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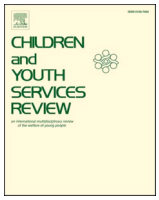

Roots and routes: navigating family identities and relationships in non-kinship care☆

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ABSTRACT

The placement of a child into a foster family alters and redefines existing family structures, having profound implications on the sense of family belonging of various stakeholders. However, studies on family perspectives in foster care often focus on only one or two specific groups, frequently overlooking the insights of children of foster parents and parents. Addressing this gap, our study takes a holistic approach by exploring how (former) foster children ($n = 5$); parents ($n = 4$); foster parents ($n = 10$); children of (former) foster parents ($n = 4$) and foster care workers ($n = 4$) in Flanders (Belgium) understand family and how they articulate family relationships and the tensions and complexities that may arise in navigating these relationships in non-kinship care. All were involved in a placement for at least two years. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis and relational dialectics theory. Five dialectics were identified in the narratives of participants: family members and non-family members; family belonging and family ambiguity; equal treatment and differential parenting; in the best interest of the child and in the best interest of all children; and imposing and nurturing bonds. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for research and practice, highlighting in particular the urgent need for a more inclusive and equitable foster care system that pays attention to the often marginalized voices of parents and children of foster parents.

1. Introduction

In families where children live with their biological parent(s), the fusion of biological and social relationships often provides a sense of belonging and family identity. Non-kinship foster care lacks this intrinsic foundation, often raising complex questions about belonging and who qualifies as "family." Foster children in non-kinship care navigate multiple transitions – moving between birth families, foster families, and at times residential care settings – that require them to constantly reconstruct their sense of belonging within both old and new relationships (Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020; Wulleman et al., 2023).

Research indicates that a crucial factor in feeling like family for foster children is equal treatment within the family unit (e.g., Driscoll, 2019). Foster children report finding validation in being treated similarly to other children in the household, engaging in typical sibling conflicts, or spending nights at adult foster siblings' homes (Andersson, 2009; Biehal, 2014). Additionally, recognition by extended family members, such as grandparents or uncles, or their foster parents classifying their children as their grandchildren reinforces their sense of belonging (Schofield, 2002; Thomas et al., 2017). Foster children describe family relationships as a continuous process, needing time to build, adapt, and, in some cases, rebuild (Boddy, 2019; Boman, 2022; Kearney et al., 2019). The period after leaving foster care can be particularly meaningful, as many former foster children reconnect with birth family members they had not previously been allowed to visit (Driscoll, 2019; Kearney et al., 2019) or assess the durability of bonds with foster families as their official ties end (Schofield, 2002).

In addition, the act of placing a child in a foster family significantly changes the family relationships of several stakeholders, who all have to reorient themselves and redefine their (family) roles and relationships. To understand these dynamics, Wulleman et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of stakeholders' perceptions of family in kith, kinship,

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and non-kinship care. They identified several meanings of family, including 'connected by biological and legal ties', 'connections rooted in roles of love, duty and care', 'family is forever versus temporary care' and the dichotomy of 'family as a private versus public concept'. These findings also highlighted key tensions, such as the fine line between devotion and duty, especially noticeable in kith and kinship care where looking after the child is often viewed as a family responsibility, and the role ambiguity felt by those involved (Holtan, 2008; Oke et al., 2013; O'Neill, 2011). Non-kinship carers, for example, faced the challenge of simultaneously being caregivers, parents, and advocates. Similarly, a mother was conflicted about how to sign off her letters to her children in foster care – whether to use 'mom' or her first name (Welch, 2018).

Of the 16 studies included in Wulleman et al.'s recent review, ten involved foster parents (Hicks, 2006; Holtan, 2008; Kiraly et al., 2015; Miller-Ott, 2017; Mörgen & Rieker, 2022; Oke et al., 2013; O'Neill, 2011; Welch, 2018; Wissö et al., 2019; Wood, 2018), seven included foster care workers (Gavriel-Fried et al., 2014; Hicks, 2006; Johner & Durst, 2017; Kiraly et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2017; Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2021; Studsrød et al., 2018), two included parents (Holtan, 2008; Morris et al., 2017), and one included children of foster parents (Sità & Mortari, 2022). Notably, only four studies addressed more than one stakeholder group (Hicks, 2006; Holtan, 2008; Kiraly et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2017), underscoring the limited scope of existing research.

Collectively, this literature reveals two critical research gaps: (1) the majority of studies focus on only one or two specific groups within the foster care system, and (2) there is a disproportionate emphasis on the perspectives of foster children, foster parents, and foster care workers, while the voices of biological parents and children of foster parents remain largely absent. Addressing these gaps, the current study is among the first to comprehensively include multiple, interconnected perspectives within the same framework. By adopting a holistic approach, it captures a broader spectrum of family perspectives in non-kinship care. This integrated approach enables a more nuanced understanding of relational dynamics that are otherwise fragmented in the literature. Such a comprehensive view is essential for uncovering the multifaceted and often hidden dynamics of family in foster care, potentially informing more inclusive policies and practices that resonate with *all* stakeholders.

To this end, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do foster children, parents,[1] foster parents, children of foster parents,[2] and foster care workers in non-kinship foster care understand and articulate their family relationships?

RQ2: What tensions and complexities do they experience in navigating their relationships?

