

# ETHNICITY REFLECTIONS IN FOSTER FAMILIES

The complexity of transculturally placed foster youth's ethnic identity and the way they are ethnically socialized by their primary carers

Clementine J. Degener





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*Clementine Degener*

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# Ethnicity reflections in foster families

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youth's ethnic identity and the way they are  
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'Sometimes I am startled when I see myself reflected in the mirror, for I look so different..... (silence)'

Liana (pseudonym), 12 years of age

'We are one, but we are not the same  
We've got to carry each other'  
(One, U2)

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# 1

## CHAPTER

General introduction

## Introduction

In the Netherlands, family foster care is considered a preferred setting for children removed from their homes compared to residential care (Dutch Youth Act, 2015). A foster family serves as a safe place for vulnerable children and resembles a normal family (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012). The primary goal of the Convention on the *Rights of the Child* (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) is to provide a safe place for vulnerable children and youth and protect them against violence. This principle of safety may conflict with the principle that children from an ethnic, religious, or linguistic minority group have the right to express and experience their own culture, to practice their religion, and to use their native language (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This conflict may occur when ethnic minority foster children are placed in an ethnic majority foster family (Day & Bellaart, 2015), which is mostly called a transcultural or transracial placement (Barn, 2018 and Brown et al., 2009).

A suitable match between the characteristics of foster parents and foster children is essential to ensure successful placements, which means a reduced probability of unplanned terminations of placements (Moffatt & Thoburn, 2001). However, according to Zeijlmans et al. (2018), matching decisions in the Dutch foster care system are frequently not based on the ideal situation but the possibilities at hand. This means among others that a match based on ethnic-cultural backgrounds is often impossible due to a scarcity of non-kinship foster parents with ethnic minority backgrounds (Day & Bellaart, 2015; Padilla, Vargas, & Chavez, 2009). Even so, when children with an ethnic minority background are removed from their home, it may be better to quickly place them in a safe place (i.e., an ethnically non-matched family) than leaving the situation as it is (Farrell-Smith, 1996)

There have been several societal discussions about foster children who have been transculturally placed. An example is a boy of Turkish descent who was placed in a Dutch foster family with an ethnic majority lesbian couple. The discussion focused on whether this boy could sufficiently explore his ethnic-Turkish and religious identity (Day et al., 2018). Studies show that ethnic identity is positively related to psychosocial functioning and academic and mental health outcomes (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Smith & Silva, 2011). In other words, not being able to explore one's ethnic identity may be problematic, particularly during (the onset of) adolescence, when identity formation becomes a major developmental task

(Crocetti, 2018; Erikson, 1968; French et al., 2006; Marcia, 1966; Meeus et al., 2012; Verschueren et al., 2017). This can significantly impact transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth, who may be vulnerable due to abuse, neglect, and out of home placements (Goemans et al., 2016; Mitchell 2016; 2017). However, no scientific knowledge exists about the ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth within the Dutch context. This is the main theme of this dissertation. Using a qualitative approach, I investigate how being transculturally placed in a foster family impacts the ethnic identity of ethnic minority foster youth in the Netherlands, and what role ethnic socialization plays in their ethnic identity development.

## Ethnic minority people in The Netherlands

On 1 January 2020, the Netherlands had a population of 17.4 million inhabitants. Fourteen percent of all Dutch inhabitants had a non-western migration background (CBS, 2020). This means that they (first generation) or one of their parents (second generation) were born in African, Latin American, Asian countries (Indonesia and Japan excluded), or in Turkey (CBS, 2020). The largest groups of people with non-western migration backgrounds in the Netherlands are people with Turkish (422,356), Moroccan (414,381), and Surinamese (358,134) backgrounds. In the 1960s, Southern European, Turkish, and Moroccan immigrants arrived in the Netherlands as guest workers and performed manual labour in Dutch industries. This type of labour migration ended after the economic recession in 1973, and was followed by family reunification, especially from Turkey and Morocco. Additionally, immigrants arrived from the former Dutch colonies, such as Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. In 1975, Surinam declared its independence, and the Surinamese people could choose between the Dutch and Surinamese nationality. As a result, many Surinamese people migrated to the Netherlands. From the 1980s onwards, people came to the Netherlands as asylum seekers from countries including Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, and Iran (Huijnk & Andriessen, 2016; Jennissen, 2012).

People whose grandparents migrated to the Netherlands (third generation) officially do not have a migration background (CBS, 2020). However, they may belong to and continue to be treated as an ethnic minority group in the Netherlands. For instance, a recent study of Andriessen et al. (2020) showed that Dutch people with roots in countries such as Morocco or Turkey face relatively more discrimination

than ethnic Dutch people. The foster youth in the studies of this dissertation are second and third-generation people with roots in non-western countries.

## **Transcultural placements in Dutch foster care**

The children and grandchildren of non-western migrant groups are overrepresented in the foster care system. In 2013, 36% of Dutch foster youth belonged to a migrant group (Day & Bellaart, 2015), while 23% of all Dutch youth belonged to a migrant group. Meanwhile, Dutch foster care agencies report that foster parents from migrant groups are scarce (Day & Bellaart, 2015). This occurs in non-kinship foster care, where foster youth are placed with foster parents recruited by foster care agencies and not with relatives or acquaintances. In 2019, 23,272 children resided in Dutch foster care, of which 52% were placed with non-kinship foster parents (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2020). Most non-kinship foster parents have ethnic majority backgrounds (Day & Bellaart). Although many Dutch foster care agencies have put extra efforts into recruiting foster parents from migrant groups in non-kinship foster care, it proved difficult to bind them to their organisations. Possible reasons include insufficient tools of the foster care organisations to reach them, a negative image of foster care as perceived by migrant groups, and the 'whiteness' of most of the Dutch foster care workers and agencies, which leads to a lack of role models within the organisations (Day et al., 2018).

## **Ethnic identity**

When youth reach adolescence, identity formation becomes a major developmental task (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Klimstra et al., 2010; Meeus, 2017; Meeus et al., 2012; Verschueren et al., 2017). Following Umaña-Taylor et al., (2014), we define ethnic identity as a multidimensional psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes individuals have about their ethnic group memberships (content), as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time (process). Ethnic identity is fluid. It develops over time and in relation to the environment where a person is situated and in daily dynamic and reciprocal interactions. Family members, peers, and societal influences are important in this process (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

In the literature, the concept of ethnic identity is frequently conceptualised from a social and developmental psychological perspective, whereby both perspectives

intersect. Social identity research investigates the relationship between individuals and their environment and their sense of belonging to a specific group (Rocca & Brewer, 2002; Verkuyten, 2018, p. 79). Ethnic identity is a social identity because a sense of belonging to the same or similar ethnic group is essential (Verkuyten, 2018, p. 79). Phinney, Jacoba, and Silva (2007) describe the development of ethnic identity as a maturation process whereby ethnic minority individuals explore their ethnic identity (exploration) and/or decide where and to whom they belong (i.e., commitment). Individuals can be in a state of diffusion regarding their ethnic identity (no exploration, no commitment), foreclosure (commitment without exploration), moratorium (exploration without commitment), or experience ethnic identity achievement (exploration and commitment). Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) mention three other dimensions of ethnic identity: the importance of ethnic group membership for self-concept or self-definition (centrality or importance), youth's own evaluations of and affect toward an ethnic group (positive affect), and youth's perceptions of others' evaluations of the ethnic group (public regard) (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Most research on ethnic identity have ethnic minority groups in majority society in their sample (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Ethnicity becomes important when ethnic minority people are aware of the differences between themselves and those with ethnic majority backgrounds (Lesane-Brown, 2006) or when people share the experience of being a devalued group because of being an ethnic minority in a majority society (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Because ethnic identity frequently develops in the light of one's position in majority society, it is vital to focus on how ethnic majority and ethnic minority identities relate. Berry et al.'s acculturation theory (2006) investigates the identity of ethnic minorities in a majority society. It illustrates how ethnic minority individuals identify with their ethnic minority *or* ethnic majority background (i.e., separation and assimilation, respectively) or with *both* backgrounds (i.e., integration) or do not identify with their ethnic minority *nor* their ethnic majority background (i.e., marginalization). The concept of biculturalism (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002; Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005; Ferrari et al., 2015; LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1997; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997) includes the development of one's ethnic minority *and* ethnic majority identity in a majority society or, as several authors put it, an ethnic identity and a national or mainstream identity (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002; Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005; Ferrari et al., 2015; LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1997; Phinney & Devich-

Navarro, 1997). The development of a bicultural identity is studied in situations where people live or grow up in or between two cultures. Individuals might feel torn between these two cultures (versus feeling harmony) or experience two ethnic backgrounds as being separated from each other (versus the possibility of blending both) (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005). These processes impact their psychosocial adjustments, such as self-esteem and life satisfaction (Chen, Benet-Martinez & Bond, 2008).

## **The ethnic identity of ethnic minority foster youth**

For transculturally placed foster youth, developing an ethnic identity may be a complex task. First, because they live as an ethnic minority in an ethnic majority Dutch family, they may be confronted with ethnic differences on a daily basis, which can impact their identity (Manzi et al., 2014). Second, they may still have contact with birth family members, which puts them in a situation of growing up with different cultures (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). They may experience loyalty problems between their foster parents and birth family members (Dansey, John & Shbiro, 2018), which may impact how they address the ethnic-cultural backgrounds of both. Third, they may be stigmatised due to being in foster care and being called "different" by others, including their peers (Kools, 1997; Madigan et al., 2013, Thomas, 2014), which may lead to a wish not to be recognised as being a foster child (Kools, 1997). Additionally, they may be stigmatised because of belonging to an ethnic minority group. Ethnic minority groups frequently experience discrimination in various social contexts. A recent study (Andriessen et al., 2020) showed that ethnic minority individuals in the Netherlands, especially Moroccan, Turkish, Antillean, and Surinamese, frequently face discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic background, and/or religion. When foster children are transculturally placed, these mechanisms of stigmatisation may intersect (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

## **Parental ethnic socialization of foster youth**

Parental ethnic socialization is important in the ethnic identity formation of children and youth (Hughes et al., 2008; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Hughes et al. (2008) defined parental ethnic socialization as the range of parental efforts aimed at

transmissions of messages about ethnicity to children, both about their ethnic minority group membership and mainstream society. These messages include (a) transmitting traditions, customs, cultural pride, and language, (b) preparing for experiences with racism and prejudice, (c) promoting diversity and equal treatment across groups or (d) fostering a sense of mistrust to other ethnic groups. Especially cultural socialization has proved to be positive for the ethnic identity development of ethnic minority youth (Hughes et al., 2009; Huguley et al., 2019).

Hughes et al.'s definition (2008) is based on the ethnic socialization of children who live in their birth parental homes, with a particular focus on ethnic minority families in the United States, and not on transculturally placed children. However, in the last decade, extensive research has been conducted on transcultural adoption (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). In contrast to most transcultural adoptees, transculturally placed foster youth may still receive ethnic minority messages from their birth parents. Foster youth's birth parents can keep (shared) authority over their children and are likely to stay in contact with them (Burns, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2016). They can give their children ethnic-cultural minority messages while they grow up. However, the results of studies about transcultural adoption may be (partly) transferrable to the context of transcultural foster care, because transculturally placed foster children, like adoptees, are confronted with ethnicity differences between themselves and their primary caregivers (Manzi et al., 2014). The literature shows that most adoptive parents tend to pay little attention to the ethnic minority socialization of their children (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Ethnic majority parents might not 'naturally' know how to guide their ethnic minority children, and therefore need to gain 'cultural competence' (Vonk, Lee & Crolley-Simic, 2010). Cultural competence refers to ethnicity awareness and the required knowledge and skills to be able to expose ethnic minority children to their birth culture and to prepare them to deal with discrimination and racial bias in society (Langrehr, Thomas, & Morgan, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Zhang & Pinderhughes, 2019).

## **Methodological approach and considerations**

### **Qualitative design**

Little is known about ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth in the Netherlands. This dissertation is qualitative and uses a constructivist paradigm approach. Constructivism here refers to the notion that our focus is not

on obtaining an objective truth from empirical data but on understanding how people make sense of and interpret their experiences in life. Each participant's account is treated as indicative of the subjective reality of that individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Within this paradigm, we adopt a qualitative interview methodology because we examine complex themes concerning the ethnic identity of vulnerable youth (foster children) in everyday reality. These youth are part of two or more ethnic and/or cultural contexts (Flick, 2014; Mortelmans, 2009).

## **Photo-elicitation**

We structured the interviews by using photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation is a method whereby photographs are inserted into interviews (Collier, 1967; Harper, 2002). The foster youth took pictures in advance of the interviews of people, objects and places that were personally meaningful to them. During the interviews, the youth picked out a photo, which led to a conversation about ethnic identity. In this way, photo-elicitation gave the foster youth a sense of agency during the interviews (Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2017; Harper, 2002; Rose, 2016). According to Harper (2002) and Rose (2016), the use of photos can be a way to observe cultural differences because they provide (a different) insight into the world of the people who have taken them. They are often used in studies on identity (Croghan et al., 2008) and studies with vulnerable people (Smith & Woodward, 1999). Photo-elicitation fits within the main goals of this dissertation to explore how foster youth develop their ethnic identity in the context of the different ethnic-cultural worlds they live in. Because visual material evokes deeper elements of human consciousness than words (Harper, 2002), combining both (words and photos) will likely lead to a deeper understanding of the lifeworlds of the foster youth.

## **Qualitative analyses**

This dissertation includes three qualitative analyses: a qualitative thematic analysis, a qualitative dyadic comparative analysis, and a qualitative longitudinal analysis. The first thematic analysis explored foster youth's accounts of their ethnic identity and used a reflective and inductive approach, following Braun & Clarke (2006).

The qualitative dyadic comparative analysis aimed to gain insight into how ethnic identity develops through a reciprocal relationship between the foster youth

and the context in which they are ethnically socialised (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Hughes et al., 2008; Phinney, Jacoby, & Silva, 2007). We examined perspectives from different members from one family: those of the foster youth and those of the foster parents (Reczek, 2014), and compared and analysed their accounts within and between families. The dyadic comparative analysis was developed based on methodological literature (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003; Sands & Roer-String, 2006; Van Parys et al., 2017).

The qualitative longitudinal analysis aimed to examine ethnic identity development as a dynamic process and to identify and understand ethnic identity fluctuations over time (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney, Jacoby, & Silva, 2007). This study also aimed to investigate how the foster youth develop (ethnic) social relationships over time and what ethnic identity pathways they might follow. We followed Calman, Brunton, and Molasiottis (2013) to derive the main themes of change from the data. We analysed the data using Saldaña's (2002) list of framing, descriptive, and analytic questions, and Derrington's (2019) concept mapping method.

## Ethical considerations

In this study, a tension arose between increased recognizability of participants and safeguarding authenticity when presenting the results of two members of the same family or two interviews conducted with the same participant (Calman, Brunton, & Molasiottis, 2013; Forbat & Henderson, 2003). I used pseudonyms to prevent recognizability and was careful to use quotes that would guarantee anonymity. Furthermore, it is important to be aware of possible increased intrusion into people's lives when a researcher enters the families more than once (Balmer & Richards, 2017). Therefore I, provided clear information, and requested the approval of all participants. We asked for approval from legal guardians when foster youth were under the age of 16. All participants could withdraw from the study at any time, and no information was shared with others.

## Objectives of the dissertation

This dissertation investigates narratives of transculturally placed foster youth about their ethnic identity and how their ethnic identity fluctuates over time. For this purpose, we also study ethnic socialization messages as indicated by

foster parents and how these messages are received by their foster youth (youth's narratives). Ultimately, we hope that these insights will help foster care agencies, foster parents, and birth parents guide the ethnic identity development of transculturally placed foster youth. This dissertation addresses the following research questions:

1. How is ethnic identity constructed in transculturally placed minority foster youth's narratives, and how does it fluctuate over time?
2. What ethnic socialization do foster parents provide and what ethnic socialization do transculturally placed foster youth receive by their foster parents, and how do both perspectives interact?

## **Outline of the dissertation**

This thesis comprises six chapters, including this introduction (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 reviews the empirical literature on how transracial placements affect the ethnic identity of ethnic minority foster children. To stay close to the terminology of the literature we found in the review, we chose in this specific chapter for the term transracial placements. Chapter 3 addresses a thematic analysis of ethnic identity outcomes of ethnic minority foster youth. It examines the ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands and how this relates to their foster parent's ethnic majority backgrounds and their birth parent's ethnic minority backgrounds. It also investigates the role of foster parents, birth parents, and peers in their ethnic identity formation process. Chapter 4 reports the results of a dyadic comparative analysis of foster youth and their foster parents. It provides insights into the dynamics and contents of ethnic socialization in transcultural foster families to understand how ethnic majority foster parents give ethnic socialization messages and how their ethnic minority foster youth receive this. Chapter 5 presents the results of a longitudinal analysis of the ethnic identity development of foster youth. It includes accounts by Dutch ethnic minority foster youth about their ethnic identity development and ethnic identity fluctuations over a period of two years. It also gives possible explanations for changes in foster youth's ethnic identity. Chapter 6 discusses the results of this dissertation and concludes. It suggests avenues for future research and provides implications for practitioners in the field of non-kinship family foster care.





# 2

## CHAPTER

The ethnic identity of transracially placed foster children with an ethnic minority background:  
A systematic literature review

Based on: Degener, C. J., Bergen, D. D. van, & Grietens, H. W. E. (2021).

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## **Abstract**

To gain insight into the ethnic identity of transracially placed foster children, we conducted a systematic literature review. Findings show that foster children's awareness of ethnic differences, disconnection from or connection with ethnic minority backgrounds and societal messages on ethnicity, impact their ethnic identity. Foster parents may play a pivotal role in these processes, since culturally competent foster parents can guide foster children in their ethnic identity development.

## Introduction

In many western European and northern American countries and Australia, children with ethnic minority backgrounds are overrepresented in the child welfare and foster care systems (Krakouer, Wise & Conolly, 2018; Schick et al., 2016; Nuttgens, 2013; Padilla, Vargas & Chavez, 2009). Although actual legislations are directed towards foster children's retainment of links with their ethnic minority backgrounds (Thoburn, 2010, p. 30), ethnic minority foster children are frequently placed in families with ethnic majority backgrounds. A main reason is a shortage of foster parents who have ethnic minority backgrounds (Padilla, Vargas & Chavez, 2009). In the international literature these placements are commonly called transracial placements (DeBerry, Scarr & Weinberg, 1996; Thoburn, Norford, & Parvez Rashid, 2000, p. 24). There has been a lively debate among both academics and professionals whether transracial placements influence the ethnic identity of foster children or children who are adopted with an ethnic minority background (Hollingsworth, 1997; Thoburn et al., 2000; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). One of the key questions is whether majority parents can guide and prepare their children for coping with discrimination experiences based on their ethnic minority background (e.g. ethnic and racial socialization, see Hollingsworth, 1997).

It is to assume that foster children with an ethnic minority background struggle with their ethnic identity. Internationally, most foster children have experienced maltreatment, abuse and/ or neglect by their birth parents (Thoburn, 2010, p. 34), and they may experience feelings of loss, grief, and trauma because of having been removed from their birth parental homes (Mitchell, 2017). These experiences can lead to the impairment of their identity or to identity losses (Kools, 1997; Thomas, 2014). For foster children who are transracially placed, developing their identity may be of increased complexity. They may, additionally to identity losses because of being a foster child (Kools, 1997), experience ethnic identity losses because of being disconnected from their ethnic backgrounds. In order to comprehend the accumulating body of international research in this field and to come to a synthesis of research findings on this topic, a systematic literature review has been undertaken. The goal of this article is to explore what is known on how transracial placements influence the ethnic identity of foster children.

## Ethnic identity

Especially during adolescence, processes of identity development become important. Adolescents try to find out who they are, what they stand for, and where and to whom they belong (Meeus et al. 2012; Verschueren et al., 2017). Ethnic identity mainly focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a group of people with a same-ethnic background (Phinney, 1990), and is based on the conviction that roots, history, culture, norms, language and religion are shared with other members of an ethnic group (Hughes et. al., 2008). Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007) state that ethnic identity develops during a process of maturation, in which people explore their ethnic identity and/or decide where and to whom they belong. In this process, they can be in a state of diffusion (no exploration, no commitment), foreclosure (commitment without exploration), moratorium (exploration without commitment), or ethnic identity achievement (exploration and commitment)(Phinney, Jacoby & Silva, 2007). Positive ethnic identity outcomes are related to a high self-esteem (Ferrari et al., 2015; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997) and to psychological well-being (Yasui, Dorham & Dishion, 2004).

The construction of ethnic identity is a lifelong, dynamic and reciprocal process, which develops through interaction with the social and societal context a person is situated in (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Ethnic identity is therefore a social identity (Verkuyten, 2018, p. 79). Social identity consists of three related components: 1) social classification of people into groups, 2) specific behavioral and normative consequences and expectations bounded to a category and 3) societal or peoples' judgements related to the category someone belongs (Verkuyten, 2018, p. 80). In western European, Australian and North American societies, people with ethnic minority backgrounds may, according to societal and people's judgement, be perceived as inferior (Aarons & Pietsch, 2012, pp. 1-14; Lavalette & Penketh, 2013, p. 2), which impacts their ethnic identity. These mechanisms also occur in the youth care systems (Hollingsworth, 1997). Historically, this is visible in the adoption and foster care systems of the USA, Canada and Australia, where ethnic minority children like First Nations were adopted or taken into foster care in the 1960' s and 1970' s in order to provide them a 'western' socialization (Krakouer, Wise & Connolly, 2018; Nuttgens, 2013).

## Transracial placements of ethnic minority children and ethnic identity

Little knowledge seems to exist about the ethnic identity of foster children, but lessons can be learned from the field of transracial adoption, as these two phenomena share similarities. Transracially placed foster children, like adoptees, are confronted with ethnicity differences between themselves and their caregivers (Manzi et al., 2014). Thereby, adoptees in countries like the United States and England may share a similar history with foster children of being placed out of home. In these countries, it is a more common practice to place children with a foster care history in an adoptive family than for instance in mainland European countries, where foster children more frequently stay in long term family foster care (Berrick et al., 2015; George, Van Oudenhoven, & Wazir, 2003). Evidence exists from the field of adoption that being transracially placed impacts the ethnic identity of children (Hrapczynski & Leslie, 2018; Montgomery & Jordan, 2018; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Children show disconnection from their ethnic backgrounds and family, and suffer ethnicity losses (Barn, 2018; DeBerry, Scarr and Weinberg, 1996; Lee et al., 2018; Montgomery & Jordan, 2018). They also may face issues of ethnicity belonging in relation to peers with same, or different ethnic backgrounds (Butler-Sweet, 2011; Goss, Bird & Hughey, 2017; Nuttgens, 2013). The way adopted children internalize their minority background in their ethnic identity, is related to the way their adoptive parents transmit ethnic minority messages (Baden, 2002; Langrehr, Thomas & Morgan, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Manzi et al., 2014). Ethnic majority adoptive parents may however not always possess sufficient skills or knowledge to guide their ethnic minority children in developing their ethnic minority identity (Langrehr, Thomas & Morgan, 2016; Lee et al., 2018). They for example do not always successfully prepare their children for survival in a society where racism and discrimination occurs (Barn, 2013; Barn, 2018; Smith, Juarez & Jacobson, 2011; Snyder, 2012).

