Interdependency models to understand breakdown processes in family foster care

A contribution to social pedagogical research

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Abstract

Following a brief outline of different foster care research approaches and beneficiaries, reasons are given for the need to develop interdependency models. As part of a programme of social pedagogical research into family foster care, theoretical models are to be developed to describe the complex interplay of widely differing factors that affect fostering processes. Using case reconstruction to investigate foster placement breakdown, a multi-level model is presented. Individual findings are outlined which could help to create a model of this kind, among other things by forming relevant hypotheses. In order to understand processes of stability loss in foster families, what is needed is not so much further data gathering as for existing findings to be integrated into theoretical models which can look for and explain the ways in which multifaceted processes interact. That is the central thesis of this paper.

Keywords: Interdependency model, relationship research – practise – policy, social pedagogical research, breakdown, instability, levels on integration

Introduction

Foster care research deals with important topics around growing up and living in foster families, the way foster children develop, and the work carried out by professional foster care services. It is positioned in different academic disciplines with widely differing research traditions, theoretical terminologies and methodological approaches, and it communicates its findings to different recipients with different expectations. It thus has a shared subject area but at the same time involves highly heterogeneous theoretical, methodological and practical reference systems. Within those reference systems, it appears in the form of research into a topic (e.g., attachment, special needs education, growing up in unfavourable conditions), based on the example of foster children, and communicating its findings partly, or perhaps primarily, to members of each theoretical reference system.

Foster care research can thus be understood as a field with *interdisciplinary* research methods. However, the different disciplines actually often tend to exist alongside one another, and it is relatively rare for findings to be connected in an interdisciplinary manner. The existence of different, sometimes contradictory research models and scientific paradigms, moreover, means that they are unlikely to be integrated into a single, all-embracing theory. However, I do think there are better chances of research findings to be integrated as a means of advancing practice and evaluating programmes used in social work practice.

In this article, I would first like to propose an initial, rough map of the different research methods used in foster care research. It is doubtless heavily influenced by my view through the lens of social pedagogical / qualitative research and knowledge of other models, and needs to be extended and further systematised. The aim here is to promote the development of a map of this type and to take some initial, doubtless at the outset insufficient steps. A second overview will then set out the different groups at which the research is aimed. This overview is again intended to help categorise the research projects, this time in terms of the beneficiaries, organisers and funders. It is set out differently to the overview arranged by academic disciplines.

The focus is then on a plea for the development of *interdependency models*. The example of research into foster placement breakdown will be used to illustrate how interdependency models can help us understand processes of this kind.

Basic categorisations of foster care research

Research projects and academic publications can be categorised by means of two frames. The first relates to research paradigms and theories, the second to the primary beneficiaries of the research.

Map of topics and research methods

In this diagram (see Figure 1) I have tried to create a little map of the topics and, especially, research methods.

First, we have quantitative research. This provides quantitative information about different foster care systems, illustrates them with statistics and sometimes compares them with other countries. It has intro-
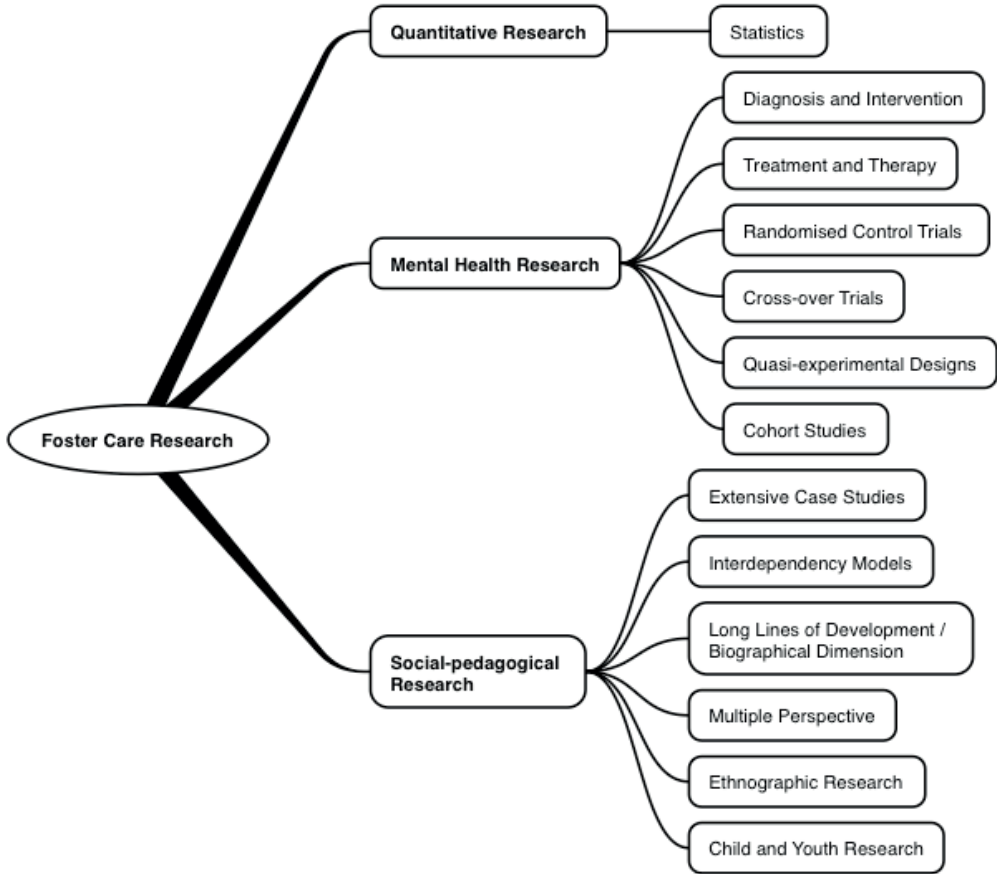
Figure 1.   Selection of topics and methods in foster care research

duced us to many interesting comparisons, for example by Thoburn (2007). It can be a challenge just to know what the structures are like in your own country. Professionals from many countries complain about the lack of such basic information on their own country. Information of this kind can be important when rationalising overarching policy decisions or organising social services. Comparison with other countries is one way of making your own country's profile clearer and opening it up to reflection.

