

L. Tilly (Ed). Understanding Health and Social Care Research Methods in Context. Routledge.

Chapter 6

Word count without References (including author's contact details, key-words, title describing Table One and Further Reading) **4698**

Word count with References **5082**

Making sense of Complexity: Using Thematic Analysis to understand the role of the Foster Carer

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[Social Work & Inter-disciplinary Safeguarding Practice – qualitative thematic analysis]

Introduction

Although the existence of children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours had been known about in the UK since the early 1990s (Hackett, 2004), surprisingly few studies existed in 2010 (and even today) which described either how those who were unable to live within their own families fared in foster placements, or how foster carers responded to the challenges they presented. Such children and young people were (and are) being placed with foster carers and they and their foster carers were (and are) reporting their experiences, in formal review processes, to their supporting social workers and to each other. At the time when this study was planned however, most of these accounts, and the lessons they contained, remained within confidential case files and in looked after children's review reports. This meant that understanding about what happened within placements, and crucially, whether what happened actually reduced the risks these children and young people presented others, or met their own needs, was not shared widely.

This study then was an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How do foster carers who look after young people who have sexually abused experience and understand their role?
- How do young people who have sexually abused experience foster care and understand the role of their carers?

The intention in undertaking the research was to find out what both groups thought was good and bad about placements, what was helpful and unhelpful, what 'worked' and didn't work and whether there was any agreement between them about this. It was hoped that findings might lead to the development of a practical 'theoretical framework' with which to better conceptualise foster care for those young people who are known to have sexually harmed others, so that understanding between those providing and receiving services might improve, and that what can make a positive difference in these young people's lives might be recognised and shared.

Ethical Issues, Sampling, Recruitment and Methodology

As this was always intended to be an initial, exploratory study it was planned that no more than five carers and five young people would be interviewed and that only experienced carers and older young people who had had both successful and less successful placements would be recruited. The reason for this was that it was thought that these would be more likely to have reflected on their own experiences and therefore to be able to offer considered views and opinions.

The particular young people recruited to the study then were those who were in, or had been in, foster care and who had previously been identified, by either criminal justice or public protection processes as having committed sexual offences or as having presented, what was understood to be a definite risk of sexual harm to others. These young people then were either those whose names were on the 'sex offenders' register' or who had been identified as fulfilling 'local multi-agency public protection arrangements' (MAPPA) criteria at level 2 ('those who present significant risk of harm to others'). Foster carers recruited to the study were those who had looked after young people fulfilling these criteria.

The method planned to encourage participants to talk about their experiences was the 'semi-structured interview'. This is a tried and tested way of enabling people to express their "opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences about sensitive and personal matters" (Denscombe, 2010, p174) and it was also the communication style most familiar to the practitioner-researcher from his professional practice. As many people find it difficult or embarrassing to discuss sexual behaviour (and particularly their own harmful sexual behaviour) very careful planning was required and agreement sought with potential interviewees about which subjects would be discussed and which would not.

While it was necessary then to be clear with everyone that the focus of the study was the foster carer's role in caring for young people who had sexually abused (and therefore that each young person taking part had sexually abused), it was not necessary or appropriate, to discuss with young people the sexual behaviour that had

brought them into foster care. Young people and carers knew in advance then what they would be asked to discuss and understood that they would not have to discuss anything which made them feel uncomfortable.

Following detailed planning, and ethical approval (from the university supporting and overseeing the study, and from my employing agency), potential participants were identified and recruited. Participants agreed to take part in the project after full and detailed discussions about the purpose and methods of the study, and about their rights to anonymity throughout the research process.

In total six carers and three young people took part in the research and all described themselves as 'white and British'. None of the young people were connected in any way with any of the carers and all the young people who took part were male and over the age of 18 years (though they described their experiences of being in foster care as younger teenagers).

The interviews were audio recorded so that they could be transcribed and then interpreted or 'analysed'. 'Analysis' here meant taking the 'raw data' from the transcribed interviews and organising them into meaningful groups or categories representing particular concepts that were thought relevant to the enquiry. Data which had something in common, or were similar to each other in some way, were grouped into initial 'codes' and reviewed against descriptive concepts. If these made some sort of sense, and proved consistent through comparison and testing, these codes were then organised into broader units of analysis or 'themes': First 'sub-themes' then broader 'over-arching themes'. At each level of organisation, data were compared with each other and concepts tested to ensure that they both "cohered together meaningfully within themes and that there were clear and identifiable distinctions between themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p91). Finally themes were defined and named before being reviewed and re-tested through discussions with more experienced researchers. Explaining the analysis to others, to test whether it made sense to them, helped to assess whether 'findings' were what Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Hammersley (1992) would describe as 'credible', 'dependable', 'confirmable' and 'relevant' (the criteria of good qualitative research).