Different than in adoption, in foster care a more active policy exists to keep birth parents involved in the lives of their children (Thoburn, 2010, p. 34). Birth parents of foster children can keep the (shared) authority over their children. Sometimes, reunification with the birth parent(s) may follow after placement in a foster family (Burns, Pösö, Skivenes, 2016; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2012). This may imply that foster children have more possibilities to stay connected to their ethnic backgrounds than adoptive children through their birth families, which possibly influences their

ethnic identity. To gain insight into ethnic identity in the field of foster care, we conducted a systematic literature review. We aimed to obtain an encompassing view of the empirical scientific literature on how transracial placements affect the ethnic identity of foster children. The review addresses the following question: How do transracial placements in foster care influence the ethnic identity of foster children with an ethnic minority background?

## Methods

### Databases, search terms and inclusion criteria

We followed the checklist and flow-diagram of the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2010). The search was carried out in four electronic databases: Psycinfo, ERIC, SOCindex, and Web of science. We searched for peer-reviewed articles with primary data (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), that dated from January 1990 to April 2020. The search terms are shown in Table 1.

<b>Search terms</b>	
First	Foster child* or Care leaver* or Looked after child* or Out of home placement or Foster care or Adoption from care or Non-kinship care or Foster youth
Second	Ethnic* or Rac* or Cultur*
Third	Ident* <hr/>

Table 1: search terms

All search terms were in English. Based on a quickscan of the literature, we expected a small literature base and therefore chose for a variety of search terms. We carefully discussed the selection of each search term and included frequently used synonyms for foster care and foster children that are linked to foster care. We furthermore did not limit our search to 'ethnic identity', but also searched for 'cultural identity' and 'racial identity'. In the international literature, studies are found on ethnic, racial or cultural identity, or combinations of these concepts. Although the concepts differ, conceptual and empirical relatedness exists. Thereby, the concepts are frequently used interchangeably in the literature (Verkuyten, 2018, p. 49; Williams et al., 2012). International consensus exists about the concepts' being socially constructed' (Markus, 2008), and that ethnic, racial and cultural identity formation processes follow similar development trajectories

(Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Furthermore, all concepts refer to a community or group to which someone feels a sense of belonging and commitment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Verkuyten, 2018, p. 56). The most important differences to distinguish ethnic, racial and cultural identity, as mentioned in the literature, is that ethnic identity refers to a subjective sense of belonging to a group of people with a same-ethnic background (Phinney, 1990). Ethnic identity more frequently reflects human values, or 'ways of living' (Markus, 2008). Racial identity focuses on belonging to a group of people with a same racial background and is frequently used in studies about racism, power differences, discrimination and coping-mechanisms (Markus, 2008; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Cultural identity tends mainly to refer to a sharing of roots, history, norms, language and religion with people of a same cultural background (Hughes et al., 2008). Furthermore, the use of these concepts is context-dependent (Markus, 2008). In the social context of the United States for example, it is proposed to combine the concepts ethnic and racial identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). In midland Europe however, the constructs of 'race' or 'racial' are used much less than in The United States, because of historical events and trauma's related to the Second World War (Siebers, 2017).

## Search outcome and exclusion criteria

The overview of the study identification and selection process is shown in a PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2010) (figure 1). Four members of the research team ran the search in the databases. This was monitored by the first and the second author, who also performed the inclusion check. All outcomes were recorded. In a team of four researchers the titles of all hits were thoroughly scanned. We removed the duplicates and excluded articles with a topic that was not considered relevant for this review. We read the abstracts and in some cases the method-section and excluded articles that did not meet the criteria. After thorough reading and discussions in the research group, 12 articles were considered relevant. Reasons for exclusion were that papers were not on transracial placements *and* not on foster care *and/or* not on ethnic, cultural or racial identity. Papers that did not present empirical data, like discussions, policy papers or systematic reviews were also excluded. As a final step, we checked the reference sections in order to examine whether we could have missed relevant titles during the search process. In this way, we first identified three additional relevant titles, of which we at the end selected two articles. This led to 14 articles to be included in this review.

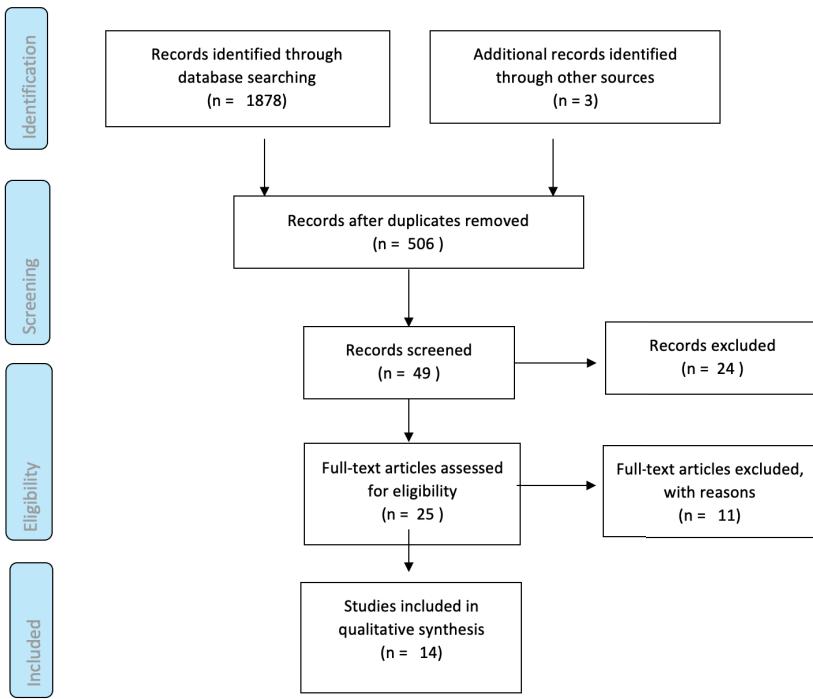


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

## Data abstraction and synthesis

Each selected article was read in full text by the first two authors. A descriptive summary was made of each article (Centre For Reviews and Dissemination, 2009). These summaries were placed in a matrix (Table 2), providing general information of the study, study characteristics, participant characteristics and outcomes. We compared the outcomes of the articles and searched for overarching themes in the articles. Through this process, we found the following themes which influence the ethnic identity of transracially placed foster children:

1. Racial/ ethnic identity fluctuations
2. Disconnection from, and connection with the birth network
3. Societal messages on ethnicity and race
4. Awareness of ethnic backgrounds because of different physical appearances between the foster child and the foster family
5. Foster parents' need of skills and knowledge to encourage ethnic identity development

## Results

### Racial/ ethnic identity fluctuations

Schmidt et al. (2015) studied the racial/ ethnic self-identification among youth in foster care in the USA. The authors (Schmidt et al., 2015) abstracted data from a larger evaluation which consisted of a survey on racial/ ethnic identity, which was held twice with a break of one year. Schmidt et al. (2015) found that 19% of the foster youth with a minority racial/ ethnic background between 16.5-18.5 years of age reported a change in their ethnic identity, which showed higher fluctuations in the racial/ ethnic identity of foster youth in comparison to adolescents with a minority background in the general population.

### Disconnection from, and connection with the birth network

Six articles showed how ethnic, racial or cultural identity of foster children can be impacted, by being disconnected from, or connected with the birth network (Barn, 2010; Brown et al., 2009a; Clark, 2000; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Moss, 2009; Waniganayake et al., 2019). In five articles, authors reported disconnection from ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds due to separation from family and community(Barn, 2010; Brown et al., 2009a; Clark, 2000; Moss, 2009; Waniganayake et al., 2019). Barn (2010) compared foster children in kinship care with foster children in non-kinship care by conducting semi-structured interviews and group discussions with 36 former foster children from the UK with different racial/ ethnic backgrounds. In contrary to foster children who were placed with ethnic minority relatives, children who were transracially placed described processes of racial/ ethnic identity confusion or 'identity stripping'. Because of being disconnected, they missed ethnic minority key role models in order to explore their racial/ ethnic minority identity. Brown et al. (2009 a) interviewed 61 Canadian foster parents and clustered the outcomes through concept mapping with 13 foster parents about challenges of transcultural parenting. Their foster children could feel no sense of belonging to the foster family, could lose connection with, or were not interested in their own cultural backgrounds and cultural traditions. Clark (2000) conducted a qualitative study, where she held in-depth interviews with 7 Australian aboriginal foster children. Foster children experienced identity losses and a fragmented aboriginal identity, due to disconnection from their aboriginal backgrounds. Disconnection was also reported by Moss (2009). Her study on identity and negotiation between indigenous and mainstream Australian culture

of 20 Australian children with indigenous backgrounds, was based on narrative art therapy. She compared children with indigenous backgrounds in foster care with indigenous children who were not in foster care. In contrast to the non-foster children, most of the children in foster care felt disconnected from their birth family and from any cultural background, including the indigenous one. Waniganayake et al. (2019) suggested, because of the possible risk of cultural disconnection when foster children are transracially placed, about the desirability of cultural maintenance in Australian foster families in order to protect the sense of belonging, culture and religiosity of the foster children. This was an outcome of focus group interviews with 15 caseworkers and 26 foster carers in matched and unmatched foster care placements with foster children from Anglo-Australian, Arabic, Turkish and Vietnamese descent.

One study provided insight into how connection with the birth network could lead to the transmission of ethnic minority knowledge. Mitchell Dove and Powers, (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 11 female adolescents with African-American backgrounds in foster care in the United States about hair care and showed how these adolescents' hair, and haircare was related to their African American female identity and self-esteem. Because they had consistent relationships with their birth network, haircare knowledge was passed on, which strengthened the foster children's self-esteem.

## Societal messages on ethnicity

Societal messages on ethnicity impacted the identity of transracially placed foster children, as was shown in two studies (Clark, 2000; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018). Clark (2000) analysed how a negative societal discourse about aboriginality in Australia impacted their aboriginal identity. Foster children were on the one hand being told by people outside of the foster family to be 'lucky' because of being placed in a non-aboriginal family. However, in their foster homes, they were being treated as inferior because of their aboriginal backgrounds. This led to aboriginal identity losses of the transracially placed foster children. Mitchell Dove and Powers (2018) showed in their study that African- American female foster children received many societal messages in the media and by other people about long and straight hair versus natural hair. The participants in the study, where very sensitive and aware of these messages, which shows, according to the authors (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018), that these messages probably influence their hair choices.

## **Awareness of ethnic backgrounds because of different appearances between the foster child and the foster family**

Two studies showed how daily confrontations with differences in physical appearances impacted the ethnic minority identity of foster children (Clark, 2000; White et al., 2008). The aboriginal children in the study of Clark (2000) sensed to be different than their foster parents because of dissimilar physical appearances, and being told by 'others' to look different than their foster parents. As a result, they became more aware of their aboriginal identity. White et al. (2008) studied ethnic identity of 188 foster children aged between 14 and 17 with Hispanic, African-American or European backgrounds through a survey. They found that foster children with a minority ethnic background had stronger commitment on their ethnic identities than foster children with a majority ethnic background. The reason authors (White et al., 2008) gave, was that these foster children were being reminded of differences of physical nature on a daily basis.

## **Foster parents' need of skills and knowledge to encourage ethnic identity development**

Most articles paid attention to foster parents' need of skills or knowledge to encourage the ethnic identity development of their foster children (Brown et al., 2009b; Coakley and Gruber, 2015; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Daniel, 2011; Folaron & McCartt Hess, 1993; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Montgomery, 2019; White et al., 2008). In the articles, the concepts cultural competence and cultural receptivity frequently arose (Brown et al., 2009a; Brown et al., 2009b; Coakley and Gruber, 2015; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Daniel, 2011; Montgomery, 2019). Cultural competence is perceived by one of the authors of a paper included in the review as the 'effort parents are willing to put forth to learn and seek help for culturally competent parenting practices with transracial foster and adoptive children (Montgomery, 2019). Cultural receptivity is found as a precursor of cultural competence, and is 'a construct which measures foster parents' openness toward participating in activities that promote children' s cultural development (Coakley & Orme, 2006).

Coakley and Orme (2006) measured the concept of cultural receptivity among 304 foster mothers in The United States of America through evaluating the Cultural Receptivity in Fostering Scale (CRFS). The CRFS consists of a list of concrete activities of foster parents, spread over four domains: (a) understanding of different

cultures, (b) willingness to become aware of children's need for cultural identity, (c) efforts to learn about availability of resources to support children's identities and (d) appreciation of other cultures. Outcomes showed that the CRFS is an effective tool to measure cultural receptivity of foster parents. Next, Coakley and Gruber (2015, USA) studied a sample of 78 foster parents and examined factors that are related to cultural receptivity of foster parents. Valuing diversity as well as egalitarianism and the encouragement of cultural pride were examples of factors with positive outcomes on cultural receptivity of foster parents. Montgomery (2019) conducted a mixed method study with 51 foster and adoptive parents in transracial placements in the United States. He used the CRFS to evaluate a web-based culturally competency training for foster parents. The author (Montgomery, 2019) reported that foster parents were after being trained more open towards the cultural backgrounds of their foster children.

In our literature we encountered a number of specific skills, relevant for foster parents to guide their foster children in their ethnic identity development (Brown et al., 2009a; Daniel, 2011; Folaron & Mc Hess, 1993; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; White et al., 2008). Foster parents firstly need to be able to balance between own cultural values and beliefs, and those of the foster children. Brown et al (2009a), found that foster parents had on the one hand to be open and understanding towards the cultural backgrounds of their foster children, but they on the other hand needed to compromise between teaching their own cultural values and beliefs, and learning from those of their foster children.

A second skill was foster parents' ability to bond with birth parents of their foster children (Brown et al., 2009a; Daniel, 2011). Daniel (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with nine Canadian foster parents about guiding the cultural development of foster children. Both Brown et al. (2009a) and Daniel (2011), reported birth parents as important persons to connect foster children with their cultural backgrounds. At the same time, relationships between foster parents and birth parents could be challenged by negative attitudes towards each other. Foster parents therefore seemed to miss skills to overcome these attitudes, and bond with birth parents.

Third, foster parents need the skill on order to engage their foster children with ethnic minority practices. Mitchell Dove and Powers (2018) provided insight into specific resources foster parents could lack in order to take care of the hair of their

foster children. Although some foster parents taught their foster children how to take care of their hair properly, most of them lacked the knowledge about caring of their foster children's hair.

Fourth foster parents need knowledge in order to be able to teach foster children about their ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Brown et al., 2009b; Daniel, 2011; Folaron & McCartt Hess, 1993; White et al., 2008). Brown et al. (2009b) interviewed 61 Canadian foster parents about what resources they need to improve their skills in guiding children from culturally diverse backgrounds. The researchers clustered the outcomes through concept mapping with 13 foster parents. Foster parents indicated that they need to understand the cultural backgrounds of their foster children. Foster care agency support and training would be helpful in this process. Daniel (2011) found culturally aware foster parents who paid attention to the cultural backgrounds of their foster children. However, according to them 'identity is not simple', but multilayered and consists of, for example religion and ethnicity. Foster parents could struggle whether or how they should pay attention to these ethnicity or religion differences. Folaron and McCartt Hess (1993) studied transracial placement experiences through qualitative interviews with foster children, birth parents, foster parents and social workers from the United States in 62 foster families, and focused their analysis on 10 foster children with biracial backgrounds. Because foster parents lacked resources and support from service providers, they missed knowledge about the African American backgrounds of their foster children, and as a result, their foster children experienced little exposure to their backgrounds. Last, the study of White et al. (2008) on 188 foster children aged between 14 and 17 with Hispanic, African-American or European backgrounds showed that the majority of the transracially placed foster children told that some attention was paid to cultural traditions by their foster parents. The foster children stated that they had wished to learn more about their ethnic backgrounds.

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Ethnic background of foster children</b>	<b>Type of recruitment</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Subject of study</b>	<b>Relevant outcomes</b>
1 Barn	2010	UK	African-Caribbean African Asian Mixed parentage European-American	Selection from a larger study	Qualitative semi-structured interviews and group discussions	36 foster care leavers from several ethnic groups placed in families with the same ethnic or different backgrounds	Social capital and relation with racial and ethnic identity of foster care leavers	Transracially placed foster children reported racial-ethnic identity stripping.
2 Brown, St Arnault, George, & Sintzel	2009	Canada	Not mentioned in article	Randomized list of phone numbers of foster parents	Qualitative telephone interviews and Concept mapping	Interviews with 61 foster parents, concept and mapping with 13 foster parents	Cultural receptiveness Being open, understanding and being sensitive towards competence of the cultural identity of the child and balancing between own cultural values and that of the foster child	
3 Brown, Sintzel, Arnault & George	2009	Canada	Not mentioned in the article	Randomized list of phone numbers of foster parents	Qualitative telephone interviews and Concept mapping	Interviews with 61 foster parents, concept and mapping with 13 foster parents	Cultural receptiveness Understanding different cultures, agency support, awareness, open discussion and support by community services	

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Ethnic background of foster children</b>	<b>Type of recruitment</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Subject of study</b>	<b>Relevant outcomes</b>
4 Clark	2000	Australia	Aboriginal	Personally known by researcher/introduced by Aboriginal community in South Australia	Qualitative in-depth interviews	7 participants from 30-40 years old who were in foster care from early childhood	Aboriginal identity of foster youth	Feelings of being different; Negative societal discourse about aboriginality; identity losses and a fragmented aboriginal identity; search for aboriginal life and identity; conflicting aboriginal and non-aboriginal identities
5 Coakley & Gruber	2015	USA	Not mentioned in the article	Foster parent associations and Department of Social Services, North Carolina.	Quantitative crosssectional study Questionnaires	78 Foster parents	Predictors of cultural receptivity of foster parents	Foster parents' race, education level, dedication to fostering, available time to foster, understanding of foster parent roles, and knowledge of transcultural parenting activities
6 Coakley & Orme	2006	USA	Not mentioned in the article	State and local foster parents associations	Quantitative questionnaires a.o. the cultural receptivity in fostering scale (CRFS)	304 Foster mothers	Cultural receptivity of foster parents	The Cultural Receptivity in Fostering Scale is an effective tool to measure cultural receptivity of foster parents

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Ethnic background of foster children</b>	<b>Type of recruitment</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Subject of study</b>	<b>Relevant outcomes</b>
7 Daniel	2011	Canada	Not mentioned in the article	Flyer via social service agencies	Qualitative open ended semi-structured in-person or telephone interviews	9 Foster parents	Cultural receptivity of foster parents	Foster parents struggled whether they should pay attention to cultural differences between themselves and their foster child(ren)'s background
8 Folaron & McCartt Hess	1993	USA	European-American African-American Biracial: African-American European American.	Selection from the department of Health and Human Services in European and eight counties of Indiana.	Qualitative individual interviews	62 foster families: interviews with foster children, one of their birthparents, foster parents and social workers	Racial identity and racial socialization of foster youth	Foster youth received no support from youth services regarding race, foster parents report of mixed racial to lack knowledge about how to ethnically socialize their foster youth

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Ethnic background of foster children</b>	<b>Type of recruitment</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Subject of study</b>	<b>Relevant outcomes</b>
9 Mitchell Dove & Powers	2018	USA	African-American	Child welfare case workers	Qualitative, individual interviews	11 Self-identified African-American adolescents in foster care, between 13 and 17 female foster youth	Hair, haircare, ethnic identity	Hair and healthcare is important for African-American female and racial socialization of African American female foster youth family members were important to transmit knowledge about hair care
10 Montgomery	2019	USA	African American Asian-American Latin American Native American Biracial unknown	Foster and adoptive parent support groups and advertisements	Mixed method: Cultural quantitative questionnaires (a.o. CRFS), and qualitative interviews	51 transcultural foster and adoptive parents (quantitative) (a.o. CRFS), 15 participants	Testing a training for competent parenting	Cultural competence can be trained.

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Ethnic background of foster children</b>	<b>Type of recruitment</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Subject of study</b>	<b>Relevant outcomes</b>
11 Moss	2009	Australia	Aboriginal children	Foster care and child protection agency workers	Qualitative narrative art interviews with children	20 Children in foster care/ not in foster care 11 Practitioners in foster care	Cultural identity issues for children in trans- ethnic foster care	Lack of cultural knowledge, loss of cultural and spiritual identity.
12 Schmidt et al.	2015	USA	American Alaskan Native Asian African-American European-American Pacific Multiracial	Selection from a larger study assessments and data from electronic databases	122 youth in foster care	Stability in self-reported ethnic identity over time. vs foster care agency categorization	Stability in self-reported ethnic identity vs foster care	Ethnic identity of foster youth is fluid/ changes over time.
13 Wanigan-ayake et al.	2019	Australia	Anglo-Australian Arabic Turkish Vietnamese	Staff or client channels of an Australian non profit organization for out of home care	Qualitative focus group interviews	15 Caseworkers and 26 foster carers in matched and unmatched foster care	Cultural identity in foster care placements	Desirability of cultural maintenance: in unmatched placements sense of belonging/ culture/ religiosity is at stake

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Ethnic background of foster children</b>	<b>Type of recruitment</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Subject of study</b>	<b>Relevant outcomes</b>
14 White et al.	2008	USA	African-American Latin American European-American Other	Selection from a larger study	Quantitative questionnaire: Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure	188 Foster youth	Ethnic identity development foster youth	Latin American and African-American youth reported a stronger ethnic identity than European-American youth in foster care. 69,3% had a wish to learn more about their ethnic background (placement disruptions seemed to influence this negatively) 2 in 5 respondents (especially Latino and African-American) stated that developing an ethnic identity in foster care is difficult

Table 2: Selected articles

## Discussion

This systematic literature review examined empirical peer-reviewed studies about the ethnic identity of transracially placed foster children. We addressed the following research question: How do transracial placements in foster care influence the ethnic identity of foster children with an ethnic minority background?

The review shows that ethnic development of transracially placed foster children is influenced by intersecting mechanisms (Crenshaw, 1991) of both being in foster care, and minority ethnicity. Because living in a foster family with a dissimilar ethnic background, foster children were disconnected from their ethnic minority backgrounds (Brown et al., 2009a; Clark, 2000; Moss, 2009; Waniganayake et al., 2019). They had a sense to be different because of being confronted with different physical appearances of themselves and their foster parents on a day to day basis (Clark, 2000; White et al., 2008). They thereby received existing negative societal messages on race and ethnicity (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018), which could include messages from foster parents (Clark, 2000). These mechanisms may result, in terms of Phinney and Ong (2007), in relatively few possibilities for foster children to explore their ethnic identity.

The outcomes of this review are reflected in studies from the adoption literature (Barn, 2018; DeBerry, Scarr and Weinberg, 1996; Lee et al., 2018; Montgomery & Jordan, 2018). Thereby, and specifically for the context of foster care, birth parents may serve as connectors with their children' s birth culture, and enable them to explore their ethnic minority identity (Brown et al., 2009a; Daniel, 2011; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018). This correlates with a foster care study of Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe (2006), who found that the identity of foster children was connected to the relationship with their birth parents.

Although none of the studies in this review measured the impact of foster parents' skills and knowledge on foster children' s ethnic identity development directly, foster parents' openness, skills, knowledge and efforts towards participating and engaging their foster children in activities that promote their cultural development are thereby perceived as important (Brown et al., 2009a, Brown et al., 2009b; Coakley and Gruber, 2015; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Daniel, 2011; Montgomery, 2019). Authors presented specific skills or knowledge foster parents need in order to guide their foster children in developing their ethnic minority identities. In line

with adoption literature (Barn, 2013, 2018; Smith, Juarez & Jacobson, 2011; Snyder, 2012), foster parents need skills and knowledge to teach their foster children how to deal with societal discrimination (Clark, 200), to bond with the birth parents foster children (Brown et al., 2009a; Daniel, 2011), to engage foster children with ethnic minority practices (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018), and to teach their foster children about their cultural and ethnic backgrounds sufficiently (Brown et al., 2009b; Daniel, 2011; Folaron & McCartt Hess, 1993; White et al., 2008). According to Vonk (2001), who studied cultural competence of parents of transracially adopted children, parenting skills parents need are 'multicultural planning', which includes skills to expose ethnic minority children to contacts and activities with people of their birth culture. So as well as for adoptive parents, multicultural planning is a skill foster parents need to guide their transracially placed foster children. In foster care, emphasis thereby relies on cooperation with birth parents to overcome cultural differences (Brown et al., 2009a; Daniel, 2011).

