
‘THIS SITUATION IS THE GOAL’. ADOLESCENTS PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH THEIR PROFESSIONAL FOSTER- AND BIRTHPARENTS.

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ABSTRACT (ENG)

In this study, the perspective of adolescents regarding their relational bond with their professional foster parent(s) (i.e. PFP) and their birthparent(s) (i.e. BP) is examined and put to practical recommendations for PFP and BP. Following the principles of Empirical Phenomenology, transcriptions of in-depth interviews with 19 adolescents were analyzed first. The results formed the base of vignette-based interviews with 7 adolescents. Results of in-depth interviews indicate four different situational patterns in which adolescents perform different relational utterances with both PFP and BP; (A) PFP and BP positive, (B) PFP positive, BP ambivalent, (C) PFP ambivalent, BP positive, and (D) PFP and BP ambivalent. Results of vignette-based interviews indicate different recommendations associated with these different situational patterns. This study describes that, in order to achieve the situation in which both relationships are positive, specific tasks have to be fulfilled by either PFP or BP. The acceptance of a placement by BP in an early stage and the supportive attitude of PFP during all stages of a placement are of key relevance in a long-term placement in a PFC.

Keywords: loyalty issues, professional fostercare, adolescents, breakdown, relational bonds

INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Between 2014 and 2016 the prevalence of adolescents growing up in professional fostercare has been increased by 50 percent (from 1.728 to 2594) (Wunderink, 2017). These are adolescents who, due to several reasons, cannot live with their birthparent(s) and now live in one of the 764 professionalized foster families across The Netherlands (i.e. *out-of-home placed adolescents*). The aim of placement inside professionalized fostercare (i.e. PFC) is *permanency* (i.e. an uninterrupted, long-term placement), which contributes to the development and wellbeing of the adolescent (Moran, McGregor & Devany, 2017). However, permanency is regularly disrupted by unscheduled placements out of the PFC (i.e. breakdowns), due to escalating problem behaviors of the adolescent (Sallnäs, Vinnerljung & Kyhle Westermarck, 2004). Conflicts between adolescents and their birthparent(s) (i.e. BP) and/or their professional foster parent(s) (i.e. PFP) play a role in the occurrence of breakdowns (Andersson, 2009).

Professional fostercare. In the Netherlands, municipalities are obligated by law to place out-of-home children into other types of family like settings, like regular foster care or, PFC (Jeugdwet, Artikel 2.3.6). PFC is a specialized juvenile care in which youth (between 0-24, M = age 12) are being admitted into a small-scale resident of PFP with one or more other out-of-home children (Wunderink, 2017). An average of three - four out-of-home children live in a resident in which it is often seen (60%) that these foster families also include the children of the PFP (Meuwissen, 2011). Within a professionalized foster family, at least one educated PFP provides care, education and guidance on a professional manner to out-of-home children 24/7 a day, in which minimal one parent receives a salary or payment for their services as PFP (Wunderink, 2017). Professional parenting means the conscious and specific use of parenting skills, to react in a sensitive and responsive way to promote the development and to reduce and stabilize the problems of out-of-home children (Van der Steege & de Vries, 2013). It is often seen that youth in PFC, in comparison with foster care and residential care, show more attachment related problems, severe behavioral problems, attend special education, have a history of sexual abuse and have a large history of placements in foster and residential care (+/- 5 years) before they were able to get a PFC placement (Leloux-Opmeer, Kuiper & Scholte, 2015). Placement duration has an average of 2.7 years (Meuwissen, 2011). Research regarding PFC is still in an early stage and for that reason this study also includes empirical literature regarding foster care and foster parents (i.e. foster parents) by assuming that foster care and PFC care are similar in context (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2015). The wellbeing and coping of the adolescent, as well as the need for further development are all influenced by a stable and sustainable placement, which is provided by the attention and support of PFP (Hermanns, 2005; Moran et al., 2017).

