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**Title:** Relationships of young adults with foster care backgrounds : tensions and management strategies

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

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**Please cite the original version:**

Tahkola, E., Metsäpelto, R., Ruohotie-Lyhty, M., & Poikkeus, A. (2021). Relationships of young adults with foster care backgrounds : tensions and management strategies. *Child and Family Social Work*, 26(3), 358-369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12816>

## **Relationships of Young Adults with Foster Care Backgrounds: Tensions and Management Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

The present study focuses on experiences of relational tensions and management strategies in family relationships among 18 young adults with foster care backgrounds who participated in interviews. In the analysis drawing from relational dialectics, three main tensions were revealed in the participants' relationships with birth and foster family members or in their romantic relationships: the dialectics of emotional distance-closeness, integration-separation and sameness-otherness. In addition, the tension of the childhood dialectic of responsibility was identified in this study. The tensions were managed utilising eight strategies. The findings highlight the importance of giving a voice to young adults who have experienced the complex web of relationships in at least two families, and of sensitising both birth and foster parents and other adults working with foster children and youth to these tensions in relationships.

*Key words:* Close relationship, Foster care, Management strategy, Relational dialectics, Tension, Young adult

### Introduction

The relationships of foster care children and youth require negotiating complex family ties, in both birth and foster families, a phenomenon not faced by most of their age-mates. The term *foster care youth* is used to refer to young people who have been placed in out-of-home care by a care order decision due to adversities that have endangered their health or development (Child Welfare Act 417/2007). As evidenced by the literature, exposure to adverse childhood experiences, such as parental mental illness and substance misuse, may have a harmful effect on individuals' attachment bonds (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Howe, Brandon, Hinings, & Schofield, 1999) and internal working models (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973, 1982, 1988). Many of these young people may have a higher risk for difficulties in creating and maintaining new confidential relationships, which is typical of insecurely attached children (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1973, 1982; Howe et al., 1999; Sroufe, 1996; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).

Despite the presence of challenging or threatening circumstances, some children and youth demonstrate a capacity for successful adaptation referred to as resilience (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Murphy, 1974; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982). Resilience constitutes a dynamic process where an individual may show resilience at one time or in certain contexts but not others (Masten & Wright, 2009) or be resilient in relation to only some stressors and outcomes (Rutter, 2007). Close relationships contribute critically to the development of resilience (Gilligan, 2004; Masten & Wright, 2009; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003; Schofield, 2001; Werner, 1989, 1997), but for foster care children and youth, problems with forming and sustaining close relationships are often the rule (Dozier & Rutter, 2008; Kufeldt, Simard, & Vachon, 2003). Currently, knowledge is scarce on the ways in which young adults with foster care backgrounds deal with tensions they experience when building and maintaining relationships. In the present study, we examine the

family relationships of young adults who had experience of foster care in a family setting using the perspective drawn from relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011). The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that foster care children and youth encounter in family relationships, and the strategies they use to manage them.

### **Complexity of relationships of foster care children and youth**

In childhood, many foster care children assume the role of the carer in lieu of their birth parent, who may be struggling with substance misuse or mental illness and may take on the responsibility for the wellbeing of their parent, siblings and themselves (Aldridge, 2006; Howe et al., 1999; Kroll, 2004). New relationships, formed with foster family members, can function as new attachment relationships (Cole, 2005; Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001; Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2004), but forming confidential relationships may be difficult after the loss of the primary attachment relationship (Andersson, 2005; Griffin, 2004; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Schofield, Beek, & Ward, 2012; Stovall & Dozier, 2000). The child's excessive need for control or temperament which is perceived as demanding may impede development of a positive relationship between the foster parent and the child (Duelling & Johnson, 1990; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Storer, Barkan, Sherman, Haggerty, & Mattos, 2012). Notwithstanding this challenge, most foster children and youth experience their foster homes and parents as caring and nurturing, and their sensitivity is critical in developing confidential relationships (Howes, 1999; Lindén, 1998; Schofield, Beek, Sargent, & Thoburn, 2000; Wilson, 2006).

Research strongly supports the benefits of keeping in touch with birth parents (Atwool, 2013; Gilligan, 2000; Schofield & Beek, 2006), but the extent of contact varies greatly (Fernandez, 2006). Some foster care children and youth experience the relationship as taxing and do not want to be in contact with birth parents (Lundström & Sallnäs, 2009; McWey, Acock, & Porter,

2010). In longitudinal study by Andersson (2009), the majority of foster care children and youth reported wishing to have more contact with their birth family member(s), but a minority wanted less or no contact, mostly in relation to the father. Some of those who wanted to keep birth parent(s) at a distance felt abandoned, were disappointed or wanted to keep their distance out of consideration for their own children. According to Franzén and Vinnerljung (2006) it is not uncommon for foster care children to lose at least one birth parent before the age of 18, and they need to find a way to deal with this loss (Andersson, 2018).

