

## **Title**

The importance of emotions in the lives of children and young people in foster care in England, France and Germany.

## **Authors**

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## **Abstract**

When foster care is discussed in research, emotions are mostly kept out of the scope. This article explores emotions narrated by young people in foster care and by their foster carers. It brings together findings from two studies: the first used biographical interviews conducted with 100 young people from Germany, while the second draws on ethnographic interviews with 12 young people from France and England. The analysis, in line with relevant literature, shows that although emotions are hardly mentioned directly, they seem to be highly relevant in understanding the experience of foster care. Therefore, we suggest, professionalism and emotions need to be understood as complementary elements.

## **Keywords**

Foster Care, emotions, relationships, agency, professionalism

## **Main text**

### 1 Introduction

Our literature overview shows that while care and protection are pointed out as central topics, emotions, however, seem to still be a difficult topic to talk about, whether for young people, foster carers, social work professionals or researchers publishing on foster care. In the scientific approaches published in France, Germany and the UK on foster care, emotions are often considered as being opposed to professionalism (see section 3).

However, relationships between foster carers and young people and the narratives on these relationships include different dimensions, which relate to emotions that are meaningful for all involved. We argue that there is a need to understand the role of emotions of young people and their carers towards each other and how they affect the experiences of being in care or having been in care.

In two research projects conducted in England, France and Germany, we collected testimonies from young people in foster care and their carers' perspectives on life in foster care. Despite using different methodological approaches, both projects were aimed at gathering young people's perspective and narratives on their life in care. In both studies respondents shared experiences regarding their relationship with their carers, as a major aspect of life in care (see section 4). This led us to look again into data collected across both studies, looking for accounts of emotions. While listening to young people's expressions on their emotions in three countries, we see different kinds of feelings, which are not specific to a given context, but rather, seem to have validity beyond cultural and legal differences.

Therefore, this article aims to see whether there are common categories of emotions in foster care, rather than to produce a cross-national comparison.

Building on the importance of emotions, in the narratives of foster children, the analysis seeks to identify whether a definition can be given to the notion of 'professional love', which includes emotions and professionalism as joint elements of high quality in foster care.

## 2 Foster Care in UK, France and Germany – a brief contextualization

Foster care systems in England, France and Germany have some similarities, which allow for a cross-national analysis of young people's experiences. The three countries have a long-lasting tradition of foster care as a means to protect and raise children who for some reason cannot be raised by their birth parents. It exists alongside institutional settings, which are now less widespread in England than in France and Germany. In all three countries, there are clear rules about who can foster a child and how control is exercised over foster carers. The details below show some specificities in each country.

In 2021, there were 72.8 looked after children per 10,000 of the under-18 UK population, with England having the lowest rate (65.4 per 10,000) among the UK nations (NSPCC, 2021). The number of children in foster care in 2020 was 80 080, representing 0.67% of all children.<sup>1</sup> Thus, foster care is the most widely used form of out-of-home placement in the UK. When a placement is made, there is a clear distinction between permanent and respite care, and in the case of permanent care, contact between children and their birth parents is supervised and very limited.

In France, 1,1% of children and young people under 21 years old are in out-of-home care, 58% of them in foster families (Tillard & Join-Lambert, 2022). A key feature of the French system is that in most situations where children are placed, the parents retain parental authority (Join-Lambert & Séraphin, 2020). Foster carers have a professional status since the 2005 Law, which introduces a national degree for foster carers. They receive a salary depending on the number of children in their care, and on the local authority they work for. Despite some attempts to introduce longer-term care plans, court placement decisions are still revised every year, which creates a lack of stability and ability to plan for foster carers, children and their birth parents.

In Germany (in detail: Reimer, 2009), about 50% of the children in out of home care are placed in foster care. Foster care is mostly permanent care, most children who enter foster care stay more than five years in the same family (Kindler et al. 2011). The "family" aspect is very important, family-like terms are used for members of the foster family (foster mother, foster father, foster siblings etc.). However, the local *Jugendamt*, which is responsible for foster care, is not obliged to make a permanency planning and foster parents have very limited rights. That means, return to the birth family can always be an option, even after many years. Hence, foster care in Germany is has always structural instabilities.