Breakdown. Not all out-of-home children are able to experience and receive an uninterrupted placement. 65% of the PFP state that they have experienced a breakdown (Gardeniers & De Vries, 2012). Van Oijen (2010) showed that 45.7% of the placements in foster care ended due to a breakdown within eighteen months. Unfortunately, accurate numbers of breakdown prevalence within PFC in The Netherlands are still missing. In this study, a breakdown is defined as a situation in which any of the parties involved initiates a premature termination of care (Sallnäs, et al., 2004). Risk factors for the occurrence of a breakdown amongst out-of-home adolescents are the presence of antisocial behavior and/or mental health problems (Sallnäs et al., 2004), a long history of residential care and previous placements, an older age at placement

(Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens & Doreleijers, 2007) and BP whom do not support the placement (Van der Vliet, 2013). Most commonly, a combination of these risk factors are associated with a breakdown (van der Vliet, 2013). The reduction of the amount of breakdowns and the increase of continuity of a placement is in the best interest of adolescents regarding attachment and wellbeing (Juffer, 2010). A higher quality of care and the involvement of BP are protective factors to reduce breakdowns (Oosterman et al., 2007). More insights into relational bonds between adolescents and their PFP and BP may contribute to a reduction of breakdowns among adolescents in PFC.

THEORETICAL BASIS

The relation and interaction between the adolescent, PFP and BP are viewed as a *family-centered approach*, in which, from an socio-ecological perspective, a partnership with and between BP and PFP has a central role in the care and development of the child (Geurts, Boddy, Noom & Knorth, 2012). Several theories are now presented in order to show the underlying mechanisms in the occurrence of a breakdown. Based on the *attachment theory* (Bowlby, 1969/1997; 1973/1998; 1980/1998), a child is born with an inclination to form attachment bonds with a possible caretaker, in order to receive protection from this person. That is, secure attachment between a child and caretaker is needed in order to promote and support a child's need to explore and master the physical and social environments (Baker, Creegan, Quinones & Rozelle 2016, p. 178). The temporary or permanent loss of bonding to an existing attachment figure (e.g. BP) leads to distress amongst children, which can only be resolved when they are able to form new attachments with alternative caregivers (e.g. PFP/FP) (Oosterman et al., 2007).

Even out-of-home adolescents with a history of maltreatment by BP have formed attachments with these caregivers, though often insecure and disorganized (Cyr, Euser, Bakersmans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2010). A study by Strijker, Knorth and Knot-Dickscheit (2008) presented the relation between the presence of an attachment disorder, placement history and externalizing problems, which in combination could lead to the increased risk of a breakdown. Thus, for abovementioned adolescents it is difficult to (re)form secure attachments with both BP and PFP, which is likely to increase the risk of a placement breakdown.

Another theory that may substantiate a breakdown incident, is the so-called *invisible loyalties theory* (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). This entails that invisible loyalties to BP make it difficult for a child to develop new attachments to other caregivers. When out-of-home adolescents are placed within foster care, they experience a source of emotional stress, not only because of the disconnection of old attachments and shaping of new ones, but also from experiencing divided loyalties due to having two sets of parents, which requires a great amount of adaptation (Baker, Mehta & Chong, 2013). Contact with BP can become a source of stress and loyalty problems when they confront the values of foster parents in presence of the adolescent (Chateauneuf, Turcotte & Drapeau, 2018). Yet, evidence supports that continued, frequent involvement of BP into the lives of their children has a positive influence on their development and wellbeing (McWey, Acock & Porter, 2010). Both theories help us understand the underlying mechanisms within the family-centered approach and the occurrence of breakdowns.

EMPIRICAL BASIS

Keeping the family-centered approach and previous theories in mind, the perspective of the adolescent should always be taken into account. Adolescents are active agents in building a positive relationship with PFP and BP, expressing their views by responding to changes in circumstances (Larkins et al., 2013). Research regarding the perspectives of adolescents on their relational bonds with their PFP and BP shows that adolescents in foster care can be classified into three groups; (1) adolescents who are confident and well-adjusted with the foster home placement and feel loved by both foster parents and BP, (2) adolescents who feel an insecure bonding with foster parents, but have strong feelings of belonging towards BP (i.e. indication of loyalty towards foster parents) and (3) adolescents who experience a strong membership towards foster parents alongside a weakened relational bond towards BP (Ellingsen, Shemmings & Størksen, 2011). In a longitudinal study by Andersson (2009), a distinction was found between adolescents with secure attachments towards foster parents and/or BP and adolescents with insecure attachments towards foster parents and BP. He found that adolescents with a secure attachment towards BP, also encountered support from foster parents in contact with BP. Adolescents with insecure attachments expressed themselves with anger and ambivalence regarding foster parents and BP (Andersson, 2009). Other research found that 83,3% of the maltreated youth blamed themselves for, and also minimized, the bad behavior of BP, yet many adolescents (93.8%) felt relieved that they were placed in out-of-home care (Baker et al., 2016). This shows how complex the views of the adolescents regarding their relational bonds with foster parents and BP can be. Further research should indicate if similar patterns in relational bonds and needs are also present amongst adolescents in PFC.