Next, we have a wide range of research projects which I will provisionally label 'mental health research'. That means programmes carrying out clinical research based on the natural sciences. The focus is on clinical diagnosis, followed by treatment and therapy programmes based on that diagnosis. They are sometimes very closely connected to intervention programmes in the field of child and youth psychiatry and therapy (e.g., Strijker & Knorth, 2007; Pecora, Roller White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009). The methods used for this research concentrate on randomised control trials (e.g., Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, Omer, & Vanschoonlandt, 2016), cross-over trials,

quasi-experiments, cohort studies (Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008) and so on. Of course, the list is not complete. That research is very well established and the findings are issued in internationally recognised publications.

Eleven years ago, when I started looking into international foster care research with my colleague Daniela Reimer, at first we thought: that's it. There's nothing else. From an international point of view, foster care research is mental health research. But that first impression was not right, even then. Later, we also found academics who did qualitative research and had developed hermeneutic methods. We call this 'social pedagogical research' (Wolf, 2012, 2016).

Extensive case studies are a productive exploratory methodological approach. The aim is not so much to correlate individual factors as to develop complex interdependency models. Many phenomena are studied from the points of view of different actors. There is an interest in finding long trajectories in people's development and biographies. This links in more easily with ethnographic research or child and youth research. There is also a focus on how societal characteristics on macro and meso levels relate to subjects' development and the course taken by their interactions.

The different approaches each have their own indicators of quality. People working in each field might sometimes think these indicators apply to all approaches, but they do not. Clinical research on person's mental health measures quality according to different criteria than qualitative, hermeneutical research. If those criteria were simply transferred from one research approach to another, they would lead to misjudgements. These kinds of research methods maps might be useful because they can help us find fields which seem familiar and obvious to us, as well as fields which are not or less familiar.

This is one way of categorising research paradigms and theoretical development. A second way of categorisation, using a different reference model, is by taking the beneficiaries of the research as a starting point.

Research – practice – policy

This aspect is about the relationship between research, practice and policy. The aim of research is to acquire knowledge via a methodologically validated approach.
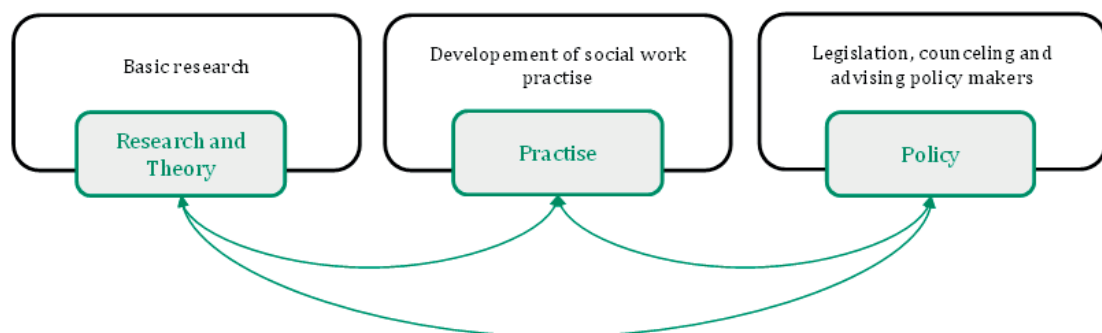

Figure 2. Relationship between research, practice and policy

Table 1. Framing family foster care research: types of research and beneficiaries

Types of research / Beneficiaries	Statistics	Mental health research	Social pedagogical research
Policy	1	2	3
Practice	4	5	6
Basic research and theory	7	8	9

That is one central reason for conducting research. However, it is also related to developing good practice and to offering policy advice. I have sketched this frame out above (see Figure 2).

First comes 'research' (left side), especially in the form of basic research and as a means of theory development. The reference system is science. We could also say that the reference system is one of the various academic disciplines set out earlier, each with its own logic.

Then comes 'practice', also with its own logic, interests and constraints. Practice has been set in the centre. The third field is 'policy', including administration and legislation. Policy, in turn, follows its own logic.

The three fields can influence one another. Researchers could and should put their knowledge in a form that potentially makes it productive in professional practice. Practitioners can call upon researchers to investigate important or controversial practical issues, or to carry out an independent evaluation. Finally, policy-makers can ask researchers questions, as experts, or commission them to make expert reports. Researchers can also comment on policy decisions without being asked for. By funding research, policy-makers can try to place topics in the focus of a public debate. There are lots of other possible interactions between these three systems of research, practice and policy.

When research findings are presented, I would like to promote the idea of naming the central reference system used: Is the research primarily aimed at preparing for, or evaluating, political decisions? Or is the aim to develop the practice, for example, of social services? Or is it basic research, primarily aimed at developing theories?

There are some complaints that – although foster care research has a broad empirical basis – there is a lack of theory (Cameron, Reimer, & Smith, 2015). I consider that criticism as justified. Basically, all three reference systems are important, and findings can often be adapted and evaluated for use in one of the other reference systems.

If the two frames are brought together in a table, this produces nine cells in which a project can be categorised (see Table 1).

Features of general social pedagogical foster care research

This section will describe the research approach which fits into cell 9: *social pedagogical research*, intended as basic research. The general features of social pedagogi-

cal foster care research will only be outlined here in brief, to explain the context in which interdependency models are to be developed (for more detail, see Wolf, 2016).

had particularly unusual experiences face particular challenges, for example when it comes to developing specific strategies for maintaining a balance of normality (Reimer, 2017).

