Foster care research in Germany
A critical review

Foster care research literature is dominated by studies from North America, the UK, Australia and Scandinavia. However, there is growing research activity in many other countries, the findings from which need to be incorporated into the international body of knowledge. In this article by Klaus Wolf, eight studies of foster care in Germany are discussed, looking at their aims, methods and conclusions. A model that aids the comparison of studies and identifies common findings is described.

Introduction
To understand a specific branch of research in a particular country, we need to be familiar with the conditions and structures that facilitate the dissemination of research findings. In this article, I will outline the contextual situation of German research as generated by the political system, the organisation of academic life and work in various theoretical disciplines. Then I will present findings from eight studies that have led to significant insights into the process of growing up in foster families. Finally, I would like to suggest how these findings can be related to one another in a synopsis of the kind suggested by the German social philosopher, Norbert Elias (eg 1981, 1984, 1987, 2001).

In contemporary Germany with its population of 82.4 million, there are 50,364 children and young people living in family foster care and 61,806 in residential homes (statistics from 31 December 2005). These figures contrast with those in the UK, especially with regard to the proportions of children placed in foster homes and residential care. In addition, adoption is much less frequent, mainly because of opposition by birth parents. Still, ‘raising children in homes’ can assume widely divergent forms (Freigang and Wolf, 2001), including professional social workers living together with a small number of children in what is a virtually private household but organised, financed and supported by a welfare agency.

In Germany, national law (Kinder-und Jugendhilfegesetz) defines the legal status of both mobile and stationary forms of youth care. The former includes youth counselling, family support and individual help for young people living with their families; the latter comprises residential homes and family foster care. This law also determines professional standards, prescribes procedures for support services and regulates their funding. Nonetheless, it is usually the municipal authorities that have the task of designing and delivering services, and this produces variations in policy and practice, even in neighbouring municipalities. Until a few years ago, there was no tradition in Germany of centralised management, national evaluation or nationwide programmes. However, this is now beginning to change, not least in response to a desire to adopt practices common in the UK. For example, the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth initiated a programme of evidence-based supervision in 2006. But individual German states remain cautious about letting the federal government become too involved in their affairs, and the municipalities are also concerned with protecting their administrative responsibilities.

Foster care occupies something of a marginal position within the political debates on youth care services in Germany. A shift did take place as a result of the demand (repeated with some regularity since the residential home scandals of the late 1960s) to place more children in foster families and fewer in children’s homes, but this process has been stagnating for at least the last 15 years. There are individual districts in which more children are placed in foster families than in residen-
tial care, but this is often simply a manifestation of the personal preference on the part of the administrative head of the district or an influential director of local youth welfare services. Furthermore, foster care services are relatively insignificant for municipal services as a whole, and the social workers involved are often considered to be poorly qualified. Some municipalities are now attempting to establish a more productive structure by contracting this work out to non-government agencies.

These circumstances may explain the fact that, in Germany, quantitative research has neither underpinned service planning nor informed the evaluation of political decisions concerning foster care. Thus, studies of the situation in a specific individual state, such as that in Lower Saxony (Erzberger, 2003), are exceptions to the rule. In universities evaluation research has received little attention, although there is some work in polytechnic institutions, but these establishments have very limited resources for research. Similarly, whenever political agencies assign evaluative projects to non-university research institutes, the results are expected to legitimize political decisions already made rather than take a neutral view. Thus, there is a real risk that the agencies commissioning studies indicate from the start the conclusions they expect to be drawn from that research.

At present, there are no well-established arrangements for cooperation in foster care research between German universities. Pertinent work usually stems from investigating issues that are of theoretical rather than policy or practice interest. Aspects of attachment theory, for instance, are often studied using the experiences of separated children or are applied to inform clinical work with a particular group of children. This type of research is usually carried out by departments of education or psychology, and occasionally, sociology, medicine or law. While the professional target groups are much the same whatever the research setting, the theoretical foundations, frames of reference and methods of publication differ widely. Therefore, findings related to attachment theory, psychoanalysis, resilience concepts, socialisation studies or biographical research tend to appear in isolation and it is difficult to make connections when the knowledge bases of different studies are so varied. At the University of Siegen, we are trying to change this situation in attempts to apply a combination of various theoretical perspectives to the same phenomenon. We are only at the beginning of this process but an international research platform has already been established to further this aim (www.foster-care-research.org).