In all three countries, foster care usually ends at the age of 18, but can be extended until age 21 and in Germany, even beyond in exceptional cases. As the following analysis will show, these contexts give raise to similar kinds of emotions on the side of young people and of carers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2020>

### 3 Emotions in foster care research

Despite an ongoing debate between experts on the definitions of emotions, traditionally, emotions appear to be linked mainly to bodily sensations and behaviour reflecting significance of others, things or event (Mulligan & Sherer, 2012). Due to the constructive and phenomenological approach in the two studies presented here, we will consider emotions in the context of the presented examples as social constructs that help shape social roles (Kurrila 2013) in a foster family. Understanding emotions as social constructs supports an analytic perspective and helps to work out the subjective sense hidden in the narratives on emotions. In the following section, we discuss notions related to foster care, according to three dominant yet contested terms: protection, care, and emotions.

#### a. Protection

Safety for the children and the control of any risk are part of what can be defined as protection. This is especially meaningful, as many children who enter foster care have experienced a lack of protection, which makes them particularly vulnerable (Pomey 2017).

The term of *child protection* used in many countries to talk about the care system and policies addressing these issues, illustrates the protective logic, which is predominant in the discourse on foster care (Biesel et al. 2020). According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to protection, which also plays a central role in national legislations. There are also discussions in many countries about how children can be protected within foster families (Husmann et al., 2020). The structures in the various countries provide quite sophisticated systems for this purpose, including preparation, review, follow-up and accompanying foster families, in some places they include ombudsmen systems for children. If professionals become aware that a child is not (or no longer) well protected in a foster family this leads to his or her (often: immediate) removal from the foster family. The idea that children must be protected by adults – from other children or adults, adverse conditions, neglect, abuse – is deeply rooted in the European idea of childhood and parental responsibilities. Some experts argue that children do not know what is good for them and that the protection of children must therefore be the task of professionals. The German educationalist Liebel (2013) argues that this is a paternalistic view of children that is adult-centred. From his perspective, referring to children's rights, the protection of a child can only ever be thought of together with the participation of the child – which means a child can only be protected if he/she can have a say in his/her protection and how it is to be provided. In a similar way, French sociologist de Singly reminds that there is a permanent tension between children's "protection" and their "freedom". As he puts it, the UN convention recognizes a double status for the child, who is "fragile as a little one" yet, deserves respect like any other human being (De Singly, 2004, p. 24).

Being protected by the child welfare system does not always equal for children to feel safe. As will be seen in the empirical material, the children's perception of protection and safety can differ from the adults' perception, especially in regards to contact with birth family. From the young people's point of view, it happens that decisions taken by the child protection system impair their feeling of being safe and protected.

#### b. Care

Wanting to care for a child is in many countries a prerequisite for being a foster parent (Reimer, 2021) and according to studies on motivation and the construal of meaning in foster care, wanting to care for a child is one of the most important elements that motivates people to become a foster parent (Schäfer, 2011; Blandow, 2004). In a very general societal and sociological discussion, the English term “care” is used in German for “care work” to describe necessary but often unpaid or low paid work in households, families and institutions (Brückner, 2010). In European societies, care work is mainly a female activity, and in foster families, too, it is predominantly the mothers who take on care activities and feel responsible for the care work. Often the successful fulfilment of care work is closely connected to the self-image of the foster mothers, and failure to care for the foster child, which in the worst case takes the form of an interruption of the care relationship, is also interpreted as a failure in the role of being a parent and as massive personal failure (Reimer, 2020). Many children have had inadequate care experiences before being placed in foster care, especially those who have experienced neglect. Sometimes children have had to care for themselves and their siblings over a long period of time and have acquired a wide range of skills. Some children then enjoy the experience of being cared for in a foster family while others cannot accept being cared for by adults, and it takes a long and often arduous journey for the foster child to be able to accept and enjoy care for themselves and their siblings (Petri et al., 2012).