Research shows that a thorough matching between adolescent, PFP and BP is of importance to accomplish a stable and permanent placement and also reduces the possibility of a breakdown (van de Vliet, 2013). The relationship between foster parents and BP has an important influence on the bond between foster parents and the adolescent (Andersson, 2009; Moyers, Farmer & Lipscombe, 2005), because a positive attitude of foster parents facilitates the support of BP to their children (Hedin, 2014; Salas Martínez, Fuentes, Bernedo & García-Martín, 2016). Also, the quality of the relationship with foster parents and BP depends on mutual respect, stable visitations, recognition of biological parenthood by foster parents and a clear assignment of BP into the life of the adolescent (De Baat, van den Bergh & de Lange, 2015). Perspectives of adolescents regarding the relational bonds within PFC have not been specifically taken into account in previous research, nor has research regarding to differences of adolescent's relational utterances towards PFP and BP.

CURRENT STUDY

In this article, outcomes are presented of a study answering the following research question: *How do adolescents in professional foster care view their relationship with their professional- and birthparent(s)?* To do so, in-depth interviews and vignette-based interviews with adolescents are examined answering the following questions: (1) What kind of relational utterances do adolescents generally express when talking about their PFP and BP? (2) Which recommendations do adolescents have in enhancing a constructive relationship with PFP and BP? It is expected that the experiences and perspectives of adolescents dependent on the quality of the relationship with BP and PFP, in which it is often seen that a placement can be successful when there is a secure attachments with foster parents and support from BP (Oosterman

et al., 2007). Contribution to the literature field of PFC care is made by specifically examining the experiences and perspectives of the adolescent regarding their relational bonds towards PFP and BP.

METHODS

DESIGN

This study has a qualitative design based on the principles of Empirical Phenomenology (Husserl & Ideas, 1962). The aim of this study is to describe and improve the current practice by focusing and describing on the experience (Boeije, 2010). The design of this study allows for a triangulation approach in which a theoretical base is supplemented with an empirical base in order to come to recommendations for improvement. The flexible character allows the researcher to switch between data collection, analysis and theory in order to expand, confirm or deepen the assertions made (Boeije, 2010). The empirical study was conducted in a two-phase framework in which in-depth interviews are followed by vignette-based interviews.

PROCEDURE

Starting data. The 20 in-depth interviews, which were used for the first part of the empirical study, are part of a larger collection of in-depth interviews which are decreased as part of a large research project 'Jouw Gezin, Mijn Zorg'. For this project 60 in-depth interviews were taken from both PFP (N=22), BP (N=21) and adolescents (N=20). The focus of the interviews was on the different perspectives on cooperation between PFP and BP. A first analysis of the interviews with adolescents showed that they have difficulties formulating ideas on cooperation (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018). However, adolescents do formulate their experiences with both PFP and BP, which is the starting point of this current study.

In-depth interviews. In-depth interviewing is a technique in which participants are asked to tell in-depth stories of their lives as far as it relates to the subject (Mortelmans, 2007). A theory-based sample was chosen in which associated PFC-organizations delivered the participants. Inclusion criteria comprised; (1) the placement of the adolescent must show future perspective, and (2) the adolescent should be between twelve and twenty-one years (i.e. N=19, exclusion of one adolescent). The adolescents, all of Dutch heritage, were primarily female (73%) with a mean age of 15.57 years (SD = 2.27). Placement duration in current PFC ranged from 9 months to 12 years (M = 4.68 years, SD = 3.36). The in-depth interviews were conducted by three different researchers. The next topics followed each other consecutively: (1) demographic variables, (2) placement duration and history, (3) relational bonds with PFP and BP, (4) perspectives on cooperation between PFP and BP and (5) specified situations of cooperation between PFP and BP. All interviews were conducted with only the adolescent within a private room in their PFC, with a duration ranging between 30-60 minutes.

