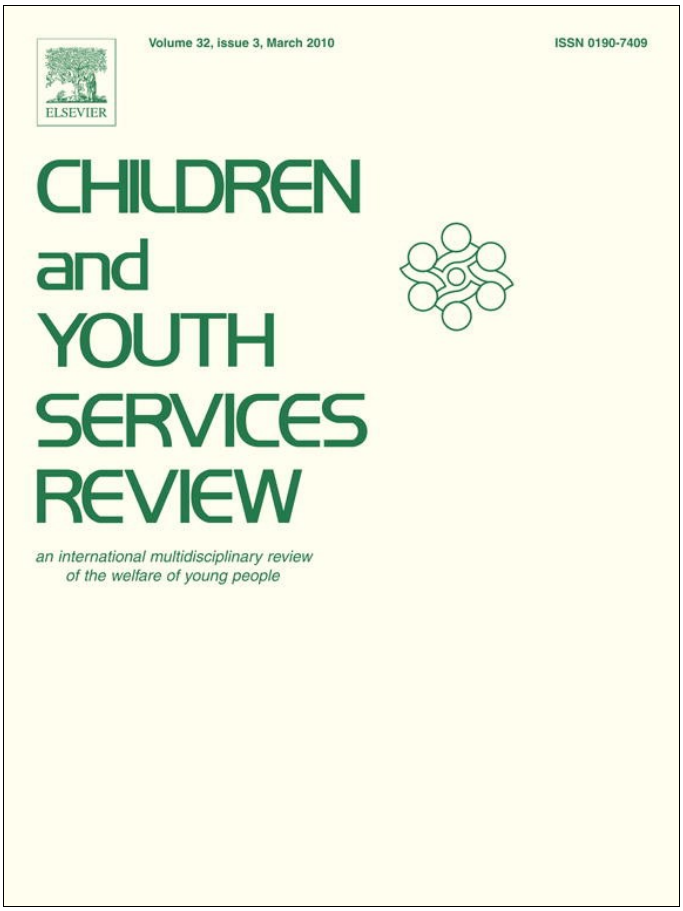
Provided for non-commercial research and education use.
Not for reproduction, distribution or commercial use.



This article appeared in a journal published by Elsevier. The attached copy is furnished to the author for internal non-commercial research and education use, including for instruction at the authors institution and sharing with colleagues.

Other uses, including reproduction and distribution, or selling or licensing copies, or posting to personal, institutional or third party websites are prohibited.

In most cases authors are permitted to post their version of the article (e.g. in Word or Tex form) to their personal website or institutional repository. Authors requiring further information regarding Elsevier's archiving and manuscript policies are encouraged to visit:

http://www.elsevier.com/copyright

Author's personal copy

Children and Youth Services Review 32 (2010) 437–444

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Does anyone know what is going on? Examining children's lived experience of the transition into foster care

Monique B. Mitchell *, Leon Kuczynski

Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Road East, Guelph, ON, Canada N1G 2W1

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 July 2009
Received in revised form 28 October 2009
Accepted 29 October 2009
Available online 11 November 2009

Keywords:
Foster care
Children and stress
Lived experience
Foster care transition
Transactions
Ambiguity
Children's well-being

ABSTRACT

Twenty children, ages 8 to 15, participated in a hermeneutic phenomenological study which examined children's lived experience of the initial placement into foster care. Using the sensitizing frameworks of life transition (Cowan, 1991) and cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the analyses identified two primary transactions resulting from the foster care transition: the apprehension transaction and foster home placement transaction. Five main events and six domains of ambiguity were elicited from children's reports of the foster care transition. The implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are provided.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Research on children in care has focused on various phenomena related to children's experiences during foster care. Examples include the stability of foster care placements (Pardeck, 1982), the involvement of biological caregivers in the lives of children in foster care (Leathers, 2003; Palmer, 1996), foster parent–foster child relations (Kufeldt et al., 1995), problem behaviours in foster care (Newton et al., 2000), children's retrospections of foster care (Festinger, 1983), and children's perspectives while in foster care (Gilligan, 2001; Whiting & Lee, 2003). What has received limited attention is the discrete experience of children's initial transition into non-kinship foster care. The initial transition, involving abrupt changes in close relationships and family environments, is important to examine because it potentially marks a significant turning point in children's lives. Studies on children in care indicate that children have reported feelings of self-doubt (Johnson et al., 1995; Whiting & Lee, 2003), uncertainty about the purpose and duration of the foster care placement (Whiting & Lee, 2003), varying expectations from within their new family environment (Chapman et al., 2004), difficulty adjusting to new relationships, roles, and life changes (Hetherington, 1991), and loyalty conflicts between their original caregivers and new caregivers (Leathers, 2003). These findings suggest that the foster care transition may be a life transition that can significantly affect a child's inner life and interpersonal world. The purpose of this study is to explore children's experiences of the transition into foster care.[1]

2. Theoretical and sensitizing framework

Two theoretical frameworks were used to examine this phenomenon: life transitions (Cowan, 1991) and transactions (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). According to Cowan (1991), a life transition involves two significant qualitative shifts: a shift in an individual's inner life (e.g. psychological sense of self and assumptive world) and a shift in an individual's interpersonal world (e.g. reorganization of relationships, role reorganization, and interpersonal coping).

2.1. Conceptualizing foster care transition transactions

Expanding on Cowan's framework, Mitchell (2008) conceptualized a transition as a series of transactions that build on successive qualitative shifts in an individual's life and interpersonal relationships. For the purpose of this study, a *foster care transition transaction* was conceptually defined as any transaction experienced by children as a direct result of placement into foster care. The transactional model presented in Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping served as a sensitizing framework to examine emergent foster care transition transactions. According to this model, a transaction involves an encounter between an individual

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: mitchelm@uoguelph.ca (M.B. Mitchell).