The analysis was explained, and findings from the data gathered from the interviews presented, by first writing abridged and edited accounts of the experiences and views of each of the research participants. This was intended to honour their accounts, amplify their individual voices and 'foreground' their particular stories. These accounts used direct quotations from the interviews and were presented in sections corresponding to each of the interviews which, when combined, represented views (about foster care with young people who have sexually abused) from 'inside' six foster placements. The first three sections presented the experiences, views and opinions of each of the foster caring couples interviewed; the second three, those of the young people about their own experiences of placements.

The mechanism of the analysis of the accounts that provided a view of these foster placements from the ‘outside’ was then described. This analysis was the researcher’s own interpretation of the stories heard and his attempt to identify whether these could be contained within a single conceptual framework that would accurately capture and describe the role of foster carers who look after young people who have sexually abused.

The details of the interpretation and organisation of data, described before as ‘thematic analysis’, is outlined below.

Table One: A summary of the thematic analysis of data obtained from carers and young people describing the role of the Foster Carer in looking after young people who have sexually abused.

<p>(6) Interviews (of between approximately one and three hours duration); Audio recorded and transcribed</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Gathering Data</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>
<p>Two very different quotations or ‘data extracts’ 1) Underlined & 2) in Italics Interpreted through thematic analysis.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Identifying Data</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>“They were there if I wanted to talk about stuff, but you know it was very relaxed; ‘you can come to us if you want, but we’re not going to make you talk about it’” (young person)</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“We told him he had to behave – he had to stay within our view, all the time” (foster carer)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>
<p>(27) Initial Codes generated. Note those underlined and</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Analysing Data</p> <p style="text-align: center;">‘Supervising’, ‘Informing’, ‘Explaining’, ‘Guiding’, ‘Teaching’, ‘Demonstrating’, <u>‘Engaging’</u>, ‘Supporting’, ‘Restricting’, ‘Caring’, ‘Helping’, ‘Listening’, ‘Communicating’, ‘Prohibiting’,</p>

<p>italicised relate to the data extracts below.</p>	<p>'Showing empathy', 'Building self-esteem', '<i>Ensuring safety</i>', '<u>Accepting</u>', 'Assessing', 'Establishing and maintaining boundaries', 'Responding to change', '<i>Managing risks</i>', 'Being available', 'Encouraging relationships' and '<i>Imposing limitations</i>'</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>				
<p>(5) Sub-Themes See relationship with initial codes and data extracts below.</p>	<p><i>Providing Safety and Security</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p><u>Accepting</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p><u>Engaging</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p>Guiding</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p><i>Controlling</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>
<p>(3) Themes See relationship with sub-themes, initial codes and data extracts below.</p>	<p><u>Protecting</u></p>		<p><u>Enabling</u></p>		<p><i>Constraining</i></p>

This table shows the three levels of interpretation that followed the initial gathering and transcription of data. Extracts from interviews are shown here to demonstrate the initial coding of that data and its organisation within different categories and sub-themes. The underlined extract, from a young person's interview about one of his placements, was interpreted then as evidence both of his understanding of his carers' 'acceptance' of him and of their skill in 'engaging' him within the placement. These terms describe both initial codes and sub-themes (underlined here) which were interpreted as constituting aspects of the *Enabling* key theme.

The italicised extract, from one of the interviews with a foster carer concerning their experiences of looking after a young person, was interpreted as an example of imposing limitations, managing risks, ensuring safety, restricting and supervising. These descriptions were organised within the sub-themes described as providing safety and security and of controlling and interpreted finally as evidence of both *Protecting* and *Constraining*.

The first of three essential elements of the caring role identified by this process of thematic analysis then is that of '*Protecting*'. This theme broadly encompasses both the identification and the management of risks within placements and suggests that, as part of their role, foster carers must anticipate, recognise, understand and attempt to reduce risks of harm to each young person placed with them, as well as to themselves and to others. This, participants described, involves establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries and providing supervision of the young person whilst in placement. Protecting here is conceptualised as encompassing the physical and emotional safety of the young person cared for and of others, and as aiming to increase everyone's actual, and felt, safety and security.

