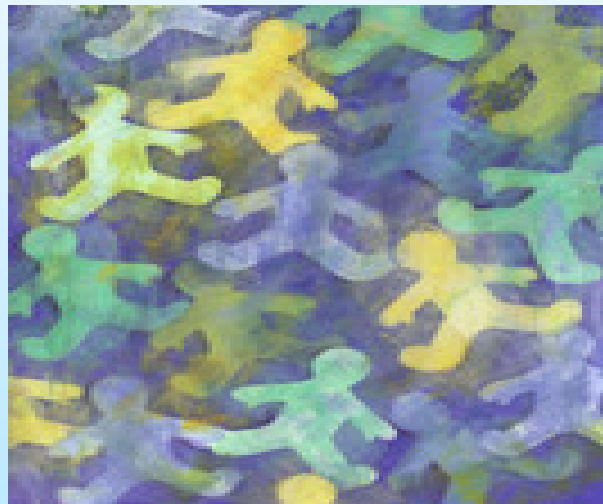




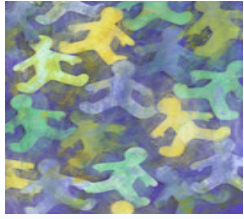
UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG



Parents of children growing up in foster care: managing their identity as parents



Dr Emma Ward, University of East Anglia



International study: three sites

University of East Anglia, UK

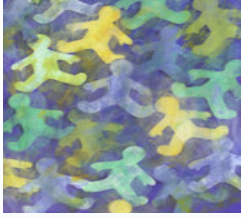
- Professor Gillian Schofield, Dr Emma Ward, Julie Young
- Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

University of Bergen, Norway

- Bente Moldestad, Dag Skilbred, Dr Toril Havik
- Funded by Stiftelsen Wøyen

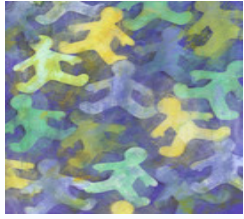
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

- Dr Ingrid Hojer
- Funded by Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset



Methods

- Interviews with birth parents
- Focus groups with birth parents
- Focus groups with social workers

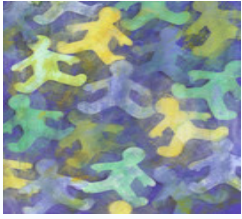


Similarities in parental status and role across the three countries

- Legal continuity of parental rights/responsibilities
- Legal right to return the case to court
- Legal/practice expectation of continuing contact
- Potential for children to return to parents when they leave care.

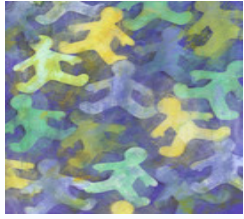
DILEMMAS

- Parents: how do I manage my role/identity over time?
- Social workers: are parents entitled to my support in their own right or to help the child – or both?



Parenthood and loss

- Parents whose children are taken into foster care experience many losses:
 - Loss of the child
 - Loss of role and identity
 - Loss of professional involvement
 - Loss of partner/home/friends
- Many parents experience a downward spiral in their mental health after their children are placed in care permanently.

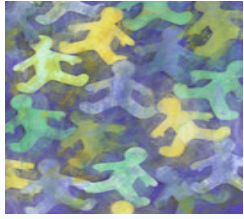


Parenthood and loss

'Awful, the hardest thing really is the grief. They are alive, they are healthy and they are safe – but you have still lost them'

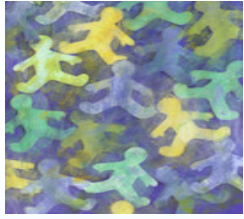
'I felt lost. One day I was a mother of three children, and then a mother with no children. There was nothing to do. I was lost, no children to look after.'

'After they took the kids well I just went on self destruct for two years'.



Parenthood and stigma

- In most societies, parents are expected to provide adequate and responsible care for their children.
- If children are taken into care this means their parents have failed to achieve the expected social identity, resulting in stigma.
- Social stigma can lead to insecurity about identity and impact on self-esteem (Goffman 1971).

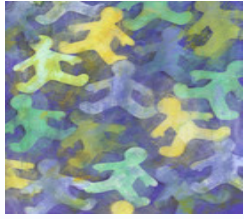


Parenthood and stigma

‘One becomes so shy and shameful. You feel useless, you have been found incapable as a mother. You are the ugly mother, the bad mother’.

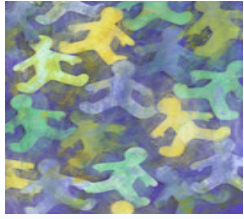
‘When your kids go into care, people look at you differently. People talk to you differently... it is just horrible, the stigma attached to parents whose kids are in care.’