### **Relational dialectics in relationships**

Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) dialectical perspective to human relationships emphasises that relationships are dynamic processes in which partners seek to balance different forces, simultaneously acting to bring them together and pull them apart. The relational dialectics theory (RDT) is informed by Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism and by his thoughts about the multivoicedness of social reality. *Dialectics* refers to the simultaneous presence of two competing forces, and it contains the view that every relationship includes a unique set of dialectics (Baxter, 1988, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Dialectics can occur *internally* (within the relationship) or *externally* (between the counterparts and their social environment), and they continuously fluctuate. In this study, we focus on the internal relational dialectics with respect to finding a balance in managing tensions in close relationships.

Specifically, this study explores the dialectics between two voices characteristic of Baxter's former model to understand the interplay between push and pull forces. In regard to the specific tensions, dialectics vary by relationship. A set of 'big three' dialectical tensions has repeatedly been identified in relation to integration, stability and expression (Baxter, 2006). Dialectics of integration, e.g. autonomy-connection, refer to the struggle between interdependence and individuation. Dialectics of stability, e.g. predictability-novelty, involve the struggle between

discontinuity and continuity. Finally, dialectics of expression, e.g. openness-closedness, refer to the struggle between what is said and what is left unsaid (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

It is important to consider the uniqueness of each dialectic, since they are often organised differently depending on the relationship type and the specific situation (Baxter, 2004a, 2011; Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, & Olson, 2002; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Baxter (2006, p. 136) notes that lists of dialectics are never exhaustive or complete, and relying on them may lead to ignoring variations in a given context. Thus, for the present study, it is critical to recognise themes beyond the typically addressed key relational dialectics that may be salient for relationships experienced by young adults who had been placed in foster care.

### **Managing relational tensions**

Tensions are the natural state in human relationships, and these oppositional forces should not be considered neither good nor bad. Relationships never reach a state of perfect balance (Baxter & Simon, 1993), and, thus, dialectical tensions are not supposed to be resolved but to be managed.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996; Baxter, 2006) identified six functional strategies for managing dialectical tensions: spiralling inversion, segmentation, balance, integration, recalibration and reaffirmation. When using functional strategies, individuals strive for balance through action (Table 1). In segmentation, the dominance of a particular pole changes depending on the specific situation: a person can, for example, decide to talk about some topics in a relationship but leave some others unsaid (Prentice, 2009). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) described two dysfunctional strategies, where individuals either refute the existence of a tension (denial) or perceive it as uncomfortable (disorientation). In the study by Pitts, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum and Becker (2009), many family members used the strategy of denial to avoid topics that could trigger conflicts.

*Table 1 Management strategies, definitions and research examples*

<b>Management strategy</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example from the literature</b>
<i>Eight strategies by Baxter and Montgomery (1996)</i>		
Spiralling inversion	The dominance of one pole of the tension may change over time	A couple balances the time between two families-of-origin in a way that satisfies each family (Prentice, 2009)
Segmentation	The dominance of a pole changes with the activity of the moment	Sharing some topics in the relationship and leaving others unsaid (Prentice, 2009)
Balance	Striving for balance in the midway point by favouring neither polarity	Giving up some private time as a couple to do more things with friends and families, and also putting limits on personal time (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996)
Integration	Attempt to respond simultaneously to both polarities through contradictory or indirect communication	Bringing together both in-law families in order to reduce the tension within the family to spend time with (Prentice, 2009)
Recalibration	Redefining the tension so that polarities no longer appear to be opposing	Learning to enjoy individual time in order to stay in the relationship where the partner longs for autonomy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996)
Reaffirmation	Accepting the tension such as it is and celebrating it	Reminding himself/herself when encountering an 'I vs. we' problem that without the relationship, he/she would not be facing the thing at all. Knowing that when the tension eases up, he/she will be stronger (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).
Denial	Denying the existence of the tension	Couple's refusal to admit the effect that distance is exerting on the relationship (Sahlstein & Dun, 2008)
Disorientation	Tolerating the tension as uncomfortable	Maintaining harmony by avoiding topics that could trigger conflict (Pitts et al., 2009)
<i>Other strategies</i>		
Venting (Kramer, 2004)	Relieving the tension by offloading it on other people or through actions	Expressing frustration to other members of the family (Prentice, 2009)
Substitution (Prentice & Kramer, 2006)	Utilising other ways to manage the tension other than communicating directly with the other party of the tension	To avoid interchanges with a researcher during systematic observations in a school class, a researcher talks with students before and after classes (Prentice & Kramer, 2006)

In addition to these primary strategies originally described by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), two additional management strategies relevant to the present study have been introduced in the literature. In venting, the tension is relieved by offloading it on other people or through actions

(Kramer, 2004), whereas in substitution an individual finds another way to manage the tension other than communicating directly with the other party (Prentice & Kramer, 2006).