A study from the UK conducted by Schofield and colleagues (2013) distinguishes between the “carer” and “parents” identities of foster parents. According to this study, foster parents with carer identities primarily want to care for children, and they are very open to guidance and training from professional services and also have a professional approach to being a foster parent. Foster parents with a “parents’ identity”, on the other hand, primarily want to live as a family and form a family with the foster child. Contact with professionals is experienced as helpful, but sometimes they feel that their normality as a foster family is being called into question. However, parents also provide care activities, and for them too, caring for and looking after the children is an important aspect of their everyday life. In that sense, caring is like a base and something that can be done with a professional attitude. Parenting a child is more emotional – and also more exclusive in regard to the professional system (Schofield et al, 2013). The word ‘*soin*’ (care) is also widely used in French literature on foster care. French foster carers, however, are not allowed to endorse the role of a birth parent. They are explicitly not supposed to be parents but to be carers; indeed, they are expected to have a professional approach that leaves space for birth parents in the children’s lives (Euillet & Zaouche-Gaudron, 2007). One main issue that is important to point out is the potential contradiction between caring for children in your own home, which requires a high level of personal engagement, and receiving a salary for it, which is mandated by law in France for foster parents (Camelin, 2019).

### c. Emotions

In foster care literature in German, French and English, emotional connection between foster children and foster carers are often described in using professional vocabulary, especially the concepts of “attachment” and “belonging”. In these concepts, emotions are central to a good development of the foster child, especially from a psychological point of view (Smith et al. 2017).

Beyond that, in French literature, several authors advocate the importance of emotions in the relationship between foster carers and children and the need to reflect on them collectively (Turbiaux 2010; Renault, De Chasse and Thévenot, 2015; Loidreau and Merlin, 2017). When asked to recall the first time they saw the foster children, foster parents speak in terms of emotions, if not love (Camelot, 2019). In contrast, publications about foster care in France state that foster carers are advised to ‘keep

a distance' vis-à-vis fostered children in order to maintain a professional approach (Jacquot, Thévenot and De Chasse, 2017). This includes for example that foster children are not allowed to call the foster parents "mum" and "dad", which leads children to use other words to communicate their feelings about their foster parents (Potin, 2012, p. 124; Camelin, 2019).

From the carers' perspective, Jacquot and colleagues (2017) found that female foster carers struggle with not showing their affection to children, in order to avoid feelings of rivalry with birth mothers, as well as being discredited by the social workers. Séverac (2018) shows how carers who manage to keep a lasting relationship with very troubled young people base their work on dealing with their own and the young people's emotions. On the other hand, practitioners and decision makers need to anticipate the risk that the child loves their foster carer more than their birth parents. If this appears to be the case, in the French system the child might be removed to another place, as Robin (2017) describes. Thus, foster carers need to find individual ways to deal with the children's and their own emotions, at the same time providing emotional security for the child (Euillet et al, 2018). Cornalba (2017) concludes about the French foster care system that emotions are difficult to talk about because of the taboo that exists about the feelings that foster children develop towards their foster carers.

A few German studies explicitly deal with emotions in a foster relationship. Hünersdorf and Studer (2010) study foster mother's emotions and distinguish the so-called distanced vs. the consummating love. According to their study the distanced love keeps the child at a professional distance, reflects the relationship with the child and lacks emotionality. Consummating love wants to make the foster child its own and overlooks the basic needs of the child, such as the child's relationship with its family of origin and the difficulties involved in being a foster child. Steimer (2000) mentions the importance of a common myth of "falling in love" to develop a feeling of being a family. At the same time, foster children sometimes cannot bear the foster parents' emotions at all: The "search for love" becomes a "staging of rejection" until the child can actually believe that he or she is loved by the foster family. Gassmann (2018) describes how fostering a child, living together and sharing every day life makes foster Wolf (1999) assumes that children in care can expect affection and care, but not love – even though love can happen. A very classic German piece of literature by Bettelheim (1971) on children in care argues that "love is not enough" for children with experiences of severe abuse and neglect. Bettelheim's psychoanalytical view mixed with a humanistic approach opens the possibility to understand the child and its behaviour. The idea is to meet the child's needs appropriately with closeness and reflected professionalism in order to open up new spaces of autonomy and freedom – thus a call for a reflected use of emotions in care situations.

