

RESEARCH BRIEFING PAPER

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT BREAKDOWN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

WHAT IS THE STUDY'S BACKGROUND

This research study was undertaken by Sinead Tobin, BSS, NQSW, MScASR, as part of the degree of Masters in Applied Social Research, Trinity College Dublin. The specific topic of placement breakdown was chosen, as, from the outset, the researcher, through her experience as a social worker with the Child and Family Agency, had a keen interest in the issue of placement disruption. This interest was founded from that fact that, both from an anecdotal and experiential point of view, disruption appeared to be a significant and escalating challenge within the care system. Presently, there is a substantial body of literature, albeit predominantly international, on the phenomenon of foster care placement breakdown, which reveals the pervasiveness of breakdown, with some studies citing prevalence rates ranging between 20% (Minty, 1999) and 47% (Wilson et al, 2000). The existing body of literature also highlights the harmful effects of disruption, or what Brown and Bednar (2006) refer to as the 'cost' of placement breakdown, to all parties involved including the young people, foster carers and indeed social workers.

In light of the prevalence and known negative outcomes connected to placement breakdown, much of the literature on disruption has focused on examining risk and protective factors associated with breakdown, and therefore these studies have, overwhelmingly adopted quantitative approaches (Unrau, 2007). A clear and considerable gap in the literature on disruption is that very few studies have gone beyond examining the predictors, or what Barber and Delfabbro (2004) refer to as the 'sterile indicators', of placement breakdown and little is known about the lived experience of placement disruption for those mostly closely involved in it, particularly the young people themselves (Rostill-Brookes et al, 2011). To redress this gap, the researcher chose to interview young people who had been in care and who had experienced foster care placement breakdown.

WHAT IS THE STUDY'S PURPOSE

In its broadest terms, the purpose of the study was to generate an in-depth understanding of young people's experience of placement breakdown. Conceptualising 'breakdown' as an experience, rather than an event, reflecting a greater sensitivity to what is a highly intimate and emotive reality for

many children living in out of home care. Furthermore, the study aimed to add a new dimension to the substantial body of literature on why placements end prematurely and to build upon the limited knowledge on young people's experiences of placement breakdown.

HOW WAS THE STUDY UNDERTAKEN

In line with the study's aims, and with particular consideration for the intent to focus on personal accounts, the researcher adopted a qualitative approach. The merits of a qualitative approach aligned with the study's research objectives; as such an approach allowed the researcher to delve into important personal issues, to elicit meanings, to understand experiences and to re-construct events (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Within the qualitative approach, the core data collection method utilised in this study was in-depth individual interviews, a data collection technique which allowed the researcher to explore fully all the factors that underpin participants' answers, be they reasons, feelings, opinions or beliefs (Legard et al, 2003).

Historically researchers have experienced strong barriers to negotiating access to children and young people with care experience (Gilberston & Barber, 2002 and Daly & Gilligan, 2005). This in part, relates to the various ethical issues associated with such research. Therefore access negotiation was a pivotal issue in this study and the role of the gatekeepers was ultimately crucial to this research project (Denscombe, 2007). The researcher identified four gatekeepers from two agencies, EPIC service and Aftercare workers, and via these gatekeepers, six young adults, who had previously been in care were interviewed about their experiences of foster care placement breakdown between May and June 2013.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS

Profile of the participants

The findings of the research study are based on the narratives garnered from the six young people who bravely shared their highly personal experiences of foster care placement breakdown. Notwithstanding the reasonably small sample size, the participants offered much diversity in their profiles, experiences and provided in-depth and emotional narratives. The participants were two males and four females who varied in age from 19-24 years, and who hailed from various places in, and outside, of Ireland. There was a wide variety in age at first reception into care (ranging from 2-15 years), in how many admissions to care the young people had experienced (between 1- 4),

number of care placements (from 2 up until 11), length of time in placement prior to breakdown (ranging from 1- 7 years) and the placement types, including relative and general foster care, mainstream residential, secure care placements and children's detention centre. However, a common trait for all participants was the experience of vast placement instability during their lives in care, specifically; in total the six participants reported a combined number of 41 care placements.

