I'm broken inside but I'm smiling out through my teeth: an exploration of the experiences of parents who have children in foster care

Seán Lynch and Majella Hynan

Introduction

This research paper will focus on the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project with parents who have experience of having a child(ren) in state care. For the purposes of this article, the term 'parent' refers to birth parents. The article highlights the voices of seven parents in relation to their experiences of engaging with foster carers. It focuses on relationships, communication and their perspectives on the current system. Based on the themes of the IFCA 2018 conference, central to the study is the concept of permanence and stability in foster care. This paper discusses the experiences of parents which are explored through an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). The primary research questions are:

- What are parents' perspectives on their relationship with foster carers?

- What are parents' perspectives on their communication with foster carers?

- What are the factors that contribute to a positive relationship and positive communication between parents and foster carers?

- How does the care system itself impact on communication and relationships between parents and foster carers?

The findings that are discussed in the paper relate to parents' lived experiences. A parent's personal sense of powerlessness will be explored, as will their experience of relationships and communication. In conclusion, parents' experiences of the systemic factors that promote or affect stability will be outlined.

Stability in foster care

Stability in foster care can relate to children's feelings, both of connection and belonging, which can be characterised by emotional attachments to adults and siblings (Schofield et al, 2012). Moran et al, (2017) assert that the main factors found to influence permanence and stability were relationships, communication, support and continuity.

Interestingly, themes emerging from Moran et al's study (2017) showed that it is not only the connection between the child and the foster family or parent that matters, the whole system surrounding the child must also be taken into account. In acknowledgement of the whole system surrounding the child (Moran et al, 2017), this study utilised an 'ecological framework' (Bronfenbrenner, 2009), a holistic way of viewing human experience, to explore the systemic factors that may contribute to stability.

While a range of studies focus on the children and the foster carer's role, this research explores where the role of the parent is situated. In exploring factors that contribute to 'placement stability', research has shown that a positive connection to the 'birth family' is a powerful theme (Tobin, 2011). While a positive connection is noted, how is this achieved, promoted or experienced? Parents with children in foster care represent a group whose voices are seldom heard (Höjer, 2011), therefore, our aim is to explore parents' experiences and perspectives. 'The factors that lead to a child both being and feeling stable and secure in their foster home can be divided into 'internal' and 'external' factors' (Moran et al, 2016; Roarty et al, 2018:53-54).