The RDT has inspired researchers to examine a range of family relationships (e.g. Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Toller, 2005), expanding the focus beyond the traditional family to stepfamilies (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006) and adoptive families (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Harrigan, 2009, Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). However, little research has examined dialectical tensions or management strategies involving foster care and birth family members. The combination of periods of adverse childhood experiences leading to foster care and, in many cases, several placements, and the balancing of two families in the here and now provides strong motivation to examine dialectic tensions experienced and managed by individuals with experience of foster care in a family setting. The specific research questions in the present study are as follows:

RQ1: What kind of dialectical tensions do young adults with foster care background experience in their close relationships (with birth and foster parents and romantic partners)?

RQ2: How do they currently manage and have managed these tensions in their close relationships?

## **Method**

### **Participants and Data Collection**

The data comprised individual qualitative interviews with 18 Finnish young adults with foster care background having specifically experience of foster care. In Finland, foster care conforms to the aims of the service-oriented welfare system in promoting a healthy childhood and mitigating serious risks with an emphasis on the prevention of harms (Child Welfare Act



2007/417). Placing children or youth in out-of-home care by a care order decision can be justified if 1) their health or development is seriously endangered by a lack of care or other circumstances in which they are being reared, or 2) they seriously endanger their own health or development through substance abuse, by committing an illegal act other than a minor offence or by any other comparable behaviour (Child Welfare Act 2007/417). There are three main forms of substitute care—foster care, residential institutions and professional family foster homes—out of which foster care is the most frequently used form of placement (THL, 2019). In this study, sampling was purposeful and focused on recruiting young adults who had experience of the most frequently used form of placement, foster care in a family setting. Many of them had also experience of other types of foster care placement, mostly for a short time before entering foster family. Participants were mainly recruited using social media. A public invitation to participate in the study was introduced on the first author's Facebook page, and foster care organisations and members of the public shared the invitation on their own Facebook pages. Twelve participants contacted the researcher directly, and six participants were reached via contacts among their family or friends. The age of the interviewees varied between 18 and 32 years with a mean age of 25.4 years. The majority of the participants, 14 out of 18, were female. There were no obvious gender differences identified regarding tensions and management strategies of the interviewees. The length of the time spent in foster care varied among the participants, being on average of 10 years. Of the participants, two had been in foster care less than 5 years, six between 5 and 10 years and ten participants more than 10 years. Seventeen participants were living on their own and one participant was still living with a foster family. Most of the interviewees were currently working, and a smaller number were studying or on parental leave. Three participants had their own children. Interviews were conducted between March and June 2018 by the first author, who met the interviewees in their hometowns located in different parts of Finland. Interviews were conducted in a location

selected according to the wishes of interviewees, and interviews were audio-recorded. A pilot study (two interviews) was conducted prior to data collection in February 2018 with the aim of ascertaining the methodology. Both pilot interviews were included in the data and the present analyses. Due to sensitivity of the research topic, an approval statement was requested and received from the Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä (complying with the ethical principles by the National Advisory Board on Research Ethics in Finland) before the data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed written consent was obtained from each participant before the data collection. In order to protect the participants' anonymity, descriptive details were either changed or deleted from the citations.

The data were collected using individual interviews in line with a narrative approach where the focus was on the participants' narration of their own life experiences and on their relationships. A timeline method (Sugarman, 1986) was utilised in which the interviewees were asked to describe their life course from their early experiences to the present and future. At the beginning of the interviews, the interviewees were presented with some incentive words to encourage them to talk about their life-related experiences and how they managed them (Gaskell, 2000). The incentive words included items related to their relationships (e.g. foster parents, birth parents, friends, partner), feelings (e.g. anger, love, disappointment), life contexts and events (e.g. parenting, school, work, relocation) and perceptions of themselves (e.g. self-esteem, coping, resources). The interviewees were free to use or not use the stimulus material in reflecting the timeline. The interviewer encouraged participants to tell about their relationships when they mentioned their close ones, e.g. "tell me more about your relationship with your birth parent" or "tell me more about your relationship with your siblings". The interviewer had a list of questions that were selected from a question battery used in interviews with people who had had extreme life experiences (Ylöstalo, 2018). These questions were utilised mainly in instances when the interviewee talked about adverse life experiences. The purpose of the

questions was to help the interviewees reflect on their sources of resilience, e.g. What helped you move forward? What gave you hope? Did you have someone else who treated you in a way that gave you hope?

