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RESEARCH

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Hurt, loss, joy, and forgiveness: Foster care–experienced young adults' relationships with their birth parents

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Abstract

Objective: This article explores young adults' relationships with their birth parents following separation from their parents during childhood due to placement in foster care.

Background: Parent–child relationships often change through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, from dependency toward more independence and then mutuality, with much variation. Less is known about these relationships for young adults who spent some of their childhood in foster care.

Method: Follow-up interviews were held with young adults who had been previously enrolled in a longitudinal study during middle childhood, shortly after they had been placed in foster care. Qualitative analysis was conducted of 191 responses to an open-ended question about their current relationship with their biological parents.

Results: Relationships varied from very close and positive to nonexistent or distressing. Many young adults who had been adopted or had aged out of care reported close relationships and, conversely, some of those who had been reunified with their biological parents were later estranged.

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Conclusion: For most participants, the relationship with their birth parent(s) remained significant despite some care decisions, such as adoption, that often lead to termination of contact with parents during childhood.
Implications: Young adults who have experienced foster care in childhood are likely to need support navigating relationships with biological parents through young adulthood, and this should be planned for and resourced.

KEYWORDS
adopted, aged out, foster care, parent–child relationship, reunified

This article presents findings and analysis about young adults' relationships with their parents. The aim of the paper is to illustrate the complex ways in which those relationships may be experienced and provide evidence of the need for support for navigating young adult–birth parent relationships when the young adult has spent some of their childhood in foster care.

The young adults in this study share the same experience of having spent some or all of their middle childhood and/or adolescence in foster care (which includes placement with nonrelatives, with kin, in residential facilities, and/or adoptive homes) in the United States. Large numbers of the participants experienced more than one form of care following middle childhood and some entered adulthood in precarious living situations such as being homeless or living with friends. Because only a minority of participants in this study aged out of care as young adults, we refer to them collectively as "care experienced" rather than "care leavers" or young people "aging out of care."

CONTEXT

There is a rich existing literature on the perspectives and experiences of those who age out of foster care as young adults (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Less is known about the qualitative perspectives of young adults who were adopted from state care (Sánchez-Sandoval et al., 2020). Similarly, little is known about the views of those who spent some of their childhood in out-of-home care but are subsequently returned to their birth families or wider kin networks (Biehal, 2007), with some exceptions (Mateos et al., 2017). This lesser attention to those who do not age out of care is surprising, because only a small minority of young people who enter out-of-home care before the age of 13 subsequently age out of care (Barth et al., 2022). Young adults experience social disadvantages in adulthood compared to their peers who have not experienced out-of-home care, with precare trauma, separation, and negative experiences of the care system all contributing factors (Lindner & Hanlon, 2024). Black and Native American populations are disproportionately affected (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014).

This section provides a brief summary of existing research on the experiences and perspectives of care-experienced young adults, focusing on evidence about relationships with birth parents. The discussion is organized to reflect reunification, adoption and aging out of care pathways, because these categories are widely used in the literature, but it should be noted that many young adults will have experienced a complex mix of care pathways that do not fall into neat, comparable categories.

Young adults who experienced reunification with birth families

Studies that focus on the relationship between reunified young people and their birth parents tend to focus on the quality of the relationship before and soon after reunification, rather than

into adulthood (Luu et al., 2022). An exception is a longitudinal study by Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021) whose data collection included young people who had been reunified. Those authors conducted a longitudinal study of infants who had entered care in Northern Ireland, following up with them in later years, regardless of whether they remained in state care. In qualitative interviews with a subsample of 41 participants, aged 16–21 years, the authors explored these young people's emotional response to their birth families. The authors found that deep and often complex and conflicting feelings were typically present, with emotional responses to birth families changing over time, including around important life transitions such as entering adulthood. They reported that the young person's care experience, including reunification with birth parents, kin care, foster care, and adoption, did not appear to be associated with their emotional connection with their birth family. This can be counterintuitive, considering the very different legal intentions of reunification, where children are returned to the care of their parents; long-term out-of-home care, in which contact with birth parents is often managed by social services; and adoption, which severs the legal link between children and their birth families.