In this review, we were mindful of potential differences between ethnicity, race and culture, and thus closely abided the concepts as used by the authors in our result section. We also made several observations regarding the concepts in the studies we included. First, some articles did not study ethnic, racial or cultural, but 'aboriginal identity' (Clark, 2000), or 'African- American female identity' (Mitchell Dove & Powers). The results however may be seen as results on cultural, racial or ethnic identity, because they discuss the experiences of discrimination, societal messages on ethnicity or race, differences in physical appearances between foster parents and foster children, a search for belonging to a same ethnic or racial group, or disconnection from one's cultural community. Second, all articles where foster parental skills and knowledge were under investigation, focused on the term 'culture' rather than race or ethnicity (Brown et al., 2009b; Coakley and Gruber, 2015; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Daniel, 2011; Folaron & McCartt Hess, 1993; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Montgomery, 2019; White et al., 2008). However, authors of the aforementioned studies argue that cultural competence also includes for instance, racial awareness of foster parents (Montgomery, 2019). The same is true for a term like "transracial placements." Since "transracial placements" in the literature also included transethnic as well as transcultural placements, and accompanying differences between foster parents and their foster children on these aspects, we argue that the term transracial should be perceived and interpreted as an umbrella term.

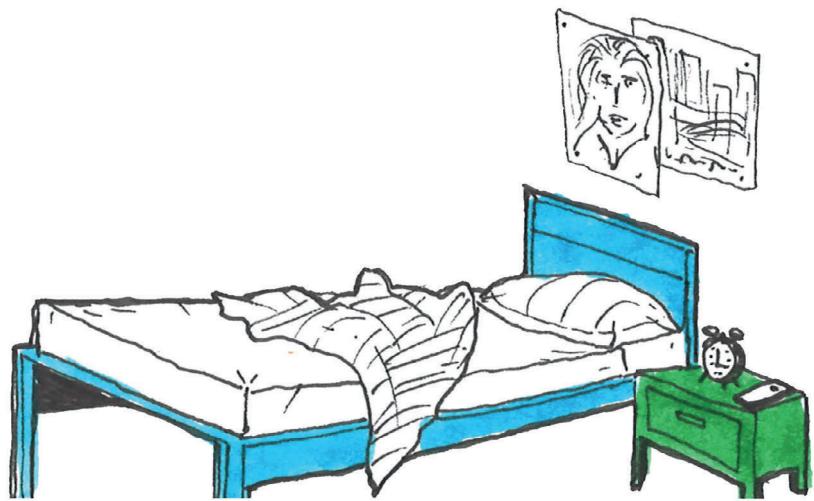
We found limitations in the studies under investigation. A limitation concerns firstly that only one study was part of a longitudinal research project (Schmidt et al., 2015), while this type of study would provide the most accurate information about ethnic identification over time, as ethnic identity formation is a process of exploration and commitment (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Secondly, most studies on ethnic, racial and/ or cultural identity addressed only perspectives from either (former) foster children, while most studies about cultural competence and cultural receptivity only captured views of foster parents. This is a missed opportunity as foster children's perspectives and foster parents' views may diverge or supplement each other. Thirdly, perspectives of birth parents are underrepresented in the studies of this review. Only the study of Folaron and McCartt Hess (1993) included birth parents in their study as participants.

Our search only retrieved studies from the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. A reason for this may that we only used English search terms. We therefore missed articles from other parts of the world, which shows a limitation of, and a gap in our study.

## **Conclusions and implications for research and practice**

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic literature review with a focus on ethnic identity and ethnic socialization in foster care and therefore it contributes to understanding scientific insights to this field. The systematic literature review shows that a transracial placement in foster care influences the ethnic identity of minority foster children and that foster parents can be expected to play a pivotal role in this process. Because cultural competence and cultural receptivity among foster parents seem to be important for guiding ethnic minority foster children in their ethnic identity processes, in future more attention should be paid to these concepts in the field of research and to practical implications. Foster parents can be trained to become more culturally competent, and in the United States, training programs already have been developed and proved to be successful (Montgomery, 2019). These training programs should be further investigated and developed for other geographical areas, and consequently be made available for more foster care agencies. Further attention should thereby be paid as to how foster parents can carefully include birth parents in the lives of

their children as cultural connectors. In these ways, foster care agencies can better assist foster parents in guiding the ethnic identity development of their ethnic minority foster children.



# 3

## CHAPTER

The ethnic identity  
complexity of transculturally  
placed foster youth

Based on: Degener, C. J., Bergen, D. D. van, &  
Grietens, H. W. E. (2020).

The ethnic identity complexity of transculturally  
placed foster youth in The Netherlands.

*Children and Youth Services Review*, 113.  
doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104957

## **Abstract**

This study addresses the ethnic identity of transculturally placed adolescent foster youth with ethnic minority backgrounds in The Netherlands. We conducted qualitative interviews to provide insight into the life-worlds of twenty foster youth. We found that for these foster youth, constructing their ethnic identity was a complex process. They showed ethnic identity ambivalence, and contradictory messages about ethnicity by birth parents, foster parents, peers, and strangers contributed to this process. The foster youth also sometimes distanced themselves from their ethnic minority background whereby the intersection of their ethnic minority background and the background of being a foster child could play a role. Additionally, some foster youth told stories of longing for and belonging to their ethnic minority background, especially when birth parents and foster parents cooperated in ethnic socialization. Overall, contradictory and intersecting messages provided by birth parents, foster parents, and peers influenced the extent to which they experienced their ethnic identity as complex. Therefore, future studies should be conducted to provide more insight into these processes, so foster care agencies and foster parents can be trained to fulfill a more guiding role in the ethnic identity development of transculturally placed foster youth.

## Introduction

During adolescence, identity formation is a major developmental task (Erikson, 1968; Meeus et al., 2012; Verschueren et al., 2017) and among youth, the formation of a strong identity is positively related to their psychological development and well-being (Crocetti, 2018). For foster youth, developing a firm sense of identity may be complex because they are vulnerable and face problems in their cognitive, adaptive, and behavioral functioning (Crocetti, 2018; Goemans et al., 2016). Youth in foster care experience feelings of loss because of disconnection from their families and social contexts, and they often grieve these losses (Mitchell, 2016, 2017). When they enter a foster home, youth must become accustomed to a new way of life (Singer, Uzozie, & Zeijlmans, 2012). According to Mitchell (2016), foster youth need to "acculturate" to the foster care system, which means they are likely to (re)appraise their existing beliefs and assumptions upon their arrival at the new home. Furthermore, foster youth may be stigmatized, especially by their peers, about being in foster care and being "different" (Kools, 1997; Madigan et al., 2013), which may cause them wish not to be recognised as being in foster care or may lead to a "devaluation of self" (Kools, 1997). This acculturation process and potential devaluation of self may become more complex when foster youth have an ethnic minority background, are placed transculturally, and experience differences between the ethnocultural backgrounds of their birth family and those of their foster family (Thoburn, Norford, & Parvez Rashid, 2000; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). A transcultural placement is likely to impact the ethnic identity of transculturally placed youth (Barn, 2013). Because the strength of one's ethnic identity is related to youth' s well-being (Sam & Berry, 2010), and youth in foster care experience challenges in their psychosocial functioning (Goemans et al., 2016), the development of a strong ethnic identity may be particularly beneficial for the healthy adjustment of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth.

## The ethnic identity of foster youth

Ethnic identity is an aspect of one's social identity in ethnically diverse societies (Williams et al., 2012) and focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture in which people share the same ethnic background (Phinney, 1990). Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007) argued that the development of ethnic identity occurs during a maturation process in which ethnic minority individuals

explore their ethnic identity (exploration) and/or decide where and to whom they belong (i.e., commitment). Ethnic identity formation is a dynamic process that is developed through a reciprocal relationship between an individual and his or her social and/or school context (Bubritzki et al., 2018; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney, Jacoby, & Silva, 2007). The socialization messages that parents give to their children (whether directly or indirectly) regarding both the majority and minority ethnicity and culture (i.e., ethnic-cultural socialization) play an important role in the process of ethnic identity formation (Hughes et al., 2008; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Rivas-Drake, Umaña-Taylor & Medina, 2017). This is also the case for transculturally placed ethnic minorities (Barn, 2010; DeBerry et al., 1996; Hrapczynski & Leslie, 2018; Moss, 2009; Nuttgens, 2013; Tyrell et al., 2019; White et al., 2008).

Acculturation theory (Berry et al., 2006) illustrates how ethnic minority individuals who are exposed to different cultures acculturate themselves to society. They may identify with their ethnic minority or ethnic majority background (respectively, separation and assimilation) or with *both* backgrounds (i.e., integration), or they may not identify with their ethnic minority *nor* ethnic majority background (i.e., marginalization). Some studies conducted in the field of foster care have shown ethnic identity outcomes of foster youth that can be related to the acculturation strategies of Berry et al. (2006). White et al. (2008) found transculturally placed foster youth of African American and Latin American backgrounds who developed a strong ethnic identity. They seemed to have become aware of their ethnic backgrounds because they daily faced confrontations with members of their foster families due to their ethnic differences, which could have led to a segregation strategy of foster youth. Other studies show that ethnic identity losses are experienced by transculturally placed foster youth (Barn, 2010; Moss, 2009; Nuttgens, 2013; Tyrell et al., 2019). Tyrell et al. (2019) found a relationship between ethnic loss and childhood maltreatment and placement disruption. Barn (2010) referred to "identity stripping," whereby foster youth from different ethnic backgrounds were confused about the ethnic or racial group to which they belonged (i.e., marginalization). Assimilation was an outcome of a study by Nuttgens (2013), that showed foster youth with native Canadian backgrounds who had distanced themselves from their ethnic roots and adjusted to their foster parents' ethnic backgrounds.

Little evidence regarding fosteryouth who can identify with *both* ethnic backgrounds (i.e., integration) seems to exist. Integration might be a possible acculturation strategy because many transculturally placed foster youth are exposed to the majority culture in their ethnic majority foster homes while also maintaining ethnic and cultural ties with their ethnic minority backgrounds through members of their birth families (Daniel, 2011). Mitchell Dove and Powers (2018) show, for example, how by passing knowledge about hair care to their children of African American descent, birth parents contributed to the positive ethnic identity development of transculturally placed foster youth. Especially when parents *and* foster parents play a role in the lives of foster youth and make efforts toward ethnic socialization, minority foster youth may develop a dual ethnic identity (Verkuyten, 2018) or bicultural identity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005) that is, two ethnic or cultural backgrounds are combined in one's ethnic or cultural identity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005; Manzi et al., 2014; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; Verkuyten, 2018).

Youth in foster care are vulnerable and face challenges in constructing their identity (Goemans et al., 2016; Kools, 1997; Mitchell, 2016, 2017). When they have an ethnic minority background and are transculturally placed, this may include their ethnic identity. Having a strong ethnic identity is related to the psychosocial well-being of ethnic minority youth (Espinosa et al., 2018; Sam & Berry, 2010), and studies indicate that foster youth can experience ethnic identity losses, but can also develop a strong ethnic identity (Barn, 2010; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Moss, 2009; Nuttgens, 2013; Tyrell et al., 2019; White et al., 2008). However, to the best of our knowledge, no scientific research has been conducted thus far about the ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands. Therefore, it needs to be examined how transculturally placed foster youth in the Netherlands develop an ethnic identity; how this relates to their foster parents' ethnic majority backgrounds, as well as to their birth parents' ethnic minority backgrounds; and the role that foster parents, birth parents, and peers play in the ethnic identity formation process. To gain insight into these processes, we conducted a qualitative study to address the following question: How do transcultural placements in foster care influence the ethnic identity of foster youth with an ethnic minority background during adolescence?

## Method

### Design

This study is based on a qualitative research design because we examined complex themes concerning the ethnic identity of youth who are a part of two or more cultural contexts in everyday reality (Flick, 2014; Mortelmans, 2009).

### Participants

We searched for foster youth in early and late adolescence who were transculturally placed in non-kinship, long-term foster care; who had lived for more than six months in their current foster families; and had an ethnic minority background. We included 20 foster youth, 10 boys and 10 girls, aged 11 to 19, with Northern-African, Eastern-African, Southern-American or bi-cultural backgrounds who belonged to foster families with a Dutch/European background. The ethnic minority backgrounds of foster youth were defined by their parents' or grandparents' countries of birth. Their ages at the time of placement in the foster families where they lived at the time of the interview varied from two weeks to 12 years old.

#### *Recruitment*

Foster youth were recruited and selected from the databases of nine foster care agencies with a geographical spread over the Netherlands (rural and urban areas). Foster care workers were asked to inform foster youth via personal information letters. As a result, 12 youth (approximately from one out of nine selected families) signed up for participation. The reasons for nonparticipation emotional or behavioral difficulties and lack of time or motivation to participate. In addition, 8 foster youth were recruited using snowball sampling (6), as well as via a call put out on social media (1) and on websites for foster parents (1).

### Research procedure

The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee Pedagogical and Educational Sciences of the University of Groningen in fall 2016.

#### *Instruments*

Through a process of reading, discussion, and reflection with members of the research team, foster parents, foster care workers, and a care leaver, we

developed a photo-elicitation manual (Harper, 2002) and an interview topic list (Flick, 2014; Mortelmans, 2009), which consisted of questions about ethnic and cultural socialization (Hughes et al., 2008) and ethnic identity (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney & Ong, 2007). We piloted the instruments with two foster families.

### *Interview procedure*

When we received the foster families' contact information, an appointment was made to introduce the research. During this meeting, we explained our study, and the foster youth signed letters of informed consent. The legal guardians for children under 16 years old signed letters of informed consent via email. The foster youth were asked to use their cellular phones to take pictures of people and objects that were emotionally close to them. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage talk, bridge cultural differences, and gain insight into their lifeworlds during the interviews (Collier, 1967; Harper, 2002).

The interviews were conducted two weeks after the first meetings. The foster youth showed their pictures, and the interviewer asked questions such as "Can you tell me why this picture is important to you?" Most pictures had no direct relation to ethnic identity but led to a conversation about foster youth's ethnic identity, probed by the interviewer. For example, a picture of a cellular phone led to a conversation about the youth's connection with his or her friends, the ethnic backgrounds of these friends, and ethnic belonging. The interviews took approximately one hour to conduct, depending on the foster youth's attention span. The foster youth kept copyrights of their pictures. To safeguard anonymity, we chose not to show the pictures in the article. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To increase credibility, a summary of each interview was sent to the foster youth, who, for the most part, responded positively or added information, which we then included in our analysis (Mortelmans, 2009).

## **Analysis**

We conducted a semantic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from a constructionist viewpoint (Flick, 2014). Although we had previously reflected on theoretical insights, we initiated our analyses with an inductive approach and constructed codes and themes that were strongly linked to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by typing and (re)reading the

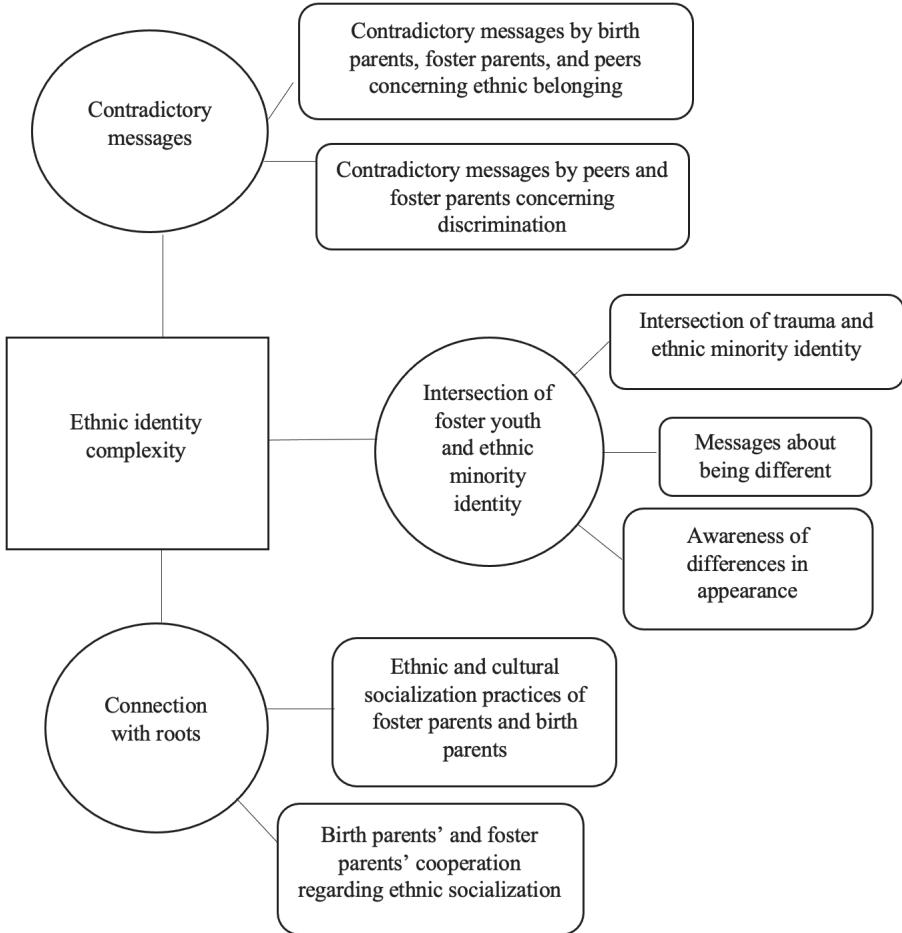


Figure 1. Thematic network

transcripts. We then conducted open coding using Atlas.ti (Friese, 2014). To increase the credibility of this process (Nowell et al., 2017), the first three interviews were coded by two researchers. After coding eight interviews, we started to reach a saturation point (Mortelmans, 2009). Only a few new codes were introduced in the interviews that followed. The researchers compared outcomes and discussed differences in codes and themes while abiding by the practice of investigator triangulation (Flick, 2014). For example, the foster youth mentioned social exclusion frequently. While reading and rereading selected fragments, we

discussed whether social exclusion centered on being a foster child, being an ethnic minority (discrimination), or both (intersection). This led to a consensus on two codes: "discrimination" and "intersection."

Then, the codes were grouped into clusters, we made memos of each cluster and searched for possible themes (Friese, 2014). All steps were reported in an audit trail (Mortelmans, 2009; Nowell et al., 2017). We constructed a network of themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001) showing the global theme "ethnic identity complexity", and three main themes: "contradictory messages," "the intersection of foster youth and ethnic minority identity," and "connection and reconnection with roots" (Figure 1). Regarding the results, we used pseudonyms in the quotes to preserve anonymity (Flick, 2014).

## Results

Three main themes related to the ethnic identity of foster youth were identified. The first consisted of contradictory messages about ethnicity from birth parents versus foster parents and/or versus peers and how this could lead to ethnic identity ambivalence. The second was how ethnic minority identity could intersect with foster youth's identity and influence them to distance themselves from their ethnic minority background. The third theme was how foster parents and birth parents could establish connection between foster youth and their ethnic minority background and how this related to these youth's longing for and belonging to their ethnic minority background. All themes occurred in the foster youth's stories, but most narratives centered on one or two themes.

### Contradictory messages about discrimination and ethnic belonging

The foster youth received messages from individuals in their social contexts and/or society regarding situations related to discrimination and ethnic belonging; these messages contradicted one another and, to some extent, their own views. First, the foster youth discussed discrimination by ethnic majority people in regard to their skin colour or ethnic minority background; they experienced this at school, in the streets, and/or via social media. However, discrimination appeared to be a subject they did not discuss regularly with their foster parents. When they did, their foster parents disapproved of ethnic discrimination, but most put minimal

effort into helping the youth deal with it. Therefore, the foster youth sensed that their foster parents denied, underestimated, or downplayed the phenomenon, as Kevin (12) shows:

You just told me that at school, you have the feeling that brown [sic] children are treated differently from white [sic] children.

Yes.

How do your foster parents react to this?

Well, they say, maybe it seems like that, but we don't think that is the case.

The foster youth thereby received messages from their foster parents regarding ethnic belonging, which contradicted the messages that they received from people with a similar ethnic minority background. This mostly occurred when the foster youth attended ethnically diverse schools and/ or had contact with their birth parents. At school, some foster youth received social exclusion messages about being raised in a "Dutch" family. Isra (15) offers an example of this, explaining that "foreigner," a nickname given to her by same-ethnic peers, is meant to be a socially inclusive term but that being raised in an ethnic Dutch family excludes her socially:

I used to belong to the 'foreigners' [sic], but it ended up in a fight.

Who are the 'foreigners'?

All Moroccans.

And they are foreigners according to whom?

According to Moroccan people. First, I also belonged to them, but they found it strange that I was raised in a Dutch way; they found it weird, and now we're not arguing anymore, but we are not friends anymore either.

Language played a role in these contradictory messages. Living in a foster family with an ethnic majority background affected the youth's accent, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Most of them therefore, spoke Dutch differently from their family members or same-ethnic peers. They explained that peers with a similar ethnic background tried to label them in terms of ethnicity, frequently referring to their use of language. Gladys (18), for example, showed how same-ethnic peers reacted to her during their interactions: "I can speak Dutch, and a lot of Antilleans can't, and I use a lot of words they don't use . . . 'posh' words . . . and then they say, Hey, what are you saying? (laughs)". Some foster youth mentioned that their foster parents disapproved of their use of ethnic minority language or, rather, the slang

associated with it. The following example offered by 16-year-old Najia shows how her foster mother reacted after she came home from seeing friends with a same-ethnic background: "Why do you talk Moroccan or why . . . (looks at the interviewer). Do you understand? Why do you talk so fast, or she [foster mother] says, Ooh, I know where you [just] came from . . .".

Later in the interview, Najia described how her birth mother reacted to her use of language due to her acculturation into a majority-background foster family: "My (birth) mother says, and actually, she says it because she's ashamed . . .(speaks softly).... it's a shame that you can't even talk our way". The example Of Najia shows that her foster mother discouraged her from speaking in a Moroccan way, while her birth mother disapproved of her loss of the Moroccan language.

### *Ethnic identity ambivalence*

The interviews indicated that the foster youth had internalized contradictory messages from their birth parents, foster parents and peers, which seemed to contribute to the youth's ambivalence about their ethnic identity. Youth such as Najia seemed confused and showed incongruences between their expressed identification to their ethnic majority foster parents' backgrounds *and* their birth parents' ethnic minority backgrounds: "I am Dutch. I am Moroccan . . . I don't know who I am".

Ethnic identity ambivalence occurred to varying degrees. Some foster youth initially presented a clear picture of their ethnic identity and expressed contrasting phrases in later stages of the interviews. Other foster youth contradicted themselves numerous times during the interviews. For example, Kaan (16 years old, bicultural) related his ethnic background more to being a foreigner than to being Turkish: "My Turkish background doesn't mean a lot to me—yes, street language; I hang around with foreign [sic] guys and, uhm, yes, in the way I behave myself, I am more foreign than Dutch . . ". Later in the interview, he said that he didn't feel Dutch, because he had Turkish blood. When the interview continued, he started to refer to his "Dutch" side: "Here [in the foster family], I am 50% Dutch, and outside, I think it is the same: 50% or 30%. Yes, that is what I think". This means that he could give himself different ethnicity labels, depending on the context he was situated in, and these labels fluctuated during the interview.