Instigators of Placement Breakdown

In terms of the immediate precursor to breakdown, foster carers were most frequently cited as the individuals who brought about an end to the placement, followed by the young person him/herself as instigators of the event. Social workers and the social work service were also part of the young people's construction and description of breakdown. Young people provided diverse accounts of why foster carers ended the placement, which included: changes in the foster families' circumstances and their relationship with the foster carer's birth child, "*her daughter didn't want me there*", moves which, for the participants often occurred quite suddenly. In other cases, foster carers were described as ending the placement on foot of cumulating difficulties and arguments over time. In several accounts of placement breakdown, young people positioned themselves as central to the premature ending of a placement. Some young people provided accounts of feeling treated poorly in their foster homes and, in a parallel narrative, a number also described feeling "drawn back" to their birth family. These circumstances led some young people to purposefully jeopardise and ultimately terminate their placement; participants described, particularly at a younger age, a pattern of running home. While others depicted themselves as choosing to move on.

Social workers and social work services also featured as contributing to placement breakdown, albeit to a lesser extent than foster carers or the young people themselves. Social workers were criticised for ending placements without adequate justification and for not having rigorously assessed their foster carers. However, social workers came under heaviest criticism for not involving or communicating with the young people around times of placement disruption, an issue discussed in further detail below.

Influences on Placement Breakdown

Broader than the narratives of the eventual cause of placement disruption, this study shed light on how vulnerable placements can be to many external influences. Of particular importance to placement stability within this study was the relationship between the child's birth and foster

families and the child's relationship with other children in the foster placement. The strong and influential connection that participants had to their birth family, and the impact of this connection on their lives in care, emerged as a powerful and pervasive theme in the data. In all but one case, when participants were asked about important people in their lives, a birth parent or sibling was named. Many young people articulated resistance to being separated from their parents and also, and at times, very intensely, to having a 'substitute' family. A sense of internal and personal conflict emerged strongly from the narratives. Indeed, many accounts of these feelings and emotions offer insight into the challenge participants faced in trying to incorporate 'two families' into their lives. A 22-year-old female described the experience of moving to a care placement at the age of ten years: *"I didn't really want to go to a foster family. The night that they told me that Mam had passed away, my first reaction was like, 'I'm not going to live with a foster family, I am not, under any circumstances!"* [Female, 22 years].

In recalling disrupted placements, foster carers were depicted as discouraging the development and maintenance of birth family relationships, a feature viewed as resoundingly negative by young people. One young person recalled developing a relationship with her biological father and highlighted the contrasting roles of two different foster parents in this regard: *"When I met (my father), I didn't know him very well, and my (former) foster parents had it in my head that I shouldn't trust him, he's a bad person, they brought up all this emotional stuff that I didn't actually have so I was very, very confused. So I didn't want to speak with him, didn't want anything to do with him ... But I only really got close to him in the last two years.... with (current foster carer), I see my dad so many times a week"* [Female, 19 years]. Alongside accounts of foster carers discouraging birth family contact, there were also narratives of birth parents actively undermining foster placements. Again, this was viewed negatively by those young people who talked about this experience and such accounts highlight the conflicted positions that young people frequently experience within substitute care, particularly when placed at the centre of opposing and fragmented relationships.

Another potential area for vulnerability was that of the young person's relationship with other children in the home, which emerged as a dominant theme and a topic which evoked very powerful recollections and emotive language from the young people. In all but one of the foster placements, the participants reported that there were other children, either the foster carers' birth children, or other children in care, in the foster home. Poor relationships with the foster carer's children were perceived as casting a negative shadow on the participant's feelings about the placement. Feelings of being treated differently were prominent in these narratives and a number of the young people recounted times when they were blamed for items that went missing from the household: *"When she (foster carer's birth child) was leaving she'd lock her door, if something went missing she'd say I*

stole it. Another young person told that she was isolated and excluded by the birth children *“Don’t come near my room....you don’t have anything to do with me”*. A majority of the narratives related to the participants’ relationship with the foster carers’ birth children; however it is clear that all children in the placement, including other children in care, influenced participants’ overall placement experience. For example, one young person felt a deep sense of differentiation from another foster child in the home. This participant related the child’s length of time in the placement, to her sense of belonging within the family: *“the foster daughter, maybe she’s adopted now.....she’s there since she’s born so she’s practically like they’re daughter”*. [Female, 22 years]

Along with accounts of the other children in the foster home treating participants differently, several accounts strongly emphasised that foster carers also treated them less well than their own children, *“the mom would constantly be doing things with her daughter take her shopping, take her out, but would never involve me in those things so I was always left home”*. This sense of feeling treated differently was distressing and weighed heavily on the participants. There was a general sense from the participants that the foster carers’ birth children ‘could do no wrong’, demonstrating Butler and Charles’ (1999) hierarchy of value and proving to be a real obstacle to settling and feeling ‘at home’ with a foster family.