Experiential perspectives and interpretative schemes

Since all pedagogical processes and interactions are filtered through people's perceptions and interpretations, and development is achieved by means of active appropriation, information can only be gathered on the full effects of pedagogical interaction on an experiential level. The topics learned and the motivations behind processes of appropriation are always guided by subjects' relevancy systems (Schütz, 1967). For that reason, processes – even those extending beyond direct pedagogical interactions – can only be understood through the experiences of those concerned. The subject's self-will is on one hand the result of previous educational and developmental processes and on the other hand the filter that sifts usable items of knowledge, interpretations and emotional patterns out of the huge flood of stimuli and information. That is why it is so important for pedagogical research to know how people perceive and experience themselves (Reimer, 2008, 2010), their current situation in life and their visions of the future, and how they interpret their past, especially the path that led to them being what they are today.

Their experiences and how they interpret those experiences are connected to the development of interpretative schemes and subjective theories: people construct explanations for themselves. Those who have

Multiperspectivity

Research aimed at social phenomena also has to bear in mind the perspective from which the phenomena are perceived. Only a constructivist approach enables these to be reconstructed. Simply understanding and analysing the experiential perspective means in itself that this approach is being taken. When multiple actors interact, social phenomena can and should be expected to be perceived entirely differently from different people's perspectives. The basic assumption that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) is fundamentally at odds with a clinical view of people and social processes.

A constructivist approach also leads to data from files, medical diagnostics and professionals' descriptions being treated in a certain way. They are also treated as social constructions, rather than as a comparison to be made between subjective experiences (e.g., by the foster children) and objective observations (e.g., data gathered by measurement). In a living environment like this where interests diverge widely, it is not even possible to understand or sufficiently investigate phenomena without systematically taking into account the fact that the different actors each have their own, distinct perspective which is *different* to the one of other actors.

Processes in interdependency networks

Opportunities for development and obstacles preventing it arise in networks of interdependency related to socialisation. Even the dyadic relationships and attachments that are particularly relevant for very young children are embedded in other webs of relationships. Taking these contexts into account and exploring and evaluating their relevance, both generally and in individual cases, is another key feature of social pedagogical research. Such research avoids taking individual relationships and interactions out of the context (Wolf, 2015). This will be described later in further detail.

Embeddedness in social processes

One essential aspect of social pedagogical research which sets it apart from many kinds of clinical research related to psychopathological profiles, is that it systematically takes into account the interplay of social macro structures, on the one hand, and interactional and intrapsychological processes, on the other. Ignoring the connection between psychogenesis and sociogenesis – the central theme chosen by Norbert Elias (Elias, 1978; Elias, Jephcott, & Dunning, 2010; Smith, 2001) – and interpreting people's difficulties, limits and stressors purely from a psychologised outlook is significantly restrictive, in that it prevents insights from being gained.

The long view: the biographical perspective

Finally, the processual, developmental dimension is central to pedagogical research. People are constantly learning, developing and changing (Reimer & Schäfer, 2015). Their current thoughts, feelings and actions are only accessible in the context of their previous experiences and how those experiences are integrated into patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour. The meaning of people's behaviour is especially easy to access when viewed in light of the conditions in which it arises. That is particularly true of people who have grown up for some time in unusual conditions and had experiences in certain fields of life and learning which were not beneficial to their development and did not respond to their personal impressionability and vulnerability with sufficient care and kindly encouragement. Social pedagogical research must be able to follow the logic behind these developmental processes and reconstruct them (Reimer, Schäfer, & Wilde, 2015; Wolf & Reimer, 2008).

Interdependency models as a means of explaining instability

When a foster placement breaks down, this is an event that causes serious stress and is thus experienced as particularly relevant, not only by the children and foster parents but also, often, by the birth parents and social services. A breakdown is often defined as "an unanticipated and untimely placement ending that is not included in the child's care plan" (Berridge &

Cleaver, 1987, p. 9). The three elements of this description (unanticipated, untimely, unplanned) raise the question of whether a breakdown should only be defined from the point of view of the social services, or whether it could or should be defined from the perspective of one of the other actors: the foster child, the biological parents or the foster carers. They are likely to have different plans, and different expectations which could be disappointed.

The subject of placement breakdowns can also be seen within the wider context of whether a placement is stable or unstable. If stability and instability are seen not as two alternative states but as a *continuum* from the pole of stability to the opposite pole of instability, and if shifts are expected along this continuum, then a breakdown is seen as the final stage in a development leading towards loss of stability. This development may take various forms, for example an unusual event causing a sudden change in direction and the collapse of stability, a gradual erosion of stability, phases of stabilisation and destabilisation, or even a structure displaying low stability right from the start. An appropriate explanatory model is required to explain the complex processes this involves. How might such a model look?

Explanatory models

We can distinguish between two types of explanatory models. The first determines influential *individual factors*, often by means of quantitative investigation. This model shows whether a certain characteristic is statistically related to foster placement breakdown and attempts to identify how influential this characteristic is when explaining breakdown. The second type takes *interdependency* as a starting point. It investigates how the interplay of the various factors and groups of factors can be described, explained and integrated into a theoretical model. These two competing explanatory models will be briefly outlined in the following.

Analysis of individual factors

Predictors, i.e. individual factors indicating that the likelihood of breakdown is rising (or falling), are frequently divided into the following main categories:
– Characteristics of the child
– Characteristics of the foster family
– Characteristics of the family of origin
– Characteristics of social services and monitoring

This list already shows that it are not only the characteristics of the child that affect the likelihood of breakdown. I would like to outline a few findings; a detailed depiction would go beyond the scope of this presentation. The meta-analyses by Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens and Doreleijers (2007) and – also taking into account qualitative studies – by Rock, Michelson, Thomson and Day (2015) provide an excellent overview of the state of research into individual risk factors and protective factors.