Analyses. The 19 transcriptions were analyzed following the principles of thematic analyses using AtlasTi as a software tool (Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, Namey, 2011). The transcriptions were divided into fragments that are of meaning to the aim of the study. These fragments were grouped, labeled and summarized by the use of codes (Boeije, 2010). Axial coding has led to the reorganization of the codes into code families and patterns (see Appendix II) (Charmaz, 2006). Theory served as an incentive for identifying

the codes, themes and patterns (Patton, 2002). Aim of these qualitative analyses was to bring structure and find patterns in the expressed experiences of the adolescents with their PFP and BP. Internal validity and reliability are guaranteed through a review of procedure in the analyses phase by the supervisor in order to come to the same encoding. This process of coding led towards the distribution of four situational patterns in which adolescents express themselves differently towards their PFP and BP.

Vignette-based interviews. The qualitative vignettes technique is best described as short stories of hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to elicit their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes (Barter & Reynold, 1999; Finch, 1987). The aim of using vignettes for this study was to explore different kinds of actions and occurrences in different kinds of situational contexts and to elucidate variables, in order to provide practical recommendations and to reconstruct theory (Barter & Reynolds, 1999; Charmaz, 2006). All four situational patterns are transformed into typologies that are constructed from actual experiences and pronunciations of the adolescents coming from the in-depth interviews. These vignette-based interviews were conducted with seven adolescents living in PFC who were approached as co-researchers and experts when it comes to living in a PFC (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). A convenience sample was chosen in which seven adolescents were recruited based on their conformity to the inclusion criteria; (1) minimal age of fifteen years old (2) cognitive capabilities to look to possibly personal situations from a third perspective. Four of them already participated in the in-depth interviews, three were newly recruited. Adolescents of Dutch heritage, were primarily male (N=5) with a mean age of 16.8 years (SD = 1.64). Placement duration in current PFC ranged from 5 months to 13 years (M = 6.68, SD = 5.38). Important to note, all these adolescents resided in two different professionalized foster families.

The vignettes were incorporated into a semi-structured topic list (see Appendix III), alongside an interview tool (see Appendix IV) that includes a visual representation of the four different situational patterns of relational towards with PFP and BP and a hypothetical story (i.e. vignettes) for each situation (i.e. situation A, B, C & D). The interview guide and interview tool were reviewed by other researchers for its intersubjectivity, in order to test the usability of the operationalization. The vignette-based interviews took place in a private room inside the residents of the professionalized foster families. Interview duration ranged from 33-41 minutes. Emphasis was laid on the respondents' reactions to the vignettes as if they spoke from what a third party ought to do, feel, need & wish for in the specific situation. The following topics followed each other, per situation, consecutively; (1) positives and negatives, (2) changeability of the situation, (3) positioning responsibility for changeability and (4) needs and wishes. Afterwards, all situations were compared and individually rated with a score (i.e. 1-10) for preferability.

Analyses. The seven vignette-based interviews were first carefully re-listened and transcribed by only stating quotes and fragments that answer the questions of the topic list. This purpose-driven way of transcribing forced the researcher to only focus on quotes and fragments that support the aim of the study, which for this study were quotes regarding recommendations for enhancing a positive relationship with BP and PFP in a hypothesized situation (Bailey, 2008; Boeije, 2010). The analysis of the fragments followed the principles of the thematic analyses (Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest et al., 2011). Next, the fragments were per interview, per situation coded, to be compared next with the other interviews, per

situation (see Appendix VI) (Boeije, 2010; Charmaz, 2006). Theory served as an incentive for identifying patterns, the construction of recommendations for practice, and new theory development (Patton, 2002).