Conversely, but likewise, positive placements were overwhelmingly depicted as ones in which participants had a good relationship with the foster carer’s birth children. Similarly, positive foster placements tended to be those in which the foster carers facilitated and encouraged positive birth parent and sibling relationships. In terms of the latter, a theme which emerged as particularly constructive in this regard was the role of relative care placements. When discussing her separation from her siblings, one young person explained that: *“It wasn’t that bad like, it wasn’t bad at the start, like cause me (relative carer) like, like they’d all go to each other’s house, like so we’d (siblings) still get to see each other like”* [Female, 19 years].

Experiences of Placement Breakdown

Another prominent theme to emerge from the young people’s narratives of placement breakdown centred on the sense of disempowerment experienced during the disruption process. The young people commonly recalled being partially, if not totally unaware of difficulties in their placements, or of the risk of their placement ending. Some participants were given notice prior to their placement ending, however as they were unaware of placement difficulties, they were often shocked by the development. *“When they said ‘you’re going’ it was like, do you ever get the feeling, like your blood*

has drained from your body and you just feel like you're going to hit the floor? And I was like okay, when am I going? And they (foster carers) said you're going in a week, after you finish school. So I finished in first year and I was gone and all in a week" [Female, 24 years]. From the above quotation, it is apparent how disempowered young people can feel in the disruption process. The experience of breakdown is also juxtaposed with normal teenage life, offering a genuine insight into the reality of disruption for many young people.

For those with notice of the disruption, the waiting period ahead of the move was portrayed as a very difficult time *"Awh, they (three days' notice) were the worst like ah....all I done was sat up in the bedroom and done nothing andI'd be just sitting there, I felt like I was, like a little ghost or something"*. However, participants often did not have a 'waiting period', as the young people more commonly reported that they were provided with no advance information or notice about the need to move. *"I still remember, I got dressed, came out (of) the shower (and) the social workers were there. I got told to go to a car and I was like 'oh maybe they're taking us for lunch somewhere to talk' but then the car was loaded with our stuff and we were like 'woah wait what's going on?' and that's what happened.....from me coming out of the shower getting dressed, right into a car, two hours later I was in somebody else's house" [Female, 19 years].* This account demonstrates the abrupt and unexpected nature of placement breakdown and also illustrates the sense of shock surrounding the event for several of the young people. While it is somewhat inevitable that some placements may end in an unplanned way, social workers invariably came under severe criticism for their failure to share information with the young people about their next placement. Indeed, many accounts shared the experience of young people having had no involvement or participatory role in this process. *"... the social worker just dropped me at a door and just said like "Shannon that's Rita, Rita, that's Shannon" like. Like she could have at least stayed in there for like, like ten minutes like, like d'ya know what I mean? I was only bleeding eleven or twelve at the time like" [Female, 19 years].* Permeating many accounts was a shared sense of disempowerment and loss of control over their own destiny, a situation which was exacerbated by their lack of involvement and participation in crucial decisions governing their lives. In this respect, the young people were left almost completely disenfranchised in the ending process.

The Impact of Placement Breakdown: Loss and Shutting Down

A unanimous theme for the participants was that placement breakdown was a time of profound loss, even for those who welcomed the ending of the placement. To provide some background to the exploration of the theme of loss, participants in this study had experienced several losses and

adversities prior to the experience of placement breakdown. Placement moves, and specifically placement breakdowns, acted as a further source of loss for these young people. The losses were felt and manifested in different ways, including the loss associated with leaving the placement, leaving their physical home, loss of relationships with foster carers and their families, loss of friendships, loss of belongings, loss of siblings, and the loss of power over one's destiny.

