents helped her in achieving a higher school level, where she felt proud of.

Theme 2: Connection with ethnic minority backgrounds of birth parents

Foster youth showed ethnic identity fluctuations which could be linked to the strengthening or, alternatively, the loss of ties with birth parents. Some foster youth showed ethnic minority identity losses in 2 years. According to them this was caused by the experience of negative new events with (one of) their birth parents that happened between both interviews, the loss of contacts with (one of) their birth parents, and/or a loss of interest in their attempts to connect with their birth parents. An example of a boy who showed ethnic minority losses in time, which he related to the quality of ties with his birth mother, was Milan. When aged 16, he temporarily lost contact with his birth mother. He did not wish to affiliate with any ethnic background, but stressed he was "a human being." However, he would also call himself Surinamese, and showed connection with and longing for this ethnic minority background: "Sometimes I would like to live in a Surinamese family, because of the nice food. Thereby the people are nice and cozy. It is just that my mom isn't nice at all." Between both interviews, Milan had experienced a new and traumatic event with his mother, which was according to him an important explanation of change within the last 2 years. During the second interview, Milan did not mention his Surinamese side and he showed no connection with his ethnic minority background anymore. He narrated the following about ethnicity: "It (that is, Surinamese) doesn't say anything about me, I am just a Dutch guy with just some background, but I don't feel myself that way."

By contrast, other foster youth in the sample had strengthened their ties with their birth parents, and as a result thereof showed a fluctuation into the direction of ethnic minority connection. An example was Hanane. During the first interview, when she was 16, she saw her birth mother regularly. Hanane showed a lot of anger because her birth mother had not been able to look after her in the past. She turned away from her ethnic-religious identity: "I don't believe in it (Islam faith). Because she (birth mother) believed that Allah wouldn't allow her to leave my dad, she stayed with him. Then I had to leave." Two years later she showed less anger. She said that she felt more comfortable with her mom. She had gained a better understanding of her mother's situation in the past, which resulted in more openness concerning the Islamic faith:

(...) I don't expect myself to become a Muslim like her, (referring to her birth mother), but just in my own way, you know. I don't know if I will ever pray five times a day, and I won't fast during Ramadan just by myself. I am open for it, but with her... together.

Theme 3: Coping with contradictory messages youth receive about ethnicity

During both interview time points, the foster youth narrated about contradictory messages they received about ethnicity from different sources, among others by foster parents, birth parents and peers with different ethnic backgrounds, and the (social) media. These messages could also contradict the way foster youth narrated about themselves in terms of ethnicity. For example, one of the foster youth in our sample whose parents originated from Turkey called himself Turkish (because of messages he received by his birth parents about being Turkish), Moroccan (because he had Moroccan friends), Dutch (because his foster parents would call him “Dutch”), and a foreigner (because of being called a “foreigner” by peers and trespassers), during one interview. These contradictory messages could make the foster youth ambivalent towards their ethnic identification(s).

We observed some fluctuations in time in the way the foster youth could cope with contradictory messages they receive about ethnicity. Especially those foster youth who showed strong ethnicity ambivalence during the first interview, mentioned they had grown older, wiser and/or stronger between both interviews. They narrated for example not to feel the strong urge of belonging to same-ethnic peers as they did 2 years before, and as a result, they seemed to be less ambivalent towards ethnicity. For example, Yasmin, narrated during interview one (age 14) about ambivalence concerning her ethnic-religious identity because of expectations from Muslim peers about being “a good Muslim” which contrasted with the ethnic Dutch socialization she received in the foster home:

I find it very hard, and I still don't know whether I want it, and whether I should join them. (... I want to learn about being a Muslim, but I'm not sure because today I would say I don't feel like it and I don't want to have anything to do with it, and tomorrow I will say, yeah, I would like to learn more about it.

During the second interview (when 16 years of age), she was not confused about whether she would explore Islamic faith. She had decided to distance herself from being Muslim. Her increased sense of independence and self-confidence seemed to play a role here, as she explained:

Back then, I really searched to belong to something, I really wanted to become a Muslim because I wanted to do good, I think in the eyes of others, and my (birth) family. And now I think: that is not the person I am, and not the person I will become in future.