[1] For a more complete report, see Mitchell (2008).

0190-7409/$ – see front matter © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.10.023

Author's personal copy

(i.e., the child) and a situation (i.e., an event or events) that precipitates cognitive appraisals and new relational meaning. Individuals are considered to engage in transactions with their environment by appraising events in relation to the environment's potential to benefit or threaten personal well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model suggests that experiences are not inherently beneficial or stressful, rather the outcome of a transaction is a product of an individual's subjective evaluation of an event in relation to personal well-being and available resources and coping strategies.

2.2. Ambiguity and the transition into foster care

Research suggests (Fanshel et al., 1990; Johnson et al., 1995; Palmer, 1996; Whiting & Lee, 2003; Chapman et al., 2004) that ambiguity (i.e., a lack of clarity) may be an important feature of the transition into foster care (Mitchell, 2006). For example, children in foster care have reported experiencing a lack of clarity about the reason for their foster care placement (Chapman et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 1995). Children who experience ambiguity about why they have been placed into care may blame themselves for the placement or make some other erroneous attribution. Studies have shown that children may create their own interpretations of the reason for their foster care placement (Palmer, 1996; Whiting & Lee, 2003). The creation of false reasons for placement may negatively affect children's psychological well-being (Auden, 1995).

Another domain of ambiguity that children in care may experience involves the maintenance and continuity of their relationships after separation from their families. Children in care have reported that their feelings of loss were unattended to within the foster care system (Fanshel et al., 1990). Feelings of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2002) can arise due to the physical and psychological separation from family members. Because their original parents are alive but absent, children may experience ambiguity about their parents' physical and/or psychological presence once placed into foster care.

When placed into care, children are physically separated from their previous caregivers and placed into a new family environment; often with little to no forewarning. Experiencing ambiguity within environments can contribute to emotional upheaval that may result in states of tension, anxiety, and depression (Cowan, 1991). In instances of abrupt, unanticipated, or untimely loss transactions, individuals are at risk of lengthy and maladaptive responses due to the inability for anticipatory adjustment (Cowan, 1991). According to Cowan (1991), successful transitions are dependent on personal and social resources, subjective interpretations, and physical and social demands. Without adequate assistance for coping, an individual's developmental progress could be impeded due to the stressful changes that often occur during (life) transitions (Cowan, 1991). Considered together the concepts proposed by Cowan (1991) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provided an integrative sensitizing framework for examining children's lived experience of the transition into foster care.

3. The purpose

Relatively little is known directly about children's experience of the transition into foster care. The purpose of this study was to learn how children experience this potentially significant life transition, to identify significant events in this transition from children's point of view, and to explore children's interpretations and evaluations of these events. It was proposed that the foster care transition could be experienced in one or more separable transactions that had the potential to be appraised as beneficial or stressful. An important question of the present study concerns how children experience the transition into foster care and, more specifically, whether children experience ambiguity during the foster care transition. It was anticipated that the identification of events that commonly elicited stressful appraisals would assist with future policies and intervention by providing an understanding of possible ways to minimize stressful experiences and preserve the inner lives and interpersonal worlds of children in foster care.

4. Method

4.1. Guiding philosophy: Hermeneutic phenomenology

The interviews and analyses were implemented using the qualitative methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology involves the study of existential accounts of human beings (Benner, 1994) and focuses on how individuals try to make sense of meaningful things in the world around them (Baronov, 2004). Because of its emphasis on individuals in relation to their contexts (Leonard, 1994), hermeneutic phenomenology is compatible with cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) which focuses on individuals' subjective interpretations of transactions that threaten matters of significance and value to an individual. Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis is therefore well suited to examine and interpret children's potentially diverse beliefs and evaluations of the lived experience of the foster care transition.

Hermeneutic phenomenology requires a statement of the researcher's personal values and experiences that are relevant to the research process. The researcher's previous research on the social support networks of Honduran female children in care (Mitchell, 2004) and experience as a Crown Ward contributed to the desire to provide assistance to children who have been removed or bereaved from their original caregivers. It was the researcher's belief that children who experience parental loss need hope, love, and guidance to assist them during this transition. Honoring children's voices, providing a research environment that promotes warmth, invitation, and trust, and establishing a rapport with participants were key values held by the researcher.

4.2. Sample

Twenty children in care (7 males, 13 females) were interviewed about their lived experience of the transition into foster care. Children ages 8 to 15, who were in regular non-kinship foster care and had been in care for more than 6 months and less than 3 years, were selected to participate in this study. Children who had been in care for less than 6 months were not invited to participate in the study because children need time to adjust to their new living arrangements and Worden (2005) suggests that children usually require at least 6 months to acknowledge parental loss. The average age of the sample was 12 years and the average time spent in care was 20 months. The children were recruited from a Children's Aid Society agency in Canada. On average, children experienced two placements during their time in care.

All children who met the sample criteria were invited to participate in this study. Children's legal guardians (i.e., the children's services workers) were first contacted to request permission for the child's participation in the study. A “child-friendly” information package and consent form were provided to participants in a sealed envelope addressed to them. Children were advised their participation was voluntary and were only accepted to the study upon receipt of their signed consent form.[2]

4.3. Data collection

4.3.1. Rapport building

Prior to the individual interviews, participants were invited to attend a “We Care” workshop, a 90-minute group session, which was

[2] The research protocol for this study was submitted and approved by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board.

Author's personal copy

created to establish a rapport between the researcher and the participants. The children were invited to contribute their ideas about a potential resource book that could be used to assist children during the foster care transition.