In practice, we find that professionals take account of research findings in a highly selective way. Thus, for 20 years a controversy has been raging in Germany over the issue of whether foster families should see themselves as replacing the child’s birth family or complementing it – an argument that has polarised almost all of the service agencies. Support for one or other of these positions has serious consequences for the children and for the birth family, as it leads to contrasting practice with regard to such things as planning long-term placements or separating siblings. The opposing sides in this debate tend to stress the findings which support their position, ignoring contradictory evidence and attempting (with some success) to divide the research community. It is only recently that the contestants in this debate have become more conciliatory and research findings stand more chance of being discussed objectively (eg Gehres and Hildenbrandt, 2008).

In light of these circumstances, I wish to present eight significant studies of foster care in Germany. Within this selection I have attempted to provide an overview of relevant quantitative and qualitative research. Most of these studies were dissertations. I will briefly outline the context in which they emerged, their methodologies, the issues considered and the most significant findings.
Lotte Danziger, Hildegard Hetzer, Helene Löw-Beer: Pflegemutter und Pflegekind [Foster Mother and Foster Child] (1930)

In the German-speaking countries, Lotte Danziger and colleagues from Vienna carried out one of the first empirical studies of the acceptance and rejection of foster children. In the first part of their research, they interviewed 200 foster mothers, including some whose placements had broken down. They also carried out extensive interviews with another group of foster mothers (some of whom participated in the first part of the study) on the problems they encountered. Eighty-six of the carers interviewed had returned a child to the care authorities because of problems that had arisen and another 59 were continuing to look after a child under some duress. These two groups were then compared.

The researchers categorised four types of relationship between foster mother and foster child:

- **Type A1** (21% of the sample) was characterised by considerable affection, love, understanding and sympathy for the child, accompanied by considerable leniency in the child’s upbringing.
- **Type A2** (31%) was also marked by affection, love and understanding for the child but in this case, with minimal respect for the child’s wishes and little effort to offer a level of care equal to that given to the carers’ own children.
- The distinguishing characteristic of **type B1** (33%) was the lack of personal affection for the child. While there was some understanding, sympathy and conscientious care, there was little concern about the wishes of the child or about providing care of the quality afforded to the carer’s own children. This approach was usually due to financial rather than pedagogical reasons.
- Finally, **type B2** (15%) was characterised by an absence of affection, understanding, sympathy and willingness to make personal or financial sacrifices. Where this last approach prevailed, the care was usually considered to be inadequate.

The factors that significantly increased the probability that the child would be returned to the care authorities were: when the age and temperament of the child differed considerably from the foster mother’s expectations; when motives for looking after the child were primarily instrumental, such as for financial advantage or to find a playmate for the mother’s own child; and when the foster child showed serious behavioural disturbance or was personally unpleasant. An examination of the difficulties that led to placement breakdown revealed the significance of attributing responsibility to the child for the difficulties encountered:

> As long as the foster mother puts no blame on the child for the effort he or she causes her, her relationship to the child remains a good one despite any burden she might feel. But if she starts to ascribe malevolence to the child, assuming that the child is ‘deliberately’ annoying her – and this sort of purposefulness is often mistakenly attributed to the child – then that will be the end of the tolerable relationship between her and the child. (op cit, p 119)

Danziger and colleagues established a relationship between the foster mother’s motives and the stability of her relationship with the foster children and, at this early stage of research studies, identified an important processes of attributing blame, a dynamic for which a further conceptualisation had to wait another 60 years (Weiner, 2005).

Jürgen Blandow: Rollendiskrepanzen in der Pflegefamille [Role Discrepancies in the Foster Family] (1972)

In a doctoral thesis submitted to the Education Department at the University of Heidelberg, Jürgen Blandow examined the success of family foster care. To this end, he analysed youth welfare...
office files and interviewed 174 foster mothers. The data from the interviews were interpreted using a role-oriented theoretical framework that had been developed beforehand. According to this conception, no culturally defined expectations existed at the time for the role of foster mother or for that of foster child. This increased the likelihood that the key role players, namely the foster mothers and foster children, would disagree about their mutual tasks and responsibilities. From this perspective, foster parents were considered successful if they were able to overcome these role discrepancies and establish a modus vivendi.