Hence, in order to respond to a child's needs, emotions play an important role but they are not enough. Children wish "to be loved", because it is common sense in our society that parents and care givers "love" the children, at the same time the content of «love» cannot be captured, defined or legislated for, «to do so would be reductive and serve only as an institutional definition of what love is.» (Independent Care Review, 2020, p. 11).

This overview of theoretical approaches to protection, care and emotions in foster care provides a framework to better understand the empirical results based on material from the two studies. These will confirm that emotional bonds between young people and their foster carers not only exist, but also hold an important place both for young people and foster carer.

#### 4 Young people and carers' perspectives from three countries

The empirical findings presented in this article are drawn from two different studies conducted with young people in foster care in three European countries: France, England and Germany. The findings from England and France are taken from a study based on day-to-day life, whilst the findings from Germany are based on a retrospective perspective of young people after care. While they were not looking specifically for accounts of emotions, the two studies focussed on the subjectivity and the perspective of the interviewees through a narrative approach. Although this topic wasn't specifically addressed, data from the two studies provide insights into the accounts of emotions by young people in care regarding their relationships with their carers. This called for a cross-cutting perspective, to look at the theming of young people's emotions and the impact emotions had on their experience of foster care.

##### *Study from Germany*

In Germany, several research projects were carried out at the University of Siegen between 2007 and 2018<sup>2</sup>. All these studies were carried out by the Siegen Foster Care Research Group and involved "biographical interviews" with 100 young people who had grown up in foster families. 97 of the young people were aged 18 to 32, one interviewee was in their 40<sup>th</sup> year, one in their 50<sup>th</sup>, and one even aged 76. Biographical interviews are a suitable means of giving people the chance to tell their life stories from their own, very subjective viewpoints, and thus gain a unique insight into their experiences (Reimer, 2017).

The interviews were analysed in detail using a theme-centred comparative method and a grounded theory approach (Reimer, 2017). In one project, the insights from the interviews were discussed with carers, and the carers points of view were also documented and analysed with a theme-centred comparative method.

##### *Study from France and England*

This project was conducted at the University of Sussex in 2013-2014<sup>3</sup>. 6 young people living in foster care in France, and 6 in England, aged 14 to 16, were asked about what was important to them in their everyday life, using mobile and visual methods (for more details on these methodological choices, refer to Join-Lambert et al., 2020). Depending on their willingness to continue with the research, each of the 8 girls and 4 boys were interviewed on two or three occasions within a period of two months. In 10 cases, their carers were interviewed as well. In order to give them opportunities to choose what they wished to talk about, and to use a variety of means of communication, they were asked to draw places (social mapping), show places (walking interviews), and take pictures of places, things and people (photo voice), which they would then comment on. This resulted in 42 interviews in French and English between January and September 2014.

A narrative analysis was conducted with all interviews; photos and maps were also included to distinguish common features and specific themes emerging from young people's testimonies.

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<sup>2</sup> Ethical approval of the projects and their methodological approach were granted by the funding organization (as common in Germany). An ethical reflection of the projects and its methods has been published in Reimer (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Approval was obtained from the EU MSCA ethics committee and from University of Sussex ethics board

The following results have been gained by screening all interviews from both studies for narratives on the relationships with foster parents and emotions linked to the foster home in young people's accounts. Data from both studies was put together and dispatched in different categories reflecting the kinds of emotions which young people and carers had disclosed. While some types of emotions were mentioned only in German interviews, others are existent in all three countries. This is possibly a result of different approaches: while German participants were looking back on their childhood at a distance, English and French participants were talking about their present day-to-day experience.

#### a. Emotions mentioned by German participants

##### *The placement not just as a "accident" but "fate"*

Some participants from Germany pointed out that they were particularly proud when they felt they were loved in their foster family. Love was used in a very emotional sense of a mutual "falling in love" from foster carers and foster children. Similar to the way Steimer (2000) described it in her study of foster and adoptive parents, in the narratives, myths are developed about the transition into the foster family that take the randomness out of placement in the family and give it at least a 'fateful' character, for example, based on affection or spontaneous "falling in love" in the process of getting to know each other. Amisha (19, Germany) describes that she "enchanted" her foster parents:

"Then they met me there and so they just told me that we were sitting outside at the table and then the biscuit jar was in the middle of the table and I couldn't reach it and so I said "shit" and then they said, not because of I said "shit", that I had simply enchanted them or something"