It was anticipated that the workshop would assist children in feeling a sense of competency and enjoyment from participating in a project designed for other children who may share similar experiences. Children who were unable to attend the workshop were provided with preliminary rapport building activities with the researcher before the Sharing Ideas interview.

4.3.2. Individual interviews

Data was collected on a subsequent day after the rapport building session using semi-structured interviews that ranged from 30–60 min in duration. To promote privacy for the children, interviews were held in a secure location that was outside of the foster home and the social services agency.

A semi-structured interview approach that allowed children to navigate the direction of the conversation was used to encourage spontaneous responses from children regarding these experiences. Interview questions concerning children's initial transition into care were as follows: “Do you remember when you first moved into foster care?”, “How did you feel when you moved into the first home?”, “Was anyone with you when you moved to the new home?”, “Did anyone tell you why you were moving to that home?”, “Why do you think you live with another family?”, “Was there anything that was difficult/helpful for you when you had to move out of your home and move into another home?” Children were not explicitly asked about the construct of ambiguity because it was of interest to discover whether they spontaneously reported ambiguity as an experience related to their transition.

4.4. Data analysis

Data analysis for hermeneutic phenomenological research involves: (i) thematic analysis, (ii) identification of exemplars, and (iii) search for paradigm cases (Leonard, 1994). In order to code, categorize, and identify emerging themes, an “organizing-system” approach was used (Patterson and Williams, 2002). Interpretation of exemplars and a search for paradigm cases subsequently followed in the analysis process.

4.4.1. Thematic analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy, and read numerous times to attain an overall understanding of the data collected. MAXQDA, a software program, was used to assist with organizing and exploring data, monitoring self-created codes and categories, and document changes and decisions related to the research process. Interviews were analyzed in a successive manner by assigning codes to phenomena while reviewing the transcript line by line. Similar codes were grouped together in order to reflect categories that emerged from the data. These categories were held loosely and were acknowledged as flexible to change. As additional lines of inquiry related to the experience of transitioning into foster care arose, new categories emerged and were included in the interpretive plan. The categories were then further scrutinized to identify the various categorical dimensions that were present (i.e., distinguishing between main categories and subcategories). Throughout this process, memos were taken and new analytic procedures were created in order to reflect on the data and categories created.

4.4.2. Key themes, exemplars, and paradigm cases

As analysis progressed, themes that emerged from the data were documented. These themes reflected the interpretations and evaluations reported by children during the interviews. Exemplars arose from the analysis of participants' concerns, actions, and practices of specific events related to the transition into foster care. These exemplars provided a rich description of children's lived experience of transitioning into foster care and were used to highlight key elements within the themes.

Paradigm cases are repetitive instances of specific patterns of meanings and are constructed to give a more holistic view of the research phenomenon. Paradigm cases illustrate the ways in which individual concerns, practices, and meanings influence personal actions and understandings (Leonard, 1994). Common experiences were threaded together to create paradigm cases which represented the amalgamation of participants' lived experiences of foster care transition transactions.[3]

4.4.3. Conceptualizing ambiguity

During analysis, the researcher was alert to the presence or absence of ambiguity in children's narratives. Ambiguity was therefore a sensitizing concept whose potential importance was suggested by the research literature. It became apparent during analysis that a refinement was needed in the conceptualization of ambiguity. Unlike Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who considered ambiguity as a fixed environmental property (i.e., a situation factor), ambiguity in this study was conceptualized as the product of an interpretive cognitive process; that is the qualification of an event as “ambiguous” was dependent on an individual's subjective interpretation. The events resulting from the foster care transition transaction were considered as “ambiguous” only if a child indicated there to be insufficient or conflicting cues in the environment that inhibited him/her from understanding and evaluating the event's potential to impose on his/her personal beliefs and commitments.

4.4.4. Minimizing bias

The following steps were taken to minimize bias and ensure the trustworthiness of the analyses. An audit trail was constructed to document decisions throughout the research process. These included daily memos for analytical procedures, analysis of coding and emerging themes, and external consultation. Critical reflection was documented in the study's logbook in MAXQDA and recorded all ideas concerning study design, concepts and categories emerging from the data, and challenges to initial presuppositions. Regular consultations with expert advisors to the study were made to review and discuss the researcher's coding and interpretations of the data.

5. Results

The foster care transition was conceptualized as the process whereby a child enters into foster care. A *foster care transition transaction* was conceptually defined as any transaction that occurred as a direct result of placement into foster care. Analyses of the interviews indicated that the transition into foster care could be understood in terms of two transactions: *the apprehension transaction* and *the foster home placement transaction*. Moreover, children's descriptions of these transactions were interpreted in terms of *main events* and domains of *ambiguity*. The analyses revealed that children's lived experience of the transition into foster care involved five main events (notification of placement into foster care, the home transfer, placement into a new home environment, loss of relationships, and formation of relationships) and six domains of ambiguity. The emergent domains of ambiguity were categorized as *temporal ambiguity, placement reason ambiguity, ambiguous loss, placement context ambiguity, structural ambiguity, and relationship ambiguity*. It should be noted that we have diverged from a purely qualitative presentation when documenting the percentage of children in the sample that experienced each domain of ambiguity. Ambiguity is an

[3] For the purposes of brevity, the paradigm cases are not presented in this article. This information can be found in Mitchell (2008).

Author's personal copy

important issue that has received little attention as a phenomenon in the foster care literature. Given this, the decision to report frequencies specifically for presenting the ambiguous domains was a pragmatic one. In addition, verbatim exemplars are identified by age and sex of child to indicate the generality of theme interpretations across the present sample. This information could be useful to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as a way of documenting the prevalence of this phenomenon for children in foster care.