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews lasted from 40 min to 2h 19 min. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, constituting a total of 430 pages of transcribed text. The ATLAS.ti software was used to organise and code the transcribed data within the general framework of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but with a specific focus on identifying expressions of dialectic tensions and the strategies used to manage them. The first author was responsible for the analysis, but all authors participated in discussions at different stages of the analysis. The data were analysed using the research questions as a guideline. We expected to find dialectical tensions, but the literature did not provide clear expectations as to the nature of the tensions and management strategies. At the initial coding, all extracts that dealt with tensions in participants' relationships were coded across the entire data set. In addition, all episodes in which the participants mentioned how they managed these tensions were coded. The length of coded episodes varied from a sentence to several sentences. This analysis phase resulted in 103 codes.

At the next phase, themes were identified by merging codes and collating them into potential themes. Four main themes of tensions were identified, some of which included several subthemes (Figure 1). Management themes were identified by using Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) list of strategies as a guideline (Table 1). We also identified some additional management strategies, some of which were previously mentioned by Kramer (2004) and Prentice (2009). Eight main themes of strategies were identified (Figure 1). At this point,

overlaps were resolved and subthemes of tensions were re-organised. In the final naming of the themes, previous research and theoretical concepts were utilised.

## Results

Three main dialectical tensions were identified regarding the relationships with birth and foster parents and the interviewees' romantic partners: 1) emotional distance-closeness, 2) integration-separation and 3) sameness-otherness. In addition to these, one childhood tension, a dialectic of responsibility, was identified. At least one of these dialectical tensions, and usually multiple tensions, were identified in interviews of all 18 participants. In the following, each tension is presented, and the associated strategies used to manage these tensions are discussed.