Several interviewees in the German sample said that they not only celebrate their birthday, but also their day of arrival in the foster family. Many have turned it into a yearly ritual, including a dinner and a cake and telling the story of how they met the members of the foster family for the first time, and how they were fascinated by each other or even fell in love at first sight. Susi tells about how she likes to hear the story of their first encounter every year:

"How it was all like that in the beginning, I would like to hear that every year again, when they saw me for the first time. My father always tells me that I ran immediately towards him, so I had probably already real sympathy for my father and I chose my foster parents myself, so to speak. Yes, I ran towards him and sat on his lap and he then immediately had tears in his eyes and it was clear to him: 'I want Susi'."

In these examples, young people talked directly about how important it is to feel a strong emotional connection with the foster family. This can also be considered as a common (retrospective) construction or "myth" in the foster family, providing a deeper common sense to the relationship. It points to an idea of "love" as part of the relationships in foster care. However, even when the entry process in care is not told as a love story, other feelings appear to be just as important to young people as well as to their foster carers.

##### *Feeling safe*

In cases where children have experienced violence, neglect or abuse in their families of origin, the foster family is considered as a place where children feel protected from future danger and possible further harm. Feeling safe and welcome in the foster family is from the young people's perspective the foundation of mutual trust, a feature that they appreciate in their relationship with the foster family. However, this shelter can also be endangered, for example, if, as is often the case in some regions in Germany, the authorities order or wish that visiting contact between the child and its family of origin

should take place in the foster family's house, even against the will of the foster child or the foster family. Lena (19, Germany) reports:

“There were always visiting contacts. But I never related to it, so I often reacted with nausea and so on and there I had a little advantage that my biological father is sitting in a wheelchair, I could always move into my loft bed, he could not get to me, and then my parents helped me to keep a little distance so that they don't come too close to me or something. But you can't avoid that [...] but, well, [...] I was totally restless and always reacted so listlessly and always felt nauseous. And then still a week or so after that it still had an effect.”

Feeling safe is endangered if there is an unclear demarcation between the foster family and the family of origin, which leads to members of the family of origin coming to the foster home regularly, often unannounced. This can be observed above all in kinship care, where the adults involved often stay in a relationship with each other. Children can then feel quite unprotected, as in the case of Nina (18, Germany).

“It just sucked that I was in a house with my mom and I heard everything and then she always freaked out, it was just hell, how many times she was at the door and wanted to slaughter me because I'm such a bad child, I don't know, I never knew what was going on, how many times I had to leave home and they didn't even notice. The ambulance service and the police knew our address by heart, because they came every week to put her in some kind of psychiatric hospital because she totally freaked out, it was just hell.”

However, this shelter can also be endangered or called into question by the behaviour of members of the foster family, e.g. if one foster parent or other children in the foster family reject or exclude the foster child or act aggressively towards him/her. This happened to Rebecca (19, Germany):

“If I wanted something and I took the food then the boys started calling me names. And the foster parents had not said "shut up" or I don't know what. Or we somehow dismantled something upstairs, some cupboards and then one of the boys almost hit me with a piece of wood, simply because I stood there and came towards him, so they reacted quite aggressively. They often hit me or they always wanted to quarrel with me, they wanted me to admit that I had broken something. And of course I might have been a little off at the beginning. But I can't understand why it would take four years or four and a half years of such terror. So I was always insulted, always no matter when, every day at dinner, at television, when I walked somewhere, when I was outside in the garden, always.”

These examples show that the feeling of safety and being protected is crucial to young people in foster care – and is at the same time fragile.

Although it was not mentioned so strongly by English and French participants, it also appears in Sophie's (England, 14) interview who says: “I'd rather be safe and unhappy than happy and not safe”. Safety is thus a prerequisite for positive emotions and feeling at home in foster care. The retrospective interviews show that when the protective space of the foster family is violated, the children themselves often wish for, or even provoke, a breakdown (cp. Gabriel/ Stohler 2020).