Characteristics of the child which are underlined as being particularly strong predictors of a risk of breakdown are the child's age at placement (e.g., Bernedo, Garcia-Martin, Salas, & Fuentes, 2016; James, 2004; Terling-Watt, 2001; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000) and externalised behavioural anomalies (e.g., Barth, Lloyd, Green, James, Leslie, & Landsverk, 2007;

Eggertsen, 2008; Hurlburt, Chamberlain, DeGarmo, Zhang, & Price, 2010; Van Rooij, Maaskant, Weijers, Weijers, & Hermanns, 2015). The higher the age and the more frequent the anomalies, the greater the risk.

With regard to characteristics of the foster family, the likelihood of breakdown increases, for example, if the foster family has a limited social network (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001) or if the foster parents have poor pedagogical abilities (e.g., Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003).

In the family of origin, chronic family problems (Stone & Stone, 1983), an alcoholic mother (Pardeck, 1985) or a parent with a criminal conviction (Webster et al., 2000) are related to a higher breakdown rate.

Finally, characteristics of the social services also affect the risk of breakdown. For example, more frequent contact, a good relationship with the foster parents and good support from the youth welfare office reduce the risk (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Stone & Stone, 1983; Walsh & Walsh, 1990). A clear majority of studies show that siblings being placed together reduces the risk of breakdown, and that there are fewer breakdowns when children are placed with relatives. Frequent changes of social worker, by contrast, raise the risk (Rock et al., 2015).

Some of the empirically proven connections are immediately plausible and indeed banal, while others leave the reader somewhat perplexed (a parent with a criminal conviction as a negative predictor of placement stability?). If one also considers those investigations with contradictory findings, or looks into interactions with the structures of the relevant youth welfare system and questions whether the findings are valid across the different systems, the state of the research (however finely nuanced and backed up by large numbers of cases) is not entirely satisfactory. The search could then turn towards the targeted formation of hypotheses on forms of interdependency and theoretical explanations. Oosterman et al. (2007, p. 53) argue, in a similar vein at the end of their detailed meta-analysis of quantitative studies: "Results of multivariate studies suggested mediating and moderating effects of variables related to the children's background. This might suggest that more insight in the processes leading up to placement breakdown may be derived from causal models." Rock et al. (2015, p. 198) also state that, "Although it is not possible to make definitive statements about the importance of one risk factor in comparison to another, it should be possible to use the available evidence when developing more systematic approaches to practice in this area."

The quest for a better understanding of the processes leading to breakdown is to be launched here by developing interdependency models.

Interdependency model

The basic assumption on which interdependency models are based, the foundations of which were laid by Norbert Elias (Elias, 1978; Elias et al., 2010), is that many social phenomena cannot be understood well in isolated cause-and-effect relationships; a better understanding can be gained by viewing them within a web of interactions. An interdependency model is a theoretical construct that examines connections and effects as part of a *network of factors* which can influence one another. Long chains of factors can thus transmit, strengthen or weaken stimuli. Linear rela-

tionships or monocausal cause-and-effect chains, where factor A only affects factor B and factor B is only affected by factor A, are extremely rare. By contrast, factors which affect one another are very common. The aim is thus to describe and explain the specific interplay between these numerous factors. The theoretical model should be close to the complex nature of real life.

Interdependencies can also be analysed as a network of *ties between actors*. Different generalisations or concretisations are thus possible. What the models have in common is that they are designed to understand how a large number of factors interact, rather than picking out individual connections and viewing them out of context.

Examining processes within interdependency networks also puts into perspective the idea of targeted action; the assumption that effects can be produced in an immediate, entirely predictable manner. "The more complex a social configuration is, the less the results of individual actions fit in with the intentions of any of the actors. At the same time, variations in complexity are directly linked to the number of actors and/or groups of actors" (Wippler, 1978, p. 160).

Interdependency model to explain breakdown and destabilisation

In the light of these points, an interdependency model will now be outlined as a means of understanding breakdown processes. First, some findings on interesting forms of interdependency will be presented. Second, a multi-level model for breakdown processes will be developed.

Interdependencies in breakdown processes

A model of interdependency in breakdown processes should have the following characteristics:

1. The aim must be to analyse the interplay of different factors: activities by the foster child, by other members of the foster family (adults and children), by the parents and system of origin, by actors in the social services and, if relevant, by other actors influencing the individual case. Moreover, factors need to be taken into account that extend beyond the immediate foster child / foster parent interaction and could affect placement stability.

2. The processes ending in a breakdown are to be described and analysed. It is only in the light of this kind of composition of stabilisation and destabilisation processes that the breakdown can be understood as an event. The model is also intended to study other developments after the breakdown. Analysing how the event developed can have repercussions on its definition as a breakdown.

3. The aim is to examine interdependencies between processes on the micro, meso and macro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This means changes in the foster family, in the immediate private environment of the foster family and its members (including peers), in the wider range of activities carried out by professional organisations and (finally) in the macrostructures of a society which, for example, lay down the parents', the foster parents' and the child's rights in laws or determine financial benefits. It also means changes such as economic crises which might affect families' stability.

4. If it is possible to cover the points of view of multiple actors, their different experiential and interpretative patterns are to be reconstructed. Comparing how they correspond and differ may be relevant to understanding the processes. If only one point of view can be covered, this is then to be interpreted as one view out of many.