1.1. The Flemish foster care system

In Flanders, foster care operates under the guidance of Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, an umbrella organization overseeing five regional services that manage the recruitment, screening, training, and support of foster families. These services are responsible for matching foster children with suitable foster families, facilitating contact visits, and providing ongoing support and training for foster parents (Verreth, 2009). Family foster care in Flanders is defined as a voluntary arrangement in which a foster household ("pleeggezin" in Dutch) cares for one or more foster children under the supervision of a foster care service and receives an expense allowance for this support (Hoofdstuk 1, Artikel 2, Decreet houdende de Organisatie van Pleegzorg). The system aims to establish a "shared parenthood" model where foster parents and birth parents collaboratively support the child, with reunification as the primary goal once the birth family environment stabilizes (Vandenbroeck, 2018).

In recent years, the number of children in foster care in Flanders has grown significantly, with a 20 % increase from 7,115 in 2017 to 8,477 in 2022, highlighting a rising dependency on foster care solutions (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2018; 2023). Flemish foster care placements are divided into kinship care, where children are placed with relatives or known adults, and non-kinship care, where children are placed with unfamiliar caregivers. As of the latest data, 67 % of foster care placements are kinship-based, while 33 % are non-kinship (Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Carlier, & Fransen, 2018; Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2023). Our study focuses on participants involved in long-term or "perspective-offering" care, a form of foster care designed to provide stability for children potentially until they reach the age of 25, although the possibility of reunification with parents can be considered at any time (Van Holen, Clé, West, Gypen, & Vanderfaeillie, 2020; Vlaanderen, 2019b).

2. Method

2.2. Study design

This qualitative study used focus groups to foster in-depth discussion and allow participants to either connect over shared experiences or share unique perspectives. However, this method turned out to be less successful for the group of parents. The sensitivity of the topic of family, compounded by the placement of their children in foster care and their own histories of complex family relationships, led to a reluctance to share their narrative in a group setting. Additionally, some potential participants expressed a preference for having a third person, like their foster care worker, present for support during the discussion. Therefore, after renewed approval by SMEC, the research strategy for the 'parent group' was adjusted to individual interviews with the possibility of support from a third person, which was effectively the case in two interviews.

2.3. Development of the interview guide

The interview guide was developed in close collaboration with four care leavers to ensure that the questions and wording used in the interviews were authentic to the experiences of people who had been in foster care. The authors identified three overarching themes central to the study: the meaning of family, who is considered family, and the process of maintaining or becoming family. Drawing upon these themes, the four individuals, in partnership with the first author, constructed an initial interview guide. This initial guide underwent multiple rounds of revisions based on feedback from both fostered individuals and the authors, culminating in a final set of open-ended questions. In addition, we created concentric circles in which participants had three circles to write down who they considered family in terms of closeness.

2.4. Recruitment

Pleegzorg Vlaanderen facilitated the recruitment of participants through distribution of our recruitment materials, including flyers and videos. Participant demographic information can be found in Table 1. For confidentiality, participant information has been anonymized, and no identifying details are disclosed.

2.5. Data collection

Due to COVID-19 limitations, all focus groups and interviews took place virtually via Blackboard Collaborate and Microsoft Teams between March and December 2021. A total of 27 distinct participants were involved: current and former foster children ($n = 5$); parents ($n = 4$); foster parents ($n = 10$); children of (former) foster parents ($n = 4$) and foster care workers ($n = 4$). Each participant had to be involved in a non-kinship placement for at least two years. To clarify, each target group was an isolated entity, meaning, for example, that participants in the focus group with foster parents were not the foster parents of the

[1] The biological parents of a child in foster care.

[2] The biological and/or legal children of foster parents.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants.

Focus group	Identified Gender	Age range	Highest level of education obtained	Ethnicity	Household composition	# FC*/FF* throughout life	# FC now
(Former) foster children	3 women (60 %) 2 men (40 %)	20–35	2 secondary education degrees 2 bachelor's degrees 1 master's degree	2 people of underrepresented ethnic groups 3 people of the dominant ethnic group	2 students, living with foster parents and their children 2 living with partners with or without children (in one case foster child) 1 living alone with biological children	1–4 foster families	2 currently in foster care 3 formerly in foster care
Parents	3 women (75 %) 1 man (25 %)	35–55	3 secondary education degrees 1 bachelor's degree	2 people of underrepresented ethnic groups 2 people of the dominant ethnic group	2 living with partners and his/her/x children 2 living alone	1–2 foster families	/
Foster parents	6 women (60 %) 4 men (40 %)	35–70	2 secondary education degrees 1 bachelor's degree 7 master's degrees	1 person of an underrepresented ethnic group 9 people of the dominant ethnic group	8 living with partners and with or without children 2 living alone and with or without children	1–15	All were in ongoing foster care placements with 1—4 foster children in their care
(Former) Children of foster parents	3 women (75 %) 1 man (25 %)	18–40	2 bachelor's degrees 2 master's degrees	4 people of the dominant ethnic group	3 living with partners and with or without children 1 living with parents and (foster) siblings	1–15	1 ongoing foster care placement with 2 FC 3 completed foster care placements
Foster care workers	4 women (100 %)	31–45	4 bachelor's degrees	4 people of the dominant ethnic group	4 living with partners and with or without children	/	/

FC* = foster children.
FF* = foster families.

participating (former) foster children.

To ensure a comprehensive representation of the Flemish foster parent community, a second focus group was organized as the first group was not sufficiently representative in terms of gender and sexual orientation, according to the participants themselves, Flemish foster care workers, and us as researchers. Participants for this second group were recruited with the help of foster care workers. Foster care workers were asked to search for homosexual, non-kinship foster parents who were caring or had cared for one or more foster children for at least two years.