INTERNAL FACTORS

Mental health

Behavioural and emotional development

Age at entry to care

Confidence and self-identity

Prior experiences of trauma, abuse and neglect

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Number of placement moves

Stability of the family structure

Foster carer's ability to cope

Foster carer's health and economic resources

The quality of social and services supports

Differing expectations between the foster family and the foster child
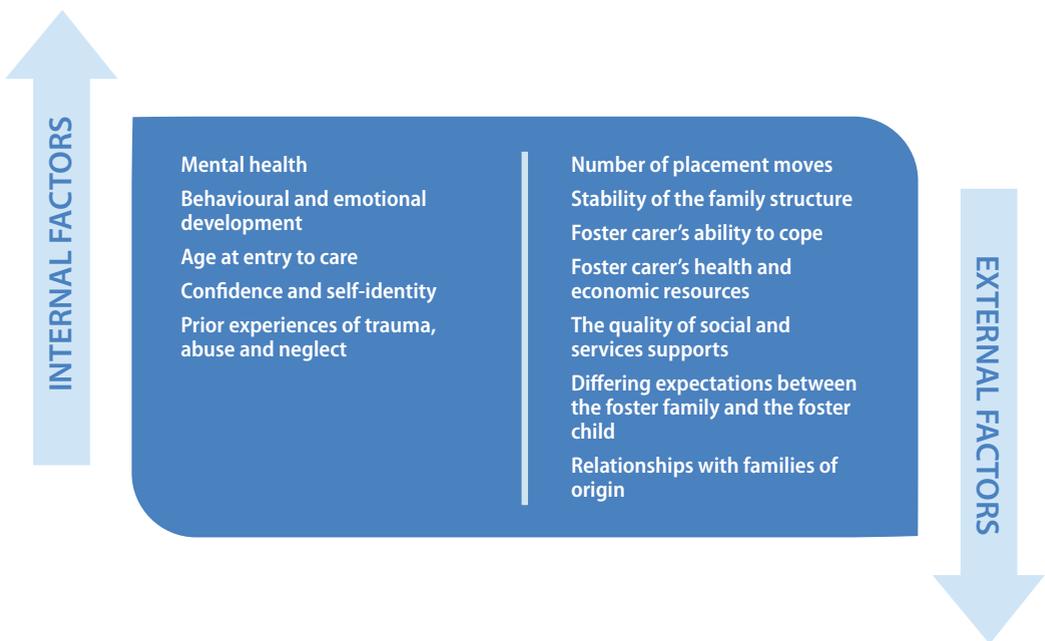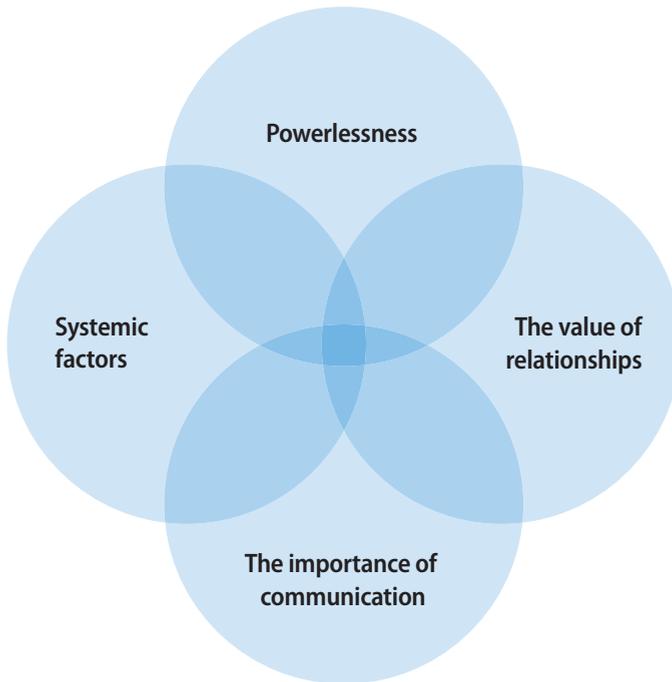
Relationships with families of origin

Figure 1: 'Internal' and 'external factors' relating to children feeling stable and secure in their foster home (Adapted from Moran et al., 2016; Roarty et al, 2018:53-54)

Themes emerging from this research

Powerlessness

" *Emotional over-reactions such as anger, irritability in meetings, during contact, or towards professionals can influence perceptions of parents' stability. Several parents spoke of feeling that they had to hide their true emotions as "it may be used against them".* "

The loss of a child through the care system has enormous psychological effects on parents and can lead to circumstances that Broadhurst and Mason (2017) describe as 'collateral consequences'. The stigma that arises from having children in care can intensify parents' underlying difficulties and this can often lead to crisis. As noted by O'Brien et al (2015:8), the 'anger, frustration and powerlessness' of parents engaging with the care system can militate against meaningful contact. Frustration and the exacerbation of underlying difficulties were evident in parent's experiences. Feelings of powerlessness were cited, with sub-themes of feeling unsupported, alone, isolated and withdrawn from their communities due to stigmatisation. Previous research has asserted that parents felt that society labelled them unfairly as 'unfit' and 'bad parents' and they

are 'powerless in determining their own futures' (Moran et al, 2017:56; Slettebo, 2011; Regan and Riddler, 2010). This was also evident in our study where parents spoke of the stigma they faced in their local communities when a child, or children, was removed from their care:

> "If you have permission to collect your child from the school, and everyone else is collecting theirs... it's like they're looking down at you. It's like everyone's talking about you and you can hear them all whispering. You're standing there, going oh my God they're all talking about me now and you can hear them, you can feel them looking at you... you can hear them nattering."