Theme 4: Sensing to be different in an ethnic majority environment

During both interviews, the foster youth sensed to be different because of living in an ethnic majority environment. As a result, they could for example express a wish to be white, or to have foster parents with a same, or similar skin color as they had. The intensity of feeling different seemingly did not change between both interviews. However, in foster youth's examples of feeling different, black and curly hair appeared more frequently as a distinguishing ethnicity feature during the second interviews. Liana (12 years old) talked

during the first interview about how she realized to be different in terms of appearances “Sometimes I am startled when I see myself reflected in the mirror, for I look so different.... (silence).” During the second interview (aged 14), her hair appeared in many of the examples she mentioned. She said for example when she described herself: “I am that girl with that messy curly hair.”

Next, participants mentioned a growing awareness of societal discrimination and injustice during the second interviews. Foster youth referred to the rise of Dutch right wing political parties, international movements like Black Lives Matter, or television series that addressed racial and ethnic inequality in society, like “When They See Us.” The foster youth said that in the foster families little attention was paid to these societal discussions. Eren narrated during the first interview (when 16 years of age) about discriminative events in the streets by trespassers, who would call him “a foreigner.” He was aware of discrimination by that time. When aged 18, he talked during the interview about these events in relation to a societal and political debate about ethnicity profiling by the Dutch police force. This seemed to trigger the perception of social injustice against ethnic minorities in his narratives. He narrated for example about himself experiencing to be a victim of ethnic profiling:

When we walked home, police officers seemed to have followed me and my friend. They stopped us and we had to lean to the car, just like this (Eren stands up, and leans with his hands towards the wall). They searched us. We had to empty our bags and pockets. They thought we were burglars and I totally went mad. And you know, that police officer did not even believe that I live here!

Theme 5: Exploration of an identity other than ethnic identity

During both interviews, foster youth were directed towards exploration and/or commitment of a “humanitarian” identity or a social identity other than ethnic identity, which was to some extent perceived as additionally, or as an alternative to ethnic identity. The foster youth would for instance explicitly call themselves “a human being” rather than being labeled in terms of ethnicity. They could also call themselves by their first name, or told to create their own identity by doing it “my own way.” Humanitarianism occurred stronger in the interviews as an alternative identity during interview two, which may show that the foster youth had further explored this identity. An example is shown by Hanane (16 years old). During the interview she was confused whether she belonged to her Moroccan peers, whether she could call herself Dutch, but also whether she had a wish to be labeled at all. She doubtedly said: “I am Dutch. I am Moroccan. . . I don’t know who I am.” Two years later, she said firmly: “I am just Hanane,” when she talked about how she would mention herself in ethnicity terms. She thereby pronounced her first name with an ethnic Dutch accent. However, she also seemed to switch between different ethnic cultural worlds she was part of, because, after a short silence, she continued: “but for Moroccans, I am Hanane, (laughs)” whereby she pronounced her first name with a Moroccan–Dutch accent.

Some foster youth had developed an alternative social identity, while turning themselves away of identities around ethnicity. For example, Ana who was 15 years old at

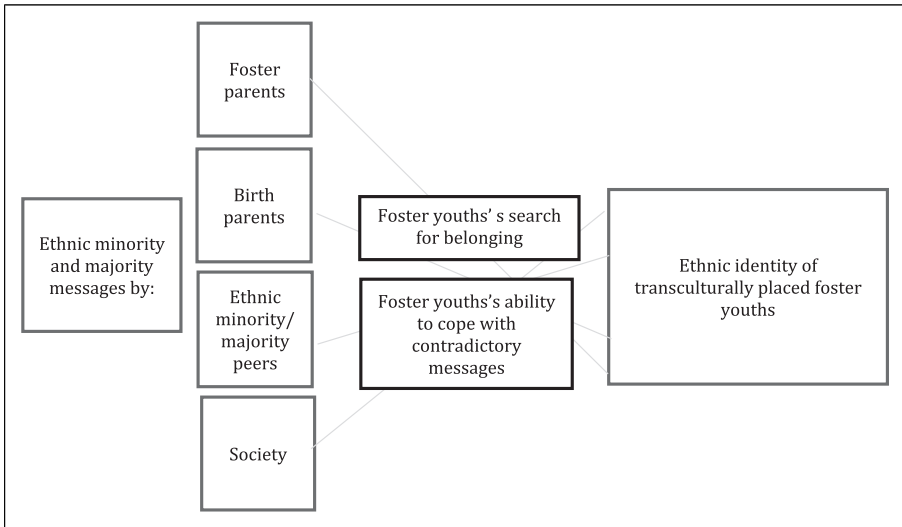


Figure 1. Theoretical model of ethnic identity development of foster youth.

the first interview showed no connection with her ethnic background during both interviews. During the first interview she said: “I don’t know, I am just not occupied with my background or that kind of things. Just with friends, and school.” In 2 years she made a shift to an alternative social identity, as an active member of a Dutch political party: “Politics. The (name of a Dutch political party) tells just in one word what I am.” The example of Ana shows, that she found herself an affiliation where she belonged. However, the way Ana positioned herself to her ethnic background did not change.