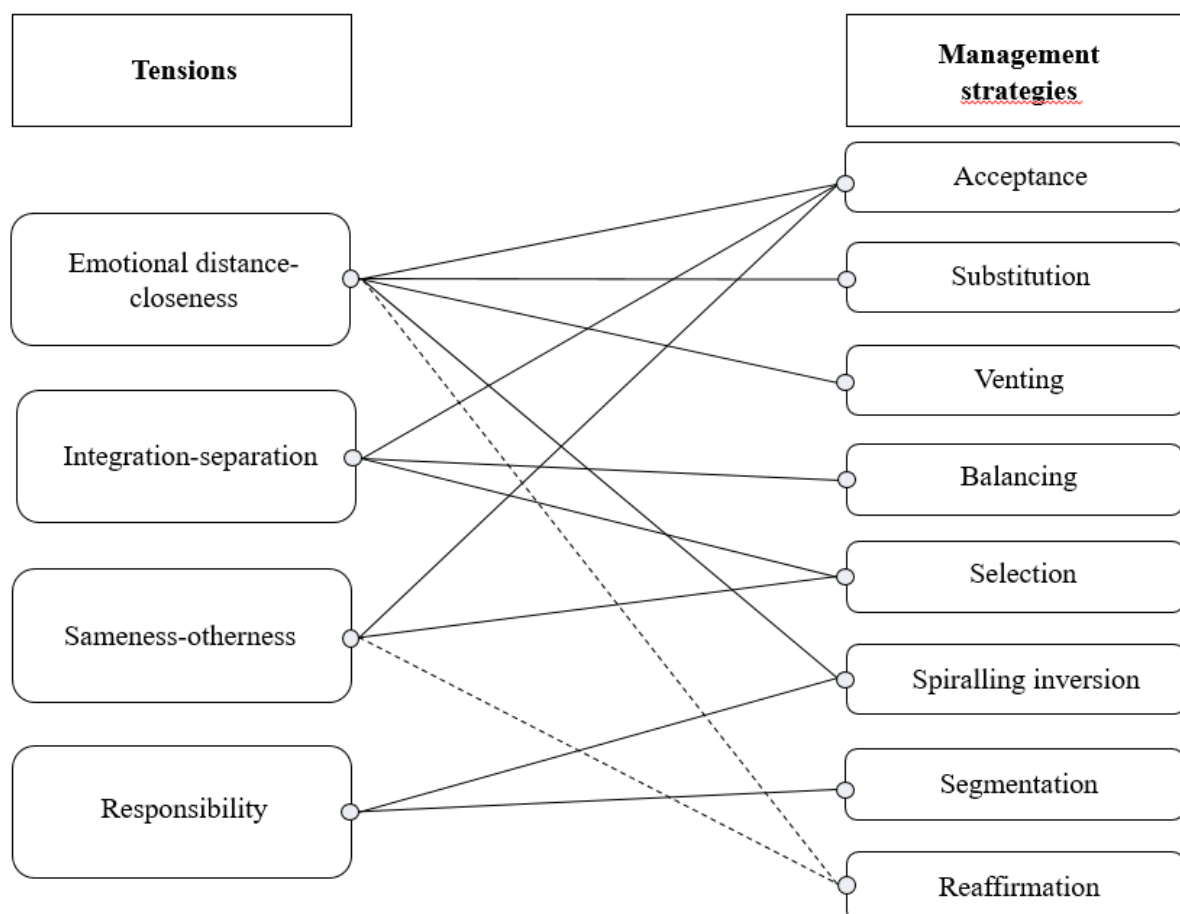


Figure 1 Tensions and management strategies

### **A Dialectic of Emotional Distance-Closeness**

Many of the young adults expressed experiences of emotional distance from a birth or foster family member, yet at the same time, they desired or felt an emotional closeness to them. Relationships were often described as 'good but distant'. The participants associated emotional distance with the lack of showing or talking about emotions in the relationship. Distance from the father, for instance, was explained by describing him as 'a stereotypical Finnish man'.

*'Dad [birth father] is . . . really perhaps what a Finnish man is like . . . really distant and does not show his emotions . . . You see that he cares though. And so, in a way we do have a good relationship. But it is maybe always not a warm or loving one. But it does not matter, it is just the way dad is.'*

For some participants, emotional distance—mainly with respect to a foster family member—appeared to be due to a perceived difference in personality characteristics or expectations, which often resulted in conflicts and prevented any deep conversations with this family member. One young adult commented on the conflictual relationship with the foster father as follows:

*'We have very different personalities, him [foster father] and I. I am this kind of temperamental and gushing person who is in a hundred places at the same time, whereas my father is a very slow and calm person, who wants to have time for thinking things carefully through. I could not stand all that waiting, because to me, things should have happened in a snap, particularly at that younger age, like right away and not later. We had it very difficult at that time.'*

For several participants emotional distance-closeness came up with respect to a birth family member who had already passed away. The interviewees felt emotional closeness towards the deceased family member, although many had rarely been in contact with the birth family member when he/she was still alive.

*'During the past year or so, it has been tough for me because of my mother's death. Now I have a child of my own, but I have no one to ask what kind of a child I was as a child or any of that sort of thing. At the time when it happened [the loss of the mother], her death did not feel like a big deal, because we had never had a close relationship, but now, along with being a mother myself . . .'*

The strategies the interviewees reported for managing the tension of emotional distance-closeness included acceptance, reaffirmation, substitution, venting and spiralling inversion. *Acceptance*, which is a form of disorientation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), was the most common strategy to manage a good but emotionally distant relationship: The relationship was accepted even though it caused some unpleasant feelings. Some interviewees mentioned that now they understood the reasons for the tension, and their attitude was more lenient towards the family member. One young adult described the ongoing relationship with the foster father as follows:

*'I thought that damn . . . I wanted to get to know Dad better and get closer to him. I felt that . . . I so wished for him to stay alive. And now, when he still is [alive], nothing has changed, our relationship has always been real. It is just the way that it is.'*

One participant tolerated the tension, but was happy that her sibling had the opportunity to have a closer relationship with their foster father. This is an example of the management strategy *reaffirmation* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

*'I think about my father in the way that he is the best possible father to my little brother. It is really great for him and I am grateful for that. Although my relationship with him has remained much more distant, I am not at all bitter about it. My little brother has really needed that attention. This is how I think about it.'*

The young adults also used *substitution* (Prentice & Kramer, 2006): by having a closer relationship with some other person, they could experience the closeness they missed in the tense relationship.

*'I was in the second grade and I wrote a really great deal of fairy tales. The teacher has all those notebooks. I think there is a total of eight of them from one school year. I just wrote and wrote, and the teacher then made corrections. The teacher encouraged me, and without her, I would probably not have acquired the skills I have now to get along.—We are still very close to each other.'*

With regard to conflictual relationships, *venting* was the most common strategy to manage the dialectic of emotional distance. Many of the youth vented their discomfort via other people, such as siblings, friends or grandparents, or via hobbies, or in childhood they escaped into an imaginary world. One young adult expressed her frustrated experience in the relationship with her foster father to her grandmother:

*'Every time when I lost my temper with my father, I went to my grandma's house. Then my grandma always phoned my father . . . "stop harassing [her], why have you been quarrelling again, and act your age as a grown man." Grandma was always on my side.'*

For a few participants, this tension eased over time, and the distant relationship became closer. This points to the management strategy of *spiralling inversion* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) where the dominance of one polarity changes with time. Physical distance was a determining factor for facilitating an increase in closeness for one young adult:

*'It has been much easier for me to be in contact with my [foster] mother now when I am living on my own. And now that I have grown up, we have had good discussions, as I absolutely love discussing. So, we have good discussions and it is more adult-like.'*