#### b. Emotions mentioned in all countries



### *Feeling at home*

Having positive experiences of being cared for and – sometimes only after a certain time – being able to enjoy being cared for in the foster family, contributed in the accounts a lot to feeling at home. Kusuma (19, Germany), who was severely neglected in her family of origin, tells how she enjoyed the feeling that the foster parents lovingly took care of her, took her to bed in the evening, woke her up in the morning and provided regular meals. Things that, among many other things, she had not known before and made her feel at home:

"Such things that all at once were no longer problems. The things I used to be busy with before every day were normal there: food was always there, warm water was always there, clothing was there (everything I did not know before). It was a completely new life for me".

Many young people mentioned that they liked the foster family's home and appreciated living in a "nice" place. Having nice surroundings and a garden was pointed out as an important element, somewhere they could play with other children and which they liked. Feeling at home was also connected to the possibility of participating in every day decisions in the family as well as in experiencing being a part of the family, inside the family as well as in the perception of the family's network.

Like in the German study, many interviewees in France and England emphasized how much they feel at home in the foster family. For example, several young people made pictures of places in the foster home where they felt comfortable. Angel (16, France) says:

"I could have taken another picture of the garden: Because in the garden, I play football and basketball and when the weather is nice, we have dinner in the garden. We chat and all the family is there."

Several young people showed the sofa in the family's living-room as a place where he felt cosy and secure, at the same time enjoying being together with other members of the foster home.

Carers' attitudes appear to be crucial regarding feelings of home. Thus Angel (16, France) remembers the carer saying to him "This is your home", which he says made a big difference to the previous foster family where he had never been told this.

From carers' accounts, it is important to strengthen this feeling of home. Thus, for Lucy's (16, England) carer, some daily routines are carefully thought through, for example, when Lucy comes home after school, one of the carers asks "how was school, are you okay?".

Some carers anticipate the time when the placement will end. They make sure that the young people are aware that they will still be there for them and providing a place they can feel at home. As Alfie's (16, England) carer puts it:

"We're not a family that thinks, 'well that's the end, umm you've got to go'. [...] They, they've come into our family and they'll stay part of the family and so it's his choice. [...] We'll be here if he wants us umm but he might decide that he doesn't."

In the view of these carers, feeling at home includes the idea that young people feel free to choose this support if they wish to, but don't have to.

Feeling at home includes positive emotions and a sense of belonging to the members of the foster family as well as a spatial belonging of feeling at home in the foster family's house, apartment and the surroundings.

However, the notion of feeling at home in the foster family was challenged again and again, especially on the level of belonging to the foster family. Foster children, for example, reported how they jealously paid attention to signs of affection in the foster family, especially among foster siblings. For example, for birthdays or Christmas they observed if everybody in the family received gifts of equal value. When foster children observed that the biological children of the foster family were favoured by the foster parents or by members of the wider family, their feeling of being at home in that family could be impaired. When children or young people lose the feeling that the foster family is their home, a breakdown is often likely. Several young people who had experienced one or more breakdowns said that they had experienced particular situations of exclusion in their foster family, which questioned their feeling of home. Leyla (18, Germany) says:

"You have to be honest, too, if you are not like at home in a foster family, then something is wrong. [...] I almost didn't feel at home at the beginning, but then it got worse and worse. In the beginning it was still ok, but later..."

The German retrospective study indicates that in some cases, this feeling of not being at home and not belonging to the family provoked certain behaviours in the children (aggressiveness, not talking to the foster family members, not participating in family activities, stealing things, etc.) which finally led to a breakdown of the placement (cp. Gabriel/ Stohler 2020).

#### *Having control over one's own space*

For the German participants, having a room of their own where other family members could not enter without permission was considered a particular privilege. Iris (32, Germany) tells that having her own room and a space just for her that she could control was a new and surprising experience for her when she came to her foster family at the age of 15. She enjoyed it, even though she felt overwhelmed deciding how to arrange and furnish the room, since she was not used to participating in that kind of decisions until then.

Having control over their own space, also appeared to be essential to young people in France and England. For many young people coming into care, it's the first time they get a room of their own. They describe their rooms as places where they are in control, in the sense that they can choose when they want to be there, and what to do.

However, control over their own space is also subject to the carers' trust. In cases where there is a lack of trust in the young people or in their abilities to take good care of the own space, the way young people and foster carers deal and negotiate about the space can be an area of life where control is contested.