The second essential element of the caring role identified through this analysis is defined as '*Enabling*'. This encompasses a broad range of sub-themes describing parenting and pedagogical tasks, including, the provision of physical and emotional care, information giving, explaining, guiding, teaching and demonstrating. It also includes categories identifying less defined activities such as engaging, accepting and supporting. Collectively these seemed to be understood, by carers and young people, as helping the young person to acquire and develop skills, overcome trauma and disadvantage and achieve a positive self-identity. Enabling then, is understood by research participants, as promoting young people's health and wellbeing, equipping them for adulthood and helping them to lead enjoyable and fulfilling lives.

The third main theme identified as an aspect of the role undertaken by foster carers here, is defined here as '*Constraining*'. This describes those interactions between carers and young people which either attempt to control, or are experienced as controlling, through containment and imposition. It suggests actions intended to restrain and inhibit; to restrict choices, limit exploration and curb freedoms. It implies attempts to determine rather than facilitate, steer rather than guide and force rather than encourage.

The relationship between these three core elements is interesting. *Protecting* seemed to be understood by participants either in relation to *Enabling* or to *Constraining*. The young people interviewed then appeared to regard *Protecting* and *Enabling* in very close relationship and almost as interchangeable or synonymous. *Protecting* was enabling for them, and *Enabling* was protecting. In contrast while they offered few examples of being constrained by carers, those they did appear to them, almost the opposite of enabling. They understood that *Constraining* may have been an understandable approach for carers to adopt in response to their past offences, and it may have protected others from them, though in their opinions, it did not provide them, with what they needed in order to grow and develop.

The carers interviewed appeared to perceive aspects of their roles as more distinct. One couple's understanding of the caring role seemed closest to that of the young

peoples' in that *Protecting* and *Enabling*, if not synonymous, overlapped considerably. They likened looking after a young person placed with them then, to "holding a child's hand while he learns to walk and picking him up when he falls". Another couple, in describing how they looked after one particular young person, appeared to regard *Protecting* as more closely related to *Constraining*. They insisted that the only way to ensure the safety of others and to reduce this child's vulnerability was by "locking him away" or "supervising him 24/7". The third couple interviewed seemed to view all three aspects as being in a more dynamic relationship with each other. *Protecting* overlapped more or less with *Enabling* and with *Constraining* depending on circumstances. These carers wanted very much to enable a young person placed with them and to be supported to do this, though they recognised that there were times when they felt it necessary to constrain him and they described being very uncomfortable with this. Eventually they found the strain in managing the tensions between these aspects of their perceived role, too great and sadly, they resigned from foster caring.

Review and evaluation of the study

So, did the analysis make sense and are these findings 'credible', 'dependable', 'confirmable' and 'relevant'? Has it made some sort of sense of complexity?

I believe this exploratory study achieved a number of aims. It has certainly provided useful data about foster care of young people who have sexually abused. It confirmed the importance of providing opportunities for young people and carers to share their experiences of placements and it demonstrated the significant contribution that service users and practitioners can make to the development of 'knowledge and scholarship' (Shaw, 2005) as well as to the evaluation, planning and development of services (Hackett et al, 2006). The study showed me that it is possible to gather sensitive data about a challenging and under-researched area of practice in a way which can benefit those who take part and I believe it has enabled the development of a useful model with which to conceptualise the role of the foster carer in caring for young people who have sexually abused.

Readers though will have recognised some limitations of the study. Principal among these is the very small number of interviews from which data has been gathered. Had I interviewed other carers and young people they would have undoubtedly described different experiences of placements and provided further data with which to explore the questions being asked here and this would likely have allowed me to develop a more comprehensive analysis and perhaps a better understanding of what goes on in foster placements. It would have been helpful then to have interviewed more carers and young people and particularly more carers who had had successful placements and more young people who had experienced unsuccessful placements.

It would also have been helpful to have had an opportunity to test the organisation and interpretation of data offered here through follow up interviews with the research participants themselves. This might have achieved what Denscombe (2010 p299) describes as 'respondent validation' of the analysis and promoted a more participative experience of the research process for those taking part. It might also have provided opportunities to further explore and test the data gathered from initial interviews and to uncover any 'missing' data, perhaps concerning the nature of the relationships between carers and young people. The study undertaken however was the study that was possible for me at the time and with the resources available and while findings from it should be considered in relation to the acknowledged limitations, I believe they raise some important issues for foster carers and for professionals who arrange and support these placements.