Before commencing, participants completed a short survey to provide background demographic information. Focus groups lasted approximately three hours and were audio-recorded. In terms of group dynamics, each focus group was moderated by the first author, who asked the questions, monitored the time, and ensured that participants took turns. She was assisted by a master's student who was also responsible for resolving technical issues and completing an observation form. Following each session, they debriefed, identifying key topics, unexpected elements, and group dynamics. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were also audio -recorded. The first author was the interviewer for all interviews, and third parties were asked to interfere as little as possible. To increase the validity of the study, member checks were conducted in which participants were asked to verify the data reported in the results to ensure that they genuinely represented their views.

2.6. Data extraction and analysis

All focus groups and interviews were transcribed manually. To analyze the transcripts, we first followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as described by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019): (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data by thoroughly reading the transcripts several times, capturing ideas, and making notes; (2) creating initial codes using Nvivo 12 and developing preliminary categories and a coding structure. Each code was either descriptive or created in vivo, i.e. the researcher used the participant's own words to summarize the data. Logically, coding was an iterative process that required multiple rounds; (3) searching for themes by reviewing and organizing the initial codes; (4) reviewing and refining the themes by checking their coherence and consistency with the data set and creating a coding tree; (5) defining and naming the themes by creating clear definitions for each theme and naming them to accurately reflect their content; and (6) discussing the themes and structure of the first draft. During this discussion, we realized that certain nuances of participants' perspectives were lost during coding, as the first author recalled that participants' meaning-making was not straightforward; their meaning-making was often inconsistent or internally contradictory.

To delve into these inconsistencies, we incorporated an additional layer of analysis based on Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) as outlined by Baxter and Braithwaite (2008). According to the RDT, each relationship contains a unique set of internal and external dialectical tensions that are neither inherently positive nor negative. These dialectical tensions are natural and constantly in flux, which is central to meaning making, and therefore require management rather than resolution (Baxter, 2004). The analysis consisted of: (1) identifying contradictions within and across themes and codes; (2) analyzing how tensions played out across stakeholder groups and whether there were similarities or differences within or between groups; (3) assessing temporal shifts by setting up individual cases for participants in Nvivo 12 and tracking any shifts in their narratives that might indicate changing perspectives or inherent contradictions and tensions; and (4) refining the remaining six tensions by presenting and discussing them with a group of researchers from the fields of education and psychology, resulting in five remaining key tensions. In our analysis, we deliberately used 'and' rather than 'versus' to describe these tensions to emphasize the dynamic interplay between the tensions. Taken together, the initial RTA offered a broad understanding of family perspectives that could be deepened through the RDT by exploring the underlying tensions and contradictions within these perspectives.

2.7. Reflexivity

It is important to emphasize that while our team has extensive knowledge in foster care literature and policies, none of the researchers grew up in foster care. However, one author is a kinship foster parent and another author has indirect experience with out-of-home placement due to a family member's placement. As the first author, I want to acknowledge that there were times during the research process when I felt uneasy about forcing participants to focus on being 'different' from the normative family. While I never implied that they were, my questions about their family identities and the way they defined their family relationships certainly did at one point.

3. Results

We identified five core tensions in participants' experiences: (1) family members and non-family members; (2) family belonging and family ambiguity; (3) equal treatment and differential parenting; (4) in the best interest of the child and the best interest of all children; and (5) imposing and nurturing bonds. As the focus groups and interviews for this study were conducted in Dutch, relevant quotes have been translated into English.

1. Family members and non-family members

During the concentric circles exercise, participants highlighted a 'gray zone' consisting of people who are not family but cannot be reckoned as non-family as well. The boundary between family and non-family members in the exercise thus failed to fully encapsulate the subtle dynamics of their relationships:

> I don't necessarily see them [previous foster family] as family, but they are still more than non-family – Gaëlle (foster child).

> It's still kind of family, I still have a connection to them [previous foster children], but it's different – Laurie (child of foster parents).
> The half-siblings of my foster child, well, I don't know. I don't see them as family, but it wouldn't feel right to call them 'not family' as well – Sophie (foster parent).

In addition, reckoning someone as family, non-family or something in between was sometimes in flux. This was influenced by factors such as visiting arrangements, unpredictability of the duration of the placement, specific moments or life stages. For instance, some foster parents indicated that their foster children's family identity fluctuated depending on how much contact they had with their parents at any given time. In their efforts to create a supportive environment, foster parents had to adjust to these fluctuations, while making sense of their own family identity:

> If she sees her own mother often, she'll point out that she doesn't belong here, and then when I say that she belongs to me, she replies: "I don't belong to you at all, I belong to my mother." In such phases, when she emphasizes that we aren't family, I don't comment on it. We usually don't talk about it unless she says something about it. That's just the way it is … – Sara (foster parent).

The unpredictability of the duration of placement sometimes uncertainty encouraged a reluctance to consider foster children fully as "real family members." Laurie, a child of foster parents who cared for many children over the years, described a protective mechanism in response to this uncertainty:

> I used to differentiate between my real brothers and sisters and my foster sisters but now I see them [foster sisters] as my sisters. (…). But I imagine that if they stay here – I don't know how long they'll stay – if they're here for another 10, maybe 15 years, they'll be more like my real siblings and that bond will be forever. If they go home within two years, maybe not. I think that's a protective mechanism. That's something you don't know for sure and that makes a difference in how … It doesn't mean you like them any less, but somewhere in the back of your mind is the thought that this isn't my real sister – Laurie (child of foster parents).