5. Moreover, we require a dynamic model with categories such as deceleration and acceleration, processes of increasing or diminishing vulnerability (for a fundamental study on foster parents' vulnerability, see Gassmann, 2018) or the stabilisation, erosion or collapse of constructions of meaning (Schäfer, 2011).

In accordance with this, an extremely complex case analysis was carried out in a research project funded by the Jacobs Foundation, in cooperation with Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), the University of London and the University of Siegen. A working group from the University of Siegen carried out interviews with foster parents, foster children, former foster children, the children's friends and other actors. Breakdown processes were then elaborately reconstructed based on these interviews. The wealth of findings cannot all be presented here; other publications on the subject are currently in preparation (Bombach, Gabriel, & Stohler, 2018). I will expound on some of the hypotheses which were developed while analysing the results, and which were eventually condensed into a multi-level model.

Selected findings

Selected findings 1: Age of the foster child in relation to other factors**.** It was mentioned above that the foster child's age at placement is a strong predictor of a risk of breakdown. There is also strong statistical evidence to show that the risk of breakdown rises considerably during adolescence, even in cases where the children entered the foster family at a very early age. Is age alone thus a cause of breakdown? That is not an adequate explanation. Age is relevant, but does not predetermine a breakdown. This explanation would also have serious consequences for the range of actions available to the social services, as they cannot prevent ageing.

However, age can also be seen, for example, in relation to the foster parents' role identity, as analysed by Schofield, Beek, Ward and Biggart (2013): foster parents with a carer identity may also be suited to temporarily caring for older foster children. Foster families whose concept of life fits in well with temporary care find it easier to take in older children than foster families who want to adopt a baby and identify exclusively as parents. The social services can take into account this interplay between the characteristics of the child and those of the foster family when matching them and thus possibly affect the risk of breakdown. It is not age alone and not role identity alone that offer an adequate explanation, but an interaction of these factors.

In adolescence, the topic of the young person's origin becomes significant. This can be understood as a developmental task specific to youth. This confrontation takes on a particular profile in the case of foster children and can – as Gassmann (2010) compellingly elaborated – be understood

as a developmental task specific to foster children. Tackling this task can be stressful for the foster parents and their relationship to the foster child if children feel devalued in relation to their birth parents and (if applicable) other connections to their system of origin, and experience their dissociation, which is so important for adolescence, as a threat. This understanding of the period of youth not only leads to a more adequate explanation but also creates important opportunities for action, e.g. when preparing and advising foster parents.

Selected findings 2: Critical events in foster parents' lives**.** In the context of topics related to the foster family, foster parents are often seen only in that role, as foster parents. It is then easy to ignore anything but the aspects related to that specific role: their relationship with the foster child and the other people to whom the child relates; their particular legal position; how they work with the social services and so on. These are all relevant topics which can affect the stability of the foster family. But focusing on them can make observers blind to other aspects not directly connected to their role as foster parents, aspects relating to other parents or, in general, relating to stability in the adults' and families' lives. This leads to a narrow focus on certain factors, ignoring others, which would be unfortunate both for research and when analysing the range of actions open to the social services.

In the cases we analysed, there were some critical events in the lives of the people acting as foster parents which were not directly related to that activity; they divorced, career plans did not work out as hoped, people became ill. This affected stability, forced readjustments to be made and

sometimes transformed family relationships. Some of these critical life events may also interact with their life with the foster child. However, assuming the foster child to be the main or sole cause of this would be far from plausible; a (mis-)construction centred on the foster child.

Selected findings 3: Unstable social services, unstable foster placement. When analysing the processes leading up to the breakdown, another aspect investigated was the events and changes which accelerated or decelerated those processes. Certain characteristics of the process escalated or stabilised the situation. Professionals leaving the social services played an important role. The ideal form of bureaucratic organisation in the case of a staffing change is to continue to manage the case following exactly the same organisational logic as before, with decisions not depending heavily on individual decision-makers. This is supposed to be ensured using files as an organisational memory, and through standardisation.

Analysing the case trajectories revealed a different picture: circumstances could only be reliably predicted for the foster family, and sometimes for the foster child, in the case of staffing continuity. If the staff or organisational responsibilities within a certain profession changed, this had the potential to alter the circumstances considerably. These observations corresponded with those seen in other research projects (e.g., Schäfer, Petri, & Pierlings, 2015), where the unintended effects of staffing changes and, for instance, procedures being put on hold during holiday leave or extended periods of illness, proved remarkably relevant. These effects can be understood as examples of interdependency between foster family stability and processes, on the one hand,

and additional stressors or resources arising from changes in relevant social service practice, on the other.

Selected findings 4: Constructions of meaning and attribution**.** When difficulties in the foster family accumulate and breakdown seems likely, people develop interpretative schemes to explain those difficulties and, if it occurs, the breakdown. These interpretative schemes contain attributions, i.e. ideas about relevant causes. These can be investigated in the light of attribution theory: Who are the causes attributed to? What self-serving biases are constructed? Are the causes seen as changeable or as constant?

In this case, analysis showed that attributions were frequently related to (relatively) constant disorders in the young person's character prior to the breakdown; here I will aggregate these as pathologising attributions.

> For example, one foster mother explains the difficulties the foster child has and makes thus: "Instinctively, I'd say that it's in him; that it's in him genetically and he grew up with it. Has a lot to do with the bad experiences that he must have had in his life. But I think that it was or is already in him."

Stable characteristics caused by hereditary transmission or negative socialisation experiences in the period before the placement place the causes outside of the foster family and their relationship with the foster child. That can have various consequences. On one hand, people believe the difficulties are caused by the young person's own character. That can relieve strain and sometimes also, as in the case of the foster mother quoted above, give people the energy to struggle through difficult phases. This is made easier if the young person is not made responsible; if the problems are attributed to his predisposition and he is not seen as being able to control them. If contrasting attributions are presented as "sickness or sin" (Weiner, 1992), here issues are interpreted as a sickness. However, on the other hand, focusing on causes relating to the young person's character can also mean that solutions are only sought by exerting an influence on the young person (therapy, systematic rewards or punishment). Sight is lost of other possible courses of action.