5.1. The apprehension transaction

The *apprehension transaction* was conceptualized as the point in time when children are apprehended from their original home and transported to their foster home. Two main events, *the notification of placement into foster care* and *the home transfer*, and four domains of ambiguity, *structural ambiguity, placement reason ambiguity, placement context ambiguity*, and *relationship ambiguity* were elicited by this transaction.

5.1.1. The notification of placement into foster care

The majority of children reported that they were advised of foster placement on the day of apprehension. Most children were notified of the need to be placed into care by a child protection worker while in a location outside of their original home. Two children indicated that a stranger advised them of their placement into care. One child reported, "The taxi told me that I'm going into foster care" (male, 8–9 years). Some children indicated they did not receive notification of foster placement and one child said she was notified by her foster mother; that is, after she had been placed into care.

The majority of children reported that the notification of foster care was a stressful experience. Common themes that emerged from children's reports included experiences of shock, abruptness, and confusion as a result of cues of immediacy and novelty of the apprehension event. A few children reported coming home from school only to discover they had to move and their belongings had already been packed. Many children reported experiencing the apprehension transaction as abrupt and not having enough time to process the event. Children stated, "It happens so quick and you're just gone and like see you later. That's it" (male, 12–13 years), and, "Does anybody know what's going on other than mom and this weirdo, this grouchy weirdo? Like, what's happening?" (female, 10–11 years).

Although many children indicated that, at the time of placement notification, they were confused about the meaning of foster care and its future implications (i.e., the events to follow once placed "into care"), many were able to identify the immediate implications and discussed emotional responses to their predicament. Children reported experiencing fear, anxiety, and especially sadness and anger.

5.1.2. The home transfer

The *home transfer* refers to the period of time when a child was removed from the home and transferred to a foster home. This experience was often interpreted by children as analogous to kidnapping or being "tooken". Children made comments such as, "I got tooken from my mom" (male, 8–9 years) and, "Yeah. It's like you're being kidnapped and nobody wants to tell you nottin" (female, 12–13 years). These reflections illustrate how the apprehension transaction can be appraised as a traumatic experience by children; especially for those who interpreted and/or equated the transaction as being kidnapped. Children who perceived they were being apprehended from their home, against their will, and in the absence of cues in the environment to explain the transaction, evaluated the transaction as threatening to their personal well-being. All but one child reported that their removal from their original home was forced and against their will.

Most children reported that an adult with whom they were familiar accompanied them to their foster home; however, for the majority of children, this adult was not a parent. Children's reports illustrated that parental accompaniment was perceived as positive or negative depending on their interpretation and evaluation of the event. One child stated, "I would have liked her to go and see my home and check it out, but, she didn't (female, 10–11 years old)", whereas another child stated, "Um, no because like then I'd get more attached to my real mom and then it'd be harder to let go when she has to go home (10–11 years old)". These findings suggest that parental accompaniment can induce benign-positive or stressful appraisals during the apprehension transaction dependent on a child's interpretation and appraisal of the event.

5.1.3. Structural ambiguity

Structural ambiguity refers to children's lack of clarity about the meaning of foster care. Many children had no idea about the implicit and explicit rules of foster care other than discovering that it involved a monumental shift in their lives. Nearly half of the children indicated that they "did not know" the meaning of foster care. One child discussed how she did not understand the meaning of foster care until the day of apprehension. She stated:

> My mom said I was going to an appointment at a person's house and she was going to come. She never went into the car…I found that this woman was packing my stuff…and that's when I ran into the house and said 'Mom, why is there people packing our stuff?' and she said, 'I'm not coming to the appointment with you 'cause you are going into foster care.' I said, 'What is that?' She's like, 'Where people take care of you, cause, cause, um, I can't' (female, 10–11 years)

Another child stated:

> I thought when I first went into foster care that I wouldn't be able to see my parents ever again...Even though my parents didn't do right, they weren't being right with me... it doesn't mean I don't like them. But, like, it kinda feels like prison if you didn't get to see them (female, 10–11 years)

Children discussed being confused about the meaning of foster care and commonly reported their concerns about whether they would ever see their family and friends again. As indicated by their reports, some children were not provided with any information regarding visitation rights with their loved ones.

5.1.4. Placement reason ambiguity

Placement reason ambiguity refers to children's lack of clarity about the reason for foster care placement. Children's experiences of placement reason ambiguity included being unaware or confused about the reason for placement into care, disagreeing with the reason provided to them, and self-blame. Half of the children indicated they did not know the reason for their placement upon entrance into foster care and some stated they were still unaware of their reason for placement at the time of the study. One child reported, "Not even now they don't even tell me. (*Have you asked anybody?*) Yeah. [My worker] doesn't know and [my lawyer] and them don't even know about it" (male, 12–13 years).

Half of the children who experienced placement reason ambiguity reported a placement reason had been provided yet the reason for their placement was still unclear. For some children, this experience was a result of having multiple reasons provided to them. One child stated:

> Even kids have come up to me and I'll be like 'Guys, help me make some sense out of this!' and they'd be like 'Sure, I have no friggin idea!' Cause I've even asked teachers 'Why do you think I'm in care?'…I'm given a million different reasons and, like, don't ask me cause I've got no clue (female, 12–13 years).

Author's personal copy

Other children discussed how they rejected the reason provided to them and created their own understanding. This understanding, however, did not necessarily alleviate the ambiguity the children were experiencing because a lack of clarity still existed within the relational meaning between their beliefs and the cues in their environment.

Lastly, some children blamed themselves for being placed into care. One child stated, "And we were dressed in old clothes… [My shirt] was like up to here, so it showed my stomach, and they weren't impressed with that so they took us away" (female, 10–11 years). In most cases, children who blamed themselves for being placed into care were aware their placement was related to the neglectful actions of adult caregivers; however, they still construed their personal actions as the main contributing factor.