RESULTS

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Relational utterances. During in-depth interviews with nineteen adolescents we found that they, while answering questions, speak out about the way they perceive their relationship with their PFP and BP. These disclosing items, or relational utterances, in the interviews were collected for all adolescents and analyzed. This analysis showed that relational utterances of adolescents towards PFP and BP differ from each other. Nineteen adolescents were categorized following their relational utterances regarding PFP and BP. Relational utterances towards PFP and BP are divided into positive (i.e. strong connection towards) and/or ambivalent (i.e. contradictory feelings and attitudes towards). The distributions of adolescents' relational utterances into the different patterns are shown in Table 1. Next, the different patterns are separately explained and substantiated by quotes out of the in-depth interviews with adolescents.

Table 1

Adolescent relational utterances (i.e. positive or ambivalent) towards PP and BP distributed in patterns including sample size, (M)age in years, (M) placement duration in current FTH in months, and Gender				
<u>Situational pattern</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>(M)age</u>	<u>(M)duration in FTH</u>	<u>Female%</u>
A: PP positive – BP positive	6	14.83	19.5	100
B: PP positive – BP ambivalent	10	16.40	82	50
C: PP ambivalent – BP positive	2	14	39	0
D: PP ambivalent – BP ambivalent	1	15	24	100
Total	19	15.57	54.5	73

SP-A. Characterizing for these adolescents is that they do not blame their BP for not being able to raise them in their own home. They put their BP before their PFP by describing their bonds as special. BP and adolescents meet and have contact on a regular base, with weekends at home and calls or messages throughout the week. The BP are also often seen as family, but the differences lie in that PFP are seen as caretakers, whereas BP are seen and called as true parents: *“They take over the tasks of a mother, so that’s the same, just, your own mom is always more important, because she is your real mother and no one can replace her”* (participant-6). The BP accomplish this by trying to always get closer (i.e. emotionally and physically) to the adolescents, saying sweet things and doing fun activities.

SP-B. Characterizing for these adolescents is that they experience a constant emotional conflict regarding their BP. There are irregular (i.e. maximum once a month) or no contact moments with BP. These adolescents do not want to live with their BP anymore, yet find it important that BP are involved in certain aspects of their lives (i.e. special events). The professionalized foster family is experienced as a safe haven and the members are seen as family: *“If I went somewhere, it felt like a very thick layer of protection was missing and if I’d return home it came back to me. That layer comes from PFP, he offers a lot of protection and I have always liked it”* (participant-5). The PFP provide stability from where the adolescent has the opportunity to personally develop.

SP-C. Characterizing for these adolescents is they have utterances mostly in favor of their BP. They prefer living with their parents over living in PFC: *“Well, if it is up to me, they can drop me off at my mother and never come back.”* (participant-1). There is regular contact between adolescents and BP. The connection towards BP often stands in the way of building a relationship with PFP. Living with PFP feels as a punishment for these adolescents and there is no understanding why they are placed inside PFC.

SP-D. Most characterizing for this adolescent is that she has conflicted emotions regarding both PFP and BP: *“Yes, but it is not entirely up to me and when I’m there it sometimes goes bad and then goes [00:11:03] not just one time, than goes [00:11:09] not only because of me, that’s my mom’s so that’s [00:11:12] learned that I should stop being stubborn about my preferences to live there.”* (participant-4). Contact with PFP is often for practical purposes and contact with BP is irregular.

Vignette-based interviews

Situational pattern recommendations. Next, the vignette-based interviews with seven adolescents showed that they have very aligned views when asked about the different patterns in relational bonds towards PFP and BP. The focus of these perspectives lies in the attitudes and tasks adolescents, PFP and BP should carry out, which were collected and analyzed. Analyses of the vignette-based interviews have shown that there was a difference per pattern distribution on how to act properly, viewed from every persona, (i.e. adolescent, PFP and BP) in the given situation. Seven vignette-based interviews with adolescents answering on hypothetical situations were analyzed. First, Table 2 shows the average mark the adolescents have given to the preferability of the situation on a 10-point Likert scale. Table 3 shows the top three advices per situation in sequence which were most often mentioned. Next, an overview per situation with substantiating quotes will be presented.