## Intersection of ethnic minority identity and foster youth identity

The foster youth related their ethnic minority background to their identity as being in foster care and vice versa. This intersection of identity components occurred in three ways: (a) through the foster youth's awareness of the differences in appearances between themselves and the people in their surrounding contexts (foster family and peers); (b) through messages that the foster youth received from their peers and strangers about "being different," which were related to being in foster care; and (c) through linking traumas from their past with ethnicity.

First, the foster youth explained how the differences in appearances between themselves and their foster parents or peers contributed to their feelings of being or looking "different" and how this made them aware of their ethnic minority identity. In this sense, they talked primarily about differences related to hair, skin, and/or eye colour. Being different could mean "feeling special," and this instilled in them a sense of ethnic pride:

I like the colour of my skin, and I like my hair.

What do you like about it?

Well, the boys in my class struggle with their hair, and they need to use styling products, and I don't have problems with that . . . And brown [sic] is different in this country, and I like that. I grew up with it. I only dislike it when they are calling names because of it, but usually, I like it. (Javi, 13 years old)

However, Javi related "looking different" also to being called names, and this was mentioned frequently by the foster youth in our sample, who in contrast to Javi, gave a negative explanation for "otherness". Looking different could lead to social exclusion according to the foster youth and they could express a desire to look like their foster parents or school peers. For instance, Guillermo (14) stated the following: "I would like to be white [sic] because I am the only brown [sic] boy at school".

Second, messages from other people—especially peers—about foster youth being "different" in regard to their ethnicity or skin colour led to these youth's increased awareness of their ethnic minority and foster youth identities. The foster youth

were reminded of being in foster care when people raised questions about or commented on the ethnic differences between these youth and their peers. In particular, the foster youth who had attended a school with primarily ethnic majority students—for example, during the primary school period—would receive negative reactions from ethnic majority peers at school about being “foreigners” (sic). In the following fragment, Kaan (16) shared that his ethnic majority peers at primary school excluded him socially because he was a foreigner and had a difficult past: “I was the ‘pitiable foreigner’ [sic], for example, with an unhappy past; they would judge me because of that”.

The foster youth also stated that strangers looked at them in a “funny” way when they visited public places with their foster families and would ask questions such as: “Is he your dad?”. In their stories, these reactions to differences in appearances also emphasized on their ethnic identity related to being in foster care.

For some foster youth, the intersection of ethnic and foster youth identity also made their experiences challenging when they linked their traumatic past of abuse and rejection by their birth parents to their ethnic minority background. Maltreatment by their birth parents thus became viewed through the lens of their minority ethnicity. For example, Amina (18) had painful memories of her father, who was Moroccan. She, therefore, tried to avoid to socialize with people of Moroccan descent:

Females are nothing in that [Moroccan] culture, and my brother always said when I visited them, ‘You’re just a girl; so, you are weak, and you are good for nothing,’ and my dad is that way too, [telling me] that I am nothing. They didn’t give me anything from that culture . . . (long silence). But what I really dislike is that everyone recognises that I am Moroccan. So everywhere I go where there are Moroccan people, they see that I am Moroccan, and they start talking Moroccan to me, and I feel bad about that.

How do you deal with that?

I look at them and walk away, or I tell them that I don’t understand them.

This quote showed that the way in which Amina perceived herself in terms of her ethnic identity was influenced by the traumatic experiences that she had undergone with her birth family in the past.

### *Distancing from the ethnic minority background*

As an outcome of the intersection of foster youth and ethnic minority identities, some foster youth distanced from their ethnic minority background. Farah (14) said: "I just hated it [birth parents' ethnic background] because it was where I came from". Instead of incorporating their ethnic background into their stories, the foster youth found other ways to express themselves when they attempted to explain to which group they belonged. They expressed that they were "a human being" or "just normal," and they stated that neither their skin colour nor their ethnic background or that of other people was important to them. The foster youth merely wanted to "be who they are" and behave likewise—not be nor behave like, for example, a Turkish, Moroccan, or Dutch person. They expressed a wish not to be labeled based on ethnicity. Layla (19), for example, stated that she was "a human being." She, therefore, rejected the notion that she would need to express herself in accordance with an ethnicity: "I don't behave that way [referring to her Moroccan background]. I just behave like a human being".

Another way in which the foster youth distanced themselves from their ethnic minority background was by identifying themselves primarily with their foster parents' ethnic background and not with that of their birth parents'. Nada (14), for example, responded quite defensively to the question about how she would refer to herself in terms of her ethnicity. She stated: "I am just Dutch". However, she could not further explain what "just Dutch" meant for her. Therefore, in this example, "just" might refer to the normality of the Dutch context within which she lives. It may also show her annoyance over potential doubts about whether she belonged to the majority Dutch culture or not.

### **Foster youth's connection with their roots**

The foster youth's connection with their roots was another theme that was evident in their narratives. The foster youth explained how, to a certain degree, ethnic socialization practices of their foster parents and birth parents connected them with their ethnic roots. According to the foster youth, the foster parents engaged them in some ethnic and cultural socialization practices, such as giving the foster youth space or opportunities to learn their language of origin, preparing or having food that reminded the foster youth of their ethnic minority background, or showing interest in the birth parents' or ancestors' country. Some foster parents

also incorporated the wishes of birth parents or other family members regarding religious practices—such as not eating pork for Muslim foster youth—into their ethnic and/or religious socialization practices. Furthermore, some foster youth explicitly mentioned that their foster parents accepted their ethnic minority background, and this seemed to be very important for them. Bonita (17), who had experienced several foster care placements, mentioned that she thought it should be a requirement for the foster parents of ethnic minority children to be open toward people of different ethnic backgrounds. She also expressed happiness that her current foster parents were open in this regard:

You know, let them [foster youth] have foreign friends; you know, don't say, 'Oh, he is black [sic]; he is not allowed to enter my home'; don't be racist; they [foster parents] just need to accept that their foster child is a foreigner, and that's what my current foster parents do.

Birth parents also contributed to the ethnic socialization of most foster youth in our sample, and in some of the youth's narratives, foster parents and birth parents actively cooperated in regard to the foster youth's ethnic socialization. The foster youth explained that both their foster and birth parents helped them learn about the religion or the language of their roots:

My (birth) mother gives me lessons from the Koran once in a while, and I think it is very important. I read a book with my foster mother about religion because my foster mother and (birth) mother think that it is important that I know something about the religion. (Inaya, 11 years old)

According to these stories, the foster and birth parents communicated frequently and accepted each other's ethnoreligious backgrounds.

### *Stories of ethnic longing and belonging*

The foster youth's connection with their roots could lead to narratives about their longing for or belonging to their ethnic minority background. The foster youth talked about the weather or landscapes of their parents' or grandparents' country of birth. They also discussed their ethnic minority language and expressed a wish to learn it; they talked about same-ethnic people in relation to ethnic belonging; and sometimes, they mentioned a shared history with people of (for example)

African descent. In these stories, the foster youth displayed ethnic minority pride. Gyan (14) for example, who also talked about having a good relationship with his birth mother, showed that he felt a sense of belonging to the people from Surinam whom he met at his football club. They did not share a friendship, but he sensed a “good feeling”:

There are a few boys with a Surinamese background in my football club, and I like that.

What do you like about them?

Well, it's not that it is easier to talk with them, but it is just a good feeling.

The youth who traveled with their foster parents to their parents' or grandparents' birth country talked about their journeys in relation to their ethnic identity. They narrated about “feeling at home” and especially how meeting their family members who lived there gave them a feeling of belonging. Gladys (18), for example, was filled with ethnic pride when she talked about her journey to the Caribbean with her foster parents: “I would like to live there! Beautiful sea, beautiful country, beautiful language”. The examples given by Gyan and Gladys show that they felt a sense of belonging to their ethnic roots, which they labeled positively. This gave them a good feeling.

## Discussion

This study provides insight into the context that contributed to the complexity of the ethnic identity formation of transculturally placed foster youth with an ethnic minority background. The context of ethnic minority foster youth consisted of ethnic majority foster parents and an ethnic minority birth family; thereby mostly an ethnic majority neighborhood and a school where students of ethnic majority and ethnic minority backgrounds attended. Due to living with their ethnic majority foster parents, many foster youth experienced ethnic losses, which has also been shown in studies by Barn (2010) and Moss (2009). Ethnic losses, including decreased ethnic language abilities, led to difficulties connecting with birth parents or school peers with a same-ethnic background. According to Barn's (2018) work on adoption, the social capital of adoptive parents in transcultural settings and the possibilities that adoptive parents and their children have within their networks to bond or bridge with people with minority ethnic backgrounds is pivotal for the ethnic identity development of their children. In our sample,

many foster families lacked this “social capital” and consequently offered little guidance in regard to ethnic (minority) socialization. Thus, some foster youth in our study experienced an “acculturation gap” with regard to their birth parents (Birman, 2006), or they sometimes experienced an “acculturation misfit” with their same-ethnic peers (Celeste et al., 2016), that is, a discrepancy in acculturation. A discrepancy in acculturation appears, for example, when the ethnic orientation of the youth (especially integrative or assimilationist youth) differs from the ethnic orientation of their parents or same-ethnic peers, when the latter are more embedded in their minority ethnic culture (Birman, 2006; Celeste et al., 2016). In our study, a perceived acculturation gap resulted in ethnicity-based contradictions between the foster youth and their birth parents and the foster youth and their same-ethnic peers.

Furthermore, the themes that we used to explain how foster youth would receive contradictory messages about their ethnic background and how their ethnic minority identity would intersect with the identity of being in foster care share a similar underlying mechanism: They refer to foster youth being approached as “the other”. In Dutch society, ethnic minorities may sense that they are being socially excluded by native Dutch people and Dutch society (Huijink et al., 2015; Verkuyten, 2018), and this was reflected in the narratives of the ethnic minority foster youth who experienced social exclusion by their ethnic Dutch peers. However, the foster youth also experienced social exclusion from their same-ethnic peers, who reacted to their ways of acting or being “Dutch” as a result of living with a foster family. These mechanisms of “double social exclusion” left them little room to explore an ethnic identity through their peers. In reaction, the foster youth became confused concerning their ethnicity, expressed a strong wish not to be labeled in terms of ethnicity, or tried even harder to acquire an ethnic majority identity. Expressing a wish not to be labeled in ethnicity terms seems to go beyond the acculturation styles of Berry et al. (2006). The foster youth’s need to experience ethnic belonging seemed to be thwarted (Baumeister et al., 2007), suggesting that they would rather attempt to avoid rejection than seek connection. The foster youth’s wish to acquire an ethnic majority identity corresponds with the acculturation-style assimilation (Berry et al., 2006) and may reflect a wish to belong to the foster family.

Thus, although research indicates that the integration of majority and minority ethnic backgrounds is often the most positive acculturation style for migrants in

terms of their psychosocial development (Berry et al., 2006), for the foster youth with an ethnic minority background, arriving at “integration” as a strategy seemed to be a complex cognitive process (Rocca & Brewer, 2002). The foster youth experienced multilayered social experiences that challenged their ethnic identity. The messages that they received about ethnicity did not always converge and, in some cases, contradicted their own perceptions of situations. Furthermore, these messages intersected with being in foster care, thereby leading to a double “devaluation of self” (Crenshaw, 1991; Kools, 1997; Madigan et al., 2013). Although some foster youth seemed to switch between cultural frames, this confused a number of them, rather than being an effortless or “natural” act (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). These processes differ from the acculturation of, for example, youth of Turkish and Moroccan descent in the Netherlands who grow up in their birth families (second- and third-generation immigrants; Huijink et al., 2015) and who switch between their Turkish or Moroccan, Dutch, and religious backgrounds with relatively minimal effort.

However, the foster youth also told stories of longing for and belonging to their cultural backgrounds. This is in line with Yuval-Davis (2006), who describes identity development as an ongoing process of belonging and longing to belong, whereby specific and repetitive socialization practices related to social and cultural spaces are crucial. In our sample, these social and cultural spaces seemed to be centered on birth parents and trips to their birth parents’ or grandparents’ country. This also shows why some youth expressed relatively little (be)longing to their minority ethnicity, as their contact with their birth parents was problematic, limited, or nonexistent. In the cases in which the foster parents established a positive connection between the foster youth and their birth parents, the latter functioned as social capital in the process of ethnic identity development, and this was realized through a process of bridging cultural differences between foster parents and birth parents and bonding between birth parents and their children (Barn, 2018). Two cultural worlds became more converged, which seemed to contribute to less ethnic identity confusion (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Rocca & Brewer, 2002). However, in practice, this aspect is challenging, as according to Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe (2006), foster youth can have a tense relationship with their parents, where they (re)experience rejection, which impacts their identity.

## Strengths and limitations

Power differences between interviewers, parents and youth may play a role in data collection with children, and in our study foster parents and the interviewer could have influenced the participation of the foster youth (Reczek, 2014). Therefore, we emphasized that participation was voluntary and during the interviews, we somewhat shifted the power balance between the interviewer and foster youth by using photo-elicitation techniques (Harper, 2002).

Next, the interviewer and foster youth did not have or partly shared a same-ethnic background. This seems to have encouraged a conversation in which topics about ethnicity or discrimination were not taken for granted by both parties (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Mizock et al., 2011), and in our study, foster youth explained in detail about, for example, what discrimination looked like for him or her. However, not having a shared ethnic background may also have disadvantages—for example, a lesser sense of mutual understanding between an interviewer and a participant (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Mizock et al., 2011).

As for limitations during recruitment, foster care workers acted as gatekeepers and did not always give the information letters to the foster families due to a lack of time or the perceived vulnerability of certain foster youth. It is possible that we therefore missed foster families who otherwise would have participated.

Finally, in this study, we did not systematically analyze the role of the socioeconomic status of foster families versus birth families, although there are indications that this influenced the ethnic identity of foster youth. This is because, as we showed, some youth talked about an ethnic majority or “posh” way of speaking versus the use of street or urban language. Language is seen as an expression of the class to which one belongs, and it has a reciprocal relationship with identity (Gee, Allen, & Clinton, 2001).

## Implications for practice and future research

Our study showed thematic patterns in the narratives of 20 foster youth. Future quantitative studies based on larger samples should be conducted to validate our findings. Dutch foster parents should furthermore be made aware of the complex social context of transculturally placed foster youth, including intersecting mechanisms of marginalized identities and contradictory ethnicity messages

youth may receive from various sources. Future research should be conducted to design training programs in which foster parents are taught how to guide their foster youth in regard to how best to integrate these complex messages into their narratives of ethnic identity. Next, when foster youth are transculturally placed in Dutch foster homes, the foster families need to gain social capital so that the youth acquire more sources through which they are able to explore their minority ethnic identity. Birth parents may be a key in this process, because the foster youth in this study showed how being ethnically socialized by both their birth parents and foster parents can lead to ethnic identity exploration as well as ethnic identity ambivalence. Future research should therefore be conducted to more thoroughly examine the conditions under which birth parents' and foster parents' cooperation in regard to ethnic socialization leads to a stronger ethnic identity of foster youth. Foster care agencies may train birth and foster parents together to improve their cooperation in regard to the ethnic socialization of their youth.





# 4

## CHAPTER

“Being one, but not being the same”: A dyadic comparative analysis on ethnic socialization in transcultural foster families

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## **Abstract**

To gain insight into ethnic socialization by ethnic majority foster parents who take care of ethnic minority foster youth, we conducted a comparative dyadic analysis, based on 16 foster parent-foster youth dyads. Outcomes show that foster parents' first concern was providing a safe environment for their foster youth, and not ethnic minority socialization. Foster parents seem to strive to belong together as one family with their foster youth. As part of those efforts, they would incorporate ethnicity differences, and/or struggle with how to address them. This occurred in a reciprocal socialization process with their foster youth. Next, although foster youth could experience discrimination, there seems to exist a relative silence about this issue in foster families. Results furthermore show that birth parents may play a role as connectors with the ethnic backgrounds of the foster youth. Foster parents may need guidance by foster care agencies in learning how to address ethnicity issues openly, teaching their foster youth how to survive in a society where ethnic minority discrimination occurs, and involving birth parents in the ethnic socialization of the youth.

## Introduction

In Northern- American and Western- European countries, youth with ethnic minority backgrounds are overrepresented in the foster care system (Barn & Kirton, 2012; Brown et al., 2009). For instance in 2013, 23% of all Dutch children had an ethnic minority background, while 36% of all Dutch foster children belonged to an ethnic minority group (Gilsing et al., 2015). Because most non-kinship foster parents have an ethnic majority Western-European background, transcultural foster care placements frequently occur (Barn & Kirton, 2012; Coakley & Gruber, 2015; Daniel, 2011; Day & Bellaart, 2015). Several societal discussions occurred around the desirability of transcultural placements. Central to these discussions is whether a child can sufficiently explore his or her ethnic minority identity, when being socialized by foster parents with a different ethnic background (Day et al., 2018; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). A literature review on ethnic identity and ethnic socialization of transculturally placed foster youth showed a scarcity of research and yielded no studies from mainland Europe. However, the few included studies show that foster youths may for instance struggle with being disconnected from their ethnic backgrounds, which may lead to ethnicity losses. Foster parents who pay efforts towards participating and engaging their foster youth in activities that promote children's cultural development, and teach their foster youth in dealing with discrimination are perceived as important in the process of ethnic identity development of ethnic minority foster children (Degener, Van Bergen & Grietens, 2021). In order to provide more insight into ethnic socialization in transcultural foster families, we conducted a dyadic comparative analysis to investigate what ethnic socialization messages foster parents give, what ethnic socialization messages their foster youths receive and how these messages interact.

## Ethnic identity and ethnic socialization

Following Umaña-Taylor et al., (2014), we define ethnic identity as a multidimensional psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes individuals have about their ethnic group memberships (content), as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time (process). Review studies show that ethnic identity is positively related to psychosocial functioning, academic and mental health outcomes of ethnic minorities (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Smith & Silva, 2011). A small number of empirical studies present results which also prove the contrary. For instance, a study by Umaña-Taylor et al., (2012), shows that for

Mexican-origin male adolescents ethnic identity emerged as a risk factor, because Mexican-origin male adolescents who reported higher ethnic identity affirmation tended to have lower grades at school one year later. A possible reason given by the authors (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2012), was that adolescents who feel most positively about their ethnicity may tend to underperform in a manner that is consistent with the stereotype that exists about their group.

Ethnic identity is fluid, and develops over time through a process of exploration and commitment (Phinney & Ong, 2007). This process occurs in daily dynamic interactions with others, like parents and peers (Huguley et al. 2019; LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Ethnic socialization, which is conceptualized as the range of parental efforts aiming at transmission of messages about ethnicity to children, contributes to ethnic identity development (Hughes et al., 2008). These messages may, amongst others, include transmission of traditions, customs, cultural pride and language (cultural socialization), or focus on preparation for experiences with racism and prejudice in society. Especially cultural socialization has proved to be positive for the ethnic identity development of ethnic minority youth (Hughes et al., 2009; Huguley et al., 2019). Thereby, nuances can be found concerning how ethnic socialization may influence youth's ethnic identity. Preparation for experiences with racism and prejudice, can for instance strengthen youth in coping with discrimination (Richardson et al., 2014; Schmitt, Spears & Branscombe, 2003), but may also install thoughts in the youth's minds concerning societal ethnic stereotypes, and undermine a process of positive ethnic identity development (Hughes et al., 2009; Huguley et al., 2019).

## **Ethnic socialization and cultural competence of parents with transculturally placed children**

The definition of Hughes et al. (2008) is based on ethnic socialization of children who live in their birth parental homes. In the last decennium, growing attention has been paid to ethnic identity and ethnic socialization of transculturally placed children, mainly adoptees (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Contrary to adoption, foster youth may have a more vivid connection with their birth network, as is mostly encouraged by foster care agencies. This may imply that foster youth receive ethnic socialization from their birth parents or other birth family members as well (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018). Nevertheless, knowledge from adoption studies

may be helpful for better understanding of ethnic socialization in transcultural foster care placements.

Studies show that the way adoptive parents ethnically socialize their children, impacts their children's ethnic identity (DeBerry, Scarr & Weinberg, 1996; Hu, Zhou & Lee, 2017). A cumulative complexity may exist concerning ethnic socialization of transculturally placed adoptees, as they need to deal with two ethnic backgrounds in their lives: the ethnic minority backgrounds of their birth parents, and the ethnic majority backgrounds of their adoptive parents (Manzi et al., 2014). The authors (Manzi et al., 2014) suggest that transculturally placed adoptees who manage to integrate their heritage culture (ethnic minority) and adopted country culture (ethnic majority) in their lives, show less behavioral problems. However, most studies about ethnic socialization solely focus on the way as to how adoptive parents address the ethnic minority backgrounds of their children. These studies show that adoptive parents in general pay little attention to their children's ethnic minority backgrounds (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Nevertheless, the ways as to how they may approach the ethnic backgrounds of their children, may vary from 'colourblindness' to active incorporation of minority ethnicity messages in daily socialization practices (Barn, 2013; DeBerry, Scarr and Weinberg, 1996; Killian & Khanna, 2019; Langrehr, Thomas and Morgan, 2016). Furthermore, according to Barn and Kirton (2012), adoptive parents can miss practical or emotional knowledge to guide transculturally placed children in their ethnic identity development. In this light, several authors investigated the concept of 'cultural competence' (Langrehr, Thomas & Morgan, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Vonk, Lee & Crolley-Simic, 2010). Cultural competence refers to adoptive parent's ability to prepare their children for racism and to help them survive in a society where discrimination occurs (Langrehr, Thomas & Morgan, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Vonk, 2001). Cultural competence also refers to skills adoptive parents need to reinforce feelings of ethnic minority pride (Langrehr, Thomas & Morgan, 2016), and 'multicultural planning', which includes the ability to expose ethnic minority children to contacts and activities with people of their ethnic minority background (Vonk, 2001). Some studies address cultural competence of foster parents. These studies especially focus on cultural receptivity as a cultural competency skill, which refers ethnic majority foster parents' ability of having positive, learning and open interactions about ethnicity with foster youth (Brown et al., 2009a,b; Coakley & Gruber, 2015; Coakley & Orme, 2006; Daniel, 2011).

## **Ethnic socialization in foster care as a reciprocal process**

Ethnic identity formation is a reciprocal process, which develops through daily dynamic interactions with others (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Transculturally placed foster youth may react to ethnic socialization messages given by their ethnic majority foster parents. Vice versa, foster parents may react on needs and messages concerning ethnicity, addressed by their ethnic minority foster youth. Thus, like ethnic identity formation, ethnic socialization may be a reciprocal process between foster parents and their foster youth. To get insight into the dynamics of ethnic socialization in transcultural foster families, we address the following research question: What ethnic socialization do foster parents give and what ethnic socialization do transculturally placed foster youth receive by their foster parents, and how do both perspectives interact?

## **Methods**

### **Design**

We followed a constructivist paradigm, whereby we tried to understand how people make sense of, and interpret their experiences in life. We thereby treated each account of every participant as indicative of the subjective reality of that individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The use of a dyadic comparative analysis enabled us to study the accounts of the foster youth and their foster parents, how both perspectives may interact, and what overarching themes can be found when comparing all dyads (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland & Gillies, 2003; Sands & Roer-String, 2006; Van Parys et al., 2017).

### **Participants**

In 16 families, we interviewed 14 foster mothers and 2 foster fathers, 8 boys and 8 girls. Based on their parents' or grandparents' countries of birth, foster youth were selected as ethnic minorities. They had Northern-African (3), Eastern-African (4), Southern-American (6) or bi-cultural (3: majority/ minority (1) and minority/ minority (2)) backgrounds, and were age 11 to 19 years old. The foster parents had Western- European ethnic majority backgrounds and their age varied between approximately 40 and 70 years old. All foster youth had contacts with members of the birth family network, and 13 foster youth had contacts with their birth parents

on a regular base. Their placement age ranged from two weeks to twelve years, but due to several out of home placements prior to the current placement, only two of the foster youth could call back memories of living with birth parents.