2. Family belonging and family ambiguity

The narratives shared by participants highlighted a recurring dialectic of both certainty and uncertainty in their family connections. For example, Lea and Robert, both children of foster parents, initially referred to their foster siblings unequivocally as their brothers and sisters and were certain that their foster siblings also considered them family. In the course of the focus group discussion, however, they articulated a more nuanced perspective:

> She [foster sister] didn't come along until I was 16, and I see her [foster sister] as my sister, but it's still a different relationship than the one I have with my sister [biological sister], who I've lived with for so many years, and that blood relationship is something that's there, so I don't want to relativize that either. Because my other sister [foster sister] has siblings and parents that I don't have. That I have no connection to. That's a part of your identity you don't share, whereas with my biological sister I share my parents, grandparents, nieces and nephews, I share everything with her – Robert (child of foster parents).
> Well, I do notice a difference between my two [foster] brothers. M. has a nice biological family that he still visits often. He kind of sees our family as family, but when he has to choose, for example on Christmas Eve, he celebrates with his brothers and then visits us later. Whereas my other brother, who has almost no biological family and doesn't want to have any contact with them, really sees us as his family. (…) For him, I'm 100 % sure that he sees us as family and as parents and siblings – Lea (child of foster parents).

These quotes reveal that the ambiguity often arose due to participants not being integrated into the same family systems. This disjunction led to a sense of partial belonging, where participants felt connected to an individual yet simultaneously distant from aspects of their lives. Chloe, a parent, expressed feelings of exclusion and disconnect, particularly during family events for her child where she encountered unfamiliar faces and relationships important to her child but not shared with her:

> When they throw him a birthday party, they invite me. That's nice (…) However, I don't know most of the people. There are always people there that I don't know and my kid hugs them. Yea … – Chloe (parent).

A vivid example of this ambiguity was the experience of Lea, a child of foster parents, who was hurt because her foster sibling had a tattoo with the names of his birth family, leading her to question where their [the foster family's] place was in that tattoo and his family identity.

In addition, Fiona, a former foster child, understood her role better when she became a parent herself. This enabled her to recognize the care and support that she received from her foster family throughout the years:

> I didn't know what my place was in the family [foster family]. It wasn't until about three to four years ago that I realized, "Okay, yeah, I'm one of them" it wasn't until I had kids of my own that I realized, "Oh, this is what it's like to be a parent, and they've actually always done that for me" – Fiona (foster child)

Participants felt that this ambiguity also occurred with outsiders, as they felt that their family relationships were often unclear to outsiders. When her foster brother died, Carolina's friends and colleagues did not attend the funeral, and she wondered if they would have been there if it

had been her biological brother who had died. She found this confronting, "I still find that … that hurts me. Even friends of mine, which is crazy, isn't it? You'd expect friends to at least inquire about the funeral.".

Linda also recalled that when she was pregnant, people asked her what she would do with her three foster children, thinking she would end these foster placements when she gave birth:

> Who thought that I'd get rid of them because I'm having my own child and that's better or something. I didn't see that coming and that was very hurtful. To this day some people think that my family consists of two kids and 'the other three' that I took in, but they're not like real family or anything – Linda (foster parent).

3. Equal treatment and differential parenting

Foster parents recounted how, before the placement, they received parenting training that prepared them to understand and support foster children who come with their own set of past experiences and challenges, what they metaphorically referred to as 'backpacks.' Alongside this preparation, they were advised by foster care workers to treat the foster child 'as normal as possible,' emphasizing the importance of providing a sense of normalcy. They recalled being encouraged to integrate the foster child into their family and treat them with the same love, attention and care as the other children in their household. Yet amid this integration, foster care workers consistently reminded them that the foster child 'is not your own child' and urged them to navigate carefully within these complex relational boundaries. This balancing act required foster parents to continually recalibrate their approach. Fig. 1 aims to visualize this delicate balance that foster parents must maintain.

Foster care workers acknowledged this "thin rope" and stated it was an inherent part of the foster care system:

> We expect foster parents to treat them as their own children, to take them in as their own children, but it's not their own child, so they can't do this and that. It's a thin rope – Marleen (foster care worker).

The narratives from participants indicated that balancing the foster care workers' advice to treat all children in the household equally with the necessity of attending to individual needs was often difficult in practice. Children of foster parents sometimes felt that their foster siblings received more privileges, freedoms, and parental attention because of their specific needs and challenges. As a result, they sometimes felt jealous, frustrated, and insecure about the imbalance of attention and time:

> He got so much more attention, it was inevitable. As a child, you're so used to it that you don't think about it. I only realized that afterwards. During the vacations, for example, he fell because he didn't listen; he wasn't allowed to jump over fences and then he did it anyway and fell on his face and we had to spend a whole day in a dentist's office. It was always something, and I remember feeling so tired of it, thinking, "Hoooooh (sighs), it's always the same" – Carolina (child of foster parents).
>
> Especially with M. [foster brother], who was the same age as me, I had the feeling that I had to fight for my parents' love. I remember very clearly that M. got some music boxes for Christmas and I wanted a ring, but it was in a little bag and I didn't see it right away and I saw those boxes and I thought "Oh my God, they prefer M. to me" – Lea (child of foster parents).
>
> When it's Easter or something, my sister always says, "We never used to get this many chocolates and presents." For me it's more important that they [foster siblings] also have to help out, for example clearing the table – Laurie (child of foster parents).