Some observations suggest that an increase in pathologising attributions can be an early warning sign that foster parents' construction of meaning is eroding. If the response from the social services is in line with the foster parents' attributional patterns and focuses solely on treatment and dealing with the young person directly ("needs therapy", "is not suited to a family placement"), events are more likely to escalate. This is because sight is then lost of other possible courses of action, such as taking some of the strain off the foster parents or looking for other coping strategies.

In several conflict situations, there was a clash between the attributions made by the foster parents and the adolescent, or by the foster parents and the social services or other organisations. If shared attributions concurred and coalesced, new interpretations and outlooks were unlikely to be found: the actors had found a shared understanding of the causes of the problems and were able to justify their decisions based on that understanding. That accelerated processes considerably.

Levels of integration and breakdown

A nuanced analysis of breakdown processes as experienced by the foster parents and other actors in this investigation, and observations of other cases found in other research projects, led to the development of a four-level model describing and explaining the shape taken by a specific breakdown process from the point of view of how those four levels interact. This model provided answers to many previously unresolved questions on how to define breakdown, such as: Is it a breakdown at all if the foster mother continues to communicate intensively with the young person afterwards? These levels will now be outlined in a phenomenological model. The four levels are:

1. Legal codes: intervention/support is in progress or has finished
2. Household
3. Contact people and relationships
4. Family membership and belonging

Level 1 – Legal codes: intervention/support is in progress or has finished. In legal terms, this level is unambiguously set out in a binary code. In Germany, this means that childraising support is either provided or not (or no longer) provided in the form of foster care. The transition to this state begins with an administrative act by an office responsible for decisions of this kind. They approve the social services for the guardian, and this approval either continues without being rescinded or is brought to an end. The latter step is also an administrative act. There are two possibilities: childraising support is either provided or not.

In Germany, care planning is an important element of this social service. During this planning, an agreement is generally made on how long the placement will prob-

ably last. The guardians and young person are supposed to be involved in this. If it comes to a sudden, unplanned, unanticipated end, this can thus be understood as deviating from the care plan: things work out differently than planned, the placement ends at a different time and in a different manner to that agreed upon together. Now the childraising support has come to an end.

When the placement comes to an end, the legal situation changes fundamentally: there is no longer any legal basis for financial benefits being paid to the foster parents and they stop having any rights and duties in the child's everyday life. From a legal point of view, this thus puts an end to the connection between the foster family and the foster child. Things seem to be cut and dried. But the foster parents and foster child may have very different feelings and a different understanding of what is happening. This divergence of views, which can be interpreted, for example, as a difference between levels 1 and 3, can lead to conflict and contradictions. This will be analysed later as part of the interaction between the different levels.

Josefie has been living on the street for several weeks and no longer spends the night with her foster parents. However, she often telephones her foster mother. The youth welfare department puts an end to the placement without consulting the foster parents. The foster parents are still hoping that Josefie will return. The foster mother is surprised by the youth welfare department's decision "Then they said 'Yes, you aren't foster parents at all any more'."

Level 2 – Household. Another level is related to accommodation: the foster child moved into the foster parents' household

quite some time ago, and is now moving out again. The foster family is a 'household community': everyone has a place at the dinner table, a place to sleep, perhaps their own regular seat in the living room. Tasks are shared within the household, the adults or biological children might have established prerogatives. Now the foster child is moving out. He packs his things and takes them with him, is picked up, leaves the home, hands back his keys. The room he lived in might be renovated, then left vacant, used for another purpose or perhaps remains the child's room, with the foster parents not allowed to use it for another purpose. Various scenarios are possible. While places in organisations, such as homes, are systematically refilled and there are routines for how to organise transitions when a family member moves out this is often a far more symbolic event (see level 4). This is partly because it is far rarer for people to move in or out in this way, and their life together was not organised with any idea that individual occupants might be replaceable or interchangeable (Niederberger & Bühler-Niederberger, 1988; Wolf, 2014), at least in the case of long-term fostering.

In the case of a breakdown, the transition is different to other placement endings which are not defined or seen as a breakdown. It takes place 'too early', at a time which was, at least, not planned by some people, and in a manner which is in some significant way unconventional for someone moving out of a family home. This can lead to it taking place in a rushed, improvised or chaotic manner. Another unusual point compared with a well-planned move organised long in advance may also be that the young person has hardly any belongings. What can he take with him; what actually belongs to him? Did he grow up there for many years, is he now leaving with a plastic bag? Or has it been agreed that he can take several items of furniture; has he been allowed to gather together crockery and take his bedcover?

The move may be drawn out, over a long period in which the co-occupants' relationships are gradually eroded: the adolescent foster child spends less and less time at home, uses the home like a hotel room; it is no longer very clear whether he is really still living there or not. This 'really' may be related to a discrepancy between his official placement (level 1) and what is actually happening in practice.

Apart from the breakdown, the degree of integration and processes of disintegration can also be seen on the level of the household. Are there rooms in the home which are reserved for related members of the foster families? How carefully is work shared in the household, and does the foster child have a different role compared to others of his age?

Level 3 – Contact people and relationships. This level plays a key role in the foster parents' self-image and also in the specialist literature on life in foster families: the foster child and other members of the foster family develop emotionally important relationships, sometimes attachments. They become important to one another.

