

# To talk or not to talk?!

Foster youth's experiences of talking about their past and being a foster child.

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# Life-story Identity

- *Life stories serve to make sense of one's past, present, and anticipated future and are partly constructed by making meaning of past experience*
- Co-constructing memories
- Secure base in dialogues about distressing events
- Memory sharing functions: personal and social

# Identity development in care

- Secure base of foster parents
- Disclosing adverse experiences
- Trauma therapy
- Being a 'foster child'

# Project BOP

*What are the psychosocial needs of foster children and how does their past influence these needs?*

- Voices of foster children
- Episodic interview study
- Q-sort survey



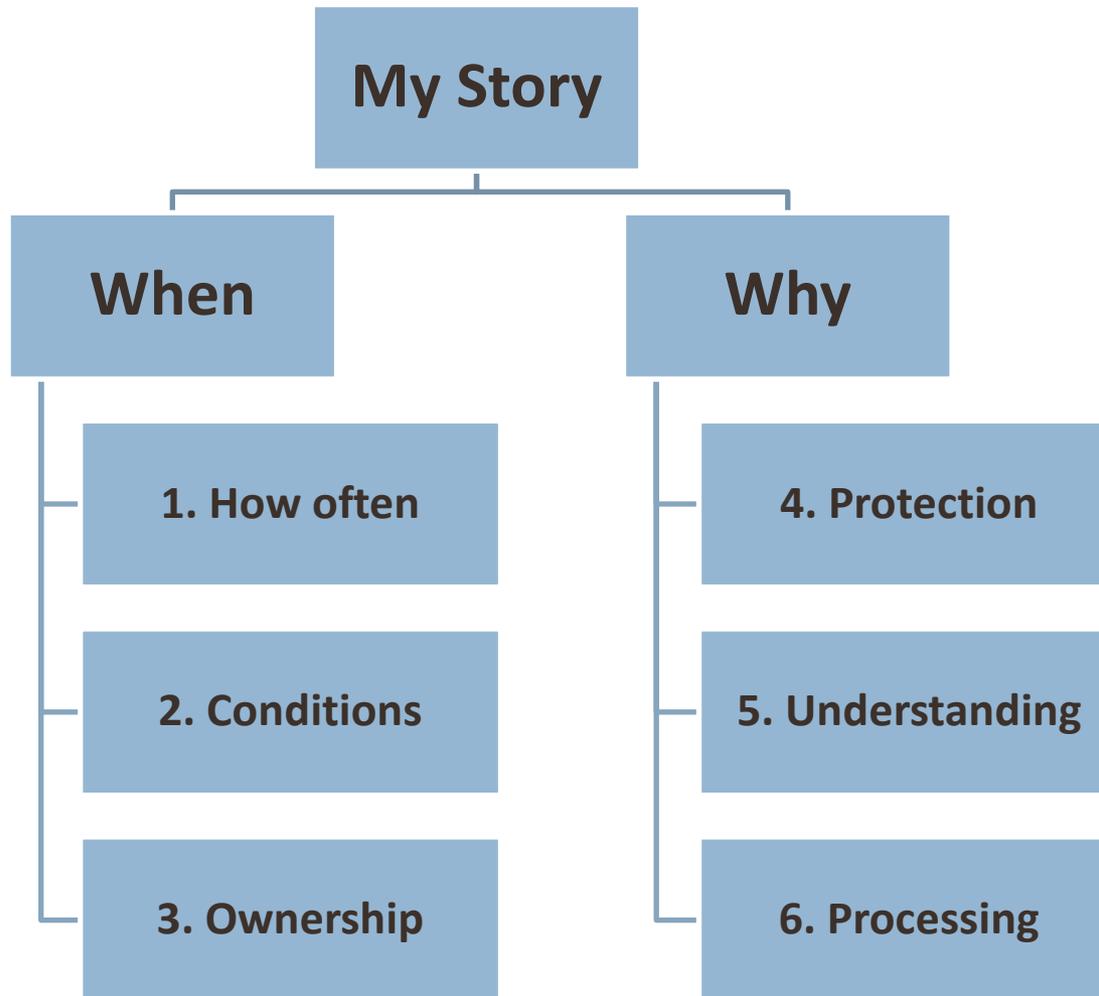
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# Method

- 13 (former) foster youth, aged 15-23 ( $m = 17,5$ )
- Thematic analysis
- Evolving codebook
- 17 broad themes -> 'My story'

# Results



# Results: When

## 1. How often do I tell my story?

### Talkers vs. Non-talkers

*I am reasonably extravert, and I just really told everybody (my story, red.). Only since last year I've decided, you know what, not everybody needs to know that I don't have any parents anymore. Participant 6.*

### Start of the conversation

*'There were moments that I really needed to talk about it (with foster parents, red.). During a cozy night by the fire place. It is also a sense of trust that develops gradually.'* Participant 7.