Table 2

Average mark of preferability to situational pattern, 10-point Likert scale	
Mean scores per situation	
<u>Situational pattern</u>	<u>(M)Score</u>
A PP positive – BP positive	6.64

B PP positive – BP ambivalent	9.83
C PP ambivalent – BP positive	4.71
D PP ambivalent – BP ambivalent	1.29

Table 3

Top three advices given by adolescents per situation
A: PP positive – BP positive
1. This situation is seen as ideal for a placement within FTH and should be strived for. (N=7)
2. PP may never abolish or reject the right to a visitation scheme to BP. (N=1)
3. Always facilitate and support the contact between adolescents and BP. (N=1)
B: PP Positive – BP ambivalent
1. The visitation scheme with BP should be on a regular base with fixed moments and clear appointments that will be honored by all. (N=5)
2. When PP notices that contact between adolescent and BP is difficult, PP should ask the adolescent about the problem and how to help in order to enhance contact between BP and adolescent. (N=4)
3. PP should have contact with BP in order to possibly motivate contact between adolescents and BP. (N=3)
C: PP ambivalent – BP positive
1. BP should explain in a conversation with adolescent the reason for placement in FTH and why they can't take care of the adolescent. (N=4)
2. BP should agree with the transfer of care onto the PP. It involves a mental approval and insight that the adolescent can receive better care with PP. (N=4)
3. PP should focus their attention to the adolescent, to look for the possibilities in contact, try to involve them in the daily <i>family routine</i> , talk to the adolescent about preferences and put themselves in a vulnerable position opposite to the adolescent. (N=4)
D: PP ambivalent – BP ambivalent
1. PP should cooperate with BP and be on the same line in order to help the adolescent. PP should be initiating this contact. (N=5)
2. PP should invest in the contact with the adolescent. They should be able to adjust their attitude towards the adolescent, open to the possibilities in creating some form of connection and getting involved into important aspects of the adolescent. (N=4)
3. PP should ask for help from an external professional. (N=3)

SP-A. Within this situation, all respondents stated that this is the highest achievable in a relationship with both PFP and BP: *"This situation is the goal."* (respondent-1). Furthermore, respondents mentioned, regarding this situation (it may also be taken as a general recommendation independent of situation), that

every adolescent has the right to a visitation regulation with BP independent of the wishes of PFP, which should always be facilitated and supported by PFP. An adolescent in this situation might be in the position to consider their own development (i.e. education and self-dependence): *“The wish is to keep developing, to do well in school and sport, to eventually become independent.”* (respondent-5).

SP-B. Within this situation, adolescents suggested that the visitations by BP should be on a regular basis with fixed moments: *“I would rather have regular contact with my parents, because a child wouldn’t understand much of it if they’d have irregular contact with your parent. Or if they might think that they would go to their parents, but eventually it would be called off for some sort of reason.”* (respondent-2). This quote states that it is important that appointments must be honored by all parties. Four respondents mentioned that PFP most initiate help and support in enhancing the relational bond between BP and the adolescent: *“If PFP perceive that the bond between adolescent and BP is not going well, PFP could ask the adolescent what’s going on or what’s the problem. Then you also know exactly where you can help as PFP.”* (respondent-3). Three respondents mentioned that PFP should motivate BP in initiating contact with the adolescent, whilst other respondents mentioned that PFP shouldn’t try to involve with BP too much.

Other recommendations given were; PFP should talk with respect about BP, BP should initiate contact with adolescents without pushing it too much, investment into the relationship between the adolescent and BP comes from both sides, and all parties must come together to look at wishes and compromises for all part. Furthermore, adolescents described the importance of a good relational bond with PFP, because adolescents reside most of their time in PFC where sufficient support can be given by PFP. Still all respondents mentioned that any form of contact with BP is very important.