There is often an idea that these relationships and what they mean to one another do not simply end when the child moves out, but are maintained afterwards. Foster parents with a strong parent-role identity, especially, see strictly adhering to level 1, and ending their relationship with the foster child at the legally prescribed time, as virtually in opposition with the whole nature of fostering. But how are things in

the case of a breakdown? On this level, we expected there to be a clear difference between breakdowns and other types of transition. And that was indeed sometimes the case: there was a sharp break, with all relationships coming to an abrupt end. However, things were more complicated than initially expected.

For example, there was indeed sometimes a sharp break in all relationships with members of the foster family, followed by a phase without any kind of contact. However, (much) later, contact was occasionally resumed, with people clearly drawing closer again. Even when processes ticked all the boxes of an 'archetypal' breakdown, there were sometimes developments which made it hard to justify categorising the case as a breakdown. The juncture at which this kind of process occurs plays an important role; it is hardly possible to simply anticipate what will happen next. The way a development is appraised thus depends greatly on the point at which this appraisal takes place. To describe and analyse situations properly, these processes of more or less intensive contact need to be taken into account, rather than misconstruing them as a binary (in contact / not in contact).

Moreover, there were cases in which there were sharp breaks in relationships with some family members, but other relationships were maintained in the background or in secret. In some cases, these emotionally significant interactions (in the form of face-to-face contact or online, via social networks) were explicitly maintained in a virtually subversive manner without the knowledge of other members of the foster family. This included, for example, contact between the foster mother and former foster child, or between a biological child of the foster parents and the foster child.

Officially, the family was seen as having undergone a breakdown, but closer scrutiny revealed that different relationships had gone in different directions.

> *And when Josefie is living on the street, and later when she is sent to a secure centre, she communicates intensively with the foster mother, often making several phone calls a day. On levels 1 and 2 this clearly seems to be a breakdown, but on level 3 contact is still very intensive and important. Is that a breakdown?*

There were also major differences in people's experiences and wishes. Sometimes the former foster child's wishes and ideas matched those of the foster parents, but sometimes there were clear differences. For example, one was still worried and concerned, while the other put a final stop to things (sometimes in appearance only). These were often indications that their experiences were considerably asymmetrical.

Level 4 – Family membership and belonging. Foster children can become members of the family. They are not just cared for at the request of the youth welfare department; they do not just live there; they do not just have emotionally important relationships with individual members of the foster family: they become a member of the family, like the other members. The foster children see it that way themselves, as do all the other members of the family. That is many foster families' ideal, and sometimes it does actually occur within the wide range of practices found in foster placements. But it cannot be assumed as a matter of course or a priori.

When analysing processes during the course of which a breakdown occurred, var-

ious versions can be found within this category. There were children who said that, looking back, they had never felt an equal member of the family. Others still felt an unquestioned sense of belonging to the family even when the placement ended in conflict, unplanned.

Other young people describe a situation in which it suddenly becomes clear to them that they do not, or no longer, belong.

Sven, for example, describes how, when his foster mother married for the second time, he suddenly noticed that the photographs of the new family were arranged so that he did not feature in them. It suddenly became clear to him that he no longer belonged to the family.

Different interpretations and feelings are also possible when analysing belonging: do all members of the core foster family have matching patterns of interpretation and feeling, or are there clear differences? Is that shared by other relatives, neighbours, friends of the foster family? Do the parents also see their child as a member of the other family, and do they see that as dual membership in two families, or do they feel as if they have lost their child? These and other patterns are all possible, and relevant to people's experiences and how they imagine the future.

Interdependencies among the four levels

The four levels of integration or breakdown are not firmly linked to one another; instead, our investigation revealed widely differing combinations. One trajectory (A) which is clearly and undoubtedly a break-

down, is when a placement ends on all four levels at once:

A. Childraising support stops in this foster family, the foster child moves out, there is no further contact with any members of the foster family afterwards and the foster child does not see, or no longer sees himself as a member of the family, and is not seen as such by any member of the foster family.

Here, and in our other research, we only came across one case in which all four levels largely followed the same path: Lena. She entered this foster family at the age of 13, having previously lived with her grandmother for more than four years. After a year, Lena moves into a residential group, where she feels very happy. Lena lived with the foster family for one year; she never developed a major relationship and was never a member of the family.

For example, Lena offers this description of a practice in the foster family: "Well it was always when I did something 'naughty', because then I was allowed to call them by their first name and suddenly then I'd apparently mucked something up again and then it was all over again and I had to call them by their surname and then if I accidentally said their first name at any time, oh boy, then there was a massive scene."

That is a breakdown that ticks all the boxes at once. However, we found various other combinations. When care comes to an early end and a child makes an unplanned move before reaching the age of majority, this suggests that there has been conflict, and that there is unlikely to be any further in-

tensive contact or even any mutual understanding of belonging to the family.

However, that was not the case in the B trajectory:

B. Care comes to an end, child moves out but intensive contact still maintained and continued feeling of belonging as a family member.

Thomas is taken into the foster family at the age of one. At the age of nine he leaves the foster family and, over the years that follow, placed (among other things) in a reform school, emergency accommodation, in professional foster care, on a psychiatric ward and in supported housing. Throughout his childhood and youth the foster mother remained a constant family reference point; even after he moved out there were regular weekend visits, holidays together and very intensive contact.

> The feeling of belonging is very clear in the foster mother: "Well my feeling is that he's still kind of my son as far as you can say that."

> It is suggested in the case of Thomas: "I felt really comfortable with her, that is with my foster mother. I always, yes I always got support from her, whatever happened. And she's still there for me, right to this day."

The foster mother knows that she is no longer responsible for the 22-year-old Thomas; that there is no remaining legally based relationship to him, but she feels as if he is her son. This development can be described as follows: level 2: living together in one household is no longer possible. However, the aim of moving out is in fact to maintain the emotional relationships and family belonging, rather than to bring them to a close.