5.1.5. Placement context ambiguity

Placement context ambiguity refers to children's lack of clarity about the context of the home where they would be living. Thirty percent of children reported concerns about the context of the appointed foster home. Once notified that they would be moving to a new residence, children reported having concerns about whether the basic needs one would normally receive in a family environment would be provided once placed into care; that is, play, sleep, being fed, and companionship. One child stated, "I was afraid of, ah, if she didn't have toys" (male, 8–9 years). Another child stated, "I didn't know where I was going to sleep" (female, 12–13 years).

Other children discussed their concerns about whether children would be residing at the home. Most children indicated they wanted other children at the home. One child stated, "The only thing that I was like scared to death about is there better be another kid there… It would weird to be alone, like there would just be parents living there and I don't even know them. Okay, that's really weird" (male, 12–13 years).

However, not all children indicated that they desired to reside with other children at the foster home. One child presented another perspective on this issue:

> [My social worker] asked me who I'd like to be with, if there's any kids there or something like that, and how the parents will be. I was like make the parents young and no kids. (*You would prefer that they didn't have any children?*) Yeah, so I can get all the attention. (female, 12–13 years)

These children's reports suggest that the presence of other children in the home may be an environmental cue that has the potential to evoke a benign-positive or stressful appraisal. Furthermore, these experiences suggest that the security of knowing if their basic needs would be met was not readily made apparent to these children.

5.1.6. Relationship ambiguity

Relationship ambiguity refers to children's lack of clarity about the people with whom they would be living. Relationship ambiguity was the most salient experience of ambiguity for children entering foster care. Seventy five percent of children reported concerns about the people with whom they were going to live. Children's reports indicated that being informed of living with strangers was a frustrating and anxiety-provoking experience that instigated a variety of stressful appraisals.

The experience of being placed into a home with an unknown family commonly elicited stress appraisals. One child commented:

> I was like, 'Woah! …Who are these people? I don't even know them and I'm moving in with them'. I was like, 'Holy! Bring me somewhere else. I don't care where I'll have to go. I'll get locked up as long as I'm not with just some family I don't know.' (male, 12–13 years)

Other children stated, "I was afraid that they might hit me or my little [siblings]… Like I didn't mind if they hurt me, but like my siblings, they're too important to get to me. So it was sort of scary for that" (female, 14–15 years) and "I didn't know the people so I don't know what to expect…they were still kind of strangers to me. Even though I know their name and stuff, but still" (male, 12–13 years).

These reports illustrate the close association between relationship ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Many of the children did not initially understand the implications of the foster parent/child relationship. On a structural level, they were not aware that the new adults with whom they were placed were screened and trained to care for children, that they would function as parents, and that this new relationship may be a lengthy one. On a personal level, children reported concerns about entering an unfamiliar relationship in which they did not have a history that enabled them to know how to relate and interact within this new relationship. It is useful to consider the stress engendered by relationship ambiguity as the child enters the next transaction.

5.2. The foster home placement transaction

The *foster home placement transaction* was conceptualized as a child's lived experience of the foster home upon entrance and throughout the duration of the foster care placement. Three main events, *placement into a new home environment, formation of relationships, and loss of relationships*, and two domains of ambiguity, *ambiguous loss* and *temporal ambiguity*, were elicited by this transaction.

5.2.1. Placement into a new home environment

Children's initial experiences of the foster home placement included reports about experiencing unfamiliarity, fear of pets, the initial greeting, feelings of isolation and loneliness. Children discussed how anxiety surfaced as a result of being unfamiliar with the foster home. One child reported, "I felt a little scared …I didn't really know them and I didn't know where I was going to sleep, when I was going to go back" (female, 12–13 years). Another child reported, "I didn't know anything. I had to ask to get food, or like ask to do something, you know 'cause it was my first time there" (male, 12–13 years). Other children discussed how they became fearful and anxious upon discovering that pets resided at the foster home.

Some children discussed how they experienced the initial contact with their foster parents and fellow siblings in care. One child stated, "I don't think [my foster father] said hi to me or anything there in like three days that I was there" (female, 12–13 years). Another child stated, "All the kids didn't really like me very much for some reason that I didn't even know why" (male, 12–13 years). These experiences suggest that a child's perception of feeling welcome and secure by adults and children residing in the foster home can influence whether stress appraisals will be evoked.

The issue of loneliness was another theme that emerged from the children's stories. Many children discussed how moving into care resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness due to displacement from family and friends. "It's a pain in the butt 'cause I'm like in the middle of nowhere, from my friends" (female, 10–11 years).

5.2.2. Formation of new relationships

When placed into care, children discussed the formation of new relationships with pets, fellow children in care, and caregivers. Although some children discussed fear of pets upon initial placement into care, most children reported they established fond relations with pets while at their foster home. One child stated, "I just got a new best friend, I'm not letting [the dog] go!" (female, 12–13 years). Peers were also considered helpful companions to children by easing placement context ambiguity, maintaining commitments (e.g. continued participation in activities), and minimizing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

When discussing the formation of a relationship with their caregivers, children addressed issues such as initial expectations,

Author's personal copy

establishing trust, and close connections. Some children discussed their thoughts on the expectations placed on them by their foster parents when they first arrived at the foster home. One child stated:

> I first got there...it was almost suppertime so we ate the supper… my [siblings] were really sad and [my foster parents] were like 'Well you have to do dishes' and it was like my first hour and like the first time you go there you don't want to quickly do a chore, you want to wait a couple days and then do your chore. And they're like, 'You have to do your chore'. I was like, 'I just came here. Why don't you wait like not tomorrow but the next day and I'll do dishes. I just came here I'm not really in the mood to do dishes'. And then I didn't do it and they were like, 'Well if you don't do dishes then you can go to your room and you can't see friends and mom and blah blah blah' so I called my dad up and was really sad. (female, 14–15 years)

This child's report reflects the experiences of those children who believed that the initial expectations placed on them by their foster parents were unfair and uncompassionate.