Remarkably, when the children of foster parents reflected on their experiences, they often countered their observations with an understanding of the challenges of foster parenting. They acknowledged that their parents may have had to make different parenting decisions or allocate resources differently depending on the child's individual needs:

> My parents were never as angry with her [foster sister] as they were with me. They never yelled at her or anything. If my sisters did something wrong, they were mad at S. [biological sister] and my foster sister just had to help with the chores [punishment]. So it always felt different. It was also difficult for my parents; raising a teenager in their home who wasn't their own child. I'm not saying they should have done things differently … – Robert (child of foster parents).

Parents also experienced the tension between equal treatment and differential parenting when their children were placed in different care settings and one child received more privileges and resources than the other:

> My daughters [in residential care] have a hard time because my son [in foster care] has everything. It hurts that my daughters feel that way and the foster care workers and the juvenile court don't get it. We can't afford that, so we can't buy it for our daughters. That's hard – Kim (Parent).

Although most (former) foster children felt a sense of equality in how they were treated alongside their foster siblings, a few perceived they were treated differently. Some felt favored and noted that they were disciplined less often than others in the household, while a few felt they

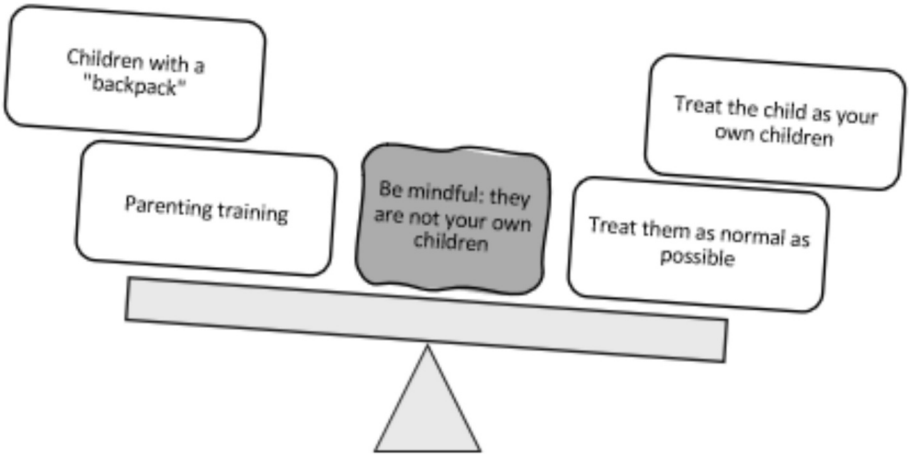

Fig. 1. Graphic representation of the balance foster parents need to find.

had fewer privileges; for example, they noted that their foster family always planned their vacations to coincide with visits to their parents. Similarly, they stressed the importance of being treated the same as their foster siblings, as well as understanding the difficult balance their foster parents had to strike:

> Yea, I sensed the differences and wondered why they were there. I thought, "You can be mad at me!" Now I know they were never mad at me because … I was a bit of a broken bird, so they didn't want to put more in my backpack. Whereas I wanted to be treated as normal as possible, but maybe that wasn't what I needed or could handle at the time. I think they [foster parents] just wanted to do good. I wasn't treated differently because I was their foster daughter [emphasis added on foster], but to make sure I felt comfortable and safe in the family – Fiona (foster child).

In this quote, the differential treatment is not perceived negatively. Instead, it is seen as an affirmation of her foster parents' care and love for her. In addition, some foster children linked their distinct treatment to their own behavior, which tended to be more cautious and conforming compared to other children in the foster family and their peers:

> I was very adaptable. I was never a brute teenager. This is all based on the fact that they [the foster family] took me in and they can sort of say goodbye tomorrow. And of course they never will, but still … you're never 100 % sure. For example, when I was 13 years old, I was in the car with friends and they [friends] were arguing with their parents. They [friends] used swear words and replied with "blah blah blah, whatever." I thought, wow, you talk to your parents like that, I wouldn't dare – David (foster child)

This quote reflects how uncertainty in foster care affects foster children's behavior and may lead to increased caution and sensitivity to preserve their place and relationships within the foster family.

4. In the best interest of the child and the best interest of all children

Although 'in the best interest of the child' stems from policy and legislation for alternative care for children and youth, all participants were well aware of its central role in decision-making. Foster care workers used the principle as a guide during tensions but reported that the principle itself also confused:

> The best interest of the child can mean different things depending on the situation. Sometimes, what feels right in the moment isn't necessarily what's best in the long run. It's tricky – we're often trying to balance what the child needs now with what might be best for their future, and those aren't always the same – Myriam (foster care worker).

While foster care workers pointed out the principle's lack of clarity, children of foster parents, however, highlighted that the principle singularly addresses the foster child, suggesting an inherent prioritization of their needs. Their narratives suggested that this principle may unintentionally imply a hierarchy where the interests of the children of foster parents might be seen as secondary or even sidelined:

> In the best interest of the [emphasis] child. It's not about the best interest of any child (laughs). It's specifically about the best interest of the foster child. Not of all the children in the foster family – Carolina (child of foster parents).
> I get that they wanted to do what was best for my foster brother, but I often wondered where that left me – Lea (child of foster parents).