‘It makes you look like you are a bad parent when you say that your kids are in foster care. People start thinking “why are her kids in foster care? is she a drug addict? is she a bad parent?” people look down on you’



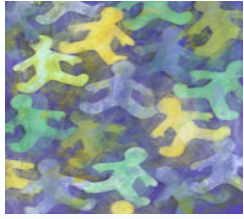
Questions for research and practice

- How do parents of children growing up in foster care manage their identity as parents in the context of loss and stigma?
- How can professionals help parents to manage their identity as parents?
- How can helping parents contribute to children's development, stability and security?



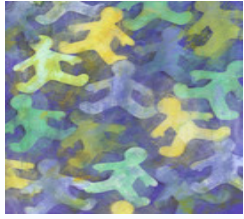
Some key areas to address

- Context of parenting before children came into care
- Parental identity when children are in foster care
- Parental identity and contact
- Social work role



Troubled families: context of parenting before the children came into care

- Parent factors
 - e.g. drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, mental health problems, learning difficulties.
 - Child factors
 - e.g. developmental delay, large sibling groups, disability, ‘unmanageable’ behaviour.
 - Environmental factors
 - e.g. poverty, lack of support, social isolation.
-
- Turning points leading to care
 - e.g. relationship breakdown, homelessness, police/school referral, prison.



Contradictions that parents face

- Most parents still identify themselves as parents and want a place in their children's lives:

'We will always be their mum and dad, no matter what'.

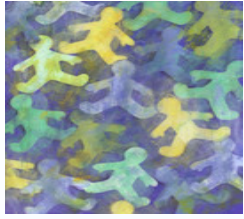
'There is no way they are going to be anyone else's children.'

BUT

- They are separated from their children and foster carers and social workers make the decisions.
- All parents see themselves as loving their children and therefore 'good' parents.

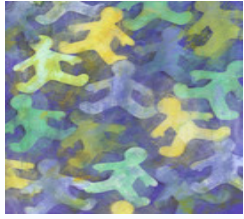
BUT

- They have been deemed by the authorities (and society) to be unsuitable to parent their children - to be 'bad' parents.



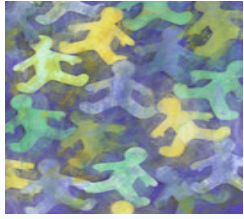
Cognitive dissonance and identity

- Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) proposes that having contradictory cognitions causes psychological stress (e.g. reduced self-esteem).
- To reduce this stress, a person will strive to modify their attitudes, beliefs or behaviour to experience the world more consistently (e.g. to protect their self-esteem).



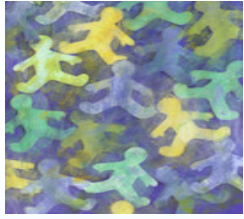
Managing cognitive dissonance and maintaining an identity as parents

- What beliefs do parents develop in order to maintain their view of themselves as (good) parents?
- Some examples:
 - I am a good parent because I am not to blame for my child coming into care and I will fight for him.
 - I am a good parent because I accept that care is best for my child.
 - I am a good parent because I am taking an active role in parenting my child while apart from him.
 - I am a good parent because I have made positive changes to my life.
 - I am a good parent because I gave birth to my child and no-one can take that away from me.



Case study 1: Laura and Tim

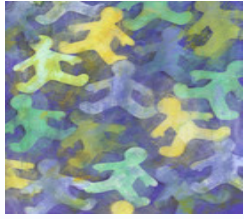
- Laura and Tim were both drug addicts - their four children had been in care for six years.
- They acknowledged they could not care for the children –and believed the children were better cared for in foster care.
- They understood the children were angry, but believed the children still loved them.
- They had made a positive change of giving up drugs.
- High resolution – sad but accepted situation.



Case study 1: Laura looks back

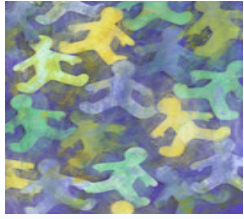
'The children were getting neglected because of what we were doing. My boy started saying to social workers 'I want to go in care' so they took him. That was his anger and I can't blame him when I look back now. I mean sometimes they would have to go through the dirty washing piles to find something clean enough to wear.'

'I felt they were going to somewhere where they were going to be looked after properly. I mean all the kids say that we did the right thing. It would have been crueller to keep them here.'



Case study 2: Mary and Leon

- Mary and Leon, also had four children in foster care for six years. Also drug addicted at time of care - but still on heroin.
- Mary believed she was targeted unfairly.
- Believed that her children should come back to her and wanted to come back – that it was natural and her right.
- Gave examples of “worse” parents in the community.
- Low resolution – did not accept the situation. Mary defined herself as a good parent through her anger.