Blandow used his empirical data as the basis for categorising various approaches of foster mothers, ie those who saw themselves primarily:

- as mothers (48.4%);
- as substitute mothers (19.4%);
- as helpers in a one-sided relationship (1.9%);
- as involved in a give-and-take situation with the child, either as a playmate for the mother’s own child (12%) or as a helper on a farm (15.1%);
- or as carers of some other unspecified kind (3.1%).

Furthermore, Blandow distinguished five dimensions of deprivation common among foster mothers, based on the motivations underlying their decision to look after a child. He found that these helped to explain the risks of placement failure stemming from role discrepancies. The concept of deprivation used was a subjective perception of deficiencies that were reduced or eliminated by taking in a foster child. The five types of deprivation were:

- childlessness in the context of a prominent, culturally mediated call for motherhood (cultural deprivation);
- perception of a deficiency in married or family life (family deprivation);
- experiencing a discrepancy between aspirations and reality with regard to health, normality, identity and integrity (personal deprivation);
- a combination of family and personal deprivation;
- looking after a foster child for financial gain (economic deprivation).

Quantitative analysis of these data showed that the number of foster children with poor prospects for development or who lived in foster homes facing difficulties was almost as large as the group whose outlook was more auspicious. Blandow summarised one key finding in this way:

_We found the highest rates of failure among families with their own child under five years old, or with a child of the same age and especially of the same sex as the foster child, or with the motivation of finding a 'playmate' or help for work on their farm._ (op cit, p 156)

In these situations breakdown usually occurred but, perhaps just as importantly, without the foster mothers being unduly upset.

Blandow made a systematic study of the interplay between foster mothers and foster children (as did Danziger et al, 1930) and between his two study groups and their environment, looking especially at socially dominant ways of thinking. In doing so, he cast a critical light on the needs of foster mothers and their corresponding motivations. Following the turn towards realism in German educational studies in the 1960s – with its call for more empirical evidence on educational and developmental outcomes – Blandow was the first foster care researcher to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

**Hans-Dieter Heun: Pflegekinder im Heim [Foster Children in Homes] (1984)**

The aim of Heun’s study was to examine empirically the reasons for foster care breakdown. To this end, he studied the history and experiences of 509 children and young people who were moved
directly from foster homes to residential establishments. A comprehensive survey was undertaken of looked after children in the German state of Hesse who, on 31 December 1980, had experienced such a move. Of the 509 children and young people who met this criterion, 264 were subject to detailed scrutiny. The reason for the study lay in an impression on the part of home directors that the number of admissions from foster care had increased.

Unfortunately, direct access to the files of youth welfare offices was denied on grounds of data protection, so Heun had to fashion a questionnaire in which home directors and social workers provided information about the children concerned. Part of this questionnaire contained a section for the children to answer with the help of their social workers. The questionnaire survey was complemented by case studies from the city of Frankfurt.

The findings of this study were especially interesting with regard to the circumstances that saw the children move from foster to residential care and how the children had experienced their initial separation from their birth families. It was found that in addition to their original foster family and the current residential home, the children had been in an average of 2.7 further placements, giving a total of 4.7 placements per child. Fifteen per cent of the children had experienced five or more additional placements, with boys moving more frequently than girls. The further placements included other foster families, residential homes, living with relatives, hospitals and child and adolescent psychiatric units. The finding that only a quarter of the children studied had been placed in three locations at the time of the study – with birth family, foster family and in the residential home – alerted professionals to the fact that looked after children commonly experienced a dramatic number of diverse locations and relationships. This came as something of a shock and, even today, the way that the system generates discontinuity in the lives of foster children is still a serious problem in Germany. Moreover, subsequent interviews with former foster children have demonstrated that this discontinuity is a major source of problems and stress (cf Wolf and Reimer, 2008).

Heun asked the children where they would prefer to live. Twenty-eight per cent named the current residential home; 23 per cent wanted to live with their biological mother or father; 12 per cent preferred to live with their former foster parents; and 19 per cent of the young people wished to live alone. Fifty-six per cent of the children said that they no longer had any contact with their former foster parents, with nearly 90 per cent of those still in contact and making regular visits. Unfortunately, the quality and intensity of these contacts could not be explored except to say that the children's views on these meetings were varied, the majority of them being positive with 64 per cent of the children expressing pleasure and 14 per cent sadness. In addition, 14 per cent were said to be homesick, 23 per cent indifferent, eight per cent withdrawn and six per cent hostile.