5. Imposing and nurturing bonds

The vagueness of the 'in the best interest of the child' principle contributes to a dialectic between imposing and nurturing bonds in foster care. Suzy, a foster care worker, reflected on this:

> We sometimes force certain family ties, especially with parents. There are all sorts of reasons why we do this (…). Nevertheless, it is difficult to weigh up whether it is in the best interests of the child or not. Especially with younger children, it's difficult to know whether we need to force a bond with the parents or whether it's better for the child if we don't – Suzy (foster care worker).

Foster care workers explained that they have to manage the balancing act between prioritizing and maintaining the foster child's connections with their parents and safeguarding their well-being, as mandated by Flemish foster care legislation and policy. They emphasized that many foster children value visits with their parents. Also in the focus group with foster children, some expressed satisfaction with their visiting arrangements and felt that they were always listened to if they wanted to change the frequency of contact. However, those who did not have a close relationship with their parents often found it difficult to have their concerns acknowledged by foster care workers and the juvenile court:

> They didn't ask. It was imposed and no attention was being paid to: "Are these moments meaningful? Did this mother really do something with this moment?" which was never the case. It seemed just a box to tick each month, without any follow-up questions or interest in my experience – Fiona (foster child).

Furthermore, foster care workers stressed their reliance on legal decisions made by institutions that may have different views on family:

> For instance, if we prioritize the neighbor over the grandmother in the contact plan due to the child's close bond with the neighbor, the [juvenile] court often finds that absurd. We then have to put in a lot of effort to justify our plan to them – Myriam (foster care worker).
> I've noticed that not all entities we collaborate with, particularly the juvenile court, share our view that family extends beyond biological connections. They tend to have a narrow definition of family. This is especially true for younger children, where there's a strong push for maintaining contact with their parents. While this is crucial for some, it can be distressing and challenging for others, burdening them with the pressure to keep in touch with their parents – Liesbeth (foster care worker).

Further, foster care workers regarded foster parents as key figures in supporting the foster child's relationships with their birth family. Foster parents themselves acknowledged the importance of being actively involved in nurturing these relationships and described themselves as bridge builders:

> Making sure mom has a present for X at his birthday party because she couldn't make it to the store, which of course she says three days before [laughs a little]. Things like that create a sense of family. We have to take a more active role than other people, other parents – Sophia (foster parent).

However, this view also sparked a debate about the extent of foster parent's responsibilities, in particular, whether their role as bridge builders necessitates them to conceal certain elements or maintain transparency:

> But how far should one go with this? I considered buying gifts on behalf of his parents, but my husband was against it. I understood his point of view, because: are we all just playing pretend and creating a false image? It's challenging (…) and kids can tell when the gift isn't from their parents – Amy (foster parent).

When it came to the siblings of foster children, the foster parents were unanimous. They all emphasized the important role of advocating for and supporting the relationships between foster children and their siblings, even if this was not a specific mandate:

> With his stepsiblings, there are no legally mandated contact rights,[3] but I organize monthly contacts. The foster services think it's a great idea, but if we didn't do that, that'd be okay too, which doesn't sit well with me. His mother is grateful that we do that – Sophia (foster parent).
>
> Their siblings reside in a group home but visit us often, especially during vacations when they stay for a few days. It's important for them to stay in contact with each other – Max (foster parent).

Fiona's experience highlights the impact of her half-sister's foster parents' active involvement. Their support not only preserved and strengthened her bond with her half-sister but also expanded her sense of family, as she now considers her half-sister's foster parents to be part of her family too:

> I also consider my half-sister's foster parents as family. They were always committed to keeping my sister and I together. Even though they didn't know me, they immediately said, "Come in." It wasn't like they said, "Go for a walk or go to the playground with your sister" but rather, "You're the sister, there's a place for you at the table, let's eat together." These things make you feel at home ["at home" is how we translated the Dutch saying "ergens kind aan huis zijn"] – Fiona (foster child).

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine how foster children, parents, foster parents, children of foster parents, and foster care workers understand and articulate their family relationships and the tensions and complexities that may arise in navigating these relationships. We identified five core tensions: family members and non-family members; family belonging and family ambiguity; equal treatment and differential parenting; in the best interest of the child and the best interest of all children; and imposing and nurturing bonds.

The concentric circles tool used for this study, which is frequently used in practice, could not fully represent the intricate relationships experienced by foster parents, children of foster parents and foster children. This suggests that the conventional family vs. non-family binary may oversimplify the reality in foster care. Participants frequently referred to an ambiguous middle ground—a "gray zone"—where individuals were not strictly family but also more than non-family. This "gray zone" of family identity aligns with the concept of boundary ambiguity (Boss, 2016), where family ties lack clear boundaries. In foster care, relationships often occupy this "in-between" space, with distinctions between family and non-family shifting based on milestones or changes in relational dynamics (Boddy, 2019; Boss, 2016; Christiansen, Havnen, Havik, & Anderssen, 2013; Samuels, 2009). Similar dynamics are observed in other major life transitions. For instance, Zartler (2011) discussed post-divorce family configurations, noting that individuals must redefine boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and ask, "Who is (still) part of my family?" (p. 181).

Additionally, family relationships were found to be fluid; their definition could evolve over time, influenced by visiting arrangements, the unpredictability of placement duration, or key moments and life stages. For example, some former foster children noted that becoming parents themselves deepened their appreciation and connection to their foster families. This insight reveals that "aging out" of foster care is not a single event but a lifelong process of understanding and reflecting on the foster care experience. This fluidity, as Boddy (2019) describes, involves family ties being "negotiated and practiced across time and in multiple (and changing) care contexts" (p. 2240), encompassing experiences such as moving between foster homes, forming connections with foster siblings, or reestablishing contact with birth family members (Boddy, 2019; Christiansen, Havnen, Havik, & Anderssen, 2013; Boman, 2022; Kearney et al., 2019).