SP-C. Within this situation, four respondents suggested that BP should explain to the adolescent why they were placed within PFC: *“Those BP could talk and explain to the adolescent, it depends on the situation, those parents could certainly tell why they can’t live with them anymore.”* (respondent-3). When this is difficult for BP, PFP could help them. Next, four respondents stated that BP should agree to the transfer of caretaker role by PFP, in order to give the adolescent the freedom to acclimate to the professionalized foster family: *“PFP can be of greater meaning to adolescents if they want to live within PFC. So, if adolescents don’t want to live in PFC, they don’t understand why living in PFC and only want to live with BP, I don’t think that a PFP could be of any meaning to these adolescents.”* (respondent-3). This quote illustrates the importance acceptance of the BP for the placement of the adolescent within PFC. Also, PFP’s first priority, stated by four adolescents, is with the adolescent by initiating contact, involving them in the professionalized foster family and having an open attitude towards them.

Other recommendations given where; PFP should ask BP to or either be advised by BP or try to cooperate with each other in favor of the adolescent, PFP should involve BP into the life of the adolescent by informing them of activities done together, and this situation should be handled with help from an external professional. Furthermore, adolescents describe this situation as being more difficult than a situation where the relational bonds are reversed (i.e. PFP positive – BP ambivalent): *“Because adolescents spent more time with PFP than BP. If your ‘living place’ feels like living in a punishment, not trusting your PFP, you’d literally live within a punishment.”* (respondent-3). Importantly, it is also stated that this situation is most likely to set stage at the beginning of a placement.

SP-D. Within this situation, five respondents suggested that PFP should cooperate with BP for the interest of the adolescent: “*In order to solve this situation, PFP and BP should sit around the table with the adolescent, looking for what the adolescent wants and how PFP and BP can meet him in his wishes.*” (respondent-3). This quote shows the importance of involving the adolescent. Four respondents recommended that PFP should invest in adolescents by adjusting attitude, creating connections and involvement into their lives. Three respondents stated that this situation would be better helped with the involvement of an external professional: “*first, seeking contact with BP. Next, reaching out an external professional for help. Afterwards with all parties around the table.*” (respondent-5). This quote illustrates that the involvement of a professional should be considered as a final resort. Respondents stated that they would wish for to build a positive relationship with either PFP or BP, preferably both at the same time, in order to show an open attitude towards them and building trust.

DISCUSSION

This paper examined the experiences and perspectives of adolescents living in professionalized fostercare regarding their relational bonds with their PFP and BP. Analyses from the in-depth interviews showed that the differences in relational utterances amongst adolescents can be distributed into four situational patterns regarding positive or ambivalent relations towards PFP and BP, in which it is considered interesting that sixteen adolescents experience a positive relationship towards PFP. Next, analyses from the vignette-based interview presented recommendations for PFP and BP regarding attitude adjustments whenever a pattern is situated within PFC. Summarizing, most important findings illustrated that a situation is preferred where relational bonds with both PFP and BP are positive, where a constructive relationship between PFP and BP is present and where PFP and BP both respect and accept each other’s role regarding the adolescent’s life. Conform these results, previous research regarding foster homes states that breakdowns occur as a result of ambivalent relational bonds between adolescent, foster parents and BP (Andersson, 2009).

Adolescents relational utterances towards PFP and BP can be subdivided into positive and ambivalent utterances (Andersson, 2009). It is of importance to note that no adolescent expressed themselves only negatively about either PFP or BP, which can be explained, forthcoming out of Bowlby’s attachment theory (1980/1998), by need for protection and personal development by forming attachments with a possible caretaker (Baker et al., 2016). Still, when only looking at utterances towards BP, results showed that eleven adolescents experience ambivalent relationships towards them. An explanation can be found in a possible history of (sexual) abuse (Steenbakkens, Ellingsen, van der Steen & Grietens, 2017). Unfortunately, this wasn’t taken into account during data collection. On the other hand, ten out of those eleven were able to form positive relations with PFP, showing that it still is possible for adolescents with a troubled history to form positive and supporting relationships with other caregivers (Oosterman et al., 2007). Which raises the question of how, by whom and in what situations is that possible.