Towards a theoretical model about ethnic identity development of foster youth

The outcomes of our study are summarized in [Figure 1](#), which presents a theoretical model about how transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth develop their ethnic identity. In line with the existing literature about ethnic identity ([Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014](#)), our study shows that messages about ethnicity by family members, peers, and society, influence the ethnic identity of foster youth. Central in these ethnic identity processes of foster youth seems to be their sense of, or search for belonging ([Walker, 2015](#)). Foster youth’s sense of belonging may be “thwarted” ([Baumeister et al., 2007](#)) because of having experienced (several) out of home placements, and mechanisms of rejection by birth parents ([Goemans et al., 2016](#)) and/or peers ([Kools, 1997](#)). For the foster youth in this study, this mechanism intersected with the ethnicity backgrounds of foster parents, birth parents and peers. Similar to the study about transculturally placed adoptees of [Manzi et al. \(2014\)](#), the foster youth in our study showed that a sense of belonging to the ethnic majority foster family contributed to their ethnic majority identity. Our study adds to this knowledge that foster youth’s sense of, or search for belonging towards their birth

parents influenced their ethnic minority identity. This is in line with studies of Boyle (2017) and (Moyers et al. 2006), who studied foster children's identity, but had no focus on ethnic identity. Boyle (2017) showed that experienced connection with the birth family network and a collaborative approach between birth families and foster carers impacted outcomes on foster children's identity positively. In contrary, but also in line with our findings, (Moyers et al. 2006) discovered that re-experienced neglect and rejection by their birth parents impacted foster children's identity negatively.

Second, the results show that the way foster youth are able to cope with oppositional messages about ethnicity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005) seems to be important for their ethnic identity. The messages foster youth received about ethnicity by foster parents, birth parents, peers, and society may be contradictory, and can be experienced by foster youth as oppositional, and difficult to integrate into their narratives of identity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005). This may lead to externalizing behavioral problems (Manzi et al., 2014). Our study shows that when foster youth are able to cope with these oppositional messages, they can better process them into the stories they tell about their ethnicity.

Discussion

We conducted a qualitative longitudinal study about the ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth, and addressed the following research question: What ethnic identity fluctuations are present in Dutch transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth's narratives, and how did their ethnic identity fluctuate during a 2 year time period?

We recognized fluctuations in foster youth's ethnic identities. These fluctuations included connection with the ethnic majority backgrounds of their foster parents, and/or connection, or losses concerning the ethnic minority backgrounds of their birth parents. We thereby showed foster youth who would explore an identity additionally to, or instead of ethnic identity. We furthermore described foster youth's narratives about becoming older and wiser, and therefore becoming more able to cope with receiving contradictory messages about ethnicity in their daily lives. Lastly, we saw foster youth who had become more aware of their position of being an ethnic minority in an ethnic majority society.

The study of Manzi et al. (2014) related the ethnic minority identity of transculturally adoptees to the way as to how adoptive ethnic majority parents pay attention to ethnic minority socialization. In our study however, especially birth parents played a role in the foster youth's ethnic minority identity development. The relationships youth had with their birth parents, even when they did not meet each other on a regular basis, influenced the foster youth's ethnic minority identity fluctuations; either negatively or positively. The different outcomes between our study and that of Manzi et al. (2014) can be explained by the fact that in contrast to the context of adoption, in foster care birth parents and their children are more likely to stay in contact with each other (Burns et al., 2016).

Worldwide societal discussions and movements have risen which address marginalized statuses of ethnic minorities in ethnic majority societies (Rickford, 2016). These discussions and movements influenced foster youth's narratives of ethnic minority

identity, especially awareness of their ethnic minority position in ethnic majority society. In African-American families in the United States, beyond the context of foster care, these events may have led to more active ethnic-racial socialization practices at home (Threlfall, 2018). According to the foster youth in our study, little attention was paid to these matters within the foster families. This suggests that foster parents did not actively address them, and they therefore not actively influenced the way foster youth thought about, or dealt with these societal matters.