### **A Dialectic of Integration-Separation**

The dialectic of integration-separation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) was identified particularly in relationships with birth parents and in romantic relationships with respect to maintaining optimal distance. Several participants had no or very little communication with their birth parent, and most of these youth wished for a closer relationship. Contact with birth parents had decreased or stopped because of emotionally tough meetings and communication, other person's personal problems or long physical distance. One young adult described meetings with the birth parents before the time when they became totally separated:

*'They [birth parents] were totally drunk when they came to the meetings or they did not come at all. It was all a horrible stress and fear, them coming. And the*

*social workers did not take it seriously in the least, and it all took many years. I responded by strong physical reactions.'*

In contrast, one participant struggled with too close contact with the birth mother:

*'She [birth mother] is unemployed, and she also has all sorts of mental problems, but she does mean well. She has a good, golden heart, but she has tons of time to constantly bombard me. And I am like, you know, I have many other things on my plate right now.'*

In new relationships the tension of integration-separation was manifested in lack of confidence, and it was linked to traumatic childhood experiences or to previous harmful relationships.

Some youth had experienced loneliness, which had led to seeking approval at any cost and in bad relationships:

*'There was this restless time, and as I was quite lonely, so there were also these bad relationships, quite many of them. And I was like seeking acceptance at any price, and in doing that, I hurt myself really badly, I mean mentally.—Then I am in a way, how do you say “co-dependent”. And I focused on people who took advantage of it [dependency] in a really gross way. In a way, I knew they were doing it, but there was nothing better. I mean, being all alone would have been like hell, so it was somehow better to have someone even if that person hurt me.'*

The dialectic of integration-separation was managed in various ways. As children, the participants typically employed *acceptance* to manage their relationships with birth parents or siblings. They learned to cope with the physical distance from their family members, and tolerate the uncomfortable feelings triggered by meeting them. Many participants contemplated whether to contact their birth parent or not. This management strategy is a form of Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) *balancing* strategy. Most chose not to be in contact with their birth family at present but considered the possibility of meeting them in the future:

*'I am doubtful of whether I even want to . . . [meet my birth father], it depends on with whom I am talking. When I talk with my friends, for instance, some of them obviously say something like “you will regret if you don't know [him] and he dies”. Others are like “you don't need to; it is the parent's responsibility, and if you are doing well without him”. I am struggling with what I even want myself. My siblings probably manage this in a different way. They are probably not even willing to try. I think that maybe I would like to see [him].'*



Some participants employed *selection* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) to manage their relationships with their birth parents. They actively selected either integration by creating a new relationship with the parent after years of separation, or separation by deciding not to be in contact. In the case of the participant who struggled with too close connection with the birth parent, the strategy of *spiralling inversion* was manifested with active regulation of communication with the parent.

With respect to new relationships, the participants used various management strategies. When using *separation* the dominant pole included keeping one's guard up with new people, being the dominant party in the relationship or pushing people away after negative experiences. When *selecting* integration, the interviewees described attempts to emotionally deal with the adverse childhood experiences in order to build confidence, and when *balancing* they sought to find a solution between separation and integration together with a partner. The following excerpt is from a participant, who often selected separation in new relationships:

*'I do have this thing [uncertainty] about whether I can ever build long-lasting relationships, because of experience of being abandoned, and it has a strong influence. If I have some friends or some dating flings, it shows in the way that I may set aside, push all people away from me. And then I expect that they will come back, but they do not necessarily always come back.'*

### **A Dialectic of Sameness-Otherness**

In the dialectic of sameness-otherness, the participants deliberated over whether they were treated similarly and equally within the foster family. Some had experienced inequality in relation to their foster siblings, for instance, with respect to rules and the extent of housework. One participant described experiencing that foster care children had to do more housework than the biological child in the family:

*'I remember that as a child quite many of us were frustrated, because all the rest of us had to do a lot of housework, or maybe not so much but at least to some*

*extent, and I remember . . . how tedious it was to sweep some floor tiles, and he never ever had to do it. He just slept late in a room somewhere.'*

In addition, several participants had mulled over whether they were full members of the family, and whether their foster parents loved them:

*'Mostly, it is inside your head, because you are aware that foster parents are paid because we are there.—So of course, one thinks about these things occasionally, especially as a teenager or in early adulthood, [you wonder] how much they actually care about us, how much they actually love us.'*

The tension of sameness-otherness was mainly managed using *acceptance* and *selection*. The participants described accepting the status of foster care child or youth and tolerated the feelings of inequality. Many of them selected sameness by identifying themselves as full members of the family, for example, by calling the foster parents mother and father. One interviewee described a positive aspect related to unequally shared housework in the form of *affirmation*:

*'I have thought, especially a bit later, that actually it was better for me in this way, it was a learning experience. Doing that in a way taught skills, housework and other things that he [biological child] did not learn, and he has not had or does not have a similar kind of self-discipline nowadays.'*