These narratives show that family relationships in foster care are often intertwined with feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity, e.g. when foster family members are not mentioned in a family tattoo, which is in line with the principles of Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Additionally, there were instances of ambiguity perceived by outsiders regarding these family ties. An example of this was the funeral of Carolina's foster brother, where the absence of friends and colleagues led her to question whether their attendance would have been different had it been her biological brother who had passed away.

The unpredictability of placements and the uncertain duration of the arrangement raised questions about long-term commitments and attachments. Some children of foster parents, aware of the possibility that their foster siblings might return to their birth families, approached the sibling relationship cautiously and were sometimes reluctant to consider their foster siblings as 'real' siblings. Laurie in particular, a child of parents who had fostered many children over the years, even before she was born, described a protective mechanism in response to this uncertainty. This aligns with findings from the literature that one of the most difficult losses reported by children of foster parents was the loss of their foster siblings when they moved out (e.g., Williams, 2017). For most children, the loss of a sibling is rare, but for children of foster parents, saying goodbye to a foster sibling is a common and recurring event (Serbinski, 2014; Serbinski & Shlonsky, 2014). Often, children of foster parents are the ones closest to foster children and those who spend the most time with them (Tatton, 2023), yet their losses are frequently unrecognized publicly or within the family (Serbinski, 2014; Sumner-Mayer, 2006). The unpredictability of placements also impacted the behavior of foster children, with some foster children being more cautious and conforming compared to other children in the foster family and their peers. This underlines the reality that the stakes are inherently higher for foster children compared to other children in the foster household.

Children of foster parents were often proud of their parents' commitment to caring for children in need, yet they struggled with the reduced parental attention they received as a result. This imbalance in resources and privileges led to feelings of inequality among siblings, causing emotional strain. This finding is consistent with previous literature indicating that foster children's needs can absorb a significant portion of family resources and parental attention (e.g., Tatton, 2023). Foster parents are aware of this unequal distribution (e.g., Nutt, 2006), with some acknowledging the impact on their own children. As Tatton (2023) notes, "A paradox revealed during the interviews was that whilst the foster carers were using their, often exceptional, parenting skills to help foster children, sometimes their own children felt that the parenting they had received had been compromised" (p. 209). In addition, parents also mentioned how differential access to resources and privileges created a sense of inequality among their children who were placed in different out-of-home settings.

Foster parents received training on how to deal with the 'backpack' of their foster children. At the same time, foster care workers emphasized the importance of treating them as normally as possible, but with the constant awareness that the foster child is not 'their' child. This balancing act required foster parents to constantly recalibrate their approach. Similarly, research highlights the ambiguity of the role foster parents play in the care system, pointing to the complexity of whether they are seen as professionals, parents, or a mix of both (Colton et al., 2006; Southerland et al., 2009; Sprecher et al., 2021). This complexity was vividly described by a former foster parent in Thomson and McArthur's (2009) study as "You are trying to bring up children with your hands tied behind your back – you are not a parent, you are a carer" (p. 74). Research has even reported different outcomes for both child and foster parent well-being based on whether foster parents identified more as parents or as professionals (Blythe et al., 2014; Southerland

[3] This law has been changed since May 21, 2021 (see Wulleman et al., 2024b).

et al., 2009).

The ambiguity surrounding the 'in the best interest of the child' principle, as highlighted by foster care workers, is a well-documented challenge in existing literature. A main drawback of the principle is that there is no clear, universally accepted definition, making it vulnerable to personal interpretation and subjective bias (Hope & Van Wyk, 2019). In this study, foster care workers found it particularly challenging to reconcile short-term and long-term interests under this principle. There is a need to ensure that 'in the best interest of the child' does not become a blanket justification for any action. Notably, children of foster parents demonstrated a keen awareness of this principle's significance. In foster care, the family home becomes part of the public domain and is therefore subject to certain legally established rules – changes to which the children of foster parents must adapt (Tatton, 2023). However, children of foster parents pointed out that 'in the best interests of the child' uses a narrow interpretation of 'the child', creating an overlooked dynamic: a potential hierarchy of interests where the needs of foster children may be prioritized over those of children of foster parents. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the principle contributed to a dialectic between imposing and nurturing bonds in foster care, which focused primarily on balancing the rights and needs of children to maintain contact with their birth family against ensuring their welfare. Foster care workers emphasized their dependence on the decisions of the juvenile and family courts, which may hold different perceptions of what constitutes a family. However, a study by Wulleman et al. (2024) examining Flemish foster care legislation and policy highlights the growing recognition of the importance of individuals who have a special emotional bond with the child.

5. Implications for research

This study underscores our duty as researchers to continuously seek out and listen to the diverse voices within foster care. Parents are often overlooked in studies because they are and have traditionally been seen as a hard-to-reach group (Bouma et al., 2020), a challenge confirmed by our data collection. The foster care workers we contacted often framed them as a vulnerable group and were therefore reluctant to invite them to participate in our study. While this caution is understandable, excluding their perspectives from academic discussions only exacerbates their vulnerability. The underrepresentation of their perspectives in foster care research is particularly paradoxical given that the primary aim of foster care remains reunification with parents. It behooves us that we have an ethical obligation to continue to strive for the inclusion of their voices, which requires the development and application of methodologies that facilitate their inclusion in the academic narrative (e.g., Bouma et al., 2020). On the other hand, the underrepresentation of children of foster parents likely stems from their overshadowed presence in the foster care system, underscoring the need for more comprehensive research that captures a broader range of voices.