### *Recruitment*

Foster families were recruited using purposive sampling via nine foster care agencies with a geographical spread throughout the Netherlands. Foster care workers informed foster families who were selected by the researcher via personal information letters. As a result, 12 families (approximately one out of nine selected families) signed up for participation. Other foster families were recruited using snowball sampling, as well as via a call put out on social media and on a website for foster parents.

## **Research procedure**

### *Instruments*

We developed a photo-elicitation manual for foster youth and interview topic lists for foster youth and foster parents, which consisted of questions on ethnic socialization (Hughes et al., 2008). To enable participants to show their own perspectives, both parties were interviewed separately from each other (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Reczek, 2014). Foster youth were asked to take pictures in advance of every interview to encourage talk and to bridge cultural differences (Harper, 2002). These pictures were meant to show people, places, activities or things that were of importance to them. The foster youth brought their selection of pictures to the interviews. Conversations about the pictures, could lead to a conversation about ethnic socialization. For example, a picture of a plate of food (for instance, rice and chicken), led to a conversation about what kind of food the foster parents prepared and whether they prepared food which was related to the ethnic background of the foster youth. The researcher followed the youth in their story, keeping the topic list in mind. In the interviews with foster parents, we did not use pictures. However, also during these interviews, the researcher followed the foster parents in their stories, which was also guided by a topic list. The interviews were first structured by topics about the foster family and socialization in general, which led to in-depth questions about the role of (minority or majority) ethnicity in their socialization messages.

### *Interview procedure*

To engage ourselves with the participants, an appointment was made to introduce the study. During this meeting, we explained the aims and procedures, and made follow-up appointments for conducting the interviews. Participants personally signed letters of informed consent. The legal guardians of youth under sixteen signed letters of informed consent via email.

Foster youth and most foster parents were interviewed in their homes by the same interviewer (who is also the first author) whereby we ensured confidentiality. Two interviews with foster parents took place at the foster parents' workplace. The interviews took on average one hour. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. A summary of each transcript was sent to the participants and we included their comments or extra information in our analysis.

## **Analysis**

We conducted a dyadic comparative analysis within and between foster families, (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland & Gillies, 2003; Sands & Roer-String 2006; Van Parys et al., 2017).

### *Step 1. Inductive analysis of individual accounts*

We started with an inductive analysis of each individual account, whereby we followed the steps of thematic coding (Flick, 2014, p.424-428). First, we coded the interview of the foster parent, and clustered the codes in conversation themes. To avoid fragmentation, a short narrative of each interview was written (Van Parys et al., 2017). We repeated this process for the account of the foster youth.

### *Step 2. Dyadic analysis within families*

To explore how two individuals within the same foster family constructed similar or different realities, we started a dyadic analysis within families. Following Eisikovits and Koren (2010), Ribbens McCarthy, Holland and Gillies, (2003), Sands and Roer-String (2006), we compared and interpreted gaps, similarities and differences for each conversation theme that appeared within each family. When a foster parent mentioned a theme or a specific subject the foster youth did not mention, or vice versa, we labeled this as 'gap.' 'Similarities' occurred when foster parents'

and foster youth narratives concerning ethnic socialization were similar on a descriptive level as well as on an interpretative level. We used the label 'difference' when participants within a dyad told similar stories, but interpreted these stories in a different way or vice versa (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

### *Step 3. Dyadic analysis between families*

After analyzing five dyads, we started to synthesize from a 'within families' level to a 'between families' level, whereby we searched for overarching themes (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland & Gillies, 2003; Sands & Roer-String 2006; Van Parys et al., 2017). We first developed a thematic structure by comparing the conversation themes of the dyadic analysis of our first five families. Then, we continued our inductive analysis (step 1 and 2), and simultaneously compared the outcomes systematically with our thematic structure. During the process, we refined and broadened the set of conversation themes (Van Parys et al., 2017). This resulted in four conversation themes, which cover and summarise the major conversation topics of the foster parents and their foster youth concerning ethnic socialization: Providing a safe and stable environment of foster youth (1), ethnicity approaches (2), silence about discrimination (3), and the efforts foster parents make to involve birth parents in the ethnic socialization of foster youth (4).

### *Step 4. Dyadic comparative analysis of conversation themes*

In order to understand the gaps, similarities and differences concerning ethnic socialization between families, we started to study and compare the accounts of the dyads in each of the aforementioned conversation themes. In the result-section we balanced between authenticity and recognizability (Forbat & Henderson, 2003). To preserve authenticity, we mostly quoted contributions of both members from one family. To decrease recognizability, we used pseudonyms and referred to foster parent, instead of foster father or foster mother.

## **Results**

### **Theme 1. Providing a safe and stable environment for foster youth.**

Foster parents' primary socialization concern was not ethnic socialization, but providing a stable, safe, peaceful and loving home for their foster youth, who had

experienced a history of trauma and abuse and out of home placements. The following example of a foster parent illustrates this: "Our socialization was mainly based on his background. Not on his cultural background, but on everything he suffered from in the past." Similar to his foster parent, Omar (16) said that his foster parents mainly looked after him and helped him to address the behavioral problems he used to have.

## **Theme 2. Ethnicity approaches**

We identified five ethnicity approaches in the narratives of foster parents and their foster youth. These approaches were not strictly divided. Some of these approaches could occur together (like 'ambivalence' and 'explaining differences in ethnicity terms'), or showed some overlap (like 'humanitarian' and 'active engagement').

### *Paying no attention to minority ethnicity*

Similarly to narratives of their foster youth, some foster parents mentioned that they did not pay attention to the ethnic minority background of their foster youth. Foster youth added that they did not wish to receive any attention concerning their ethnic minority backgrounds, which may show a reciprocal relation. An example of this approach could be recognised in the foster family of Azizi (age 12), who resided in a non-diverse area. Azizi lost contact with her birth parents, but saw some of her siblings on a regular base. Azizi had no wish that any attention would be paid to her ethnic background. According to her, this kind of attention was 'unnecessary.' She furthermore said: "They raised me. I came here when I was two, so it is just normal for me here. Maybe it would have been different when I was ten and you enter a family where people are not the same." Her foster parent told a similar story: "We never paid attention to her background.... she doesn't even know it herself... (silence)...."

### *Humanitarianism*

Humanitarian foster parents expressed the value of all individuals as human beings. Although these foster parents and their foster youth mentioned to be involved in ethnic minority socialization practices like introducing cultural traditions or customs in the foster homes, foster parents actively valued 'the person' above

ethnicity. Vice versa, foster youth shared humanitarian views during the interviews which may show a mutual interaction between the foster parents and their foster youth. The following example shows a foster mother and her foster daughter Salma, (12) who lived in an ethnic diverse area. Salma visited her birth mother frequently, and had some contacts with extended family members. The foster mother said: "When I think of what makes your identity, I also think what makes you who you are? Ethnic background is very important, but in my eyes there is a more essential layer behind it". Salma (age 12), stated: "It doesn't matter that I look different than other people in The Netherlands, but that I feel at home among people.... and this (points at her arm) is just a piece of skin with some hair on it."

### *Ambivalence*

Most foster parents were ambivalent towards the minority ethnicity of their foster youth. They acknowledged, yet struggled how to pay attention to ethnicity differences between themselves and their foster youth. They, as well as their foster youth reported no or few ethnic socialization practices during the interviews. A possible reason was foster parents' ideal of belonging to each other as family members. Foster parents posed questions about whether they -as a foster family- could truly belong to each other, when they highlighted ethnicity differences. The following example shows a foster family who lived in an ethnic homogeneous area. The foster son, Romano (14) sometimes had contact with his birth mother and siblings. He felt different than others in his near environment. He did not like this, and therefore expressed a firm wish to be 'white'. Furthermore he said that he did not long for attention concerning his ethnic minority background. He, and the foster parent both told, that little attention was paid to the ethnic minority background of Romano in the foster family. The foster parent thereby struggled whether more attention should be paid to the foster son's minority ethnicity, and said: "It is always his skin colour that comes to the surface, you know. I sense that he always feels different. I wonder if it will ever be normal that he belongs to us."

### *Active engagement*

Foster parents could tell how they, mainly in interaction with their foster youth's expressed ethnicity needs, actively engaged with the foster youth ethnic background. Foster youth who still had memories of living in their birth families,

were found in the group of actively engaged foster parents. This might show a reciprocal relation between foster parents and their foster youth, who already might have developed a sense of ethnic minority identity before they entered the foster family. Examples of ethnic socialization included searching for friends with similar ethnic backgrounds in the neighborhood, or travelling to the foster youth's birth country. These involvements were similar to examples mentioned by the foster youth in these dyads, who also expressed the importance of ethnicity in their lives. Valery (17) for example mentioned that she followed a Papiamento (Caribbean language) course together with her foster parent, because she wanted to travel to her birth parents' country. The foster family where she lived, was situated in an ethnic diverse city. Valery had contact with her birth mother on a frequent basis. Similar to Valery, the foster parent said: "We followed a Papiamento course, and it was her wish to do this together."

### *Explaining differences in ethnicity terms*

Foster parents could express doubts concerning experienced differences between themselves and their foster youth, especially when it concerned in their eyes 'negative' behavior of the foster youth. They questioned, whether they could explain this behavior of their foster youth in ethnicity terms. No foster youth told about having received these kind of messages, which may show that the foster parents did not express their thoughts or doubts openly. The following example shows a foster family who lived in an ethnic homogenous area. Alba (12) sometimes had contact with his birth mother and siblings. During the interview, he firmly expressed that he belonged to the foster family. He also stated that he experienced differences concerning his temperament between himself and the environment he lived in, which he did not relate to his ethnic background: "I am just a rough person. I am in fights more often than others and I shout at people." The foster parent shared the following thoughts about specific behavior of Alba, who was frequently involved in fights at school:

It might also be related to being a foster child. For me, it is painful to sense that he is different. You will never know where it comes from. But generally, I think it is his ethnic background.

### **Theme 3. Silence about discrimination**

Foster parents told that they knew or suspected that the foster youth could experience discrimination outside of the foster family. They thereby narrated about discriminative events which could occur within the foster family. One of the foster parents said for example: "They (biological children) shout during a fight: 'You are just stupid brown (sic)' or something like that.... (silence)". In contrast to the foster parents, no foster youth talked about discrimination experiences from within their foster families, but similar to the narratives of foster parents, they mentioned discrimination experiences outside of the foster family. Omar (16 years old) narrated for example about being teased at school because of his Turkish descent. He lived in an ethnic diverse city and actively posed himself the question to what ethnic group he belonged. This question was troubled by his peers with ethnic-Dutch backgrounds, who according to him neglected him: "Well they are just racists. I mean.... Well I don't know if I can say that.... (silence), but they always run away from me."

Both the foster parents and foster youth told, that they hardly talked about discrimination experiences together, which may mean, that there was a relative silence around this topic within the foster families. For instance, Can (16) lived in an ethnic homogenous area. He narrated frequently about discrimination experiences at the streets, like being called 'foreigner' in a negative way, and said that he never talked about the subject with his foster parents, for they "would not understand him". The foster parent of Can said: "Not really, I don't think we pay attention to it (discrimination). When he comes home and talks about it, I ask him what he did, to provoke them, so that people would react to him in that way, you know."

### **Theme 4. Foster parents involve birth parents in the ethnic socialization of foster youth**

Establishing birth parental involvement was one of the most commonly mentioned ethnic socialization practices, mentioned by foster parents. This was not recognised in the stories of the foster youth, and might show that it involved foster parental efforts 'behind the scenes'. Foster parents undertook many activities in establishing or strengthening contacts with birth parents, mainly, to keep ties with the network of their foster youth. The foster parents furthermore told, that when

contacts with birth parents were established or strengthened, birth parents could provide ethnic socialization requests to the foster family. Foster parents explained about how they, as a result, integrated wishes of birth parents in the daily lives of their foster youth. The most common examples concerned food, like not preparing pork for their foster youth for religious reasons.

Furthermore, according to foster parents and their foster youth, birth parents could serve as direct connectors with the ethnic backgrounds of the foster youth, and some foster parents felt this was a task where birth parents were irreplaceable. Zakiya (16), who saw her foster mother on a frequent base, narrated for example about how her birth mother taught her about her Antillean roots, while Zakiya's foster parent said:

"A foster child may feel abandoned by its roots. I try to fill that gap, but I can't do that by myself. So I had a lot of conversations with her mother, and this led to trust in my relationship with Zakiya, but also in the relationship between Zakiya and her mother".

## Discussion

This study provides insight into ethnic socialization in Dutch foster families from the perspectives of ethnic majority foster parents and their ethnic minority foster youth. We recognised reciprocal relations in ethnic socialization processes. Foster parents thereby seemed to search for a balance between belonging to each other as a family, and in the same time acknowledging differences. This notion inspired a variety of approaches towards the ethnic backgrounds of their foster youth. Some of these approaches linked back to the empirical work of Barn (2013), DeBerry, Scarr and Weinberg (1996) and Langrehr, Thomas and Morgan (2016), and varied from paying no attention to the foster youth ethnic background, to a possible 'culturalization' of behavioral differences (Eliassi, 2015).

Other influences which seemed to play a role in the ethnic socialization processes in foster families were firstly foster parents' primary concern of providing a safe and stable environment for their foster youth, and not listing ethnic socialization as a first goal. An explanation may be that foster parents are mainly occupied with alleviating foster youth's behavioral problems, which also causes foster parents to have relatively high stress levels (Maaskant et al., 2017; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2012). Foster parents therefore may have little emotional or practical space and

time for ethnic socialization. Furthermore, some foster youth in our study were not very occupied with their ethnic backgrounds, hence this may go to show why their foster parents in a response, did not actively pay attention to this issue. This may be understood by the work of Tyrell et al. (2019), which shows that childhood maltreatment and placement disruption leads to ethnic identity losses of foster youth. It was beyond the goals of our study, to explore this relation. However, possible childhood maltreatment and the aftermath hereof, as well as past placement disruption experiences might have played a negative role for foster youth's ethnic identity development in our study.

Secondly, the participants narrated about discrimination as experienced by foster youth. Within the foster families however, little attention was paid to discrimination experiences. The foster parents therefore may miss skills to teach their foster youth how to survive in a society where discrimination exists (Langrehr, Thomas & Morgan, 2016; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020; Vonk, 2001). On the other hand, foster parents might also be cautious about addressing societal stereotypes and ethnicity discrimination, as it may lead to negative feelings about the way youth perceive other people's attitudes towards them (see Hughes et al., 2009).

Thirdly, birth parents seem to play a role in the ethnic socialization of the foster youth, because the most commonly mentioned ethnic socialization practice was foster parents' efforts to involve birth parents in the ethnic socialization of the foster youth. This corresponds with the cultural competence skill 'multicultural planning' (Vonk, 2001). When birth parents were present in the foster family's lives, they could serve as connectors with the ethnic backgrounds of foster youth in the eyes of both foster parents and foster youth. An important comment to make in this respect is that birth parents can also impact foster youth identity negatively, for foster youth may (re)experience a rejection when they have contact with their birth parents (Moyers, Farmer & Libscombe, 2006).

## **Strengths and limitations**

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that shows ethnic socialization in foster care from a dyadic perspective. In existing studies about ethnic socialization in foster care the perspectives were shown of foster parents, and no comparison between foster parent and foster child perspectives existed (Brown et al., 2009; Coakley and Gruber, 2015; Daniel, 2011).

We conducted an in-depth analysis within dyads whereby we systematically compared outcomes of conversation themes between dyads. This represents a strength of our study, because it contributes to the scarce amount of dyadic analyses which provide 'a bird's eye view' of family processes (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland & Gillies, 2003; Van Parys et al., 2017).

In family-based research, where two or more family members are interviewed, a double power-balance may exist between the researcher, the parent and the youth (Reczek, 2014). Therefore we assured at the beginning of each interview that no information would be shared with others. Nevertheless, participants in this study could have expressed themselves less openly because of loyalties to each other.

The interviewer tried to build a relationship with the interviewee whereby different ethnic backgrounds of both parties may have played a role. The interviewer had a Dutch ethnic majority background. Not, or partly sharing a same ethnic background with the foster youth may have led to a lesser sense of mutual understanding (Adamson & Donovan, 2002). Therefore, we used pictures to bridge possible ethnicity differences (Harper, 2002). On the other hand, not sharing a same ethnic background did encourage a conversation in which topics about ethnicity or discrimination are not taken for granted (Adamson & Donovan, 2002). In the interviews with the foster parents, the interviewer shared having an ethnic majority background. This could have led to a sense of mutual understanding and trust, whereby foster parents were open concerning their doubts about ethnicity related matters.

Only foster families, whose members were willing to be interviewed, participated in our study. Therefore, we might for example have reached a group of ambivalent foster parents who were struggling with ethnicity issues and posed questions around whether and how they should pay attention to minority ethnicity. This makes our results more difficult to generalize to a larger group of foster parent-foster child dyads.

## **Implications for practice and future research**

As foster parents may struggle with how to address ethnicity issues within foster families, they may need guidance by foster care agencies in strengthening their

skill of cultural receptivity (Brown et al., 2009; Coakley & Gruber, 2015; Daniel, 2011), so they can address and reflect on ethnicity issues openly, share their thoughts and doubts with foster care workers and other foster parents, and learn from each other's good practices. Furthermore, because a relative silence seems to exist around discrimination related matters between foster youth and their foster parents, foster parents might be better prepared to assist their foster youth in dealing with discrimination. Because foster youth may experience discrimination, it is important for them to learn survival skills (Vonk, 2001). Moreover, foster parents may be guided by foster care agencies in how to involve birth parents in socialization processes in order to strengthen the process of foster ethnic identity development in the foster youth.

Last, future research needs to be conducted in order to validate our findings, and contextualize them within a more ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hochman, Segev & Levinger, 2020).



# 5

## CHAPTER

Grasping ethnic identity  
fluctuations of transculturally  
placed foster youth over time:  
A longitudinal study

Based on: Degener, C. J., Bergen, D. D. van, &  
Grietens, H. W. E. (2021)

Grasping ethnic identity fluctuations of  
transculturally placed foster youth over time: A  
longitudinal study.

(submitted)

## **Abstract**

Transcultural placements occur frequently in foster care, and impact the ethnic identity of ethnic minority foster youth. Studies that investigate how foster youth's ethnic identity develops over time, and what role ethnic minority as well as ethnic majority influences play, are extremely scarce. Therefore we conducted a longitudinal qualitative analysis, in which we explored how transculturally placed foster youth develop their ethnic identity and what fluctuations occur over time. Results show that the ethnic identity of foster youth seems to be influenced by a sense of belonging towards foster parents, birth parents and peers, as well as the foster youth's ability to cope with receiving contradictory ethnicity messages. Furthermore, societal movements and discussions about discrimination and racism impact the way foster youth view themselves as being an ethnic minority in majority society. In future, more attention should be paid to how foster youth can be guided by foster parents and foster care workers in safely exploring an ethnic identity of their own, and how a positive bond with both foster parents and birth parents, can further contribute to this process.

## Introduction

In The Netherlands, there is an overrepresentation of ethnic minority youth, and an underrepresentation of ethnic minority foster parents in non-kinship foster care (Day & Bellaart, 2015; Gilsing et al., 2015). As a result, ethnic minority foster youth are frequently placed in ethnic majority foster families. In the international literature these placements are mostly called transcultural or transracial placements (see for instance Barn, 2018; or Brown et al., 2009). Being transculturally placed may lead to challenges for the ethnic identity of foster youth (Barn, 2010; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2015). These youth may be vulnerable and traumatized due to negative experiences of living in their birth family, and a history of one or more out of home placements (Goemans et al., 2016; Mitchell 2017). This personal history may impact their identity development, including their ethnic identification process negatively (Kools, 1997). When foster youth are transculturally placed, they grow up in different ethnic-cultural worlds: among foster parents, among birth parents and in the school environment. They may therefore receive a diversity of socialization messages from ethnic minority and majority ethnicity perspectives, which may lead to identity challenges and ambivalence (Degener, Van Bergen & Grietens, 2020; Hughes et al., 2008). Additionally, a study of Schmidt et al. (2015) indicated that transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth's ethnic identity may show relatively high fluctuations in relation to that of other ethnic minorities in society. To the best of our knowledge, no studies exist which provide further insight on this topic in the field of foster care. To address this gap in the empirical literature, we conducted a qualitative longitudinal analysis (Calman, Brunton, Molasiottis , 2013; Derrington, 2019; Saldaña, 2002; Taylor, 2015). In this paper we illuminate stories of 10 Dutch foster youth about their ethnic identity development, whereby we provide a view on their ethnic identity fluctuations in two years of time.

## Ethnic identity, bicultural identity

Following Umaña-Taylor et al., (2014), we define ethnic identity as a multidimensional psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes individuals have about their ethnic group memberships (content), as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time (process). Especially for people who are member of ethnic minority groups, and aware of ethnicity differences between themselves and ethnic majority people in society, ethnic identity

becomes of increasingly importance (Lesane-Brown, 2006). Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007) describe the development of ethnic identity as a maturation process in which ethnic minority individuals explore their ethnic identity (exploration) and/or decide where and to whom they belong (i.e., commitment). Ethnic socialization, which is conceptualized as the range of parental efforts aimed at transmissions of messages about ethnicity to children, contributes to ethnic identity development (Hughes et al., 2008; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020).

Individuals who grow up between different ethnic and cultural backgrounds might try to integrate and negotiate these backgrounds in their lives, and develop a bi-cultural identity (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005). These backgrounds can be compatible and integrated vs. oppositional and difficult to integrate (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005), and impact individuals' psychosocial adjustment such as self-esteem and life satisfaction (Chen, Benet-Martinez & Bond, 2008). A study about bi-cultural identity conducted in the field of transcultural adoption (Manzi et al., 2014) shows that adolescent adoptees' ethnic minority identity is related to ethnic (minority) socialization of the adoptive parents, and adolescent adoptees' ethnic majority identity is related to their sense of being part of the ethnic majority adoptive family. Adoptees who perceive both ethnic backgrounds as conflictual, show more externalized behavioral problems (Manzi et al., 2014).

Similar to adoptees, foster youth may develop a bi-cultural identity. In contrast to birth parents of adoptees, it is not uncommon for birth parents of foster youth to keep the (shared) authority over their children, and stay in contact with them (Burns, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2016). This enables birth parents to continue providing their children with ethnic minority socialization, which influences and might enrich the possibilities for foster youth to explore their ethnic minority identity (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018).

## **Ethnic identity fluctuations of transculturally placed foster youth**

We assume that the ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth, which may include ethnic majority and/or ethnic minority identity, fluctuates over time. The formation of one's ethnic identity is a dynamic process which develops through a reciprocal relationship between an individual and his or her social context (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney, Jacoby, & Silva, 2007).

International evidence exists showing that being placed from one's birth family to transcultural foster care impacts the ethnic identity of foster youth (Barn, 2010; Brown et al., 2009; Clark, 2000; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Moss, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2015; Tyrell et al., 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2019; White et al., 2008). These studies observed disconnection from ethnic cultural backgrounds and ethnicity losses (Barn, 2010; Clark, 2000; Brown et al., 2009; Clark, 2000; Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018; Moss, 2009; Tyrell et al., 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2019), (re)connection with ethnic minority backgrounds through birth parents (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018) and awareness of minority ethnicity because of differences in the physical appearance between foster youth and their foster parents (Clark, 2000; White et al., 2008). The studies however did not focus on how foster youth might integrate both majority and minority identities into their lives. Furthermore, studies investigating how ethnic identity of transculturally placed foster youth fluctuates in time are extremely scarce. To the best of our knowledge, one study (Schmidt et al. 2015) examined ethnic identity fluctuations of minority foster children, and showed relatively high ethnic identity fluctuations over time of ethnic minority foster youth compared to non-foster youth minority populations in the US. However, this study (Schmidt et al., 2015) did not investigate how and why ethnic minority foster youth showed relatively high ethnic identity fluctuations, and what role foster parents, birth parents and/ or peers play in these processes. To further investigate these issues, we will address the following research question: What ethnic identity fluctuations are present in Dutch transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth's narratives, and how did their ethnic identity fluctuate during a two year time period?