### **A Dialectic of Responsibility**

Most participants had as a child experienced a dialectic of responsibility regarding their birth sibling or parent, and had worried about a family member's wellbeing. These experiences were typically related to situations where birth parents had been unable to take care of their children or themselves, mostly due to incapacitation linked with intoxication or mental problems. One participant described a period being pushed to take responsibility for oneself and for the birth mother:

*'I lived with my intoxicated [birth]mother for a week so that we had no food in the fridge or anything. I ate at school, I went to school every day, but nobody at school had a clue. I came back home and mom was there in a bad shape. And the next morning, I went to school and back again.'*

In addition, several participants had taken care of their little siblings in a conflict situation:

*'I have two little siblings and I worried about them when they saw violence. I have always been one like, you know, I have been the one to take them aside and away from the situation.'*

The tension of responsibility was managed using *segmentation* and *spiralling inversion*. Segmentation refers to fluctuations between situations when birth parents were unable to take care of their children, and times when the participants were able to act their own age. Spiralling inversion refers to the easing up of responsibility at the time of moving in with a foster family:

*'My [foster]mother said that now you can be a child and you can play. And that we will take care of your little sibling, so that you no longer need to do it.'*

*'I got a family where I could be a 10-year-old child. I did not need to look after my parents.—I learned so much about it, how to defend myself and stand up for myself, how to be a part of a group.'*

## **Discussion**

This study examined relational tensions of 18 young adults with experience of foster care in a family setting and their strategies in managing these tensions. Three current tensions and one childhood tension were identified, and eight strategies to manage these tensions were identified (see Figure 1), which varied according to the specific tension and phase of life.

The first tension, the dialectic of emotional distance-closeness, was experienced in both birth and foster family relations. It was typically manifested as lack of showing or talking about emotions in the relationship. Some participants described disparate expectations concerning behaviour or expressions of emotions and closeness, especially in their relationships with foster parents which sometimes resulted in conflicts. The interviewees also described conflicts springing up because of a clash of personality characteristics in relation to foster family members. Similar results were reported by Baxter and her colleagues (2004) in a study where stepchildren described experiencing emotional distance from their stepparent due to the

absence of sharing anything in common and the outsider status of the stepparent. Emotional distance or closeness can also be experienced in a relationship where the other party is not present (Andersson, 2018), and several participants wrestled with contradictory feelings towards their deceased birth parent.

The second tension, the dialectic of integration-separation, focused on the deliberation and resolution of whether to be in contact or avoid contact with the birth parents. The participants had typically felt a need to separate from their birth parents at some point, but they were currently often willing to build a closer relationship and missed the integration (c.f., Andersson, 2018). Our findings are consistent with previous studies which have also identified tension stemming from friction and frustrations with respect to expectations experienced in meetings and communication with birth parents (Chateauneuf, Turcotte, & Drapeau, 2018; Moyers, Farmer, & Lipscombe, 2006; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011).

Many of the interviewees expressed concerns or described difficulties in creating and maintaining new relationships which they often attributed to traumatic childhood experiences. Prior research indicates that many foster care children and youth are insecurely attached due to the lack of consistent, nurturing care in their early childhood (Crittenden, 1988; Dozier et al., 2001; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; McWey, 2004). Early attachment is known to create the base for socioemotional development while insecure attachment impedes trusting others or letting them get close to oneself (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1973; Simpson, 1990; Sroufe, 1996; Sroufe et al., 2005). The dialectic of integration-separation identified in this study has also been identified as a family of related tensions in previous studies (Baxter & Braitwaite, 2006) termed as autonomy-connection, dependence-independence and private-public (Baxter & Braitwaite, 2006; Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Speer & Trees, 2007; Williams, 2003). The third main dialectic, sameness-otherness (c.f., dialectics of similarity-difference, sameness-difference and self-other, Baxter, 2004b), was manifested mainly in the young adults' relationships with

members of the foster family. This tension surfaced in the participants' deliberation of whether they had been treated similarly to their siblings and to which extent they felt part of their foster family. The tension related to belonging has been reported to be linked with social, emotional and attachment difficulties (Howe, 2005; Dozier, Grasso, Lindheim, & Lewis, 2007; Quinton, Rushton, Dance, & Mayes, 1998; Schofield & Beek, 2005). Numerous foster care placements can make it challenging to develop trust and may contribute to unwillingness to attach (Biehal, Ellison, Baker, & Sinclair, 2010; Schofield et al., 2012).