Answers to the question, ‘How did you feel when you were discharged from your last foster family?’ also produced varied replies. Forty-three per cent of the children answered, ‘I was very sad’; 31 per cent, ‘I was glad to get away from there’; ten per cent, ‘I was pretty indifferent about it’, and 17 per cent, ‘I can’t really say anymore’. Nevertheless, it was clear that expulsion from a foster family produced feelings of grave loss for children, whatever the circumstances. The main factor predicting placement breakdown for those children who said that they were ‘very sad’ was the birth of the foster parents’ own child. But for those who said they were ‘glad’, the main reasons were conflicts between the child and carers. This evidence indicates considerable risks when placements break down: the child’s sense of loss preceded by a difficult time in the foster family. A further source of anxiety became apparent from
the fact that 20 per cent of the children held themselves responsible for the placement breakdown.

The breakdown scenarios examined and the varied individual experiences charted in this study underline the value of a discriminating approach when investigating placement breakdowns and their consequences. A recently completed study by Gehres and Hildenbrandt (2008) makes the same point.


For a doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of Medicine at the University of Ulm, Sabine Kötter interviewed 51 foster parents using an interview schedule developed for this purpose, supplemented by a general questionnaire and several items taken from the ‘Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment Inventory’. In a comparative study, she examined the risks and benefits arising from the foster child’s contact with birth families. She looked at three groups:

- 17 foster families with a foster child who had no contact in the form of visits to the birth parents (Group 1);
- 17 foster families with a child whose contact had been terminated (Group 2);
- 17 foster families where the foster child enjoyed regular family visits (Group 3).

The theoretical framework for this study comprised a combination of systemic conceptualisations of the family and psychoanalytic theory.

Nearly all of the foster parents defined their situation as a ‘surrogate’ family, in the sense that they had constructed a situation in which they completely replaced the child’s biological parents. Hence, the foster parents often perceived the care they offered as a permanent arrangement, in contrast to many birth parents (who were not interviewed personally but whose opinions were surmised from the observations of the foster parents) who made serious efforts for their child’s return: 30 per cent from Group 1 and 50 per cent in each of Groups 2 and 3. The foster parents usually experienced contacts with birth families as stressful and were often pleased when contact diminished. They often saw the child’s birth parents as an attendant, sometimes constant, problem and a considerable number expressed pejorative views about them (Group 1: 60%; Group 2: 80%). Indeed, in Group 2, where there had been some initial contact, foster parents no longer knew anything about recent developments in the child’s birth family and held the view that the children no longer had a perceptible emotional relationship with their birth parents and, thus, no noticeable conflicts of loyalty.

It was not surprising, therefore, that foster parents in Groups 1 and 2 had much less contact with relatives, friends and social workers than those in Group 3, who proved to be much more accessible and flexible than those in the other groups. They were better able to cope with the risks and stresses they associated with birth family contact. They were also much better informed about the birth parents and there was greater mutual understanding between all the people involved in the fostering process. Many foster parents from all three groups had the impression that while visits were important events for the birth parents, they were only of minor significance for the children.

In summarising her findings, Kötter determined the following preconditions as beneficial to visits involving the birth parents:

... the relatively older age of both the foster child and the foster mother at the time when the child is taken in, motives for looking after a child reflecting a humanitarian perspective, the presence of foster carers’ own children, and the foster family being embedded in a supportive social network. (op cit, p 247)

Kötter clearly demonstrated the problems that foster parents experience...
from contact with birth families, but she also stressed the interplay between the accessibility and social integration of foster families on the one hand and their chances of coping with difficulties on the other.


In a doctoral thesis completed for the Open University in Hagen, Richard Müller-Schlotmann studied the development of older foster children in professional foster families. The children had experienced serious neglect or violence in their birth families. Müller-Schlotmann was primarily concerned with the reconstruction of the major structures regarding communication and action within the foster family, in particular, the various processes of integration. Symbolic interactionism provided the theoretical frame of reference for the study and a major focus was the way foster children achieve identity.