Regarding the distribution of relational utterances into situational patterns, overlap can be found in the studies of Ellingsen et al. (2011) and Andersson (2009). Although both studies used a different design (i.e. Q-methodology and longitudinal in-depth study), similarities can be seen in the distributions and overall sample size. For instance, Ellingsen et al. (2011) found three factors which show great resemblance in

content to factor A, B and C of this study. Noticeably, they found that most adolescents (N=15) in foster care had formed positive relationships towards both sets of parents, in contrast with only a mere portion of this study's sample (N=6). On the opposite, the study of Ellingsen et al. (2011) found a greater portion of the adolescents (N=10) experiencing ambivalent relational bonds towards BP and positive relational bonds towards foster parents, in contrast to the findings of three adolescents. Thus, adolescents in PFC seem to have more problems with remaining attached towards BP than adolescents in foster care. Previous research already focused on the differences between children in foster care and PFC (Leloux-Opmeyer et al., 2015), yet differences regarding their attachments towards several caregivers should be examined. Recommendations given by the respondents differ per situational pattern. Interestingly, when looking from another perspective, it shows that each person within this family-centered approach (i.e. adolescent, PFP and BP) has its own tasks regarding the construction and maintenance of positive relationships (Geurts et al., 2012). Research shows that a positive relationship with and between PFP and BP is in the best interest of the child regarding a placement with perspective (Andersson, 2009; De Baat et al., 2015). Within this study positive relational bonds with both sets of parents is seen as the highest preferable, but also timewise seen as the situation which eventually will be or is strived to become. Meaning that all other situational patterns can be seen as developmental stages, in which one or more person(s) (i.e. adolescent, PFP or BP) have a task which needs to be fulfilled in order to reach that stage of positive relational bonds towards PFP and BP. In reality, the transition of these phases is not static as presented within this study, but are experienced as dynamic in which patterns do not always follow each other up. When looking from this perspective, it shows us which recommendations are essential in order to develop positive relationships in PFC.

So, a conclusion can be built when we ask ourselves; which tasks need to be fulfilled, when and by whom in order to develop positive relations? At the beginning of a placement, adolescents often have ambivalent relations towards PFP and positive relations towards BP (i.e. situational pattern C) by presumably experienced divided loyalties (Baker et al., 2013). Presented tasks mainly focus on the acceptance by BP of the placement of the adolescent and the support of PFP to involve them into professionalized foster family. Van der Vliet (2013) already stated that not giving consent to the placement might leave the child in elongated loyalty issues, increasing the risk of placement breakdown (Andersson, 2009; Oosterman et al., 2007). This states the urgency of passing through this phase. Next, a change in preferred relational bonds by adolescent may take place, because a positive relationship with PFP is seen as more of a necessity than positive relationships with BP when looking at the transition dynamics between situational pattern B and C. This suggests that when consent is given by BP, adolescents feel the need of stable caregiver(s) (i.e. PFP) who help them regain the relational bonds with their former caregivers (i.e. BP) and helps them in their personal development (Oosterman et al., 2007). Within these transitions the overall tasks of PFP are to support the adolescent in a practical and emotional way, enable contact with BP when possible and to look for the potential of change into better relational bonds with and between all involving parties (Larkins et al., 2013; McWey et al., 2010).

It is no coincidence that sixteen adolescents experienced positive relationships with PFP, because the average duration of placement within this sample is four and a half years, resulting in a selection bias. Research states that a successful placement depends on the duration of a placement (Oosterman et al.,

2007). Although, when looking at the average duration of placement per situational pattern, it is interesting that situational pattern A has the lowest average placement duration. Future research should take this into account by including adolescents who are recently placed within PFC. Also, the reflective skills might not be fully developed with some of the respondents in the vignette-based interviews. The younger adolescents mentioned that it was really hard to place themselves out of their own situation into a hypothetical one, so some results might be biased by looking at situations from their own perspective and history (Barter & Renold, 1999).

This study contributed to the rather small field of research regarding professionalized foster care by explicitly describing the perspectives and experiences of adolescents from different angles. More insights into the differences in perceived relational bonds between adolescents and their caretakers and how to face difficulties within these relationships contributes to longer healthy placements and less breakdowns. Future research should incorporate a larger set of respondents in order to enforce the results of this study with more causality regarding differences in relational bonds. Next, a longitudinal study should be conducted, following adolescents who were recently placed within PFC in order to examine how differences between adolescents in relational bonds towards PFP and BP may develop over time. Finally, this study emphasizes the important tasks and cooperation of PFP and BP, showing that more research regarding these fundamental assets within PFC should be examined.

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