Many parents are left to deal with the trauma and loss of a child on their own, particularly as they may be ostracised by family and friends due to the stigma and shame of court-ordered removal (Morris, 2018; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014). A parent spoke of the impact that key dates have on her:

> "Birthdays and Christmas, you get too depressed, you are just left there, rotting alone, literally alone, inside yourself, going deeper and deeper and you're trying to find a way out and you're screaming for help."

This parent spoke of her way of coping with stigma in the community and her anger regarding having her children removed from her care:

> "Over the years, you just block it out, you just learn. It's like you put on armour, where you can't get hurt. It's an invisible armour or a mask so when you meet people, you're totally protected inside and they can't hurt you, but you've got to learn how to put these on."

While this parent said she was able to protect herself from the stigma associated with having a child removed from her care, this was not the case for many participants. Reflecting on the complexity of parental experiences, Schofield et al (2011:75) comment that emotional reactions to a child going into foster care are 'powerful, diverse' and that 'often contradictory feelings arise from their experience of loss.' How this manifests can have further consequences for parents. Emotional over-reactions such as anger, irritability in meetings, during contact, or towards professionals can influence perceptions of parents' stability (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018). Several parents spoke of feeling that they had to hide their true emotions as "it may be used against them":

> "When my baby was taken into care, they phoned the next day and when I asked how she

was, the social worker said that she was very unsettled in the foster home during the night.
I wanted to scream down the phone… but I couldn't because it would have been used
against me, so I just said okay, thanks."

Feelings of anger, guilt, and powerlessness were referenced by parents. This sense of powerlessness is also present in recent studies (Morris, 2018; Broadhurst and Mason, 2017; Regan et al, 2010). In a study focusing on mothers, Morris (2018) reported that those who have their children removed by the state are haunted by the shame of being judged to be a deeply flawed mother: '… frequently stigmatised in public forums. Here parenting is collapsed into 'failed mothering" (Morris, 2018:5).

The feeling of having to suppress intense emotions was highlighted by several participants in the research. One parent called for a recognition of the emotions being expressed as natural:

"Well I think the social workers need to understand and fair enough not doing it in front of
your child, but like it's normal for parents to get thick, upset, angry, cross, cry. They are all
natural emotions to have and if you do that in front of the social workers, they can label
you unstable, and say oh your behaviour is erratic, your behaviour is a concern. They are
normal emotions. You come and take someone's child off them, am I supposed to turn
around and say Jesus lads, thanks very much, you're after doing me a favour. I'm going to
go out now and enjoy myself. No, I'm going to be upset, I'm going to cry, it's my child, it's
my baby."

The value of relationships

❝ *In discussing their relationship with their children's foster carers,*
themes of being included and valued emerged in parents'
narratives, and the smallest gestures were greatly cherished. **❞**

Establishing caring and supportive relationships with the foster family is considered a crucial need of children in care (Bell et al, 2015). Furthermore, where these relationships are in the child's best interests, children in foster care generally need continuity of the relationships with their birth family members (Mason 2008; Moran et al, 2016). The importance of forming and maintaining appropriate relationships between parents and foster carers was highlighted, as were the benefits to all involved when this worked well.

The challenges faced by parents included feeling that decisions were made without their input or being isolated in matters relating to their children. In discussing their relationship with their children's foster carers, themes of being included and valued emerged in parents' narratives, and the smallest gestures were greatly cherished:

"I know it's not a lot to people but when you're a parent and you get a birthday card, it's not about the present but it means a lot. I'm never forgotten for my birthday, never forgotten for Christmas, Mother's Day, Easter. Like I'm number one, she makes me feel number one to my children so I've nothing but good to say about the foster carer."

Another parent noted:

"I know they have to care for the children, but it's great when you get included... even though it doesn't feel like you're actually included, like going on trips with them. It doesn't have to be that, it's the little things like the updates and small talk at meetings. Once you tell a mother about her child, she'll relax."

Mutual respect was fundamental, as asserted by this parent:

"There's respect there, there's loyalty from one mother to another mother... if you don't have respect for each other there's no point even in trying to make it work."