For example, in Lucy's (16, England) case, she has her own en-suite bathroom and although she is learning to clean it herself, this means that her carer has to take a look at it sometimes, as the carer tells:

*"You never go into her bathroom? No, not by routine, because it's her personal space. Right, so you trust her that she will keep it clean? Well yes! But I will check every now and then, when I – So you do check? Her bedroom is done on a Friday, so I check on a Friday."*

Lucy's carer explains, the weekly checking is to avoid accidents. So control can be due to cleaning skills young people still have to develop, but it can also be linked to a lack of trust between the carer and young people. For example, Emilie (16, France) found out that her carer searched her suitcase while she was away:

"I had hidden the sweets in my suitcase so she couldn't find them and throw them away... well, she

found them.”

Emilie’s case points the issue of trust that can limit the feeling of control that young people can have over their own space and life. Her carer also reports on the issue of hiding her phone, which prevents from building a trustful relationship.

In the example taken from French interviews, Emilie points the foster carer’s control as an issue that makes her uncomfortable in her own room. In the English interview, however, Lucy doesn’t mention the control of her bathroom at all, but describes other areas of her daily life where she feels trusted by her carer.

### *Trust*

Trust and control in general were big issues for foster children. Many of the foster children interviewed reported that they had difficulties in building trust with the foster family, which they feel is a result of their previous experiences. What helped them was that the foster family proved to be trustworthy themselves, for example by sticking to agreements and being careful with entrusted knowledge.

Matteo (Germany, 19) sums it up: *“Since they were always consistent and they really did what they said, I was able to build more and more confidence”*

Kusuma, too, (19, Germany) tells how clear and strict the foster parents were and gives it a positive connotation:

“they were really very strict, and I sometimes cursed them for that, sometimes I thought they were Christian or something else, I was not allowed to wear colourful underwear, friends were chosen; it was exhausting, but retrospectively, it did me good.”

Several young people from Germany report that for the first time, someone in the foster family took an interest in when they came home and with whom they spent their free time – a behaviour from carers that was judged by the young people as soft control that helped to build trust.

In some of the French and English interviews, relationships with boyfriends appear as yet another topic that requires trust between carers and young people. Rules seem to differ from one foster home to another. In Emilie’s and Marie’s (16, France) case, their carer says she will not keep them from spending time with their boyfriends, but she wants to make sure they know about contraception and use it. In Hermionne’s (16, France) case, the door to her bedroom has to stay open when her boyfriend is with her. In England, only Lucy (16) mentioned the relationship with her boyfriend, whom she planned to marry later in life. As for the rules in the foster home, they appeared to be very precise: “No boys and girls in bedrooms – it’s posted in every room”. However, in Lucy’s case, the feeling of trust has grown in a way that her carers made an exception to the rule. Lucy is allowed to stay overnight at her boyfriend’s place, and her carer describes how she trusts Lucy and her boyfriend, while she would never allow the same for other girls in her care:

“Well I think it’s because the relationship has been built the way that us, as adults, would really want the young person to build their relationship, you know, over a long period of time without any pressure and without anything, and I think that’s brilliant. So it’s – yes, I don’t think I’ve ever let anyone else do that before, but I think it is totally appropriate because she’s – when she’s there, she’s in the family and they are doing that activity together and – do you know what I mean? I just think it’s all – it’s genuine – unless I’m really naïve, but I don’t think I am!”

Although the specific issues that are mentioned are not the same, relationships in which both carers and young people trust each other, are highlighted as a core aspect of relationships in all three countries. The retrospective approach highlights that a certain degree of rules in the family and control by the foster family helped young people to build mutual trust. At the same time, the control aspect in the relationship to the foster carers was sometimes difficult to bear. Similarly, the study of everyday life shows that the feeling of control which young people like to have over their own space and their relationships with boyfriends is subject to a feeling of trust which has to be gained over time.

## 5 Conclusions

In the literature and from the interviews, emotions appear to be a crucial part of the relationship between children in care and foster carers. Feeling protected, safe and cared for, taking over control, feeling trusted and trusting the carers contributed to a feeling of belonging to the family. However, to achieve this requires a constant balancing work for foster children and members of the foster families. The accounts of these emotions show that they are crucial for the way everyday lives in foster care and the way the foster care experience in retrospective is perceived.

