



**RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEMBERS OF THE  
BIOLOGICAL FAMILY IN THE LIFE OF YOUNG  
ADULTS FROM FOSTER CARE**

Daniela Reimer  
University of Siegen

# BACKGROUND AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In different projects: 2006-2011

- 100 biographical interviews with young adults from foster care
- from these projects: developing quality standards in foster care services, but als theoretical analysis: transitions/ family cultures, normality, construals of meaning, resilience

Since 2014: Qualitative Longitudinal Study

- second interview wave with 15 interviewees

# FOSTER CARE IN GERMANY – SOME CHARACTERISTICS

- ❖ Most of foster care in Germany is long term foster care, often quasi-adoption
- ❖ Foster families are in most cases volunteers and not professionals (though they receive some expense allowances as well as supervision and counselling)
- ❖ Contact with the birth family is supposed to be supported - though there has been a large discussion about it up to the 1990s, thus ambivalent attitudes from foster carers and professionals maybe reflected in biographies of our interviewees

# MAIN QUESTION

How do relationships form between young adults from foster care and members of the biological family (with whom they did not spend a significant part of their childhood)?

# TWO CONTRASTIVE CASES


## Marcel

### Interview 1:

In the first interview, Marcel is age 23, has a good, well paid job and is just founding an own family. Marcel entered foster care at age four after an accident and stayed with the foster family until age 19.

During the first years in foster care he had hardly contact with his biological mother, later on he was in regular, very close contact.

He admits that in his birth family there were severe problems with alcohol and domestic violence, but holds the view that he could have stayed with his birth mother. He is convinced that his foster carers had mainly a financial interest in fostering and he considers his birth family as his « real family ».



*(.) then they turned it somehow that I couldn't have contact with my mum for two years, she wasn't allowed to pick me up or to see me and things like that [...] at that time I said I want to get out of this. Because I never understood what was going on. My grandpa was allowed to pick me up, but my mum wasn't allowed to see me, and then we went for a walk in the forest and she sat behind a tree just to watch me! And afterwards I developed a good relationship with her, during the next year, when she was again allowed to pick me up, it has really tightened and ever since that we have ups and downs, like every normal family, I'd said, I do not let stand anything against my mother.*



## Interview 2:

Marcel is 30 years old. Ever since several years, Marcel is switching between periods of being unemployed and precarious jobs. He is separated from the mother of his child, contact with his son is irregular. Since his income situation is precarious, he doesn't have an own flat but stays with different friends including his current girl friend, with whom he doesn't make any future plans. He admits to have passed through periods with intense consumption of alcohol

He is in good and regular contact with his foster family, but has hardly any contact with his birth family. He accuses the birth family – especially his biological mother – to be responsible for his problems in his relationship with the former girl friend as well as his working and financial situation



## Tobias

### Interview 1:

Tobias was age 21 at the first interview. His parents splitted up just after his birth, contact with the father was rare, and Tobias had suffered neglect from his biological mother who was herself mentally ill. When Tobias was age 16, the mother comitted suicide. Afterwards he was in a assisited living group for young people but was overcharged and changed to his uncle and aunt to be a foster child.


Contact with his father is very limited after the mother's dead. From the few meetings he had with the father he describes him as „oddball“, „*totally strange person*“ „*mentally sick*“, „*religious fanatic*“, „*egomaniac*“, who always talks when he meets him but never listens and who is not interested in his son. Looking back on his childhood with his mother, Tobias accuses the father of having left him and the mother alone in a very difficult situation, without caring for them or supporting them in any way.





## Interview 2:

Tobias is 28 years old. A few month before the interview he has split up with his girl friend, moved back into the house of the foster carers (his uncle) and has finished his university studies (master level). Also, he is ever since three month in a very close and regular contact with his father. They share a deep common interest in christian religion, talk a lot about faith and religion and Tobias considers his biological father as his „big example“. He is completely fascinated by the father's life style and his world views.



*„he lives with 70 Euro one month sometimes, he sleeps often simply eh (.) in the car [...] he has no possessions [...] he lives very spirit- yes spiritual, one has to say, yes, well (.) he loves life in simplicity and that's great.“*

*„I have a lot of similarities with him [...] he has, how can I say (.) such a macroscopic thinking, well, he takes always the whole, well, very holistic, this all-encompassing, realising always the big whole, which is more than just the sum of its parts. And I do also have that tendency, very very strong, I always had that.“*

*„I'd say that directly, he is an example. Because I was always that kind of person, I tended always to be like my mother (.) more stressful, very much (.) controlling everything, mastering everything, asserting oneself somehow, being ambitious, (.) and that has disappeared, now during the last years somehow and especially during the last time when he joined even more, somehow.“*

# MAIN TOPICS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

- ❖ Questions about and searching for similarities with members of the birth family
- ❖ A desire of belonging to the biological family
- ❖ Worries and fear about „contamination“
- ❖ Worries, responsibility and compassion towards the members of the biological family and a bad conscience because oneself is „better off“
- ❖ Wish to be able to compensate what the parents have done

# DEALING WITH THESE TOPICS DIFFERS ON A CONTINUUM

---

Establishing  
boundaries

Getting closer

Idealization  
Identification

# CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

- ❖ The relationship with the biological family must be considered as a lifelong topic and challenge for children from foster care - during the time in foster care, children need to get resources to deal with that challenge!
- ❖ Young adults from foster care need support to be able to cope with that challenge (e.g. contact person in a foster care service)
- ❖ In our research: We need to study the dimensions that are interdependent with changes in the relationship with the biological family (relationship with foster family, personal development, etc.)
- ❖ We will need a third wave of interviews to better understand the life long implication