## Method

### Design

We conducted a qualitative longitudinal research. In order to discern a meaningful change in ethnic identity, we approached foster youth twice over a period of two years (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2013). A longitudinal qualitative approach enabled us to clarify ethnic identity development, change and process among ethnic minority foster youth (Holland, Thomas & Henderson, 2006). Our goals were to assess ethnic identity change through time (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003), and to understand ethnic identity changes within and across foster youth (Balmer & Richards, 2017).

## Participants

Foster youth were recruited through purposive sampling via nine Dutch foster care agencies, which mainly cover the southern part of The Netherlands. We thereby used snowball sampling, a call put out on social media and on websites for foster parents. We firstly interviewed 20 adolescent transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth. After the first interview, we asked participants whether we could approach them for a second interview. One foster youth responded negatively to this question, because she was about to move out of the foster home. So we re-approached 19 youth after approximately two years. Three foster youth did not respond to our second call, and six youth could not participate because of negative psychosocial wellbeing (N=3), lack of time (N=1), or not being interested in participating a second time (N=2). So, for the second interviews, we could interview 10 foster youth, of which 6 were female, and 4 male. These 10 participants were between 11 and 18 years of age during the first interview, and between 13 and 20 years of age during the second interview. They had Northern-African (2), Eastern-African (4), Southern-American (1) or bi-cultural (minority-minority (2) and minority-majority (1)) backgrounds. In the selection process, their ethnic minority backgrounds were based on their parents' or grandparents' countries of birth. The foster parents had ethnic majority western-European backgrounds.

## Research procedure

We used the method of photo-elicitation, whereby photos were inserted into the interviews to encourage talk and to bridge cultural differences (Harper, 2002). We also used a topic-list, which consisted of topics such as ethnic pride, and having friendships with same-ethnic peers (LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Phinney, Jacoby & Silva, 2007). Foster youth were asked to take photos that showed people, objects, events or places, which were meaningful for them in advance of the interviews. The photos revealed little information about ethnicity, but led to a discourse about ethnicity in the interviews. A photo of a music-box for instance led to a conversation about musicians as ethnic minority role models. Before the second interviews started, the first interviews were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Calman, Brunton & Molasiottis, 2013; Holland, Thomas & Henderson, 2006). The second interviews were guided by the same methods as the first interviews. Thereby we referred to quotes or narratives from the first

interview, and asked the participant to reflect on his or her 'former self' (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2013).

## Analysis

We based the steps of our analysis on the international literature about longitudinal qualitative analysis (Calman, Brunton & Molasiottis , 2013; Derrington, 2019; Saldaña, 2002; Taylor, 2015).

### *Step 1: Analysis of data of the first interviews (N=20)*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. We analysed the data of the first interviews with 20 foster youth thematically to identify ethnic identity narratives. We followed an inductive approach and constructed codes and themes that were strongly linked to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis showed that the transculturally placed foster youth experienced ethnic identity ambivalence due to contradictory ethnicity messages given mainly by their foster parents, birth parents, and/ or peers. Foster youth also showed ethnic identity losses due to intersectional mechanisms of minority ethnicity and the identity of being a foster child. When foster youth felt connection with their ethnic minority background, for example, their birth parents or by visiting the countries where their parents or grandparents were born, foster youth experienced feelings of ethnic minority belonging (Degener, Van Bergen & Grietens, 2020).

### *Step 2: Longitudinal analysis of the first and second interviews within each case (N=10)*

We coded the second interviews, by using the codes we derived from our thematic analysis of the first interviews. Some refinement was carefully added to our existing codes. An example was that hair texture and colour as an aspect of foster youth's ethnic minority identity emerged more clearly during the second interviews. Therefore, we split the code: differences in ethnic appearances into two codes: hair texture and colour *and* skin colour as distinguishing ethnicity aspects. When finished, we compared the codes of both interviews, and analysed differences and similarities in two years of time within cases (Calman, Brunton & Molasiottis, 2013).

*Step 3. Longitudinal analysis of interview one and interview two between cases (N=10)*

As a last step, we compared differences in time for the whole sample, whereby we tried to derive main themes of change from the data (Calman, Brunton & Molasiottis, 2013) As a tool, we used Saldaña' s (2002) list of framing, descriptive and analytic questions, and adapted these questions to our study. We asked for example the following questions to the interview data: What are preliminary assertions concerning ethnic identity development? (framing question, Saldaña, 2002)? In relation to ethnic identity development, what increased, or emerged through time (descriptive question, Saldaña, 2002)? Which changes concerning ethnic identity interrelated through time (analytic question, Saldaña, 2002)? To create an overview of changes in time, we also used the method of concept mapping (Derrington, 2019). In this way, we analysed how the outcomes of the first interviews had changed over two years of time, and interpreted differences and similarities between cases. The main outcomes of the concept mapping process (Derrington, 2019) and the aforementioned steps by Saldaña (2002), are shown in our five main themes of change:

1. Connection with ethnic majority backgrounds of foster parents
2. Connection with ethnic minority backgrounds of birth parents
3. Coping with contradictory ethnicity messages
4. Sensing to be different in an ethnic majority environment
5. Exploration of an identity other than ethnic identity

In presenting the results, we were aware of increased potential recognizability, because data were collected and represented over an extended period of time from the same participants (Taylor, 2015). We thus balanced between preventing recognizability versus presenting authenticity, by carefully choosing fragments from the interviews, which did not expose specific features of the participants. The names of participants are pseudonyms.

## Results

### Theme 1: Connection with ethnic majority backgrounds of foster parents

Related to a sense of belonging to their foster parents, foster youth's ethnic identity could fluctuate into the direction of their ethnic majority background. Some foster youth who did not express an ethnic majority identity during the first interview, could narrate about ethnic majority pride, or called themselves 'Dutch' during the second interview. Their explanation was that they belonged to the foster family, and/or because it was their foster family who took care of them. Vivian for example, who mainly showed pride of her Antillean background during interview one: 'I would like to live there! Beautiful sea, beautiful country, beautiful language,' two years later made a shift to an ethnic majority identity: 'I am proud on being Antillean, of course, but I am also just Dutch, and I am proud of what I have achieved.' She thereby connected 'being Dutch' to her foster parents' efforts to help her with her studies. According to her, the foster parents helped her in achieving a higher school level, where she felt proud of.

### Theme 2: Connection with ethnic minority backgrounds of birth parents

Foster youth showed ethnic identity fluctuations which could be linked to the strengthening or, alternatively, the loss of ties with birth parents. Some foster youth showed ethnic minority identity losses in two years of time. According to them this was caused by the experience of negative new events with (one of) their birth parents that happened between both interviews, the loss of contacts with (one of) their birth parents, and/or a loss of interest in their attempts to connect with their birth parents. An example of a boy who showed ethnic minority losses in time, which he related to the quality of ties with his birth mother, was Milan. When aged 16, he temporarily lost contact with his birth mother. He did not wish to affiliate with any ethnic background, but stressed he was 'a human being.' However, he would also call himself Surinamese, and showed connection with and longing for this ethnic minority background: 'Sometimes I would like to live in a Surinamese family, because of the nice food. Thereby the people are nice and cozy. It is just that my mom isn't nice at all.' Between both interviews, Milan had experienced a new and traumatic event with his mother, which was according

to him an important explanation of change within the last two years. During the second interview, Milan did not mention his Surinamese side and he showed no connection with his ethnic minority background anymore. He narrated the following about ethnicity: 'It (that is, Surinamese) doesn't say anything about me, I am just a Dutch guy with just some background, but I don't feel myself that way.'

By contrast, other foster youth in the sample had strengthened their ties with their birth parents, and as a result thereof showed a fluctuation into the direction of ethnic minority connection. An example, was Hanane. During the first interview, when she was 16, she saw her birth mother regularly. Hanane showed a lot of anger, because her birth mother had not been able to look after her in the past. She turned away from her ethnic-religious identity: 'I don't believe in it (Islam faith). Because [my birth mother] believed that Allah wouldn't allow her to leave my dad, she stayed with him. Then I had to leave.' Two years later she was less angry at her mom. She said that she felt more comfortable with her mom. She had gained a better understanding of her mother's situation in the past, which resulted in more openness concerning the Islamic faith:

(...) I don't expect myself to become a Muslim like her, (referring to her birth mother), but just in my own way, you know. I don't know if I will ever pray five times a day, and I won't fast during Ramadan just by myself. I am open for it, but with her... together.

### **Theme 3: Coping with contradictory ethnicity messages**

During both interviews, the foster youth narrated about contradictory ethnic minority and ethnic majority messages they received from different sources, amongst others by foster parents, birth parents and peers with different ethnic backgrounds, and the (social) media. These messages could also contradict the way foster youth narrated about themselves in terms of ethnicity. All in all these contradictory messages made the youth ambivalent towards their ethnic identification(s).

We observed some fluctuations in time in the way the foster youth coped with contradictory ethnicity messages. Especially those foster youth who showed strong ethnicity ambivalence and confusion during the first interview, mentioned they had grown older, wiser and/ or stronger between both interviews. They

narrated for example not to feel the strong urge of belonging to same-ethnic peers as they did two years before. As a result, they seemed to have become less ambivalent towards ethnicity. For example, Yasmin, narrated during interview one (age 14) about ambivalence concerning her ethnic-religious identity because of expectations from Muslim peers about being 'a good Muslim' which contrasted with the ethnic Dutch socialization she received in the foster home:

I find it very hard, and I still don't know whether I want it, and whether I should join them. (...) I want to learn about being a Muslim, but I'm not sure because today I would say I don't feel like it and I don't want to have anything to do with it, and tomorrow I will say, yeah, I would like to learn more about it.

During the second interview (when 16 years of age) she was not confused about whether she would explore Islamic faith. She had decided to distance herself from being Muslim. Her increased sense of independence and self-confidence seemed to play a role here, as she explained:

Back then, I really searched to belong to something, I really wanted to become a Muslim because I wanted to do good, I think in the eyes of others, and my (birth) family. And now I think: that is not the person I am, and not the person I will become in future.

#### **Theme 4: Sensing to be different in an ethnic majority environment**

During both interviews the foster youth sensed to be different because of living in an ethnic majority environment. As a result, they could for example express a wish to be white, or to have foster parents with a same, or similar skin colour as they had. The intensity of feeling different seemingly did not change between both interviews. However, in foster youth's examples of feeling different, black and curly hair appeared more frequently as a distinguishing ethnicity feature during the second interviews. Liana for example did not refer to her hair during the first interview (12 years of age). However, she talked about how she realized to be different in terms of appearances: 'Sometimes I am startled when I see myself reflected in the mirror, for I look so different..... (silence)'. During the second interview (aged 14), her hair appeared in many examples, when narrating about

herself. She said for example when she described herself: 'I am that girl with that messy curly hair.'

Next, participants mentioned a growing awareness of societal racism and injustice during the second interviews. Foster youth referred to societal discussions about discrimination, the rise of Dutch right wing political parties, international movements like Black Lives Matter, or television series that addressed racial and ethnic inequality in society, like 'When They See Us'. The foster youth said that in the foster families little attention was paid to these societal discussions. Eren narrated during the first interview (when 16 years of age) about discriminative events in the streets by trespassers, who would call him 'a foreigner.' He was aware of discrimination by that time. When aged 18, he talked during the interview about these events in relation to a societal and political debate about ethnicity profiling by the Dutch police force. This seemed to trigger the perception of social injustice against ethnic minorities in his narratives. He narrated for example about himself experiencing to be a victim of ethnic profiling:

When we walked home, police officers seemed to have followed me and my friend. They stopped us and we had to lean to the car, just like this (Eren stands up, and leans with his hands towards the wall). They searched us. We had to empty our bags and pockets. They thought we were burglars and I totally went mad. And you know, that police officer did not even believe that I live here!

## **Theme 5: Exploration of an identity other than ethnic identity**

During both interviews, foster youth were directed towards exploration and/ or commitment of a 'humanitarian' identity or a social identity other than ethnic identity, which was to some extent perceived as additionally, or as an alternative to ethnic identity. The foster youth would for instance explicitly call themselves 'a human being' rather than being labeled in terms of ethnicity. They could also call themselves by their first name, or told to create their own identity by doing it 'my own way'. Humanitarianism occurred stronger in the interviews as an alternative identity during interview two, which may show that the foster youth had further explored this identity. An example is shown by Hanane (16 years old). During the interview she was confused whether she belonged to her Moroccan peers, whether she could call herself Dutch, but also whether she had a wish to

be labeled at all. She doubtedly said: "I am Dutch. I am Moroccan . . . I don't know who I am". Two years later, she said firmly: 'I am just Hanane,' when we talked about how she would mention herself in ethnicity terms. She thereby pronounced her first name with an ethnic Dutch accent. However, she also seemed to switch between different ethnic-cultural worlds she was part of, because, after a short silence, she continued: 'but for Moroccans, I am Hanane, (laughs)' whereby she pronounced her first name with a Moroccan-Dutch accent.

Some foster youth had developed an alternative social identity, while turning themselves away of identities around ethnicity. For example, Ana who was 15 years of age during the first interview showed no connection with her ethnic background during both interviews. During the first interview she said: 'I don't know, I am just not occupied with my background or that kind of things. Just with friends, and school.' In two years of time she made a shift to an alternative social identity, as an active member of a Dutch political party: 'Politics. The (name of a Dutch political party) tells just in one word what I am.' The example of Ana shows, that she found herself an affiliation where she belonged. However, the way Ana positioned herself to her ethnic background did not change.

## Towards a theoretical model about ethnic identity development of foster youth

The outcomes of our study are summarised in figure 1, which presents a theoretical model about how transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth develop their ethnic identity. In line with the existing literature about ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), our study shows that ethnicity messages by family members, peers and society influence the ethnic identity of foster youth. Central in these ethnic identity processes of foster youth seems to be their sense of, or search for belonging (Walker, 2015). Similar to the study about transculturally placed adoptees of Manzi et al. (2014), the foster youth in our study showed that a sense of belonging to the ethnic majority foster family contributed to their ethnic majority identity. Our study adds to this knowledge that foster youth's sense of, or search for belonging towards their birth parents influenced their ethnic minority identity. This is in line with studies of Boyle (2017) and Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe (2006), who studied foster children's identity, but had no focus on ethnic identity. Boyle (2017) showed that experienced connection with the birth family network and a collaborative approach between birth families and foster

carers impacted outcomes on foster children's identity positively. In contrary, but also in line with our findings, Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe (2006) discovered that re-experienced neglect and rejection by their birth parents, impacted foster children's identity negatively.

Secondly, the results show that the way how foster youth can cope with oppositional ethnicity messages (Benet- Martinez & Haratitos, 2005) seems to be important for their ethnic identity. The ethnicity messages foster youth received by foster parents, birth parents, peers and society may be contradictory, and can be experienced by foster youth as oppositional, and difficult to integrate into their narratives of identity (Benet- Martinez & Haratitos, 2005). This may lead to externalized behavioral problems (Manzi et al., 2014). Our study shows that when foster youth are able to cope with these oppositional messages, they can better process them into the stories they tell about their of ethnicity.

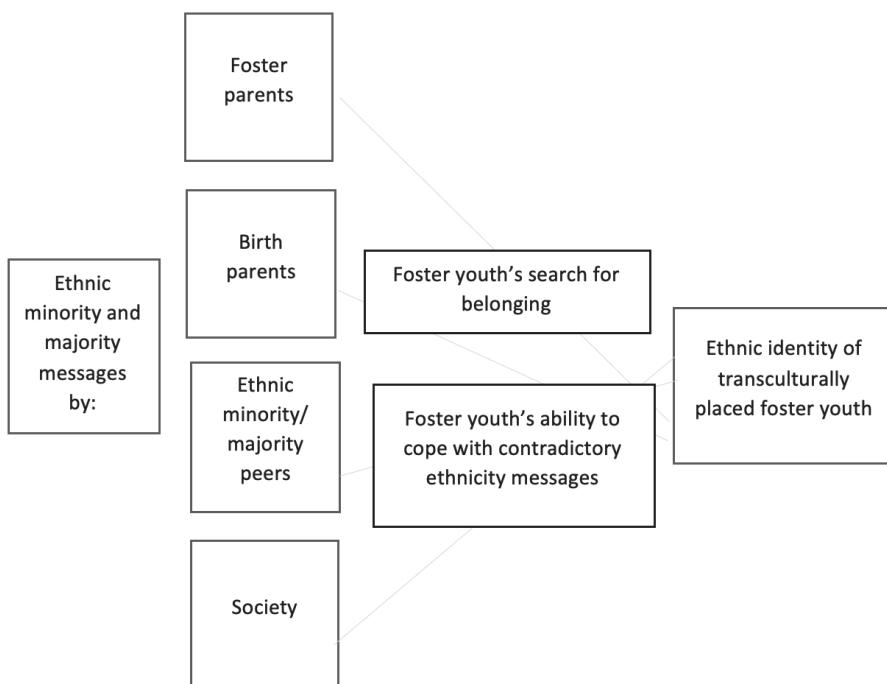


Figure 1: Theoretical model of ethnic identity development of foster youth

## Discussion

We conducted a qualitative longitudinal study about the ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth in The Netherlands, and addressed the following research question: What ethnic identity fluctuations are present in Dutch transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth's narratives, and how did their ethnic identity fluctuate during a two year time period?

We recognised fluctuations in foster youth's narratives of ethnic identity. These fluctuations included connection with the ethnic majority backgrounds of their foster parents, and/ or connection, or losses concerning the ethnic minority backgrounds of their birth parents. We thereby showed foster youth who would explore an identity additionally to, or instead of ethnic identity. We furthermore described foster youth's narratives about becoming older and wiser, and therefore more able to cope with receiving contradictory ethnicity messages in their daily lives. Lastly, we saw foster youth who had become more aware of their position of being an ethnic minority in an ethnic majority society.

The study of Manzi et al. (2014) related the ethnic minority identity of transculturally adoptees to the way as to how adoptive ethnic majority parents pay attention to ethnic minority socialization. In our study however, especially birth parents played a role in the foster youth's ethnic minority identity development. The relationships youth had with their birth parents, even when they did not meet each other on a regular basis, influenced the foster youth's ethnic minority identity fluctuations; either negatively or positively. The different outcomes between our study and that of Manzi et al. (2014), can be explained by the fact that in contrast to the context of adoption, in foster care, birth parents and their children are more likely to stay in contact with each other (Burns, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2016).

Second, worldwide societal discussions and movements have risen which address marginalized statuses of ethnic minorities in ethnic majority societies (Rickford, 2016). These discussions and movements influenced foster youth's narratives of ethnic minority identity, especially awareness of their ethnic minority position in ethnic majority society. In African-American families in the United States, beyond the context of foster care, these events could have led to more active ethnic-racial socialization practices at home (Threlfall, 2018). According to the foster youth in our study, little attention was paid to these matters within the foster families. This

suggests that foster parents did not actively address them, and they therefore not actively influenced the way foster youth thought about, or dealt with these societal matters.

Some foster youth told they became older and wiser over time, and could according to them better cope with contradictory ethnicity messages. An alternative explanation may however be the role trauma played in their lives. Tyrell et al. (2019) showed that experienced trauma impacts the ethnic identity of foster youth negatively. Some foster youth in our study had received professional guidance or treatment to overcome past traumas between both interviews. This might have influenced them feeling less confused due to receiving contradictory ethnicity matters. This explanation however remains rather speculative. Although the topic of "therapy for trauma" appeared as a conversation subject during the interviews, this was not linked to ethnicity by the participants.

Last our study may show results on ethnic identity centrality (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), under which the position ethnicity had in the foster youth's narratives is understood. Ethnicity was not the first subject foster youth thought about, when they took photos as preparation for the interviews. Foster youth thereby showed a wish not to be labelled in terms of ethnicity in their narratives, or they searched for alternative social identities additional to or instead of ethnic identity. These outcomes may be in line with a study from Butler- Sweet (2011) who showed that for transcultural adoptees from the United States, ethnicity was not centred in their identity narratives.

## **Strengths and limitations**

Because literature about how to conduct a longitudinal qualitative analysis is scarce, we chose to combine the questions as suggested by Saldaña (2002) and the method of concept mapping of Derrington (2019) in analyzing the results between cases. We thus provided and illustrated clear steps of conducting a longitudinal qualitative analysis, which contributes to future research and methodological discussions.

In longitudinal qualitative research, the most frequently mentioned ethnical issue is the relation a researcher builds with the participants (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Calman, Brunton & Molasiottis, 2013; Hermanowicz, 2013; Taylor, 2015; Thomson

& Holland, 2003). It is for instance important to be aware of more intrusion in people's lives, and distortion of experience due to repeated contact (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Thomson & Holland, 2003). The interviewer was aware of this ethical issue, and therefore took every step needed for providing clear information about the study and checked repeatedly for approval of the participants before each interview started. However, a tension existed in approaching and interviewing foster youth about their ethnic backgrounds, while some foster youth expressed a wish not to be named in terms of ethnicity. Thereby, because of participating in our research, the foster youth might have become more aware of themselves as being members of ethnic minorities, which possibly influenced their narratives.

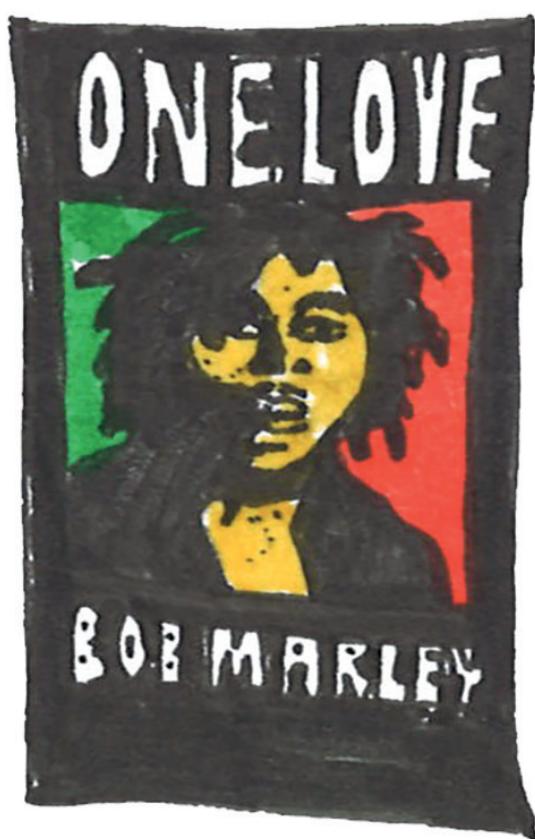
Furthermore, the second interviews were partly tailor-made. The interviewer referred to quotes and narratives from the same participant, which were dated from the first interview. This shows a strength of our study. The researcher could build trust while referring to past conversations, by expressing that words 'matter' and were unforgotten (Balmer & Richards, 2017).

## Future research and implications for practice

After further investigation, programs should be developed with a focus on how to guide birth parents and their children in building or strengthening a positive bond, where foster youth can safely develop their ethnic minority and majority identity.

Next, further research should be conducted on what foster youth need to better process contradictory ethnicity messages into their narratives of identity. The role of trauma, and how it may intersect with foster youth's ethnic identity, should be included in this research. When more knowledge is available on this matter, foster youth may be better guided in coping with these mechanisms, which may possibly make them less ambivalent, as a result of contradictory (ethnicity) messages.