# Results: When

## 2. Conditions for talking

### Interest

*'If I want to talk about it, that's possible, but I am not obligated to talk about it or anything.'* Participant 5.

### Trust

*Small signals caused me to close up, because I was afraid they (foster parents, red.) were going to send me away. I think that if there was more trust (..) I would have been more able to have these personal conversations and indicate what was bothering me.* Participant 10.

# Results: When

## 2. Conditions for talking

### Acceptance

*Imagine jumping into a swimming pool and breaking your leg. It really hurts at that moment and you try not to pay attention to it, because if you focus on the pain it will hurt even more. But once that leg is healed, you can talk about what happened because the pain is gone. That is what I have with talking about my past. When I talk about it now, I do not get emotional anymore.*

Participant 5.

### Skills

*I kept everything in, so at one moment everything comes bursting out. That is not okay. And in that 'kopp group' I learned how to talk about it.* Participant 1

# Results: When

## 3. Ownership of my story

### I decide who knows what

*Uhm, well, I tell them that I have some past with drugs and alcohol, but not that it was my mother, you know. I rather not talk about that, that is somewhat of a black page in my past. Participant 3.*

### I decide what people do with my story

*For me, they are not supposed to tell him that (foster parents to ex-boyfriend). It is my youth and if I think that it doesn't concern him, than it really doesn't concern him. Participant 1.*

*The more things you tell, the more people can twist the story. Participant 3.*

# Results: Why

## 4. Protection

### Of myself

*It bothers me less if I don't talk about it than when I do talk about it. If I talk about it, it all comes back to me and it only makes me unhappy and I'll be thinking about it more. Participant 11.*

*I had a good friend and her grandmother died, the whole family was grieving. And she didn't really dared to say that to me, because she thought I've been through enough. But I think it was more difficult for her than it was for me when my (biological) mother died. I think that is a common misconception. Participant 8.*

# Results: Why

## 4. Protection

### Of others

*Many people hear your story and are like 'ow I am so sorry for you' or listen to it with a thrill, those people find the story very interesting, but someone who really cares about you doesn't want to hear it because it pains their ears. That's what I appreciate about my boyfriend, I'd rather not talk about it and he'd rather not hear it. Participant 10.*

*If I would tell her things just like that, she would get really upset. She would start dreaming about it and thinking about it, and she'll just find it awful for me. And I really want to prevent that from happening. Participant 11.*

# Results: Why

## 5. Understanding

### Of myself

*Reading the file and taking everything in, and I mean I didn't have a small file, so. There were a couple of things that I found out: 'o wait, is that what happened?!'. And what choices were made and I was like 'they really did think that one through'. Participant 9.*

*We had conversations when something was bothering and then we figured out what might be the reason for this. And how I could handle that. That was really nice. They (foster parents, red.) really tried to help me in so many ways. Participant 10.*

# Results: Why

## 5. Understanding

### From others

*If I just say 'I have no contact with my stepbrother', the first reaction I get is: 'o, I think that is wrong'. But when I explain why I have no contact, suddenly they are more understanding of the situation. Participant 1.*

*I always really needed somebody there that I felt safe with. I didn't dare to ride my bike alone in the dark. And my friends said: 'you are just like the kids we babysit'. And I was like, they have no idea they are dealing with a traumatized person. Participant 6.*

# Results: Why

## 6. Processing my past

### Through talking

*These conversations with foster parents really helped me because they could point out the positive things, and that took the pressure off. I always say the glass is half-full, but acting on it is sometimes difficult. Participant 13.*

*I liked having these conversations (with foster parents, red.) and I also liked that they noticed me or something. They really noticed how I was doing. Participant 7.*

# Results: Why

## 6. Processing my past

### Through activities

*I could express so much emotions in my guitar play, especially in the second foster home I play so so often. Participant 11.*

*Instead of being bombarded with only this negative stuff, you can sometimes just feel neutral. It is such a relief if you find that distraction with something fun to do (with friends, red.). Participant 12.*

# Conclusion

- Foster children are very protective of their life-story identity
- Identity formation through meaning-making processes
- Interviewees had generally accomplished a mature psychosocial narrative identity based on their past and being a foster child

# Discussion

- Mixed experiences with talking -> talking conditions
- Knowing story brings responsibility
- Talking conditions opens opportunity for meaning-making and processing the past
- Is talking always necessary?
- Different needs for each child