Some foster youth reflected that they became older and wiser over time, and could according to them better cope with contradictory messages about ethnicity. An alternative explanation may be the role trauma played in their lives. Tyrell et al. (2019) showed that experienced trauma impacts the ethnic identity of foster youth negatively. Some foster youth in our study had received professional guidance or treatment to overcome past traumas between both interviews. This might have influenced them feeling less confused due to receiving contradictory ethnicity matters. This explanation remains rather speculative. Although the topic of “therapy for trauma” appeared as a conversation subject during the interviews, this was not linked to ethnicity by the participants.

Lastly, the foster youth wished not to be labeled in terms of ethnicity in their narratives by others, or they searched for alternative social identities in addition to or instead of ethnic identity. This relates back to outcomes on “ethnic identity centrality” (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), which shows that variation exists regarding the (central) position ethnicity has in people’s identity. Similar to outcomes of our study, work by Butler-Sweet (2011) for example about adoptees in the United States showed that ethnicity is not always centered in transculturally placed youth’s identity.

Strengths and limitations

Because literature about how to conduct a longitudinal qualitative study is scarce, we chose to combine the questions as suggested by Saldaña (2002) and the method of concept mapping of Derrington (2019) in analyzing the results between cases. We thus provided and illustrated clear steps of conducting a longitudinal qualitative study, which contributes to future research and methodological discussions.

In longitudinal qualitative research, the most frequently mentioned ethical issue is the relation a researcher builds with the participants (Balmer and Richards, 2017; Calman et al., 2013; Hermanowicz, 2013; Taylor, 2015; Thomson and Holland, 2003). It is for instance important to be aware of more intrusion into people’s lives, and distortion of experience due to repeated contact (Balmer and Richards, 2017; Thomson and Holland, 2003). The interviewer was aware of this ethical issue, and therefore chose to conduct only two interviews in time, took every step needed for providing clear information about the study and checked repeatedly for approval of the participants before each interview started. However, a tension existed in approaching and interviewing foster youth about their ethnic backgrounds, while some foster youth expressed a wish not to be named in terms of ethnicity.

We conducted two interviews at two different points in time with a small sample of 10 participants. This encourages us to reflect upon the question what ‘meaningful change’ is in this particular study (Saldaña, 2002). We took two “snapshots” in time, whereby we

asked the youth to reflect on their former self, and on differences between two snapshots. The interviews were therefore partially tailor-made, since the interviewer referred to previous quotes and narratives from the same participant from the first interview (Balmer and Richards, 2017). In this way, we tried to capture meaningful change. These two “snapshots” showed how foster youth reflected upon themselves in terms of ethnicity at these specific moments in time, and we may have heard additional perspectives had we spoken with them in a third or fourth interview. Furthermore, as this study investigates the perspective of a relatively small and heterogeneous group of foster youth, “constructed” knowledge is specifically related to our sample. Therefore, it is not certain whether outcomes can be generalized to other foster youth. Nevertheless, considering the paucity of research of socially marginalized ethnic minority adolescents in foster care, we assume that this study makes a contribution to the field of foster care (Harding, 2015).

Future research and implications for practice

After further investigation, programs should be developed with a focus on how to guide birth parents and their foster youth in building or strengthening a positive bond, where foster youth safely can develop an ethnic identity.

Next, further research should be conducted on what foster youth need to better process contradictory messages about ethnicity into their narratives of identity. The role trauma plays, and the intersection between trauma and foster youth’s ethnic identity should be included in this research. When more knowledge is available on this matter, foster youth may be better guided in coping with these mechanisms, which may possibly make them less ambivalent as a result of contradictory messages about their ethnicity.

Lastly, societal and political discourses about the positions of ethnic minorities in society seem to influence foster youth’s narratives about their ethnic identity. Foster care agencies and foster parents should actively address these issues, so guidance is offered to their foster youth on how to incorporate these discourses in their own narratives of ethnic identity in a way that is helpful.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, grant number 023.008.022

ORCID iD

Clementine J Degener  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1093-358X>