This research demonstrated how the children’s interpretative schemes changed during their separation as the result of a number of factors. As the children were older at the time of placement, they had already developed interpretative schemes while living in their birth families but under conditions of neglect or violence. These schemes, in turn, influenced how the children viewed the foster family and their relationships with carers. Various patterns of integration thus followed. For example, at the start of their foster placement, children’s experiences of reversed roles, common among neglected and abused children, led them to adopt extreme positions with regard to independence, distance and self-responsibility. They subsequently tended to behave in highly independent and reserved ways or they became over-dependent and familiar. In the early stages, they were observed to be self-confident in their dealings with the foster parents and seemed to be happy to reject their birth parents and enjoy their new family. Only later did they make (often extremely ambivalent) attempts to come to terms with separation from their origins.

Müller-Schlotmann proposed a distinction between integration into the family structure and the personal relationships therein. He found that children soon came to appreciate the stability and predictability of their new living situation, as manifest in the clear division of subsystems and rituals. However, they were slower to develop deeper relationships with their foster parents, even if ultimately they became significant partners. As the children initially interpreted their new experiences using their existing interpretative schemes, they needed to adapt to new conditions and were also confronted with profound challenges to their ways of thinking, sometimes requiring a radical transformation of their identity.

One important developmental task for these children was to form a realistic conception of their birth families, especially their mothers. In order for the children to abandon misconceptions and illusions, the foster parents had to offer support to help them ‘accept the weaknesses of the birth family, as well as to undermine unrealistic and general condemnations of the parents’ (*op cit*, p 205).

Finally, Müller-Schlotmann emphasised the creation of a biography as a condition for establishing identity:

*The child attempts to fill in the gaps in his or her experience of socialisation by constructing a unified biography.* (*op cit*, p 196)

Terminated relationships and changes in location made this process more difficult and often forced young people to seek support from those sympathetic to their perspective – especially their peers.

With this concentration on the processes of identity formation, Müller-Schlotmann argued for an individual, biographical perspective in order to understand the developmental processes.
affecting foster children. He was able to demonstrate the tasks facing older children in care who have experienced neglect or violence. In a current research project that examines biographical processes in light of diverse previous experiences and ages at the time of family foster placement, we are also discovering specific, individual forms of coping with the difficulties associated with separation and substitute care (www.foster-care-research.org).


In her doctoral thesis, Brigitte Steimer, who works at the University of Bremen’s Institute of Applied Psychoanalysis, analysed ten interviews with foster and adoptive parents who had sought psychoanalytic counselling. The interviews were then subject to a hermeneutically-oriented content analysis.

Within the context of a psychoanalytical theoretical framework, a particular emphasis was placed on transference and counter-transference processes in the relationships between foster carers and foster children. The unconscious dynamics of these processes were reconstructed from the interviews. The behaviour of the children was interpreted as a fight for survival in which they compulsively repeated the quest for love and the staging of rejection (hence the title of Steimer’s study). To change this, they needed professional help. The focus of this reconstruction (and of the therapy offered) was on the experience and behaviour of foster and adoptive parents.

Steimer used the concept of a social and psychological ‘sudden birth’ to describe the abrupt transition experienced by couples who moved from childlessness to foster parenthood. Often, after a period of waiting that was felt to be agonisingly long, everything happened quickly. The process was described simply as: ‘Go, have a look and take the child with you.’ Such excessive speed, due to poor social work practice, left the carers little time to realise or cope with the repercussions of these events for their own family history, their experiences of taking in a separated child or their relationship as a couple.

In the early stage of the foster family placements, the carers tended to play down the children’s past traumatic experiences. They trusted their own energies, oriented themselves to a conception of starting a normal family and hoped that their offer of a caring relationship would heal the trauma the child had suffered (op cit, p 91). If this plan did not succeed and the carers became distressed by increasing tensions, there was a radical reinterpretation of the situation: the ‘ideal’ child became a ‘crazy’ child. This process was intensified if the foster carers saw themselves as better than the child’s birth parents or if they unconsciously attempted to respond to their self-reproach for having taken a child away from his or her mother. Their perception, in such cases, was constantly focused on disturbances stemming from the child; they avoided contemplating their own feelings.

The psychoanalytic therapy was aimed at raising conscious awareness of these unconscious conflicts, which otherwise would simply have recurred until they eventually caused the placement to break down. Throughout the course of the therapy, the parents were also expected to discover connections to their own childhood experience. Therapeutic support was intended to facilitate a process of self-reflection on the assumption that the foster and adoptive parents wanted to heal their own earlier injuries by dealing with the child’s vicarious suffering. The process of making their own motivations accessible was intended to allow for new forms of interaction with the children they looked after.