A new relational tension, the dialectic of responsibility, was identified in this study. Many participants had been responsible for their parent, siblings, or their own wellbeing at a young age when they were not mature enough for the role. Children who live with a parent with substance misuse or mental illness are referred to in the literature as young carers (Aldridge & Becker, 1993; Charles, Stainton, & Marshall, 2009a) or parentified children (Earley & Cushway, 2002; Howe et al., 1999). These children take on full or partial adult roles to support the family's survival with respect to basic need satisfaction, although they are in need of care themselves (Aldridge, 2006; Charles, Stainton, & Marshall, 2009b; Howe et al., 1999; Kroll, 2004). The children who engage in parentification attempt to perform duties beyond their age or maturity in several ways: through emotional parentification by responding to parent's or sibling's emotional needs and by acting as the peacemaker for the family, or through instrumental parentification by taking on major a role in doing household chores or managing financial matters (Hooper, 2007; Hooper, Marotta & Lanthier, 2008; Jurkovic, 1997, 1998). Participants of this study described experiences of both emotional and instrumental parentification mostly due to parents' incapacitation linked with intoxication or mental problems. Parentification can be seen as a risk factor for the child's development, resulting in difficulties in forming relationships, development of self-esteem and separating from the family of origin (Chase, Deming & Wells, 1998; Hooper, 2007; Olson & Garity, 1993).

Notwithstanding the possible negative consequences, some studies have considered positive growth after childhood parentification (DiCaccavo, 2006; Hooper et al., 2008; Thirkield, 2002; Tompkins, 2007). For example in the study by Tompkins, emotional parentification increased closeness between parent and child, and promoted positive parenting and child adjustment in families with a parent with a serious medical condition. Thus, it is possible that through positive coping and attachments parentification experiences may contribute to child's resilience to adversities.

The second goal of this study was to explore the kinds of strategies that young adults with foster care backgrounds use to manage tensions in their family relationships. Eight strategies were identified, which varied by tension and phase of life. In this study, *acceptance* was the most common strategy to manage relationship tensions in childhood. *Substitution* and *venting* were other strategies that were commonly used, especially at younger ages. Seeking support from other people and venting discomfort through hobbies and imaginary worlds, for instance, were important strategies. At older ages, the participants had had more opportunities to directly manage tense relationships. They employed *balancing* to decide whether to contact or not contact their birth parent, and they *selected* between integration and separation. Many of the tensions had changed over time, and the dialectic of responsibility often dissolved at the time of placement in foster care, which represents the strategy of *spiralling inversion*.

The findings of the present study echo the universal understanding of the dynamics of human relationships (Collins, 1997; Samuels & Pryce, 2008) wherein relationships as well as the tensions experienced in them and the management strategies change over time and are partly different for birth and foster family relationships. The differences between the tensions in birth and foster parent relationships point out their different roles in the lives of foster care youth, and the differences in how these relationships are formed (Bowlby, 1982; Dozier et al., 2001; Pecora, Le Prohn, & Nasuti, 1999).

Management strategies represent ways of coping which contribute to resilience (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In childhood coping can be indirect, but the interviews also included positive examples of direct managing on tensions to increase one's wellbeing. Management strategies such as the decision to eliminate any contact with a birth parent may not be conducive to resilience in the long run, but may be the best solution for the individual at the time. Thus, it is not possible to determine unequivocally whether a specific management strategy reflects an individual's resilience especially when one takes into account the dynamic and context-bound nature of resilience. Foster care children and youth may show adaptation in relation to some kind of stressors and not others, and their resilience may change over time, especially when life circumstances change and when faced with new adversities (Masten & Wright, 2009; Rutter, 2007).

This study has a few limitations that should be mentioned. First, all participants had experienced foster care in a family setting. Thus, we do not know whether the findings would be similar among those young adults who have lived in another type of foster care placement. Second, the participants represented very different ages, the youngest being 18 years and the oldest 32 years of age. Relationships are dynamic, and young adults are likely to reflect on their childhood experiences differently in later years, than right after achieving legal age and moving out. Third, all the young adults who participated in this study were willing to tell their stories on a voluntary basis. The results may have been different if data had been collected from participants, for instance, in the context of social protection and foster care services. In conclusion, the unique contribution of the present study is that it explored tensions typical to foster care children and youth and the ways in which they managed them in their close relationships. This knowledge is highly relevant for professionals and other adults who work with foster care children and youth. Extending understanding of relational tensions of foster care children and youth and their ways to manage them may help to better understand and

support them and their family relationships both while and after foster care. Our findings can also be helpful for caregivers of children and youth at risk or in vulnerable circumstances. Caregivers may utilize the knowledge to better understand the emotional experiences of foster care children and youth, and to support them in their relationships while ensuring equal treatment of each child. Furthermore, the knowledge can help the children and youth themselves to recognise the tensions and empower them in negotiating strategies to manage them. In future research, to gain better understanding of relationships of foster care children and youth, investigations examining tensions in their peer relationships are needed, as well as broader sampling allowing analysis of potential gender differences in tensions and management strategies.



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