References

- Azghari Y, Hooghiemstra E and Van de Vijver FJR (2015) Young Moroccan-Dutch: thinking in Dutch, feeling Moroccan. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 35: 280–295.
- Balmer DF and Richards BF (2017) Longitudinal qualitative research in medical education. *Perspectives on Medical Education* 6: 306–310. DOI: [10.1007/s40037-017-0374-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-017-0374-9).
- Barn R (2010) Care leavers and social capital: understanding and negotiating racial and ethnic identity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33: 832–850. DOI: [10.1080/01419870903318896](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870903318896).
- Baumeister R. F., Brewer L. E., Tice D. M. and Twenge J. M. (2007) Thwarting the need to belong, understanding the interpersonal and inner effects of social exclusion. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 1: 506–520. doi: [10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00020.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00020.x).
- Benet-Martinez V and Haratitos J (2005) Bicultural identity integration (BII): components and psychosocial antecedents. *Journal of Personality* 73(4): 1015–1050. DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00337.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00337.x).
- Boyle C (2017) ‘What is the impact of birth family contact on children in adoption and long-term foster care?’ A systematic review. *Child & Family Social Work* 22: 22–33. DOI: [10.1111/cfs.12236](https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12236).
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101. DOI: [10.1191/1478088706qp0630a](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a).
- Brown JD, St Arnault D, George N, et al. (2009) Challenges of transcultural placements: foster parent perspectives. *Child Welfare* 88: 103–127.
- Burns K, Pösö T and Skivenes M (2016) Removals of children by the child welfare system, variations and differences across countries. In: Burns K, Pvsö T, Skivenes M, et al. (eds), *Child Welfare Removals by the State, a Cross Country Analysis of Decision Making Systems*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.
- Butler-Sweet C (2011) ‘Race isn’t what defines me’: exploring identity choices in transracial, biracial, and monoracial families. *Social Identities* 17(6): 747–769. DOI: [10.1080/13504630.2011.606672](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2011.606672).
- Calman L, Brunton L and Molassiotis A (2013) Developing longitudinal qualitative designs: lessons learned and recommendations for health services research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 13: 14. DOI: [10.1186/1471-2288-13-14](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-14).
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (2020) *Jaarrapport Integratie 2020*. Heerlen, Bonaire: CBS: Den Haag.
- Chen SX, Benet-Martinez V and Harris Bond M (2008) Bicultural identity, bilingualism, and psychological adjustment in multicultural societies: immigration-based and globalization-based acculturation. *Journal of Personality* 76: 803–838. DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00505.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00505.x).
- Clark Y. (2000) The construction of aboriginal identity in people separated from their families, community, and culture: pieces of a jigsaw. *Australian Psychologist* 35(2): 150–157. doi: [10.1080/00050060008260337](https://doi.org/10.1080/00050060008260337).
- Day M and Bellaart H (2015) *De rol van Etniciteit, Cultuur en Religie in de Pleegzorg. Een Verkenning*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut.

- Degener CJ, van Bergen DD and Grietens HWE (2020) The ethnic identity complexity of transculturally placed foster youth in The Netherlands. *Children and Youth Services Review* 113: 104957. doi: [10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104957](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104957).
- Derrington ML (2019) Longitudinal data analysis. In: Derrington ML (ed), *Qualitative Longitudinal Methods: Researching Implementation and Change*. Thousand, Oaks: Sage.
- Ghorashi H (2003) Multiple identities between continuity and change. The narratives of Iranian women in Exile. *European Journal of Anthropology* 42: 63–75.
- Goemans A, Van Geel M, Van Beem M, et al. (2016) Developmental outcomes of foster children. *Child Maltreatment* 21: 198–217. DOI: [10.1177/1077559516657637](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559516657637).
- Harding S (2015) *Objectivity and Diversity, Another Logic of Scientific Research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Harper D (2002) Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies* 17(1): 13–26. DOI: [10.1080/14725860220137345](https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860220137345).
- Hermanowicz JC (2013) The longitudinal qualitative interview. *Qualitative Sociology* 36: 189–208. DOI: [10.1007/s11133-013-9247-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-013-9247-7).
- Holland J, Thomson R and Henderson S (2006) *Qualitative Longitudinal Research: A Discussion Paper*. London: London South Bank University.
- Hughes D, Rivas D, Foust M, et al. (2008) How to catch a moonbeam: A mixed-methods approach to understanding ethnic socialization in ethnically diverse families. In: Quintana S and McKnown C (eds), *Handbook of Race, Racism, and Child Development*. NJ: John Wiley.
- Kools SM (1997) Adolescent identity development in foster care. *Family Relations* 46(3): 263–271. DOI: [10.2307/585124](https://doi.org/10.2307/585124).
- LaFromboise T, Coleman HLK and Gerton J (1993) Psychological impact of biculturalism: evidence and theory. *Psychological Bulletin* 114: 395–412.
- Lesane-Brown CL (2006) A review of race socialization within black families. *Developmental Review* 26: 400–426. DOI: [10.1016/j.dr.2006.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2006.02.001).
- Manzi C, Ferrari L, Rosnati R, et al. (2014) Bicultural identity integration of transracial adolescent adoptees. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 45(6): 888–904. DOI: [10.1177/0022022114530495](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022114530495).
- Mitchell MB (2017) “No one acknowledged my loss and hurt”: non-death loss, grief, and trauma in foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 35: 1–9. DOI: [10.1007/s10560-017-0502-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-017-0502-8).
- Mitchell Dove L and Powers LE (2018) Exploring the complexity of hair and identity among African American female adolescents in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 95: 368–376. DOI: [10.1016/j.childyouths.2018.10.043](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouths.2018.10.043).
- Mitchell Dove, Powers (2018) Williams J. L., Tolan P. H., Durkee M. I., Francois AG. and Anderson R. E. (2012) Integrating racial and ethnic identity research into developmental understanding of adolescents. *Child Development Perspectives* 6: 304–311. doi: [10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00235.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00235.x).
- Moyers S., Farmer E. and Libscombe J. (2006) Contact with family members and its impact on adolescents and their foster placements. *British Journal of Social Work* 36: 541–559. doi: [10.1093/bjsw/bch270](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch270).