Jürgen Blandow (1972) had already noted the connection between mothers’ experiences of deprivation and the rate of placement breakdown, but Steimer’s
study now clarified the unconscious processes at work. She reconstructed the interdependencies between foster carers’ (earlier) experiences, the extremely accelerated placement of the (originally) unfamiliar child and the formation of an image of a ‘crazy’ and difficult child, and showed how these factors could lead to considerable stress and eventually to placement breakdown (op cit, p 81).


For his dissertation at the Department of Education of Munich’s Bundeswehr University, Josef Faltermeier scrutinised 16 case studies looking at the experiences of birth parents whose children had been placed in foster families. He conducted biographical narrative interviews with them, in particular with the mothers. The results of this statistical analysis of biographical data were summarised under four main headings.

The first of these dealt with interpretations (ways of assigning meaning) formed by parents with regard to the fact that their children lived away from home. This situation substantially changed the basic conditions of their own biographical, familial and social lives. Thus, they found the experience disconcerting and some became seriously disorientated, generating a search for ways to interpret the events and adapt to the new situation. Parents often felt defenceless in this new situation, as they rarely had any experience of successfully coping with such circumstances. For this reason, Faltermeier argued that they were especially in need of outside help and, moreover, this had to be of a kind they had never received. If they were successful in assigning positive views on their own and their child’s situation, they were more likely to be sympathetic to other people’s perspectives.

The second heading concerned processes of interaction with social services. Often, the parents experienced this relationship as stressful rather than supportive. This perception frequently created obstacles to positive interaction and some parents clearly preferred to discontinue it. These obstacles include a sense of alienation, feelings of betrayal, having one’s views ignored and being subject to excessive control.

In the third part of this study, Faltermeier looked at parents’ perceptions of the help needed by their children. The fourth examined differences in the conceptions of help held by parents and social services, and how discrepancies confounded the relationship between families, carers and welfare agencies.

Faltermeier’s study drew attention to the risks and problems that many parents (with, as in most of the other studies, a particular focus on mothers) experience when their children are placed away from home. It charted the difficulties that birth parents face when coping with a new situation, especially if their views and needs are ignored and if professionals make moralising judgements, such as ‘forfeited parenthood’, about them. The final part of the study made specific recommendations for improving practice.


In a dissertation submitted to the Department of Education at the University of Siegen, Marmann investigated how biological children in foster families experienced the arrival of foster children. Marmann conducted eight comprehensive narrative interviews with young adults during whose childhood their parents had taken other children into the collective household. In this study, the narrative interviews and additional group interviews were analysed using an elaborate hermeneutic approach.

The study illustrated the importance
of the biological children for the success of the foster family and the opportunities and risks that arose for all the children involved. Conditions for the biological children proved to be especially favourable when parents avoided attempts to treat the foster children as their own. The interviewees explained that while it was normal for all the children to have equal rights and obligations in the collective household, the situation was significantly easier for them if, in addition, they enjoyed certain privileges, such as proximity and intimacy, more than the foster children. This gave the biological children absolute confidence in the quality of their relationship with their parents. Once this reassurance and security were established, the biological children were able to help the foster children by fulfilling a stabilising and mediating function.

Nevertheless, while they were happy to see themselves as models for the foster children, they resisted any obligation to play these roles. Older biological children often experienced the presence of foster children as a restriction to their privacy – in contrast to the biological children born afterwards.

In the light of these risks, a decisive factor for the experience and, in the final analysis, for the stability of the foster family was whether (older) children were allowed a say in the plan to take in foster children and other important decisions affecting family life. If the biological children were not prepared to have their parents look after foster children and had not been sufficiently consulted or informed about what it meant for the family, they tended to reject the newcomers and perceive their arrival as a threat. The constant changes that occur in families with a large number of foster children or in those offering short-term placements exacerbated these difficulties. The placement outcomes were worst when the foster children were subjected to the pressures described. In summary, this study revealed the effect of taking in foster children for the happiness and healthy development of the biological children. However, equally important was the fact that the balance between the developmental benefits, such as earlier maturity as a result of taking over responsibilities, and the disadvantages, such as the partial loss of childhood, varied among individuals.

Marmann’s study demonstrated the extent to which the life situation and developmental conditions of all family members are affected by taking in foster children. In particular, it shows the importance of acknowledging the interests of the biological children, not only for the stability of the placement but also for the health and stability of the host family.