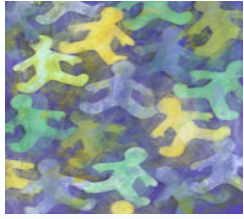


Case study 2: Mary's view of the children going into care and now

'My kids were doing fine. My kids didn't need to be taken off me. I am a drug user and alright there might be some things they missed out on , but they were not unloved. They were clean and tidy. They enjoyed Christmas.'

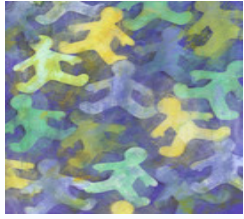
'When they took my kids they just took everything from me –if anything that pushed me further into drugs.'

'They love me – but they are drifting further and further away from me. I am frightened of that –any parent would be.'



Does contact help parents to maintain their identity?

- Identity maintained through contact
 - Compensation for children being in care not adopted– ‘at least I have a place in their lives’
 - Parents can contribute and feel involved in their children’s lives
 - Relationships built through contact
- Identity damaged through contact
 - Punishment for children being in care – ‘contact reminds me of what I have lost’
 - Parents feel powerless to influence / ‘parent’
 - Gaps between contacts/ poor quality contact weakens relationship
- Most parents experience elements of each to some degree - how these feelings are managed appears to be important.



What do parents need from social workers?

- To be heard

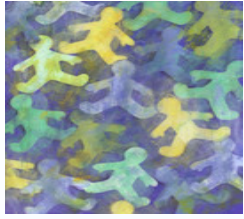
'I can talk to her and if there is anything ever happens she is straight on the phone to me, you know if they were ill she says I will always let you know.'

'I felt as if you are there but you are not heard, yes, so it is a case of sit there, shut up. You listen to what is going on by all means but whatever you say has got no bearing to what happens.'

- Honesty and trust

'Parents all say the same thing to us "you are honest with us"... that is the contract we work from... that is where the trust comes from.' (social worker)

'I start getting used to one of them (SW) and I start to try and build up a little bit of trust, then I start to think right ok they are trying and they disappear on me.'



What do parents need from social workers?

- Information and involvement

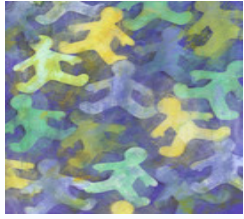
'I can phone Jim (SW) up and ask what [child] wants to do for Halloween so that I can go out and buy her a Halloween costume.'

'I don't feel involved at all, I feel totally out of touch with my children... I don't know anything about Sammy, I don't even know what her favourite film is, what her favourite music is or nothing.'

- Understanding

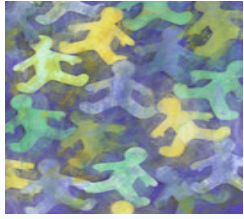
'I will say one thing about social services, they do a good job yes, but just be more aware of parents' feelings because we are human, we do hurt.'

'A lot of social workers they have had an easy life, they have had loving parents, they have had a good education, they haven't had the raw deal.'



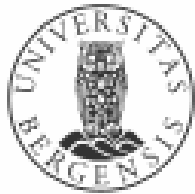
The dilemmas for social workers

- Uncertainty about the appropriate parent role.
- Uncertainty about social work role in relation to parents:
 - Parent welfare focus
 - Child welfare focus
- Social workers have to manage their own attitudes and feelings about parents:
 - Extent of empathy for parents' position.
 - Parents entitled or not entitled to social work time.
 - Feelings of sadness and anger about child's and parents' history and situation.



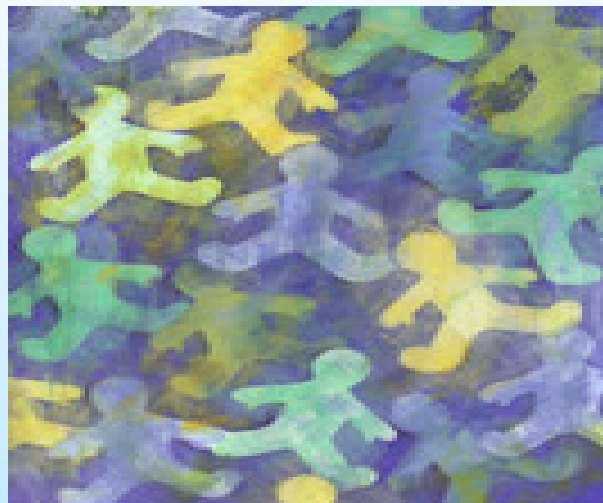
Social work with parents of children growing up in foster care: messages

- Flexible approaches that can accommodate the full range of parents – their (often mixed) feelings of loss and anger and their evolving relationships with the children, social workers and foster carers over the years in care.
- All parents will be trying to find ways to maintain their identity as parents and resolve the inevitable tensions and contradictions they face
- If parents feel valued and supported, they are more likely to support the child's stability and progress in foster care.



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

UEA
University of East Anglia



emma.ward@uea.ac.uk