- Neale B and Flowerdew J (2003) Time, texture and childhood: the contours of longitudinal qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 6(3): 189–199. DOI: [10.1080/1364557032000091798](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000091798).
- Phinney JS, Jacoby B and Silva C (2007) Positive intergroup attitudes: the role of ethnic identity. *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 31: 478–490. DOI: [10.1177/0165025407081466](https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025407081466).
- Rickford R (2016) Black lives matter. *New Labor Forum* 25(1): 34–42. DOI: [10.1177/1095796015620171](https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796015620171).
- Saldaña J (2002) Analyzing change in longitudinal qualitative data. *Youth Theatre Journal* 16(1): 1–17. DOI: [10.1080/08929092.2002.10012536](https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2002.10012536).
- Schmidt J, Dubey S, Dalton L, et al. (2015) Who am I? Who do you think I am? Stability of racial/ethnic self-identification among youth in foster care and concordance with agency categorization. *Children and Youth Services Review* 56: 61–67. DOI: [10.1016/j.childyouths.2015.06.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouths.2015.06.011).
- Taylor R (2015) Beyond anonymity: temporality and the production of knowledge in a qualitative longitudinal study. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 18(3): 281–292. DOI: [10.1080/13645579.2015.1017901](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2015.1017901).
- Thomson R and Holland J (2003) Hindsight, foresight and insight: the challenges of longitudinal qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 6(3): 233–244. DOI: [10.1080/1364557032000091833](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000091833).
- Threlfall JM (2018) Parenting in the shadow of Ferguson: racial socialization practices in context. *Youths and Society* 50(2): 255–273. DOI: [10.1177/0044118X16670280](https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X16670280).
- Tyrell FA, Marcelo AK, Trang DT, et al. (2019) Prospective associations between trauma, placement disruption, and ethnic-racial identity among newly emancipated foster youth. *Journal of Adolescence* 76: 88–98. DOI: [10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.08.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.08.010).
- Umaña-Taylor AJ, Quintana SM, Lee RM, et al. (2014) Study group on ethnic and racial identity in the 21st century ethnic and racial identity during adolescence and into young adulthood: an integrated conceptualization. *Child Development* 85: 21–39. DOI: [10.1111/cdev.12196](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12196).
- Veerman GJ and Platt L (2021) School composition and multiple ethnic identities of migrant-origin adolescents in the Netherlands. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44(16): 106–125. DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2021.1887503](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1887503).
- Walker J. (2015) Establishing a sense of belonging for looked after children: the journey from fear and shame to love and belonging. In: Briggs A. (ed). *Towards Belonging: Negotiating New Relationships for Adopted Children and those in Care*. London: Karnac books.
- Waniganayake M, Hadley F, Johnson M, et al. (2019) Maintaining culture and supporting cultural identity in foster care placements. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 44(4): 365–377. DOI: [10.1177/1836939119870908](https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939119870908).
- White CR, O'Brien K, Jackson LJ, et al. (2008) Ethnic identity development among adolescents in foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 25: 497–515. DOI: [10.1007/s10560-008-0140-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-008-0140-2).