Several parents spoke of feeling disempowered even when they were included in events relating to their children:

"I used to go to my daughter's doctor's appointments when she'd be getting her injections. If she was upset at all, the foster carers would get up and take her away. They wouldn't even say did she want to go to me and like I'd find that hard because I'm her mother and she was sore. They never gave me that chance to soothe her or try and calm her."

The relationship with the allocated social worker was discussed, both in its challenges and benefits. A core theme referenced by parents was the feeling of having to navigate supports on their own:

"The best line that I heard that's used by social workers, is I'm not your social worker, I'm your child's social worker. I feel that I cannot go and ask any one of them for help, and yet the child is taken from your care because you've done wrong. Yes, you admit you've done wrong, you're screaming for help, to get better so you can actually have your child home with you. They should actually be there and saying that we're here to support the family, but I don't feel like they're supporting the whole family."

Several parents reported having a positive relationship with their social worker and foster carer, as highlighted by this parent who referenced the benefits of open dialogue:

"It was all about working together, making decisions together. No decisions were made behind my back, I was involved in everything. So that's what made it work for me when I felt that I was involved and included in every decision."

The importance of communication

Open communication between social workers, children and families was seen as having a positive impact on relationships. Parents highlighted the benefits of feeling listened to and being involved in matters relating to their children as well as adequate notice of meetings and contact. When communication was positive, parents relayed:

"I feel like I am involved with my children so that's what makes it work for me. I'm involved… I'm included in every decision, in every aspect of my children's lives. I know my kids are okay, even if they've got the dentist, I don't have to wait to go to a case conference to find it all out."

"I meet [foster carer] on a regular basis. If there is something wrong, she has my phone number, I have her phone number. Of course, we do it including the social workers, we don't go behind the social worker's back and ring each other. We involve everyone, we do it in as safe a way as possible. But it hasn't always been like that, I had to fight so hard to get myself included in my children's lives."

Parents highlighted the importance of being informed and involved regarding their children's lives. Many parents reported that they do not receive enough information about their children and the distress that this can cause was evident:

"I find it hard when I know nothing about my children. I didn't find out for a few weeks that my child had been in hospital…"

Another parent spoke of her baby's first Christmas and the distress that this caused her given that no services were available for contact:

"The foster carers wouldn't and there was no social worker willing to contact me on Christmas day and let me know what my child's first Christmas was like. That was the worst day, like, the day when he was taken off me was bad but Christmas day, my child's first Christmas, that was the worst of all. I know he didn't know what was going on, like, but not to even receive a call, a picture or even an email of my child on Christmas morning opening his presents that I got him, like… it was horrible."

Systemic factors

It is well known that the majority of families involved in child protection experience multiple chronic stressors, including poverty, marginality, family problems, housing instability and social isolation (Kojan, 2010). Relative deprivation involves greater social insecurity and a range of risks are associated with income poverty (Featherstone, 2016). Stressors associated with parenting in poverty, 'including a lack of access to appropriate support services, are likely to impact upon the quality of parenting and increase, but do not accurately predict, the probability of maltreatment' (Hyslop et al, 2018:6). Following the removal of a child from their care, the sense of 'loneliness and isolation impacts severely on parents' mental health, their ability to cope with everyday routines and how they manage relationships with foster carers, children, and social workers' (Moran et al, 2017:57). Parents said that navigating services was a challenge and that the pace of change was frustrating. A parent spoke of waiting for over five years for their contact to be increased, despite remaining sober:

> *"It's been so hard because it's their way or no way. I'm doing the same thing for five years. It's been a long time. I should at least deserve to be getting her for the full day. Everything they've asked me, I've done. This is some test. I'm clean and they're telling me how good I'm doing and this and that but it's no good telling me how good and then still give me two hours (contact) a month."*

Another parent spoke of feeling alone in accessing supports:

> *"When they get foster carers, they get them help, give them a link worker, tell them about the Foster Carer's Association or whatever but when you're the parent, it feels as if they don't want to know you. You've to climb out of that bed, with a heart that is broken into 1,000 pieces and find help for yourself and try and look for it yourself."*