Children also discussed the importance of establishing trust with their new caregivers. One child stated, "But at first I didn't start talking to her right when I went there because I couldn't really trust her yet. I needed to know I could trust her" (male, 12–13 years) Trusting an adult was not a given, rather, it was something that had to be earned. For most children, earning their trust involved an investment in time. Another child reported, "Before I felt that I couldn't talk to like [my foster mother], but now me and [my foster mother] have heart-to-heart conversations like all the time" (female, 12–13 years). Children's reports indicated that intimacy within the foster/parent–child relationship was established through a sense of familiarity and a foundation of trust. Some children discussed how their relationship with their foster parent became more intimate over time. One child stated:

> Sometimes I feel like I want to call them mom and dad because I feel that I want to and just, I don't know…Once in a while I'll call them mom and dad...I know [my foster father] doesn't mind because I never had a dad in my life, but she's like, 'Well please call me, Nanny', so, I was like 'Oh, Nanny. Okay, I guess'. (female, 12–13 years)

For this child, calling her foster parents 'mom' and 'dad' was important to her, possibly because the use of these terms reflected a relationship of a more intimate nature. That is, as more intimacy forms between children in care and their caregivers, the relationship may no longer reflect children's interpretations of "the role of foster parent" and, in turn, they may choose to rename the caregiver to better reflect their understanding, or expectation, of the relationship that has formed.

5.2.3. Loss of relationships and ambiguous loss

The placement into foster care resulted in the children being separated from loved ones. The separation from loved ones often resulted in children's experience of ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss refers to a lack of clarity about the psychological and/or physical presence of members in one's [original] family (Boss, 2002). Boss's (2002) concept of ambiguous loss was used to capture the domain of ambiguity that more than half of the children experienced once they had been placed into care. These experiences usually involved situations where the family member was psychologically present yet physically absent.

The most common form of ambiguous loss related to the loss of parents. Children commonly discussed feelings of helplessness when they were placed into their new home with no invitation or means to communicate with their parents. One child stated, "I got tooken away from my mom. That was really harsh … I just moved into my foster house and I was crying for my mom and stuff" (female, 12–13 years). Children also discussed how separation from their siblings resulted in feelings of loneliness and a desire for companionship. One child commented, "I'm used to having siblings and stuff, so, I'll want to hang out with my friends and stuff because I'm the only kid there and it's really boring" (female, 12–13 years). Children who are accustomed to living with siblings may have difficulty adjusting to a new family environment where no other children reside. This child's experience captures elements of initial concerns reported by children when experiencing placement context ambiguity (i.e., Will there be other children residing at the home?) Other children addressed how they experienced ambiguous loss even when they were placed into the same foster home as their siblings. One child (male, 12–13 years) discussed how he wanted to sleep in the same room as his brother who had also been placed in the foster home. He reported that his foster parents woke him up from his brother's room and told him he needed to return to his own room because he was not allowed to sleep in the same room as his brother. This was upsetting to the child because he found it comforting to have his brother nearby in an unfamiliar place. These children's reports illustrate how children can experience a shift in their inner life world and interpersonal relationships when placed into foster care. The inability to partake in activities like they once did with their siblings resulted in ambiguous loss. Children discussed experiencing stress when they were unable to be accompanied, or accompany, their siblings during times of discomfort and anxiety.

5.2.4. Temporal ambiguity

Temporal ambiguity refers to children's lack of clarity about the duration of foster care placement. When placed into foster care, children began to question the length of time they would be in care and when they would get to return "home". As one child stated, "I didn't know when I was going to go back" (female, 12–13 years). It was initially thought that the experience of temporal ambiguity may create conflict in the foster parent–child relationship. However, when referring to temporal ambiguity, children's preoccupation with this experience was more in reference to their desire to return home (i.e., a focus on the original parent–child relationship) than to how it was affecting the parent–child relationship in the foster home (i.e., the foster parent–child relationship). It could be inferred, however, that the foster parent–child relationship could be negatively affected when a child's is preoccupied with thoughts of returning home. Further research is required to better understand the relationship between children's experience of temporal ambiguity and its effects on the foster parent–child relationship.

6. Discussion

This study is one of the first to examine the foster care transition as an important turning point in children's lives and raises awareness of the significance of this transitioning process for children. A theoretical contribution of this study was the integration of the concepts of transition (Cowan, 1991) and discrete transactions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Life transitions involve a macro-level of analysis resulting in qualitative changes in an individual's life course and consist of one or more transactions involving micro-level qualitative change (Mitchell, 2008). Considering these two levels of analysis together may advance both the theoretical analysis of the transition process as well as provide more fine grained implications for intervention and social policy.

The transition into foster care was not reported by children as one monolithic event. Instead they were found to report the foster care transition in terms of two separate transactions: the apprehension transaction and foster home placement transaction. Each transaction evoked distinct subjective appraisals and involved distinct events that

Author's personal copy

threatened their well-being. Within the apprehension transaction, children identified the notification of placement into foster care and the home transfer as stressful events. Within the foster home placement transaction, children identified new stressors concerning placement into a new home environment, formation of new relationships, and the loss of old relationships. The identification of such separate and, from the children's perspective, momentous transactions may have implications for context specific intervention. One possibility is that the manner in which the notification and home transfer is handled by service providers may have implications for children's initial receptivity to the new foster home. Similarly the way the placement to the new foster home is handled may have implications for the child's longer-term adjustment in foster care.