**Conclusion: a model of the balance between needs and services**

To conclude this review, it is useful to describe a model being developed by German researchers to connect the diverse findings that emerge from the studies discussed.

The preferred model focuses on the relationship between needs and tasks on the one hand and resources for dealing with them on the other (Wolf, 2007). Resilience research has long emphasised the relationship between needs, risks, protective factors and outcome; our preferred focus has been adapted from this perspective because it seemed a productive way of understanding the array of problems that have been delineated in the research projects.

The model, then, centres on the analysis of the problems encountered by the people involved in fostering: the child, the carers, the biological children of the foster parents, the foster child’s birth family and other significant individuals. The key question in our view is: What difficulties do these people face and what resources are available to meet them? Some problems occur every day and can be solved by simple, pragmatic help. But, there are also complex developmental problems with which the child has to cope and major biographical issues confronting the adults.
On the other side of the equation, resources are needed to deal with problems and carry out tasks. These include the abilities and potential of individuals, for example, the sense of coherence they are able to construct. In addition, there are contacts with other people, relationships within a social network, professional counselling, therapy and material resources, all of which can help alleviate problems. The question to social services is, therefore: Can you make available the resources that people need to deal with their problems but cannot find elsewhere?

Using this perspective, the focus is not on human disorders and ways to treat them. Instead, abnormal behaviour is understood and perceived as a strategy – perhaps an abnormal and sometimes damaging one but nevertheless a strategy for dealing with a problem. If we have failed to understand that problem, we cannot begin to consider the nature and meaning of behaviour; indeed, it may seem incomprehensible and agencies will struggle to fashion effective interventions.

We can, therefore, begin by incorporating the findings of the various studies into this framework and link the needs of children and carers, evidence about service effectiveness, and the desired outcomes for the children. An initial step covered in the German research is to identify the problems and tasks confronting all parties: the child, the foster parents, the birth parents and the foster parents’ biological children. Using this list, we can then identify specific problem areas, difficulties and tasks confronting foster parents with regard to the foster child, the birth family, other family members, external interventions, the foster parents’ own lives and life in the foster family.

The next step is to incorporate the research findings on the effectiveness of particular interventions to the problems that have been identified. For example, Kötter (1997) noted the connection between being able to cope with the stress generated by visiting practices and the foster parents’ support network.

This method of matching needs and services allows us to assemble a comprehensive bank of authoritative research findings and, at the same time, identify effective practice. In addition, it draws attention to the complex interplay of factors. As the German social philosopher Norbert Elias has argued, we will never find appropriate explanations for phenomena if we only perceive linear connections between a few factors. Instead, we must think in terms of networks of interconnected effects where a change in one can trigger change in others, even if seemingly far apart – similar to what happens in a spider’s web. If, for example, a well-integrated foster family loses contact with important friends as a result of taking in a child, this can have adverse effects on its ability to cope with difficulties arising elsewhere, such as relationships with the birth family. The research also urges us to be sensitive to the fact that these difficulties will be manifest in different forms for each family member.

Furthermore, any model has to be dynamic because although some factors are fairly static, for instance the biographical experiences of foster parents described by Steimer (2000), others can be modified in the short term, for example moderating and guiding visiting practices.

Finally, we can also use the model to assess and improve the quality of services by designating who is responsible for fashioning and harnessing new services that are needed but not yet available. When helping an individual child, needs, risks and available resources can be compiled in a pedagogical assessment and effective interventions laid out in a corresponding care plan. An advantage of this approach is that it draws attention to structural issues that go beyond the scope of individual cases. In Germany, for instance, after a child has been placed with a foster family, it often remains totally unclear who should be responsible for helping the birth family.

I hope that this overview of some aspects of foster care research in...
Germany will help to motivate more international co-operation among researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The research available in Germany is more limited in size and scope than that emanating from the English-speaking countries and Scandinavia. Our studies are smaller and there is a dearth of longitudinal evidence. They also tend to be more theoretically driven, with an intention of informing academic disciplines as opposed to improving services. Whatever the case, it is clear that there are many findings about separated children and substitute care that are common across countries, despite differences in culture, heritage and legal systems, and we in Germany have certainly been able to profit considerably from the insights of colleagues from beyond our borders.

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