Last, societal and political discourses about the positions of ethnic minorities in society seem to influence foster youth's narratives about their ethnic identity. Foster care agencies and foster parents should actively address these issues, so guidance is offered to their foster youth on how to incorporate these discourses in their narratives of ethnic identity.



# 6

## CHAPTER

General Discussion

## General discussion

This dissertation aimed to explore the ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth in the Netherlands. I investigated their ethnic identity, what difficulties they face, and what role foster parents, birth parents, peers, and (social) media play in these processes. The dissertation also focused on ethnic socialization, as it has proved to play a pivotal role in the ethnic identity formation of children and youth (Hughes et al., 2008; Huguley et al., 2019). We addressed two main research questions:

1. How is ethnic identity constructed in transculturally placed minority foster youth's narratives, and how does it fluctuate over time?
2. What ethnic socialization do foster parents provide and what ethnic socialization do transculturally placed foster youth receive by their foster parents, and how do both perspectives interact?

To answer the two main research questions, I conducted a systematic literature review and three qualitative analyses: a qualitative thematic analysis, a qualitative dyadic comparative analysis, and a qualitative longitudinal analysis. In this final section, I discuss the main findings, and the methodology that was used throughout this dissertation. I suggest recommendations for future research and practice.

## Discussion of main findings

The main findings of this dissertation are concentrated around three topics: ethnic identity, ethnic socialization, and ethnicity bias. I summarise the main findings of each topic and discuss them.

### Ethnic identity

Foster children who are transculturally placed can become disconnected from their ethnic minority backgrounds. They can furthermore show relatively high ethnic identity fluctuations compared to ethnic minority youth who grow up with their birth parents, and they can become aware of their ethnicity because of experiencing differences in appearances between themselves and their caregivers. These were the results of a systematic literature review (Chapter 2). The first empirical study of this dissertation (Chapter 3) thematically analysed interviews

with transculturally placed foster youth. Foster youth experienced ethnic identity ambivalence due to contradictory ethnicity messages given mainly by their foster parents, birth parents, and/ or peers. Foster youth also showed ethnic identity losses due to intersectional mechanisms of minority ethnicity and the identity of being a foster child. However, when they felt a connection with their ethnic background, for example, through their birth parents or by visiting the countries where their parents or grandparents were born, foster youth experienced feelings of ethnic minority belonging.

Outcomes of a longitudinal analysis based on foster youth's interviews (chapter 5) show that in their search for belonging, foster youth explored an ethnic majority identity related to their sense of belonging to their foster parents, and/ or an ethnic minority identity related to a sense of belonging to their birth parents. Furthermore, they searched for an alternative identity, other than ethnic identity. Last, foster youth were better able to process contradictory messages about ethnicity given by foster parents, birth parents, and peers. The explanation they gave was that they had grown older and wiser over time.

All in all, transculturally placed foster youth deal with complex ethnic identity processes. In their search for ethnicity belonging, they are confronted with a mechanism of intersecting marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) and contradictory ethnic identity messages (Manzi et al., 2014; Rocca & Brewer, 2002). Both themes refer to foster youth being approached as "the other." For instance, the youth experienced social exclusion by their ethnic Dutch peers because of being an ethnic majority and/ or in foster care, and they additionally experienced social exclusion from their same-ethnic peers, who reacted to their ways of acting or being "Dutch" as a result of living with a foster family. Thereby, according to Lesane-Brown (2006), ethnicity becomes increasingly important when youth become aware of differences between themselves and people with different ethnic backgrounds. The fact that foster youth looked different in terms of skin colour and hair compared to their foster family members increased their sense of feeling different. This was triggered when they saw themselves for instance in photos among their foster family members or when other people (peers at school, strangers in the supermarket) commented (which could also be discriminatory) on them being or looking different. These mechanisms frustrated their search for ethnic belonging to the same or similar ethnic group, which is essential for one's ethnic identity (Verkuyten, 2018, p. 79).

In the data, a possible relatedness between trauma and ethnic identity was found. Several studies have indicated that foster youth may suffer trauma due to harmful and unsafe birth family homes (Dovran, Arefjord & Haugland, 2012; Mitchell, 2016; Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010) and negative experiences with out-of-home placements (Mitchell, 2016). Tyrell et al. (2019) show that foster children may be less occupied with their ethnic backgrounds when they experience trauma. Walker (2015) posits that foster youth need to address unresolved trauma, process feelings of rejection, grief, and losses because of being placed out of their homes and form a coherent sense of themselves before establishing a safe sense of belonging. Foster youth's history of traumatic events played a role in our studies. The foster youth who had received therapy to overcome past traumas were less ambivalent towards ethnicity, which may show that trauma therapy and ethnic identity are related. Thereby, the role of trauma influenced foster youth to position themselves towards their ethnic minority backgrounds. We saw examples in the data where a mechanism of 'culturalization of behaviour' (Eliassi, 2015) occurred. Foster youth linked their trauma related to aggressive, abusive and/or neglecting behaviour of their birth parents to their minority ethnic backgrounds. For example, they labelled domestic violence by their father in ethnicity terms (culturalization of behaviour). As a result, foster youth tended to label all males of their ethnic background as aggressive and distanced themselves from their ethnic minority backgrounds.

## Ethnic socialization by foster parents and birth parents

### ***Ethnic socialization by foster parents***

In this study, transculturally placed foster youth received little ethnic minority socialization by their foster parents. The systematic literature review (Chapter 2) showed that ethnic majority foster parents may not always possess the skills and knowledge to socialise foster youth ethnically. They therefore need to be cultural competent and cultural receptive, in order to encourage their foster youth's ethnic identity development. Chapters 3 and 4 validated this and showed that most foster youth received little ethnic socialization by their foster parents. Nevertheless, foster youth and foster parents mentioned examples of ethnic minority socialization, such as learning the ethnic minority language of the foster youth together. Foster parents hoped this would give their foster children a sense

of ethnic belonging. The dyadic analysis (Chapter 4) compared the accounts of foster parents and their youth about ethnic socialization, and showed that foster parents' prime focus was to provide a safe and stable foster home for their foster youth, and not ethnic socialization. The data included foster parents who paid no attention to ethnicity, humanitarian foster parents, foster parents who showed ethnicity ambivalence, and foster parents who actively paid attention to ethnicity. However, in their narratives, most foster parents showed ambivalence about the ethnicity of their foster children. Although they thought that ethnicity was important in their children's lives, they did not know how to address these ethnic differences at home.

Chapter 5 showed that foster youth had developed an increasing awareness of being an ethnic minority in a majority society in two years of time. In the last decade, the media and politics have paid increasing attention to the position of ethnic minorities in a majority society (Rickford, 2016). This was reflected in the foster youth's narratives. They talked about Black Lives Matter and ethnic profiling by the police. Foster parents seemed to pay little attention to these events. These outcomes show that youth's increasing awareness of being an ethnic minority in a society where discrimination occurs might have gone hand in hand with more societal messages and were not triggered by interventions from foster parents or foster care agencies (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

When reflecting on these findings, it seemed that there was little attention for ethnic socialization in Dutch foster families. A possible explanation is that ethnically socialising foster youth can be a complex balancing act for foster parents – a balance between sameness and being different. They strive for sameness as one family while they at the same time experience ethnicity differences. An underlying question is how foster parents can build a sense of belonging with their foster child when they would emphasize these differences (Walker, 2015). They also have to find a balance between safety and culture (Berrick, 2018). Although most foster parents valued ethnicity, they focused on providing a safe and caring place for troubled youth. This left them little space to pay attention to the ethnic-cultural backgrounds of their foster youth.

***The role of birth parents in ethnically socialising foster youth***

The results of the systematic literature review (Chapter 2) showed that birth parents served as connectors to the ethnic minority background of foster youth by giving culturally specific knowledge and skills to their children. This was in line with the results of Chapter 4, where foster parents talked about how they recognised the birth parents or the birth network as the most important connectors to the foster youth's birth culture. Outcomes of the foster youth interviews (Chapters 3 and 5) showed that birth family members could help to develop foster youth's ethnic identities if present in their lives. When foster youth talked (see Chapter 5) about improved and positive relationships with their birth family, they were optimistic about their narrative of minority ethnicity. In contrast, when they talked about a negative and worsened relation with their birth parents, this negatively impacted their ethnic minority identity. These results are in line with Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe (2006), who investigated how contact with birth parents affected adolescents in foster care. When foster youth re-experience neglect and rejection by their birth parents, this impacted their identity negatively. However, the authors (Moyers, Farmer, and Libscombe, 2006) did not focus on ethnicity in their results on foster youth's identity.

Chapters 3 and 5 presented foster youth who received different or contradictory messages about ethnicity from their foster parents compared to their birth parents. These messages caused ambivalence and/ or confusion. However, when birth parents and foster parents collaborated in the ethnic socialization of foster youth (Chapter 4), foster youth were less ambivalent about their ethnic identity. In these cases, the foster parents actively developed an open relationship with the birth parents and involved them in ethnically socialising the foster youth. Several studies (Boyle 2017) proved that birth parents and foster parents who collaborate in the child's upbringing support foster children in developing their identity. Outcomes of this dissertation show that the same is true for ethnic identity.

The results of this dissertation show underlying issues of foster youth's loyalty towards birth parents and foster parents (Dansey, John, & Shbero, 2018). As foster youth do not live with their birth parents, they have to 'acculturate' into a new family, a new home (Mitchell. 2016), and a new ethnic-cultural context (Berry et al., 2006). If they see their birth parents regularly, they tend to receive different messages from their foster family and their birth family members about ethnic

minority and majority backgrounds. This can lead to a loyalty conflict. Some foster youth managed to switch between the ethnic-cultural frames of their foster parents and birth parents (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002), whereas others experienced ethnic-cultural conflict (Benet-Martinez & Haratitos, 2005).

## Ethnicity bias

The literature review found several articles on ethnicity bias in society and in the foster family network. As a result, foster youth could express a wish not to be different than others (Chapter 2). The thematic analysis (Chapter 3) and dyadic analysis (Chapter 4) reported foster youth talking about discriminative events at school or on the streets. Foster youth also mentioned receiving biased messages through the media, for example, by right-wing politicians. These events could make them wish that they were not different.

The studies in this dissertation showed that foster parents took a passive stance on discrimination. The literature review (Chapter 2) reported foster parents who lacked the skills to guide their foster children who experience bias in society. Chapter 3 described foster youth who mentioned that their foster parents paid little attention to discrimination. The dyadic analysis (Chapter 4) showed that foster youth and foster parents did not seem to talk about discriminative events. Although foster parents reported being aware of discrimination in their foster youth's lives, they paid little attention to it in conversations with their foster youth. Foster parents mentioned examples of what they perceived as discriminatory remarks by other foster family members towards their foster youth. However, foster youth did not comment on this.

Foster parents in our sample could label or explain in their perception negative or bad behaviour of their foster youth in terms of ethnicity. For example, a foster parent whose foster youth was late for school every day, labelled his behaviour as 'Caribbean.' In other words, foster parents could culturalise their foster youth' behaviour (Eliassi 2015). The foster parents showed hesitation when mentioning it, which may show unease or difficulty with the subject.

When further reflecting on these outcomes, there might be a 'veiled silence' around discrimination in foster families. This means that a phenomenon is present and experienced but outvoted by other conversation subjects and avoided (Mazzei,

2003). Many foster parents did not know how to address discrimination or felt uneasy because they belonged to an ethnic majority group (Barn & Kirton, 2012). As a result, foster youth were reluctant to talk about discrimination because they suspected or experienced that their foster parents could not understand it. Another possible reason for foster parents to avoid talking about discrimination might be that they wished to protect their foster children from negative societal messages, which may be an outcome of preparation for bias (Hughes et al., 2009).

## **Methodological reflections**

I now discuss the methods used for this dissertation. First, I focus on how quality criteria in the qualitative studies were met and then discuss the sample, ethical considerations, and photo-elicitation. Finally, I discuss the qualitative dyadic comparative and the qualitative longitudinal study.

### **Methodological rigor in qualitative research**

Methodological rigor was established by following Flick (2014, pp. 182-193), Forero et al. (2018), Lincoln and Guba (1986), Mortelmans (2009, pp. 427-450), and Nowell et al. (2017). We strived to establish the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the three qualitative empirical studies. We established credibility by discussing and piloting the instruments in the field of foster care before the empirical fieldwork started. I spent time in each foster family to get to know each other and stored all data in a safe environment. Dependability was established by providing rich descriptions of all the steps during the research processes. Confirmability was established by holding reflexive meetings with the research team on a four-weekly basis and applying data, methods, and investigators triangulation. Transferability was addressed by using a purposeful sampling approach.

Furthermore, when coding each group of interviews, a saturation point was reached. The last interviews of each group (foster parents and foster youth) provided very few new codes, only slight refinements of the codes obtained from the other interviews. However, the heterogeneity of the sample makes transferability to different settings or ethnic minority groups difficult and shows a limitation of this dissertation. As this dissertation studies the perspective of a relatively small and heterogeneous group of foster youth and their foster parents

in Dutch non-kinship foster care, 'constructed' knowledge is specifically related to this group. However, this also shows the strength of this dissertation because it examines a small and socially marginalized group whose perspectives are often underinvestigated in academic research (Harding, 2015).

## Participation

Foster families were selected from the databases of nine foster care agencies. One out of nine selected families participated in this research. There are a few possible reasons which may have caused this small response. Foster care workers functioned as gatekeepers and were asked to hand over the information letters to the selected foster families. However, some of these workers said that they were not interested in this research, and therefore would not cooperate and approach the selected foster families. Some foster care workers also thought the foster youth were too vulnerable to participate or identified a current risk of breakdown of placement in a particular foster family. Also, when foster care workers approached families, most decided not to participate in the study. The main reasons included a lack of time or motivation and the vulnerability of the foster youth.

## Ethical discussions in family-based research

In qualitative longitudinal and dyadic family studies, a researcher enters the family homes at least twice and speaks with several family members. The interviewer tries to establish a relationship with participants (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Calman, Brunton, & Molasiottis, 2013; Hermanowicz, 2013; Taylor, 2015; Thomson & Holland, 2013). Below I discuss three aspects of the relation between the interviewer and the interviewee: the power balance between the interviewee and the interviewer, the possibility of socially constructing ethnic identity narratives through qualitative interviews, and the role of trust when presenting and discussing results.

First, there were power differences between the interviewer and the interviewee. Foster youth are a vulnerable group of young people who have experienced negative relationships with adults, for example, by abusive or neglecting birth parents (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010; Strijker & Knorth, 2007). They have been taken out of their birth homes and placed into a foster home or residential foster care by child protection services, which traumatized them (Mitchell, 2017).

We can assume that childcare workers did not always sufficiently involve them during the decision-making process about their placements (Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018). These memories and experiences could have played a role during the interviews with youth because an unknown adult researcher entered their homes. Although the researcher was not involved in decisions about (future) placements, we approached the youth very carefully before and during the interviews (Sinclair, 2004). To (partly) overcome power differences, foster youth were asked to participate in the research voluntarily. They were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that they would never be obliged to talk about certain matters or subjects. The interviewer tried to establish a shared and egalitarian conversation by talking with the participants and not about them (Balmer & Richards, 2017).

Because the concept of ethnic identity is socially constructed (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), it could have been partially co-constructed during the interviews. The researcher asked the foster youth to reflect on ethnic matters concerning their identity. There were very few signs that this construction of ethnic identity took place. At the end of the interview, one of the foster youth said that she had not realized that ethnicity was important to her. Equally, one of the foster parents reported that their foster youth suddenly became more aware of experienced discriminative events. The foster parent questioned whether this had been by participating in this study.

Trust plays an essential role in qualitative research (Balmer & Richards, 2017). During the interviews, most participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly. We had agreed in advance to respect anonymity. However, presenting the results in longitudinal or dyadic analyses with small samples could increase recognisability. So, I had to find a balance between presenting the results authentically and limiting the chances of participants being recognised (Taylor, 2015). This was by instance done by showing the outcomes of the comparative analysis between dyads and not presenting specific details of foster families, which we obtained from the analysis within dyads.

## Photo-elicitation methods

Following Collier (1967) and Harper (2002), I used photo-elicitation during the interviews with the foster youth. According to Packard (2008) and Zoe Smith &

Woodward (1999), pictures bridge the lifeworlds between a researcher and the participants, mainly when cultural differences between both exist. This was the case in this dissertation. Thereby, photo-elicitation gives participants agency during the interviews (Harper, 2002). This was established by structuring the interviews by using photos taken by the youth. Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller (2005) suggested that taking photographs would be more interesting and attractive for adolescents instead of only talking to a researcher and could make the process of recruiting foster youth easier. Because recruiting foster families for this research was rather difficult, we cannot conclude whether photo-elicitation was an effective strategy. One of the foster youth withdrew from the study because he thought the use of photos was too 'childish'.

Two weeks before the interviews started, the researcher visited the youth in their homes, explained the photo assignment, and asked if there were any questions (Rose, 2016, p. 319). Foster youth took photos of objects, people, events, or places that were personally of great importance to them and/or with which they could identify. In other words, foster youth were not specifically asked to take ethnicity-related pictures. They took photos of their bedrooms, mobile phones, friends, families (birth as well as foster family members), pets, hobbies, sports activities, music, and food. The study therefore might also show outcomes on ethnic identity centrality (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Ethnicity was not the first thing foster youth thought about when taking photos about themselves. This is in line with outcomes of a study by Butler-Sweet (2011), who showed that ethnicity was not centred in the identity narratives for transcultural adoptees from the United States. Nevertheless, when the interviewer asked follow-up questions relating to ethnicity in an already ongoing conversation about the photos, ethnicity played an important role in most of the foster youth's lives. For example, a photo of a boy in combat sports gear led to a conversation about respect as an important value of that particular sport, followed by a narrative about treating each other respectfully, and personal experiences of social exclusion based on being an ethnic minority in a majority-minority society.

Croghan et al. (2008) suggested that the use of pictures encourages participants to talk about sensitive matters. This was the case in this dissertation. First, the images allowed both parties to be silent in a natural way. When foster youth took time to choose a photo during the interviews, there was some time to rethink

or reflect about things said or just time to be quiet, sit and wait. These silences seemed to create an atmosphere of ease. Second, while the researcher and the youth looked at the photos and talked, they did not feel obliged to look each other in the eyes. So, structuring the conversation by using the photos led to a more comfortable situation, which stimulated the youth to speak openly and talk about sensitive topics.

Although the use of photos was important in collecting data, we did not analyse them. Perhaps this was a missed opportunity because photos reveal a different reality than talk (Rose, 2016, p. 321). A reason was to preserve the anonymity of the youth. A second reason was that the photo-elicitation assignment and most of the photos taken had no focus on ethnicity. Because this dissertation focuses on ethnicity, we analysed the interviews and not the photos. However, an analysis of both the interviews and photos would be interesting for a follow-up study. It would provide a broader look at the foster youth's different personal and social identities (Rose, 2016, p. 321).

## **Qualitative dyadic comparative analysis**

The qualitative dyadic study enabled me to study the accounts of the foster youth and their foster parents, and how both perspectives interact (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003; Sands & Roer-String, 2006; Van Parys et al., 2017). I encountered some challenges during this process, which could be linked back to the literature (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Reczek, 2014; Ummel & Achille, 2016). First, the interviews with foster youth and foster parents were structured differently. Both interviews addressed the same topics around ethnic identity and ethnic socialization, but the questions and structure of the interviews were adapted to each group of participants. Photos and a topic list were used during the foster youth interviews, and only topic lists in the foster parent interviews, resulting in different data within each foster family. Although it was more difficult to compare them, this was resolved by clustering codes of each interview in conversation themes, which were compared within, and later, between dyads (Flick, 2014; Van Parys et al., 2017). Furthermore, the interviews were held with both members of each dyad separately from each other. This was particularly important because sensitive matters were addressed whereby the main goal was to enable each participant to tell their personal story. Nevertheless, several authors (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010;

Reczek, 2014; Ummel & Achille, 2016) point out that the other member of the dyad is always virtually present, which may influence the participant's answers. The same interviewer held all interviews. This could be a limitation as the interviewer might have been influenced by the first interview within the same dyad and might have approached the other family member less openly. The research team was aware of this possible limitation and addressed and it actively, and I kept my experiences, thoughts, and reflections by in a logbook.

When conducting a dyadic analysis, it is important to reflect on the interviewee's perspective as the analysis will be more likely be structured from that perspective (Harden et al., 2010). The analysis started from the foster parent's perspective because the main goal was to study the ethnic socialization messages they gave, how the youth received these messages, and how both perspectives interact. Because of this starting position, the manuscript focused on how foster parents positioned themselves towards the ethnic backgrounds of their foster youth. Nevertheless, the interviews were labelled and analysed separately (Ummel & Achille, 2016), and both perspectives were compared continuously. In this way, it was possible to clearly describe how ethnic socialization in foster families occurs in a mutual relationship between foster youth and their foster parents.

This study applied dyadic comparative analysis and combined the steps described in Flick (2014), Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, and Gillies (2003), Sands and Roer-String (2006), and Van Parys et al. (2017). This methodology is innovative and provides an example for future researchers in this field.

## Qualitative longitudinal analysis

Foster youth were interviewed twice with two years between both interviews, to discern potentially meaningful changes (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2013) in the ethnic identity of foster youth. This longitudinal approach enabled me to explore how and why their ethnic identity changes over time (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003).

The first interviews included ethnicity narratives of 20 foster youth. The thematic analysis shows the results (Chapter 3 of this dissertation). For the second interviews, conducted two years later, data were collected from the same group of participants (Balmer & Richards, 2017; Hermanowicz, 2013). However, only half of

the group participated in the second round due to negative psychosocial well-being or lack of time or interest. Therefore, our longitudinal analysis included ten foster youth. Although the perspectives of the other half of the group of participants were missing, we obtained valuable insights on how the ethnic identity of foster youth might fluctuate.

In qualitative longitudinal studies, designs can change within the process (Balmer & Richards, 2017). At both interviews the same topic list and the same photo-elicitation method were used. Thereby, the second interviews were tailor-made. The interviewer recalled quotes or narratives from the first interview, and the interviewees were asked to reflect and respond to their former selves. This qualitative approach allowed me to analyse any changes that might have occurred in their ethnic identity. It thereby served the primary goal of this particular study.

I used the codes derived during the thematic analysis (Chapter 3) as a starting point for the coding process of the second interviews. New codes, like hair colour and texture as a distinguishing aspect of ethnic minority identity, were added to address the newly obtained data openly. I then compared ethnic identity differences and similarities within and between cases (Calman, Brunton, & Molasiottis, 2013). As a last step, I used framing, and descriptive and analytic questions (Saldaña, 2002), and concept mapping (Derrington, 2019) to compare between cases. Research on how to conduct a qualitative longitudinal analysis is scarce. This manuscript contributes to future research and methodological discussions about longitudinal qualitative studies by defining clear steps in our longitudinal qualitative analysis.

## **Recommendations for future research and implications for practice**

Ethnic minority foster youth have at least two marginalised identities (Crenshaw, 1989), a foster child identity and ethnic minority identity, which may intersect with trauma experiences (Tyrell et al., 2019). Future research should examine what this vulnerable group of young people needs to develop a strong identity that includes their ethnic identity.

Another theme that occurred in all of the studies, and has implications for practice, was a sense of belonging. Foster youth experienced rejection and at least one out-of-home placement in their lives (Goemans et al., 2016; Mitchell 2016; 2017). As a

result, they wonder who they belong to (Singer, Uzozie, & Zeijlmans, 2012). In this dissertation, I studied foster youth who were searching for a sense of belonging and were confronted with several contradictory messages, including ethnicity rejection and acceptance messages. Foster parents and foster care workers therefore need to guide foster youth through these complex processes in their search for (ethnicity) belonging. More research on the guidance of foster children is needed.