A second contribution of this study is the documentation of the role of ambiguity as a source of stress within each transaction. The study goes beyond previous research involving the perceptions of children in foster care (Altshuler, 1999; Chapman et al., 2004; Festinger, 1983; Gilligan, 2001; Johnson et al., 1995; Whiting & Lee, 2003) by identifying specific events that precipitated ambiguous interpretations during the foster care transition. Interpretations of ambiguity always elicited stressful appraisals and resulted from a lack of clarity about the meaning of foster care (*structural ambiguity*), the reason for foster care placement (*placement reason ambiguity*), the context of the home where they would be living (*placement context ambiguity*), the people with whom they would be living (*relationship ambiguity*), the psychological and/or physical presence of members in one's [original] family (*ambiguous loss*), and the duration of foster care placement (*temporal ambiguity*).

Relationship ambiguity, the most predominant domain of ambiguity, was found to be particularly distressing for children and was exemplified in children's reports when offering advice to children in care, child welfare workers, and fosters parents about ways to assist children during the foster care transition (Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2009). The importance of children's relational concerns can be understood with reference to theories that stress that human development as well as discrete social interactions occur in the context of long-term, interdependent relationships (Hinde, 1979; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). The disruption of the relational context of children during the transitioning from parent to foster care may be stressful because it removes the context which enables children to make sense of themselves in relation to others as well as the relational history which forms the basis of knowing how to act with regard to others and predicting how others will respond to them.

The findings suggest that the transition into foster care corresponded with Cowan's (1991) criteria for a life transition consisting of shifts in children's inner lives and interpersonal worlds. In particular, children reported experiencing significant shifts in their assumptive world and in the major relationships in their lives. Children often questioned what would happen to them once placed into care, what their home would be like, who would be caring for them, if their basic needs would be met, and if they would ever see their loved ones again. Ultimately, children's reports indicated that all interpretations of ambiguity resulted from insufficient or conflicting cues in the environment that hindered their ability to evaluate the potential of events to threaten their personal well-being, relationships, and matters of significance in their lives. These findings support research from other nations such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom by which children in care reported receiving inadequate information during their transition into care (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Chapman et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 1995; Gilligan, 2000). It is proposed that the debilitating effects of the foster care transition can be minimized if children are advised, immediately upon apprehension and/or during home transfer, about efforts that will be made to preserve matters of importance to their personal well-being. Suggestions to minimize the various experiences of ambiguity may include explaining the meaning and purpose of foster care, providing information about the reason for placement into foster care, the home where they will be living, and the family with whom they will be placed, and providing children with the opportunity to raise any questions or concerns. Children could be provided with resources and information that have the potential to minimize ambiguous interpretations and subsequent stressful appraisals as well as preserve relationships and matters of significance during the transition into foster care. The provision of this information could be provided to children verbally as well as in an informational package that introduces children to life in foster care (Mitchell, 2008).

An implication for policy makers is that the transition into foster care should be considered a distinct phase of service delivery. Guidance regarding ways to provide services within the child welfare system is contained in documents such as best-practices, which provide informal guidelines, and standards which are legally binding requirements that establish a minimum level of performance for child protection providers. A review of pertinent standards in different countries is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it can be noted that although existing standards to regulate foster service providers in the United Kingdom (Secretary of State for Health, 2002) and in Canada (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007) do an exceptional job of promoting and securing a child's welfare at various stages before and after placement into care, none of the standards specifically address ways to promote and secure a child's welfare during the initial transition into care. The best interests of the child is our primary consideration (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and, therefore, establishing a standard that specifically addresses this critical experience would provide a normative desired level of achievement and would better assist child welfare agencies in tending to the needs of children and families during the transition into foster care.

6.1. Limitations

One of the main limitations to this study is that the perspectives of all parties involved in the foster care transition have not been included. The perspectives of all major stakeholders, including policy makers, child welfare workers, foster parents, original parents, and experienced children, should be considered when suggesting recommendations at the level of social policy. These reports may not be generalizable to the larger population because all participants had experienced regular foster care, were from the same geographical region, and were reflective of a relatively small sample. Children from other cities or countries may have different perspectives of the transition into foster care due to various cultural influences (i.e., family, ethnic, religious, and societal). It is also possible that children's perceptions at the time of the study may have differed from the time of their transition into care. Lastly, this study was focused specifically on children's experiences of the transition into foster care. As was found in Mitchell (2008), children reappraised the experience of foster care as more benign-positive with time. Interpretations and appraisals at the time of transition into care do not necessarily constitute children's interpretations and appraisals of transactions throughout care.

6.2. Suggestions for future research

Future research on the experience of the transition into care could examine perceptions of other parties during the foster care transition. Researchers may be interested in examining how foster parents, child welfare workers, and original parents experience a child's transition into care. Research topics could include parents' lived experience of fostering children transitioning into care, social services workers' lived experience of assisting a child during the foster care transition, siblings' lived experience of transitioning into care, and original children's lived experience of having a child in care transitioning into

Author's personal copy

their family home. Lastly, further research on ambiguity is needed. Acquiring a better understanding of the role of ambiguity may provide foster care researchers, practitioners, and policy makers with useful ways to minimize children's stressful experiences during the foster care transition.