Another feature of the participant's narratives of the impact of placement breakdown was of the loss of self-identity. *"I just think that, meself, that I don't know like I just, I just went off the wall like when I wasn't living there anymore. Like I was just a completely, completely different person like"*. This narrative illustrates a common account of the loss of 'one-self' and self-identity following a placement breakdown. Profoundly, one young person recalled that the impact of the instability while in care meant he had lost recollections and memories of a number of years of his life: *"Like, there's three or four years of, when I've lived in and out of foster families, that I can't remember"*. [Male, 19 years]

A universal theme to emerge from this study was that participants responded to placement breakdown, and often to the lack of knowledge of the breakdown and of their onward care plan, by 'shutting down', being dismissive or, in attachment terms, building 'a suffering skin' (Beaumont, 2012). It was striking that few participants had ever discussed the 'event' of the breakdown, let alone the experience or impact of the disruption, with others. One participant appeared to enact 'shutting down' during the interview, as her voice became very low and she presented as closed and cautious. This participant stated: *"This is probably the first time I talked about that (placement breakdown)...so that's why I don't know what to say"*. [Female, 22 years]

Some young people specifically named 'shutting down' as a coping mechanism used to counterbalance the uncertainty which accompanied breakdown, while others alluded to emotionally withdrawing. In terms of the former, one participant stated: *"I really think (children in care) should be given information ... because otherwise you're going into the place with that mentality like 'I was just abandoned here'... and then they start to shut down"*. For others, shutting down was less explicit, as participants often described that they learned to cope with feelings of unhappiness by being *"quiet I wouldn't say nothing, I'd sit there and just be quiet...and stare and not talk like"*. Indeed, the accounts of many indicate that shutting down was not simply a temporary mechanism used during the period subsequent to the placement breakdown, with several young people stating they had continued to 'shut down', avoid and deny into their adult life. *"I can't talk to counsellors, d'ya know what I mean?I tried, but I just shut down and I walk out"* [Male, 19 years]

One young person offered a particularly powerful metaphor of how, at twelve years of age, she dealt with feelings of sadness and anger following her first placement breakdown: *“A great way to describe it is a swan.....what does a swan do with its feet underneath the water? Go mad fast with their feet. And that’s what it’s like; you kind of bottle everything up and its racing around inside (looking calm) on (the) outside perspective, but inside, its racing!”*. This metaphor offers an invaluable insight into a developed coping mechanism and serves to highlight how young people can become adept at disguising their emotions to the outside world. The narratives also shed light on the impact of instability on future placements by linking the experience of uncertainty to a future inability to build relationships with foster families. *“I didn’t know like whether I could become fond of someone in a house like or anything, because I didn’t know whether I was gonna get moved or not like, I could be like there for a week or I could be there for like two months, could be there for two years”*.

Along with ‘shutting down’ emotionally, the participants also described feelings of isolation, and loneliness during placement disruption. One young person repeatedly stated that she went ‘downhill’ following the breakdown of her most recent placement, her physical and conceptual home of five years, and to cope with this loss, she tried to escape and ‘block out’ these emotions: *“It did have a very big impact on me, it still does like, even though I’m not there for like nearly a year and a half like, two years like..... I just feel like, it went downhill after that. Like when that placement broke down like, me meself.....like I was taking more drugs, it could have been to block everything out like. It could have been to say like “this isn’t really happening”, although it was like but I don’t know like, it wasn’t nice anyways.” [Female, 19 years]*

Indeed, along with emotional consequences, this 19 year old male described instability in care as having physical repercussions: *“When I get stressed as well my skin would go really bad, I have psoriasis, so that always got bad when I moved from house to house”*. Regardless of the participants’ views of disrupted placements, overall, negative effects dominated young people’s narratives of the impact of the breakdown on their lives. Disruption was experienced as a loss, and a common mechanism used to buffer the effects of this experience was to shut down emotionally.

WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS?

This study has offered a nuanced understanding of young’s people experiences of placement breakdown, in this respect it had added to a limited body of international literature, while it has offered an essential insight into the Irish context. The findings shed considerable light on external

influences that can work to prevent young people from settling into a foster placement, as well as ways in which their experiences of day to day family life are very often fragmented. This study further highlighted that disruption can leave a lasting and deleterious impression upon young people. Placement breakdown is an issue deserving of further and immediate attention both within research and social worker services and practice. The final section of this briefing paper will focus on recommendations in relation to the latter.