Foster youth's ethnic identity seems to be influenced by their relationship with their birth parents and how their foster parents and birth parents cooperate in (ethnic) socialization. Future studies should examine how these relationships can be strengthened since they are likely to influence a strong ethnic identity formation. Some studies show that when birth parents and foster parents collaborate in a child's upbringing, they support foster children in developing a dual identity (Boyle, 2017). The results of these studies require further investigation in the light of the dual ethnic identity development of foster youth.

Yuval-Davis (2006) describes identity development as an ongoing process of belonging and longing to belong, whereby specific and repetitive socialization practices related to social and cultural spaces are crucial. The foster youth in this dissertation seemed to lack specific and especially repetitive ethnic-cultural socialization from their primary carers. This study underpins that further investigation is needed to study cultural competence for foster parents, as this may form a basis for future training and reflection programmes (Langrehr, Thomas, & Morgan, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Montgomery, 2019; Zhang & Pinderhughes, 2019).

Cultural competence firstly refers to ethnic majority adoptive or foster parents' ethnicity awareness (Lee et al., 2018). This study shows that foster parents may not always be aware of the ethnicity-related issues of their foster youth or of their personal ethnicity bias. Setting up programs for foster parents, so they can discuss ethnicity-related matters could be effective.

Cultural competence secondly includes foster parent's knowledge and skills to expose their ethnic minority children to their birth culture and enlarge their social capital (Barn, 2018). This dissertation has discussed several ethnic socialization practices. However, most foster parents viewed the birth parents as the most important connectors to the birth culture of foster youth and tried to involve

them in the (ethnic) socialization of the foster youth. Therefore, we recommend that parents who foster youth with different ethnic backgrounds meet each other regularly to learn from good practices and discuss the problems of ethnically socialising their foster youth.

Cultural competence thirdly refers to foster parent's skills to prepare foster youth to deal with discrimination and racial bias in society (Langrehr, Thomas, & Morgan, 2016). The study showed that a veiled silence exists around discrimination in foster families. This silence implies that foster youth may not be sufficiently prepared to deal with messages of exclusion based on ethnicity. Therefore, future research can examine how we can help ethnic majority parents to discuss ethnicity bias with their foster youth. However, foster youth should not develop negative perceptions of others' evaluations of the ethnic group (public regard) (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), which may negatively impact their ethnic identity (Hughes, 2009).

Cultural competence of foster parents fourthly addresses cultural receptivity, which refers to the ability of ethnic majority foster parents to have positive, learning, and open interactions about ethnicity with foster youth (Brown et al., 2009; Coakley & Gruber, 2015; Daniel, 2011). Most of the foster parents in this study were unsure about how to address ethnicity issues openly. Foster parents may need guidance to gain cultural receptivity skills, which should be developed and provided by the foster care agencies.

Dutch foster care is responsible for the wellbeing of many youth with ethnic minority backgrounds. Therefore it should be one of its main aims to recognise and help these youth discover who they are and to whom they belong. In foster families, these youth should be given explicit possibilities and opportunities to explore and express their ethnic identities openly. A strong ethnic identity will promote their well-being and help them live a life where they experience a sense of belonging.





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# **SUMMARY**

## Summary

In the Netherlands, family foster care is considered a preferred setting for children removed from their homes compared to residential care. Because foster youth with ethnic minority backgrounds are overrepresented in the Dutch foster care system, and non-kinship foster parents with ethnic minority backgrounds are scarce, transcultural placements occur frequently in Dutch foster care. The question is how being transculturally placed influences foster youth's ethnic identity. Following Umaña-Taylor et al., (2014), we define ethnic identity as a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes individuals have about their ethnic group memberships, as well as the processes by which the beliefs and attitudes develop over time. Ethnic identity is positively related to psychosocial functioning, academic and mental health outcomes. This implies that not being able to sufficiently explore one's ethnic identity may be problematic, particularly during adolescence, when identity formation becomes a major developmental task. This might especially impact transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth, who are vulnerable because of a history of abuse and neglect and being placed out of home. However, no scientific knowledge existed about the ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster children and youth within the Dutch context yet. The aim of this dissertation was to investigate the ethnic identity of transculturally placed ethnic minority foster youth in the Netherlands. We also focussed on ethnic socialization, as this has proved to play a pivotal role in the ethnic identity formation of children and youth.

**Chapter 2** provided an overview of the existing empirical literature about ethnic identity and ethnic socialization in foster care. The fourteen included studies showed that ethnic minority foster children may be disconnected from their cultural backgrounds. They furthermore showed relatively high ethnic identity losses and fluctuations. Foster children thereby experienced a sense to be different because of being confronted with physical appearances between themselves and their foster parents and received biased messages on race and ethnicity which could include messages given by their foster parents. The review also showed that birth parents may serve as connectors with foster children' s birth culture. Foster parents who were culturally competent, paid efforts towards participating and engaging their foster youth in activities that promote children' s cultural development, and taught their foster youth in dealing with discrimination

are perceived as important in the process of ethnic identity development of ethnic minority foster children.

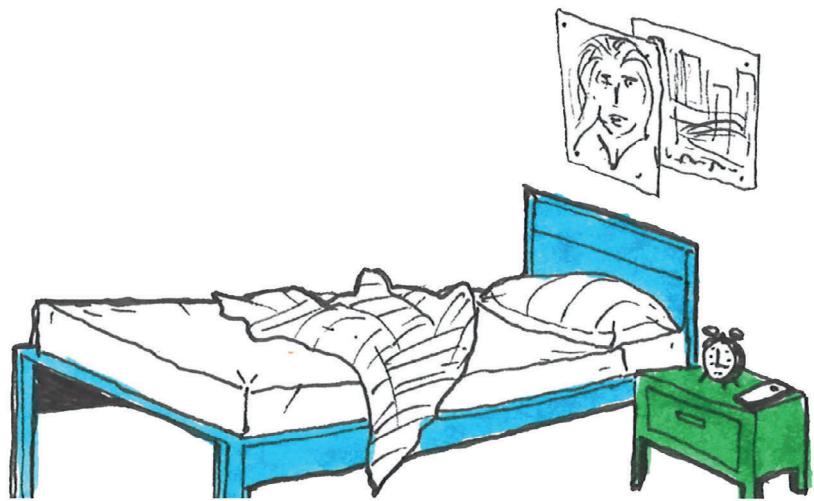
**Chapter 3** explored outcomes of a thematic analysis based on twenty foster youth's narratives about ethnic identity. The thematic analysis revealed patterns of foster youth's ethnic identity complexity. Foster youth may receive contradictory messages by foster parents, birth parents, and peers concerning ethnicity belonging. These contradictory messages led to ethnic identity ambivalence and confusion in the foster youth's narratives. Ethnic identity and the identity of being a foster child, could thereby intersect. Ethnic identity could intersect with trauma's foster youth had suffered from in the past, and it could additionally intersect with expressed messages and feelings of being different concerning being a foster child. These intersection mechanisms could lead to foster youth who were distancing themselves from their ethnic minority backgrounds. Foster youth could also express feelings of longing and belonging towards their ethnic minority backgrounds, and they felt this as strongest, when connection was established with their ethnic minority background, for example through their birth parental network.

In **Chapter 4** outcomes of foster youth's and their foster parents' narratives about ethnic socialization in foster families were dyadically compared. This analysis showed that although most foster parents valued ethnicity in their foster youth's lives, their primary focus seemed to provide them a safe and stable foster home. Foster parents approached the ethnic backgrounds of their foster youth in several ways. They could either pay no attention to ethnicity, express humanitarianism, be ambivalent towards whether and how to pay attention to ethnicity, or actively address the ethnic minority background of their foster youth. These approaches were similar to foster youth's narratives, and seemed to interact with their expressed wishes or questions concerning ethnicity. Foster parents furthermore could culturalise behavioural differences that were not necessarily related to ethnicity. Thereby, although discrimination was experienced by the foster youth, it did not appear as a conversation subject in the foster families. Last, results show that, whenever possible, foster parents put efforts in involving birth parents in ethnically socializing the foster youth, as they perceived them as most important connectors with the foster youth's birth culture.

**Chapter 5** builds on the data from the interviews with the foster youth we analysed thematically in chapter 3. The field was entered twice in order to conduct second interviews with foster youth. A longitudinal analysis was conducted, whereby we included, and compared the accounts of foster youth concerning their ethnic identity, and how this fluctuated in two years of time. The longitudinal analysis showed that the ethnic identity of foster youth may be either positively or negatively influenced by their sense of belonging towards foster parents and birth parents, and their mutual relationships. Furthermore foster youth told that they became older and wiser, and as a result were more able to cope with receiving contradictory ethnicity messages in their daily lives. Last, current societal discussions and movements like Black Lives Matter about the position of ethnic minorities in for instance Dutch society made the youth more aware of their ethnic minority position in majority society.

**Chapter 6** discusses and reflects on the findings that were retrieved through the studies. All in all, transculturally placed foster youth may deal with complex processes in their search for ethnicity belonging. For foster parents, ethnically socializing their foster youth can be a complex act of balancing between safety versus ethnicity, and between belonging to each other as one family versus emphasizing ethnicity differences. Furthermore, a possible 'veiled silence' around discrimination exists in foster families. Last, birth family members may, when present in the youth's lives, act as connecting people for the foster youth in developing their ethnic identities. Follow-up studies should focus on how foster youth can better process contradictory messages of ethnicity, which may intersect with messages about being a foster child into their identity. Attention should be paid to as to how foster parents and birth parents can cooperate in ethnic socialization of their youth. Last, follow-up research needs to be conducted in order to develop programmes for ethnic majority foster parents in The Netherlands to gain more cultural competence. Important goals should be to become more reflexive about ethnicity, and to gain skills and knowledge which may help them in guiding and strengthening ethnic identity processes of their ethnic minority foster youth.





# **SAMENVATTING**

## **Samenvatting**

Wanneer kinderen tijdelijk of voor langere tijd niet thuis kunnen wonen, wordt pleegzorg vaak als het beste alternatief beschouwd vergeleken met residentiële jeugdzorg. In eerste instantie wordt er in het bestaande netwerk (familie, vrienden) van het kind een geschikt pleeggezin gezocht (netwerkpleegzorg). Wanneer er geen beschikbaar netwerkpleeggezin is, worden kinderen bij pleegouders geplaatst die ze nog niet eerder kenden. Deze mensen hebben zich als pleegouders bij pleegzorgorganisaties opgegeven en worden “bestandpleegouders” genoemd. In de Nederlandse bestandspleegzorg komt het relatief vaak voor dat kinderen wonen bij pleegouders met een andere etnisch-culturele achtergrond dan zij zelf hebben. In deze dissertatie worden dit transculturele plaatsingen genoemd. In Nederland zijn de meeste pleegouders in de bestandspleegzorg vooral afkomstig uit de etnische meerderheidsgroep. Daar tegenover staat dat in 2013, 36% van de Nederlandse pleegkinderen afkomstig was van een etnische minderheidsgroep.

Wanneer pleegkinderen wonen bij pleegouders met een andere etnisch-culturele achtergrond dan zij zelf hebben, kan dit leiden tot problemen met hun etnische identiteit. Deze kinderen hebben op dagelijkse basis te maken met verschillende etnisch-culturele achtergronden; die van hunzelf, van hun ouders en hun pleegouders. Die achtergronden kunnen conflicteren. Daarbij kan het zijn, dat zij hun etnische minderheidsachtergrond onvoldoende kunnen exploreren in het pleeggezin. Etnische identiteit wordt vooral belangrijk als jongeren in de adolescentiefase komen, en gaat over de overtuigingen en houding die individuen hebben ten opzichte van mensen uit eenzelfde etnische groep. Daarbij includeert het begrip etnische identiteit de processen waarop deze overtuigingen en houding zich door de tijd heen ontwikkelen.

Van pleegkinderen is bekend dat ze kwetsbaar zijn. Ze hebben misbruik, geweld, en/ of verwaarlozing meegeemaakt, en zijn tenminste één keer in hun leven uit huis geplaatst. Uit verschillende onderzoeken blijkt dat het ontwikkelen van een positieve of sterke etnische identiteit is gerelateerd aan een beter psychosociaal functioneren, betere school prestaties en betere mentale gezondheidsuitkomsten van individuen. Dit houdt in, dat het problematisch kan zijn voor pleegkinderen wanneer zij niet of onvoldoende hun etnische identiteit kunnen ontwikkelen. Er was tot nu toe nog geen wetenschappelijk onderzoek verricht naar deze groep pleegkinderen binnen de Nederlandse context. Het doel van deze dissertatie

was dan ook om de etnische identiteit van Nederlandse pleegkinderen met een etnische minderheidsachtergrond die wonen bij pleegouders met een etnische meerderheidsachtergrond, te bestuderen en te volgen door de tijd heen. De dissertatie had daarbij een focus op etnische socialisatie vanuit pleegouders, ouders en peers, omdat uit verschillende onderzoeken blijkt dat dit een belangrijke rol speelt in de etnische identiteitsformatie van kinderen.

**Hoofdstuk 2** gaf een overzicht vanuit de empirische en internationale wetenschappelijke literatuur over etnische identiteit van pleegkinderen en etnische socialisatie door pleegouders. De veertien geïncludeerde studies in dit literatuuroverzicht lieten zien dat pleegkinderen hun connectie verloren met hun etnische minderheidsachtergrond. Pleegkinderen toonden daarbij relatief veel fluctuaties in hun etnische identiteit. Pleegkinderen konden zich ook 'anders' voelen in een pleeggezin, doordat ze in uiterlijk (haar/ huidskleur) verschilden van andere gezinsleden of de nabije omgeving. Dit gevoel van 'anders zijn' werd versterkt door oordelen over mensen met etnische minderheidsachtergronden vanuit de media, maatschappij, en mensen uit het netwerk van het pleeggezin. Een enkel artikel liet zien dat ouders een verbindende factor waren tussen het pleegkind en zijn/ haar etnisch- culturele achtergrond. In de artikelen werd het belang beschreven van cultureel competente pleegouders voor een positieve etnische identiteitsontwikkeling van pleegkinderen. Pleegouders die over culturele competenties beschikten, bedden de pleegkinderen in hun etnisch-culturele minderheidsachtergrond en bereidden hen voor op een samenleving waarin discriminatie en uitsluiting op basis van een etnische minderheidsachtergrond voorkomt.

In **Hoofdstuk 3** werden uitkomsten gepresenteerd van een thematische kwalitatieve analyse op basis van 20 interviews met transcultureel geplaatste pleegkinderen in de adolescentiefase. De thematische analyse liet zien, dat het ontwikkelen van een etnische identiteit complex kan zijn voor deze groep kinderen. Zij ontvingen verschillende en soms contrasterende boodschappen vanuit pleegouders, ouders, peers, en (sociale) media, over hun etniciteit(en) en over bij welke etnische groep ze horen. De pleegkinderen hadden moeite om deze boodschappen te integreren in hun eigen narratief (verhaal) over etnische identiteit. In de interviews gaven zij blijk van gevoelens van ambivalentie, of verwarring over hun etnische identiteit. Daarbij lieten ze zien, dat ze tegelijkertijd

twee gemarginaliseerde identiteiten konden ervaren. Ze vertelden over de identiteit die behoort bij 'pleegkind zijn', en gepaard kon gaan met trauma en stigma. Dit viel samen met het hebben van een etnische minderheidsidentiteit in een meerderheidssamenleving, waarbij pleegkinderen soms werden buitengesloten op basis van etniciteit. Pleegkinderen reageerden hierop door niet anders te willen zijn dan anderen. Sommige pleegkinderen keerden zich af van hun etnische minderheidsachtergrond. In de interviews gaven de pleegkinderen echter ook aan te verlangen naar, of te horen bij mensen van hun etnische minderheidsachtergrond. Dit laatste werd versterkt door etnische socialisatie via pleegouders, die bijvoorbeeld met hun pleegkinderen het land van hun ouders of grootouders bezochten. Als pleegkinderen goed contact en goede nieuwe ervaringen hadden met hun ouders, spraken zij in de interviews over connectie met hun etnische minderheidsachtergrond.

**Hoofdstuk 4** toonde resultaten van een analyse aan de hand van interviews met 16 pleegouders en 16 pleegkinderen die bij hen woonden. Per pleeggezin is het interview van de pleegouder vergeleken met dat van zijn of haar pleekind. Deze analyse liet zien dat voor pleegouders het bieden van een veilige thuisbasis voor de pleegkinderen voorop stond in het socialisatieproces. Etnische socialisatie werd wel als belangrijk gezien, maar gevoelens van veiligheid en geborgenheid kregen prioriteit. Daarom werd in de dagelijkse praktijk niet veel aandacht aan etnische socialisatie besteed in de pleeggezinnen. Pleegouders benaderden etniciteit op verschillende wijzen. Centraal stond voor hen de vraag in hoeverre zij pleegkinderen konden laten ervaren dat ze bij het pleeggezin als eenheid hoorden, wanneer ze aandacht besteedden aan verschil in etniciteit, en 'anders zijn'. Sommige pleegouders besteedden daarom niet of weinig aandacht aan etniciteit. Andere kozen explicet voor een humanistische insteek. Ze beschouwden etniciteit als belangrijk, maar leefden bovenal menselijke waarden voor, zoals respect en openheid. Sommige pleegouders konden weer ambivalent tegenover etnische verschillen staan. Echter, er waren ook pleegouders die actief en doelbewust aandacht aan de etnische achtergrond van hun pleegkind besteedden. Pleegouders en pleegkinderen gaven voorts aan dat pleegkinderen discriminatie konden ervaren op basis van hun etnische minderheidsachtergrond. Echter, uit interviews met beide partijen kwam ook dat ze deze ervaringen niet met elkaar deelden binnen het pleeggezin. Er leek dus een stilte te bestaan over discriminatie op basis van etniciteit binnen pleeggezinnen. Als laatste kwam naar

voren dat de belangrijkste en meest voorkomende vorm van etnische socialisatie door pleegouders bestond uit het waar mogelijk het betrekken van ouders, om zo de pleegkinderen in te bedden in hun etnisch-culturele achtergrond.

**Hoofdstuk 5** bouwde voort op de data uit de thematische analyse (zie Hoofdstuk 3). Na twee jaar werd een groep van tien pleegkinderen voor de tweede keer geïnterviewd. Op basis van de verkregen data uit beide interviewmomenten, is een longitudinale analyse uitgevoerd. Deze analyse liet zien dat het gevoelens van ‘horen bij’ de pleegouders enerzijds en de ouders anderzijds bijdroegen aan de etnische identiteitsontwikkeling van transcultureel geplaatste pleegkinderen. Wanneer zij een fluctuatie lieten zien richting ‘horen bij’ de pleegouders, lieten zij ook vaak een fluctuatie zien in hun etnische meerderheidsidentiteit. Hetzelfde gold voor ‘horen bij’ de ouders met betrekking tot de etnische minderheidsidentiteit van pleegkinderen. Tijdens beide interviews toonden de pleegkinderen zich kwetsbaar voor de impact van contrasterende boedschappen over etniciteit vanuit pleegouders, ouders, peers, en (sociale) media. Echter, pleegkinderen die tijdens het eerste interview veel verwarring lieten zien als gevolg van contrasterende boedschappen, leken hier twee jaar later beter mee om te kunnen gaan. Een verklaring die ze gaven, was dat ze ouder en wijzer waren geworden, en zich daardoor minder aantrokken van wat anderen over hen zeiden. Dit betrof ook etnische classificaties. Als laatste bleek dat de pleegkinderen zich bewuster werden van hun eigen positie als etnische minderheid in een meerderheidssamenleving vanwege maatschappelijke discussies over de gemarginaliseerde positie van etnische minderheden en internationale bewegingen zoals Black Lives Matter. Pleegkinderen gaven aan dit niet te bespreken met hun pleegouders.

In **Hoofdstuk 6** werden de bevindingen bediscussieerd. Vanuit de verkregen data kan geconcludeerd worden dat transcultureel geplaatste pleegkinderen te maken krijgen met complexe processen als het gaat om hun etnische identiteit. Ze ontvangen contrasterende boedschappen over etniciteit door ouders, pleegouders, peers en de (social)media. Daarbij ervaren zij een mechanisme van intersectorende gemarginaliseerde identiteiten: de identiteit die hoort bij ‘pleegkind zijn’, en het hebben van een etnische minderheidsachtergrond. Voor pleegkinderen is het moeilijk om deze intersectorende mechanismen en contrasterende boedschappen te vertalen naar een eigen coherent verhaal over etnische identiteit.

Binnen pleeggezinnen lijkt er weinig aandacht te worden besteed aan de etnische identiteitsontwikkeling van pleegkinderen. Pleegouders balanceren bij het socialiseren van pleegkinderen met een andere etnisch-culturele achtergrond tussen enerzijds het creëren van een veilige thuisbasis voor pleegkinderen die uit een onveilige situatie komen, en anderzijds tussen het besteden van aandacht aan etnische identiteitsontwikkeling. Ook balanceren pleegouders enerzijds tussen het benadrukken van gezamenlijkheid, en anderzijds het benoemen en erkennen van etnische verschillen. Tenslotte wordt discriminatie ervaren door pleegkinderen en als zodanig benoemd door pleegouders, maar niet of weinig met elkaar besproken in het pleeggezin. Binnen de pleeggezinnen lijkt daarom een versluierde stilte te bestaan over discriminatie.

Wanneer ouders aanwezig zijn in het leven van hun kinderen, spelen zij een belangrijke rol in het proces van etnische identiteitsontwikkeling van pleegkinderen. Wanneer pleegkinderen negatieve ervaringen (her)beleven met hun ouders, heeft dit een negatieve impact op hun etnische minderheidsidentiteit. Vice versa, wanneer zij een positieve band hebben en over goede ervaringen met hun ouders spreken, ervaren ze meer connectie met hun etnische minderheidsidentiteit. Samenwerking in etnische socialisatie tussen ouders en pleegouders, is hierbij van belang. Dit leidt bij pleegkinderen tot een betere band met hun ouders en connectie met hun etnische minderheidsidentiteit.

Vervolgonderzoek zal zich moeten richten op hoe pleegkinderen complexe processen rondom hun etnische identiteit kunnen verwerken, en op een positieve wijze kunnen integreren in het verhaal dat zij over zichzelf vertellen. Daarbij moet aandacht besteed worden aan de rol van pleegouders en ouders, en de wijze waarop zij kunnen samenwerken in de etnische socialisatie van pleegkinderen. Vervolgens is nader onderzoek nodig met als doel het ontwikkelen van programma's om pleegouders te trainen en te begeleiden. Centraal zou hierin moeten staan dat pleegouders culturele competenties verkrijgen om pleegkinderen beter te kunnen begeleiden in het versterken van hun etnische identiteit.





## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



## About the author

Clementine Degener was born in Bleiswijk in 1981. She studied andragologie (adult education) at the University of Groningen. During her last year, she went to South-Africa to do an internship in an early school leaving project (Baswa). After graduation, she started as a Social Work teacher at the University of Applied Sciences of Arnhem and Nijmegen, and switched after three years to a similar job at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. Based in Rotterdam she combined teaching and curriculum development with researching. From 2016 and onwards, she worked under the supervision of prof. dr. Hans Grietens and dr. Diana van Bergen of the University of Groningen on a project on ethnic identity and ethnic socialization in Dutch foster care, which resulted in this dissertation. She received a scholarship by Dutch Research Council.





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'As it was in the beginning - *one love* - so  
shall it be in the end - *one heart*'  
(One love, Bob Marley)