Feeling unsafe in the foster family seems to be a particular issue in systems where birth parents are allowed into the foster family's home, which can lead to children feeling insecure and shows how easily safety can be contested. This point needs particular attention from professionals, especially in kinship care. Respecting the children's safe place seems to be a continued challenge for all stakeholders. Recent studies show that visiting contacts are perceived in a positive way when all parties feel safe (Hofer-Temmel et al., 2019). Also, professionals are challenged to address the dynamics among all children living together in the foster family in order to ensure safety and protection for the foster child (Marmann, 2005; Lehmann, 2018).

Going beyond care, safety and protection, trust seems to be a key aspect of the empirical results shown above. Young people appreciate the amount of trust that they receive from their carers. Feeling trusted allows them to have control over their own space, privacy allows them to feel at ease in the carers' home and it gives them agency for their own plans and the use of their space. In the interviews, feeling at home in the foster carers' home appears as a foundation for a sense of mutual trust, belonging and positive emotions towards the care situation. However, the feeling of being at home and experiencing mutual trust in foster care is likely to be challenged and is thus more a process than a stable condition. Likewise, trust is subject to tensions, because foster carers have to meet society's expectations that young people are safe and well cared for. They need to make sure, for example, that young people come back home every night and that their rooms meet a certain standard of cleanliness and hygiene. So, trust is balanced with a certain need for control over young people's private lives.

The notion of emotions that go beyond the wish to care for and to protect a child and to establish mutual trust is more complex. In some families, these emotions are likely to be called "love", a term that tends to stay undefined due to its romantic mystification that withdraws from scientific definition. Foster care stands somewhere between a professional attitude – where undefined emotions are rather excluded - and private-family life – where the idea of love is (over-)idealized (Illouz 2006). In modern societies usually the private and the professional exclude each other (Gehres and Hildenbrand, 2008). In the field of foster care, where private life and professionalism come together, the idea of "family love" is challenged. Professionalism is marked by specific elements: professionals have a responsibility

that is not universal, but for defined areas; they are paid for their activity, which is time limited. On the opposite side, “love”, in the romantic European ideal, cannot be linked to economic advantages, is universally competent and comprehensive, includes the whole person, and knows no time limit (Illouz 2006). This might be one of the reasons that talking about “love” in the context of foster care is challenging.

Foster care is contradictory (Gehres and Hildenbrand, 2008)– in between private and public, family and professionalism. And emotions in foster care are entangled in contradictory expectations: expectations of society, of the protection system, of carers and of the young people themselves.

In foster care, emotions need to find their place despite tensions and contradictions. In many cases, avoiding talking about emotions – or even forbidding them, as in the French system - is a way to escape some of these tensions. The more “professionalism” is imposed to families, the more contradictions arise. Dealing with tensions and contradictions requires awareness and acknowledgement of, and transparent communication about, emotions and tensions (Severac, 2018). In order to cope with contradictions, keep agency and develop a positive identity, those involved in a foster placement need to be able to talk openly about the tensions and their emotions and they need resources in order to deal with them in everyday life (and not be torn apart by them). These contradictions hold a particularly high potential for vulnerability for foster children and foster parents alike; if they find a way to deal with them, there will be room for growth and development (Gassmann, 2018). The concrete expressions of emotions in foster care cannot be prescribed and the narratives of the emotions can differ from observable expressions. But the way emotions are perceived and narrated (in individual narratives or family narratives) has an impact on everyday experiences and on people's long-term development (e.g. if trust is not experienced, young people hide; if love is not felt, young people break off the care relationship, etc.). It is therefore crucial to be aware of constructions and expectations of emotions. And it is important to address them in foster care practice.

Thus, bringing emotions and professionalism together can be a central resource for children if in Bettelheim's (1971) sense it means understanding and reflecting on children's behaviour, creating therapeutic situations in everyday life and allowing a "healing milieu" to take effect. That might include an engagement for the child and his or her uniqueness. The foundation of it is however the recognition of need for emotions, protection and care.

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