Things progressed similarly at first in Josefie's case: she leaves the household and lives on the street for a while. Soon afterwards, the foster care is brought to an end, but there is still intensive contact and many signs of family belonging. Later, she moves back into the household, and she is later adopted by her foster parents, as an adult. That is a surprising continuation, but one which follows its own internal logic. Over the course of the process, the combination of levels constantly changes. At first they correspond positively: care is provided, shared household, important relationships, family membership. This then shifts to a phase in which levels 1 and 2 are missing, then on to the establishment of a new legal level and positive correspondence between all four levels.

Another combination (C) indicates that various relationships can be continued after an unplanned, early move and care being brought to an end:

C. Care comes to an end, child moves out, various forms of contact maintained with individual members of the foster family, not (no longer) a member of the family

Sven enters the foster family whom he has already known for many years, at the age of 10 after his mother's death. At the age of 16 he moves into supported housing. The foster mother and he maintain sporadic contact and always try to get in contact with one another again. The new foster father (following separation and a later marriage) cuts off contact with Sven as soon as

he moves out. However, he is still in regular touch with the foster mother's biological son.

> Sven: "… but it's just that I see him once or twice a week, and actually arrange to meet up and do something."

Simon is six when he and his younger sister are taken into the foster family. He is 15 when an argument between him and the foster parents escalates and both children are excluded very suddenly.

> One week before Easter, Simon and his sister Julia appear on their grandmother's doorstep with all their belongings. There had been an arrangement that the children would be staying there for a week during the holidays. However, the foster parents tell them that the children are to stay permanently with their grandmother, which comes as a shock to them all, as the foster parents have not previously mentioned anything of the sort. Grandmother: "I was just thinking, my goodness, they've brought lots of things with them for one week, and then they told us that they weren't willing or able to look after the children anymore, they'd reached the end of their tether. And they were supposed to stay with us for ever now."

None of those involved saw them as being members of the family; when they moved out this was a total exclusion, but they nonetheless still kept in touch.

> Simon: "We are still in contact with our old foster parents; we try to stay in touch as best we can. My uncle's best friend lives in a care home near there, and if he goes over there then we always phone up my

> foster parents, my foster parents from back then and ask if we can come over. It's not that long ago at all, we visited them about a month or so ago. And it was really nice. He showed me a couple of things he'd just bought, like motorbikes and tractors."
> Grandmother: "I think they were pleased that the two of them were over there again; they really aren't that kind of people at all."

Simon's case shows that a scenario in which the child moves out does not mean that subsequent developments in the relationship are inevitable. There is no doubt that the form a transition takes has a significant effect on people's experience during the transitional situation and how events develop later, but it does not necessarily determine what happens afterwards: the range of possibilities is surprisingly wide, as shown by an investigation into long-term biographical developments (Reimer & Petri, 2017).

Analysing the interplay between the four levels enables other structural characteristics of the ending of foster placements to be pinpointed which are relevant to the experience of the people involved. The different logics these entail, such as those related to approving or ending support and developing family belonging, can explain many conflicts.

D. Care comes to an end, foster child continues to live in the family home, intensive contact with the members of the foster family, family membership

This is a combination which indicates that the child has found a home in the foster family. The legal basis and related financial benefits have come to an end, but the fos-

ter family and the perhaps adult foster child have decided that the foster child (legally the ex-foster child) will keep living with the foster family. The emotional basis for this is the feeling of family belonging. The foster children who have now grown up often see this as a litmus test for whether they actually do belong to the family (Reimer, 2017).

Beyond breakdown

By analysing the interactions, other structural characteristics of existing foster placements can be pinpointed, even leaving aside the topic of breakdown. Host parents taking in young refugees have sometimes expressed their disappointment, for example, that no emotional ties have developed, let alone any feeling of family belonging ("used us as a three-star hotel"). There was a legal

basis for the care (level 1), the young person lived with them (level 2) but levels 3 and 4 did not develop as they expected.

In families providing emergency foster care, feelings of family belonging are not intended to develop. Yet if, for example, very young children end up staying with them over a longer period than planned, they not only develop significant emotional relationships and often attachments but sometimes also a feeling of family belonging. The next transition, to a long-term foster family or back to their family of origin, then involves a transformation in their emotional relationships and, in addition, the end of an unanticipated feeling of family belonging. This greatly complicates the process.

Other combinations can also be imagined. Those examined here can be summed up thus in a table.

Table 2. Exemplary types of foster family functioning, related to four levels of involvement of the foster child and foster family

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Type of foster family functioning
x	x	x	x	Ideal foster family (parent role identity)
x	x	x	-	Ideal foster family (carer role identity)
-	-	-	-	Archetypal breakdown
-	x	x	x	Archetypal feeling of being at home
-	-	x	-	Sven + Simon
-	-	x	x	Josefie temporarily
x	x	-	-	"Like in a hotel"
-	-	x	x	Emergency care ending in conflict

Level 1: Legal codes: intervention/support is in progress or has finished; level 2: Household; level 3: Contact people and relationships; level 4: Family membership and belonging.
x = involved, – = not involved

Conclusion

There are extensive, well-verified individual empirical findings explaining the breakdown of foster placements. However, these are only of limited help in *understanding* the multifaceted processes which can lead to a loss of stability in foster care and finally to a breakdown. To achieve this, we need interdependency models which include interacting processes with different actors and developments on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. The development of models of this kind has only just begun. I would like to call for further research in this direction, and for research results to be integrated into these interdependency models as a means of forming hypotheses. This might provide the basis for a theory about development and socialisation in foster families – and we will be better equipped to understand the dynamics, the composition and the complexity of breakdown processes. That research is conceived as the basis for developing a theory, but could also generate fresh ideas for practice by revealing new courses of action to be taken by the social services.

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