Firstly, while it is clear that caring for young people who have sexually abused presents foster carers with particular and significant challenges, I believe this study has shown that these challenges are not insurmountable. Foster care can and does provide some young people who have sexually abused with rich and positive experiences and with the stability and security they need to overcome significant disadvantages and trauma and to enter adulthood successfully (DfES, 2006, p3). These findings then provide support for the argument that foster care should remain an option for those young people who have sexually abused and who are unable to live within their own families.

Secondly, I believe the study has shown that foster carers understand the tasks they undertake in placements very differently. While all the carers interviewed understood that their role involved *protecting* themselves, the young person placed with them and others, they differed in how they thought they could achieve this. Some appeared to think that *protecting* meant *enabling* the young person to achieve developmental goals and independence; others appeared to understand it as involving controlling and curtailing the young person's behaviour in such a way as to *constrain* their development and independence.

The young people who participated in the study also appeared to understand the foster carers' role in these terms. They were clear however that although they had experienced some aspects of their placements as *constraining*, the proper role of foster carers was to *protect them* and others from harm while *enabling* them to achieve developmental goals. This suggests to me a very helpful way of understanding the foster carer's role which if adopted by fostering services might encourage more open and meaningful dialogue with carers and young people about their placements. Effective care of young people who have sexually abused both *protects* and *enables* young people to achieve developmental tasks while less effective care fails to protect, and actually *constrains* young people's journeys towards successful independence.

Thirdly, this study has shown me that foster care can only be a viable option for young people who have sexually abused when foster carers are themselves *enabled* and *protected* to *enable* and *protect* young people. Those who support foster carers then need to understand their role in ensuring that placements *protect* and *enable* both carers *and* young people. I think this offers a very helpful way of understanding the role of the supporting social worker which, if adopted, might facilitate a more open and meaningful dialogue between carers and social workers about their foster placements. *Protecting* foster carers involves identifying and minimising risks to them and ensuring they feel safe: *Enabling* foster carers involves ensuring they understand both their responsibilities to the young people they look after, and how to fulfil these, while supporting them in their role.

The conceptual framework developed here then describes both the role of the foster carer in looking after the young person and those of the service provider and others in supporting the carer and the placement. This means that it fulfils the last of the tests of good qualitative research suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Hammersley (1992), that of 'transferability'; the findings can be applied to other contexts and settings.

The 'Protecting, Enabling, Constraining' framework developed (or the PEC model as I have begun to call it) is certainly broad enough to encompass the particular challenges associated with placements involving young people who have sexually abused and to be relevant to foster placements involving young people who have not sexually abused and its use therefore is consistent with the approach that considers these particular young people 'young people who have sexually abused' rather than 'sexual abusers' (Lovell, 2002). It is also, I believe, broad enough to be able to encompass and therefore complement other more established theoretical models describing foster care and the development of sexually harmful behaviour in young people.

Before being adopted more widely further work would of course be needed to explore whether the model can be applied to different types of foster placements ('short term', 'long term', 'emergency', 'respite', 'remand', 'treatment' for example), to placements involving carers or young people from different cultures (and perhaps to placements involving girls and young women who have sexually abused) as well as to understand whether carers and those who support them, recognise and understand the developmental tasks young people need to achieve and the specific challenges they face in attempting to do so.

It would be particularly important then to explore further whether carers accept a role in *enabling* the companionable non-abusive sexual behaviour of young people who have sexually abused in the same way as they might accept a role in, for example, enabling a young person with a physical disability to acquire mobility skills. Carers in this study seemed to understand that they had a proper role in *enabling* young people not to sexually abuse and to support them to manage their sexual behaviour within

certain boundaries though they were less clear how they might facilitate young people's positive sexual expression.

Application / Relevance to practice

Coulshed and Orme suggest that “to be truly effective, social workers need to be constantly asking ‘why?’ and that it is in this quest for understanding, that theory informs practice” (2006, p9). This project was born out of a desire to better understand the association between theory and practice in social work and to be able to “defend what we, as social work practitioners, think and do, while remaining open to new ideas and fresh research” (Howe, 2009, p205). It provided an opportunity to begin to develop theory and to test this against theoretical models informing practice in foster care and in work with young people who have sexually abused at that time, and it has been a vehicle then to explore the relationship between inductive critical reflection and deductive evidence based practice. It has shown me that “practice (including what service users have to say about practice) is a rich source of social work theory and knowledge that complements and enhances formal theories” (D’Cruz et al 2007; p74).