In reflecting on the manuscript, I have grappled with the use of 'diverse families' to describe families in foster care. Such terminology raises an important question: Does categorizing families in foster care as 'diverse' inadvertently uphold the nuclear family as the default or gold standard? We do not refer to nuclear families as diverse families, we call them 'families'. Are we really dismantling normative definitions of families if we keep using them as an implicit reference, a yardstick to label what differs from them as 'diverse'? If the term 'diverse families' is applied only to those who do not fit the conventional mold, without encompassing the norm itself, is the term 'diverse' merely a disguise for the word 'deviant'?

6. Implications for practice

The concentric circles technique, commonly employed both in research and practice, was used in our study to explore participants' perceptions of who constitutes their family. However, our findings revealed that the definitive boundary between the circles' 'family' and 'non-family' zones failed to accurately reflect the complex relationships experienced by individuals in foster care. This highlights a crucial consideration for foster care workers: the distinction between family and non-family is not always clear-cut. In reality, there often exists a gray area where individuals reside in an intermediate space between being family and non-family. This nuanced dynamic is depicted in Fig. 2.

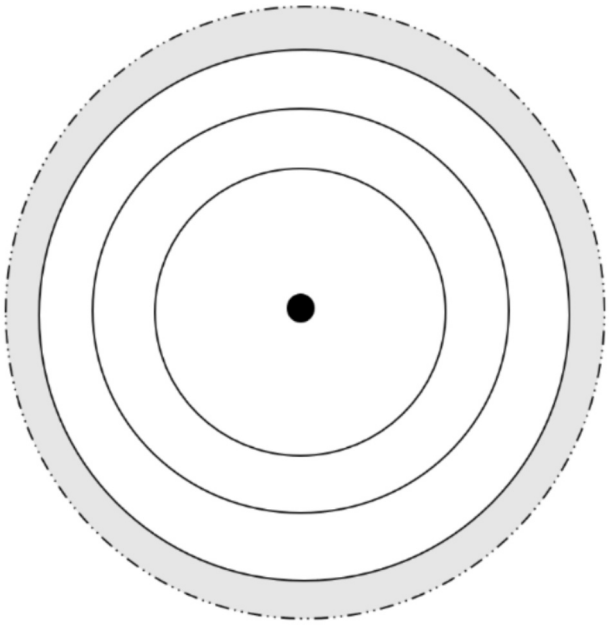

Fig. 2. Graphic representation of the "gray zone" between family members and non-family members in concentric circles.

The focus of foster care workers in Flanders centers on the "foster care triangle" (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2019a), consisting of the foster child, parents and foster parents. Yet, this study, aligning with previous research (e.g., Wulleman et al., 2024), suggests that this model is increasingly inadequate. A more holistic, family-based approach is called for, one that fully engages with and supports the entire foster family unit. This would include acknowledging children of foster parents as key contributors in the foster care journey (Tatton, 2023). Such recognition is important not only to acknowledge their role in the placement, but also to understand their particular challenges, such as the loss of foster siblings or diminished parental attention, and the support they need. The transition to foster care changes the entire family dynamic, with adults sometimes assuming that children of foster parents will adapt seamlessly to these changes and challenges. For instance, while foster parents receive specialized training to manage the complexities presented by children carrying a 'backpack,' children of foster parents are often expected to adapt without similar support. Children of foster parents are important and deserve to be listened to and supported in their own way so that the 'best interest of the child' applies to them as well. In closing, it is vital to equip foster families with the necessary resources to adequately support all children in their care, alongside developing support programs to address the unique challenges faced by children of foster parents.

7. Strengths and limitations

This study provides an in-depth analysis of family dynamics in non-kinship care and brings to light valuable perspectives from various stakeholders, including groups that are often underrepresented in research, such as children of foster parents and parents. The insights gained are critical to practice and underscore the importance of approaches that are both inclusive and responsive to the needs of *all*

stakeholders involved in foster care. However, the study is not without limitations. Our participant group consisted mainly of individuals who identified as women (70 %) and belonged to the dominant ethnic group in Belgium (81 %), suggesting that intersectional research with more heterogeneous participant groups is needed to uncover additional layers of family dynamics in foster care. Examining these dynamics in kinship care relationships, both in placements within one's own network and with relatives, could also provide valuable comparative insights. In addition, the groups of foster children and children of foster parents consisted of participants who were both currently and formerly part of a foster family. Some participants shared their views retrospectively, drawing on memories of experiences often many years in the past. Given the dynamic nature of family relationships, it is common for adults to perceive and interpret their childhood experiences differently as they grow older, and the experiences recounted may not fully align with current foster care practices and policies. However, our analysis found no significant differences in experiences based on the timing of participants' involvement in foster care.

Declaration of generative AI

During the preparation of this work the first author used ChatGPT-4 in order to rewrite sentences and improve clarity and readability. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

7.1. Ethics

The project received ethical approval from the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of KU Leuven (G-2020–2606-R4) to conduct focus groups with five distinct groups: (1) former and current foster children over 18 years old; (2) parents of a child in foster care; (3) foster parents; (4) children of former and current foster parents over 18 years old; and (5) foster care workers. Before participation, each participant provided written informed consent. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and all names, institutions, and other identifying details were modified or omitted throughout the study.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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