Foster Care: A Fragmented Life?

As set about above, this study has identified that some of the wider influences at play which often make placements vulnerable, and moreover that these pressures are as important as narratives of the immediate precursors to placement breakdown. Two influences and sources of fragmentation are of particular interest: first, the child's position at the centre of birth and foster carer's relationships, and second, the complex adjustments required when there are other children in the foster home. Many of the young people maintained powerful connections to their birth families throughout their lives in care. However, marrying and trying to simultaneously belong to two families, proved to be a difficult task, and one in which young people found themselves stretched in all directions (Butler and Charles, 1999). Ideally, young people, birth families and foster carers would work in partnership with one another. However, in reality, working in partnership is perforated with difficulties, conflicts and ambiguities (Thoburn et al, 1995). The impact of fraught relationships on the child can be significant, with foster and birth families often experienced as two separate and mutually exclusive worlds, a situation which frequently leaves the child with divided loyalties (Murphy and Jenkinson, 2012). The personalised accounts of the young people illuminate how they are often placed at the centre of, and fully exposed to, conflicting and opposing relationships, leaving the placement vulnerable to disruption and the young person with powerful feelings of fragmentation.

From a practice perspective, these findings suggest that social workers individually, and social work services in general, need to prioritise and invest in the promotion of co-operative relationships between birth and foster families. It has previously been suggested that effective partnership hinges on the foster carers' ability to accept the birth families' on-going and ever-lasting physical or emotional place in the child's life (Butler and Charles, 1999). This study's findings clearly support the importance of this suggestion, however, the findings also reveal that a co-operative relationship is not simply the sole responsibility of the foster carers; rather, it is dependent on the commitment of all parties to developing inclusive and respectful relationships. In this regard, specific intervention,

such as a mediation service for all parties, particularly in long-term foster care arrangements where there is an active involvement of birth parents, merit consideration.

An additional source of fragmentation identified in this study centres on the child's relationship with other children in the foster family, particularly but not exclusively, the foster carers' birth children, which was an especially emotive topic for young people. The findings lend additional weight to the full body of research on placement breakdown, which indicates that placement success can be dependent on, or at the very least influenced by, the young person's relationships with the other children in the placement (Barber and Delfabbro, 2004; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Butler and Charles, 1999; Kalland and Sinkkonen, 2001; Swan, 2002; Twigg, 1995). Again, these findings build upon Butler and Charles' (1999) study by adding renewed insight into the dynamics at play, specifically the differentiation children in care often feel, which appears to be particularly exposed when there are other children in the foster home.

The importance of the role and input of foster carers' birth children is recognised in Irish child care standards and policies (Department of Health and Children, 2003). However, in Ireland there is little knowledge or understanding of the extent to which this is prioritised in practice. This study did not include foster carers' birth children as participants; however, the accounts of young people with care experience suggest that that social work services need to focus attention on, and directly support, foster carers' birth children. They further suggest that specific support and intervention is crucial to assist all members of the foster family to adjust to a 'new family life' and negotiate new family dynamics.

A Disenfranchised Position

This study's findings suggest that young people were disenfranchised and disempowered throughout their lives in care, and particularly so during times of placement disruption. Specifically, young people in this study generally felt that they had little ownership over decisions made about their lives; they frequently recalled disruption as a time of great uncertainty and often found themselves in a position of 'not knowing'. These findings are highly consistent with the existing research which has had young people as research participants (Barber and Delfabbro, 2004; Rostill-Brookes et al, 2011; Sinclair et al, 2005). Given the paucity of knowledge in Ireland, these findings offer a valuable and unique insight into Irish children's experiences, and the highly personalised and emotive narratives of this experience, extend a powerful dimension to the limited international knowledge.