This parent spoke of their frustration regarding the weight given to parenting capacity assessments:

> *"All hope can be taken from a parent as fast as you blink your eyes. I think it's very unfair because when you've been put through so much, going into treatment, coming out of treatment, linking with all these services, proving clean urines, and bang… a parent capacity assessment says you've been through too much trauma to parent your children. It's just more trauma on top of trauma."*

Child protection is practiced in a context of uncertainty, risk and deep anxiety (O'Sullivan, 2018; Featherstone, 2016). Foster carers' and parents' relationships can be

strained, given the varying perceptions regarding the best interests of children and the challenges in understanding each other's perspectives (Browne, 2002). Considering the role of the social worker in overseeing the child's welfare in a statutory capacity, as well as tasks like facilitating contact, this is a difficult context in which to build relationships with parents (Connolly et al, 2016; Regan et al, 2010). Several parents spoke of the difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships with social workers and the challenge that meeting a newly allocated one and 're-telling your story' can have. One parent noted:

"You could have a social worker, then all of a sudden you'll get assigned a new one and at the start, they ask questions like 'how are you feeling', and I'm looking at her…what do you want me to feel? I'm broken inside but I'm smiling out through my teeth… F… off and leave me alone. How am I feeling inside? You live in my shoes and have your children taken from you and then tell me how you're feeling inside…"

Social work turnover was frequently cited:

"I know she was working for the child but she took the time to actually tell me what needed to be done and supported me in getting into services but they moved her on too quick and then they brought in another one. It's rare that you actually get a social worker that sits down and looks at where the parent needs to get and gives that extra support."

The sheer complexity of engaging with the wide range of professionals within the system was described as overwhelming by parents.

"…there was so much going on with so many different people and so many different meetings, everything going on and like you're going through the loss of your child being in care and it's so confusing to take it all in and actually be able to remember times, dates, meetings, who said what. There is so many different people involved, and they all have different roles. It's so hard to, like, take on all those different people, and you're just sitting in there then, and you're like… you kind of feel lost."

Conclusion

This research-in-progress provides an insight into the experiences of parents who have had children in state care. Emerging from this study is a recognition by parents of the role of foster carers in their children's lives and the assurance regarding their children's wellbeing and safety. The research process identifies the challenges faced by parents in navigating supports that are primarily focused on their child. Salient points are

highlighted by parents in relation to the need to feel supported as part of a family. While child safety is central, viewing the child as being part of a family is evidenced in parents' narratives and provides much for us to reflect on. In exploring the factors that contribute to 'stability' from a parent's perspective, this study highlights the value that parents attach to being included and involved in matters pertaining to their children. As was highlighted by Devaney et al (2018), parents value everyday expressions of support, that is to say, a friendly word, empathy, and time, and this study also speaks of the 'ordinary work' of building and maintaining relationships which takes extraordinary skill and ability. What is emerging from the voices of the parents heard so far within our research is, that where attention is paid to that 'ordinary work' of supporting communication and relationships between parents, foster carers and social workers, this pays dividends in terms of parents feeling respected, included, and therefore more open to participate in the care plan for their child(ren). Given the importance of positive connection to the birth family (Tobin, 2011), increased parental participation can only promote better outcomes for children in care.

About the authors

Seán is a CORU-registered community social worker at Limerick Social Service Council. He is currently undertaking a PhD in Social Work at University College Cork, where he also lectures in mental health and supervises social science research in the Applied Social Studies and Adult Education Departments. Sean's research interests include refugee resettlement, 'cross-cultural' work, and social work responses to trauma and distress.

Majella has worked since 2009 at Limerick Social Service Council CLG as an advocate for parents who have children in care. Majella also works as a psychotherapist at Limerick Social Service Council's Counselling and Psychotherapy Service. A graduate in psychology, she holds a Master in Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy from University of Limerick. Since 2012 she has been a student of the Diamond Approach, as an ongoing support in her work.

Acknowledgements

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