The method used to gather data here proved appropriate to the practice context and to the type of data sought and also to be effective. This represents a significant achievement and offers future researchers a possible template for engaging service users who are often excluded from participatory activities as well as for facilitating discussions about highly sensitive subjects. The main tool used to collect data here was the semi-structured interview with questions providing both triggers and signposts for discussions about specific issues and prompts for clarification. These interviews provided evidence then of participants’ prior learning about their experiences of foster care and also of ‘learning through reflection’ during the interview. Several participants reported valuing the opportunity provided by discussion to explore past events and suggested that these had helped them to make sense of some very difficult experiences.

Research Method: Semi-structured interviews

These are conversations “initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information and focussed on content specified by research objectives” (Cohen and Mannion, p307). They require careful preparation and a great deal of skill to work for both parties.

Advantages

They are flexible and adaptable

They can provide rich data

Disadvantages

They are time consuming

They lack standardisation which means that researcher biases are difficult to rule out.

(Robson, 2002)

The six foster carers who participated in the study described very different experiences of caring for young people, though they confirmed the nature of the challenges they faced as being to do with understanding and managing the risks of sexual harm they believed those they looked after presented. They understood these risks differently and they approached the management of these risks according to how they perceived individual young people, how they understood their role and how well supported they were by others. Placements were most successful when young people, their carers and carers' social workers shared an understanding about their purpose, and when carers were well supported. Placements were most vulnerable, and stalled or broke down, when carers perceived their role differently from those who were supporting them or when the support they received was inadequate. This suggests that foster carers must receive adequate training and appropriate, on-going support to look after young people who have sexually abused (Sinclair, 2005).

It is important to restate here that this study was conducted ten ago and that since then, understanding about foster care has developed, professional practice has continued to evolve and legislation has been updated. Following the publication by the government in 2007 of 'Care Matters: Time for Change' and its promise to "improve the plight of children in care", National Minimum Standards and Regulations for the provision of fostering services were updated (DfE 2011), and in 2017 the Social Work and Children Act required local authorities and their partners to have regard to the 'Corporate parenting principles' (first outlined in 'Care Matters') in carrying out any of their functions in relation to the children and young people they look after. These have been welcome and transformative developments which have both articulated and clarified the roles and responsibilities of all those providing fostering services to children.

Together they provide a comprehensive and detailed description of the expectations government and society has of its 'corporate parents' and also of how outcomes for children in care are to be improved. My own study represents an attempt to track developing understanding amongst those delivering and receiving foster care at that time of change, and to distil the lessons of experiences from within foster placements. I believe the strength of the conceptual framework developed lays in its simplicity and its ability to link the tasks carers perform with actual outcomes for young people. Very simply put, what carers do in *protecting* and *enabling* is to *protect* and *enable* young people; in *constraining*, carers *constrain* young people.

In summary the strength of this study was that it demonstrated that carers and care experienced young people, have important views and opinions to share about their experiences of placements. Professionals have a responsibility to listen to these, to continue to learn from them, and to share those lessons as widely as possible.

Web Link to full research study

Watt, C, F. (2014) "I couldn't understand why anyone would let someone like me into their house": Foster Care for young people who have sexually abused. University of Birmingham. Available at <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/4778/>

Group activity

Making sense of Complexity: Analysing a conversation with a friend

- Choose two or three partners (fellow students) with whom to have a 20 minute audio recorded conversation about something you all find interesting (for example 'memories of school', 'first day at college/university' or 'what you would do if you won the lottery').
- Separately, listen to the recording you have made and, using pencil and paper, write notes organising your conversation into categories representing particular aspects of the topic you have discussed.
- As you organise the content of your conversation, identify and name the sub-themes discussed and provide an example of each.
- Identify and name two or three overarching themes in the content of your conversation.
- Discuss and compare your analyses with each other and justify the themes you have chosen.
- Did you all make the same sense of your discussion?
- Compare the analysis of your conversation with that offered by Braun, V., & Wilkinson, S. (2003) discussed in Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) listed below.

Further Reading

About the methodology: Part 3 of Bryman, A. (2016). Social research methods. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press (particularly Chapters 17, 18 and 20).

About the research topic: Hackett, Simon (2014) Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. London: Research in Practice Research in Practice Research Reviews, 15.

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