The disenfranchised position young people hold during their lives in care, and particularly at times of disruption, along with the cost and impact of disruption, highlight the pivotal role that social workers play in young people's lives and experiences. From a practice-based perspective, to counterbalance children and young people's disenfranchised position during their time in care, and particularly at times of crises, such as placement disruption, and for them to be included and empowered, social workers must dedicate time to getting to know the young people, prioritise building positive and purposeful relationships, act as strong advocates for them and their views and, quite simply, listen and try to understand them (EPIC, 2010; Murphy and Jenkinson, 2012). For service provision to diminish the likelihood of placement disruption, or at a minimum, ensure that when disruption does occur, it is managed in a child sensitive and centred way which facilitates a positive onward move, the service needs sufficient resourcing such that social workers are in a position to afford time to develop good relationships with the young people in care, and to make informed professional assessments and decisions, and, as will be set out below, to utilise theoretical and empirical knowledge to support the young people.

Individual and Societal Costs of Placement Breakdown

In keeping with previous studies, foster care placement breakdown was found to have deleterious effects on young people (Rostill- Brookes et al, 2011; Unrau et al, 2008). The findings of this study offer valuable insight into how young people cope with their feelings and emotions during times of disruption, a topic yet to be given much attention within research, with an exception of the study of Unrau et al (2008). Consistent with this study, shutting down emotionally was a very common mechanism used by the young people, who explained that they often masked and/or blocked out their emotions from others. However, the findings extend upon Unrau et al's (2008) study, and suggest that 'shutting down' not only places a significant emotional burden on young people, but it also may jeopardise their relationships in subsequent foster placements. This finding offers a more nuanced understanding of why the experience of one placement disruption can form part of a self-perpetuating cycle which threatens future placement stability (Rich, 1996).

This study's qualitative approach and use of young people as the only informants, offers valuable insight the wide ranging losses that young people frequently endure alongside the breakdown of a placement. These findings extend upon the study of Unrau et al (2008), in that placement breakdown typically involved multiple losses, including loss of home, school, friends, siblings and self-identity. Irish research on children's overall care experience (Murphy and Jenkinson, 2012) has recommended that social workers have, and utilise, a theoretical perspective of loss and grief to

support young people when they are first received into care. However, in light of the finding that placement disruption is a time which involves further and often multiple losses, consideration should also be given to social workers drawing on theories of loss and grief to support and understand young people around periods of disruption.

Moreover, given the complexities involved in providing out-of-home care and the numerous influences on the stability of care placements, placement breakdown is likely to continue to be a recurring feature of the child care system in Ireland and elsewhere. Therefore merits of social work practice also drawing from principles of a resilience-based approach which encourages and promotes protective factors in the young people's lives to buffer against future experiences of adversities, such as placement breakdown, are clear (Fernandez, 2007; Gilligan, 1997). The findings support Unrau et al's (2008) view that while theories of attachment, grief, and traumatic stress help us to understand the negative consequences of multiple placement moves, theories of resilience can be used to shape more sensitive policies and practices in foster care.

Placement breakdown and general care instability is clearly costly to the young people themselves but it can also prove costly for others, including foster carers, social workers and society at large (Brown and Bednar, 2006; Lally, 1991). In terms of the latter, many of the participants in this study had been placed in, and availed of, services that are costly to the state including: incarceration, placement in secure care and high support cares settings, prolonged admittance to mental health services and use of homeless and drug services. While the necessity of these placements may not be directly correlated to the experience of placement disruption, it is widely accepted that placement breakdown can be harmful to a child's development and is associated with poorer outcomes, specifically those related to educational attainment and emotional and behaviour difficulties (Darmody et al, 2013; Daly and Gilligan, 2005; Rubin et al, 2007). Consequentially, there are clear moral and social, as well as economic, reasons for seeking to ensure that social work practice and intervention with young people in out-of-home care is focussed on reducing disruption.

Notwithstanding the negative focus of the study, namely the premature endings of foster carer placement, the findings also suggest that foster care can and has played a positive role in young people's lives. When asked, all young people recalled at least one positive placement and indeed some placements that had ended prematurely were remembered positively by the participants and despite the ending were framed as playing constructive roles in their lives. The last words of this briefing paper will reflect the findings of what young people want from foster placements, which is: to develop good quality relationships with all members of the foster family, to have a sense of acceptance and belonging within their foster home, to have a unified family life where birth and

foster parents have civil and co-operative relationships and finally, and perhaps most powerfully, they want their views and perspectives to be asked, listened to and acted upon.

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