7. Conclusion

This research contributes to existing research by providing an understanding of children's interpretations and evaluations of the transition into foster care. Specifically, this study addresses new constructs such as foster care transition transactions and experiences of ambiguity. Furthermore, the examination of children's interpretations of ambiguity during the foster care transition provides an understanding of the various events that could be appraised as stressful by children during the transition into care. The suggested implications arising from this research could prove useful to policy makers, child welfare workers, researchers, and caregivers who are interested in assisting children during the transition into foster care. The foster care transition should cultivate nurturance; not neglect. Through the acknowledgement, consideration, and nurturance of children's lived experience, efforts can be made to preserve children's inner lives and interpersonal worlds during their transition into foster care.

Acknowledgements

This article describes findings from the Transitioning into Care Project partially funded by the Dorothy Britton Memorial and H. H. Harshman Foundation Doctoral Scholarships. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the children and agency who participated in this study and to Dr. John Russon (University of Guelph) and Dr. Sandra Mackey (National University of Singapore) who served as expert phenomenological consultants to this study.

References

Altshuler, S. J. (1999). Children in kinship care speak out: "We think we we're doing fine". *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *16*(3), 215—235.

Auden, J. M. (1995). Lessons on living from dying adolescents. In J. D. Morgan, D. W. Adams, & E. J. Deveau (Eds.), *Beyond the innocence of childhoodHelping children and adolescents cope with life-threatening illness and dying, Vol. 2*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.

Baronov, D. (2004). *Conceptual foundations of social research methods.* Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.

Benner, P. (1994). Introduction. In P. Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring, and ethics in health and illness* (pp. xiii—xxvii). California: Sage.

Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach*, 2nd ed. University of Minnesota: Sage Publications.

Cashmore, J., & Paxman, M. (1996). *Wards leaving care: A longitudinal study.* Sydney: New SouthWales Department of Community Services.

Chapman, M., Wall, A., & Barth, R. P. (2004). Children's voices: The perceptions of children in foster care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *74*(3), 293—304.

Cowan, P. A. (1991). Individual and family life transitions: A proposal for a new definition. In P. A. Cowan & M. Hetherington (Eds.), *Family transitions* (pp. 3—30). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Fanshel, D., Finch, S. J., & Grundy, J. F. (1990). *Foster children in a life course perspective.* New York, New York: Columbia University Press.

Festinger, T. (1983). No one ever asked us... A postscript to foster care New York: Columbia Press.

Gilligan, R. (2000). The importance of listening to the child in foster care. In G. Kelly & R. Gilligan (Eds.), *Issues in foster care: Policy, practice and research* (pp. 40—58). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gilligan, R. (2001). *Promoting resilience: A resource guide on working with children in the care system.* London: British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.

Hetherington, M. (1991). The role of individual differences and family relationships in children's coping with divorce and remarriage. In P. A. Cowan & M. Hetherington (Eds.), *Family transitions* (pp. 165—194). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Hinde, R. A. (1979). *Toward understanding relationships.* London: Academic Press.

Johnson, P. R., Yoken, C., & Voss, R. (1995). Family foster care placement: The child's perspective. *Child Welfare*, *74*(5), 959-074.

Kufeldt, K., Armstrong, J., & Dorosh, M. (1995). How children in care view their own and their foster families: A research study. *Child Welfare*, *74*(3), 695—715.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* New York: Springer.

Leathers, S. J. (2003). Parental visiting, conflicting allegiances, emotional and behavioral problems among foster children. *Family Relations*, *52*(1), 53—63.

Leonard, V. W. (1994). A Heideggerian phenomenological perspective on the concept of person. In P. Benner (Ed.), *Interpretive phenomenology: Embodiment, caring, and ethics in health and illness* (pp. 43—63). California: Sage.

Lollis, S., & Kuczynski, L. (1997). Beyond one hand clapping: Seeing bidirectionality in parent–child relations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *14*, 441—461.

Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2007). Child protection standards in Ontario Retrieved on April 11, 2007 http://www.gov.on.ca/children/graphics/stel02_179887.pdf

Mitchell, M. B. (2004). *Investigating social support networks of female orphans in Honduras: A needs-based journey into the lives of the "invisible".* (M.Sc. dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. MR01841).

Mitchell, M. B. (2006). *Cognitive appraisal theory: Understanding children's transitions within foster care.* University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada: Unpublished manuscript.

Mitchell, M. B. (2008). *The transitioning into care project: Honouring children's lived experience of the foster care transition.* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. NR47610).

Mitchell, M. B., Kuczynski, L., Tubbs, C. Y., & Ross, C. (2009, Oct. 22). We care about care: Advice by children in care for children in care, foster parents, and child welfare workers about the transition into foster care. *Child and Family Social Work, Early View online publication.* doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2009.00657.x.

Newton, R. R., Litrownik, A. J., & Landsverk, J. A. (2000). Children and youth in foster care: Disentangling the relationship between problem behaviors and number of placements. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *24*(10), 1363—1374.

Palmer, S. E. (1996). Placement stability and inclusive practice in foster care: An empirical study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *18*(7), 589—601.

Pardeck, J. T. (1982). *The forgotten children: A study of the stability and continuity of foster care.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Patterson, M. E., & Williams, D. R. (2002). Collecting and analyzing qualitative data: Hermeneutic principles, methods, and case examples. In D. R. Fesenmaier, J. T. O'Leary, & M. S. Uysal (Eds.), *Advances in tourism applications series, Vol. 9.* (pp. i—127) Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing, Inc.

Secretary of State for Health. (2002). *Fostering services: National minimum standards, fostering services regulations.* London: The Stationary Office.

U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). UN General Assembly Document A/RES/44/25.

Whiting, J. B., & Lee, R. E. (2003). Voices from the system: A qualitative study of foster children's stories. *Family Relations*, *52*, 288—295.

Worden, J. W. (2005). *Child bereavement study.* Paper presented at the annual conference of Bereaved Families of Ontario-Waterloo Region, Waterloo, ON.