Young adults who were adopted from foster care during childhood

It is common for adopted young people to seek contact with their birth parents in adulthood and to need support with what can be a difficult process (Sánchez-Sandoval et al., 2020). Studies suggest that positive relationships with birth parents can be developed in adulthood (for example, Howe & Feast, 2001), with some studies suggesting that open and positive relationships with adoptive parents provide the base from which to achieve this (Farr et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2013).

Young adults who aged out of foster care

There are more studies of young people who remain in care until adulthood than those who reunify or are adopted, perhaps because it is easier to identify this population.

Havlicek (2021) conducted a systematic review of relationships between youth in foster care and birth parents, before and after aging out, from 10 studies. The review reported that relationships with birth parents after exiting foster care, particularly with mothers, are common. A dominance of quantitative studies means that there is less evidence from qualitative or mixed-methods studies, which would allow more in-depth exploration of areas such as (a) the quality, rather than simply the frequency, of such relationships; (b) how formerly fractured relationships are repaired; and (c) resource exchanges between parents and youth.

Despite the dominance of quantitative research on this topic, there are a number of relevant qualitative studies. Driscoll (2019) followed 18 young people between the ages of 15 and 18 years in foster care. Some of those who had been prevented from having contact with their parents made efforts to reconnect when aged 18 years, but this was not always straightforward, and in some circumstances "young people often took on a role more akin to parenting in relation to both birth parents and siblings" (Driscoll, 2019, p. 544). Holland and Crowley (2013) found that care-experienced young adults talked about their birth parents as being a strong emotional presence in their lives, even when they were not currently in touch.

Other qualitative studies from a range of national settings also confirm that birth parents remain important to care leavers in early adulthood, even when the parents have been abusive or otherwise perceived to have not met normative expectations of parenting (Boddy, 2023). In some cases, young people will reassess their feelings about their parents and their past behaviors after foster care, and this may become more or less positive as they assume new roles, including becoming parents themselves. Examples include Cmurová and Záhorcová's (2023) qualitative

study from Slovakia, Wade's (2008) longitudinal research with 118 care leavers in England, and Mauri's (2023) qualitative research with Italian care leavers who are parents.

Overall, it is clear from studies conducted to date that birth families are an important feature in the lives of young people aging out of care, but there appears to have been less attention to these relationships in the lives of young adults who spent some of their childhood in foster care but did not age out of care. The inclusion of young adults who did not age out of care in this study partly addresses this gap.

Relationships between young adults and their parents

Psychological empirical and theoretical research focused on understanding the relationships between young adults and their parents in the general population provides insights into the dynamism of such relationships over time, related to cycles of identity development and their interaction with interpersonal relationships (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Studies of parent–child relationships tend to show marked changes during adolescence, with some stabilization in early adulthood (Fang et al., 2021). Nonetheless, although general trends in relationships over time can be identified, empirical studies note the diversity of individual experiences and the risks of overgeneralizing about young adults' relationships and identity formation (Schwartz et al., 2005).

Individuation theory explores the relationship between developing autonomy and connectedness with parents in adolescence and adulthood, with parent–child relationships often moving from (varying degrees of) parental authority toward mutuality and cooperation (Buhl, 2008). In societies that have seen rapid social changes over the last few decades, young adults' degree of agency, as an aspect of individuation, has become another area of exploration. In Schwartz et al.'s (2005) cross-ethnic study of undergraduates, higher degrees of agency were associated with aspects of identity development assumed to be positive, such as the ability to explore, be receptive to interpersonal feedback, and to make choices. All these aspects may be relevant to the ability to negotiate young adult relationships with parents and have informed the analysis of the data in the present study.

Sociological theories of family relationships add to the understanding of parent–child relationships by exploring the interaction between human experience and macrosocial and economic changes (for example, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). A wave of work since the 1990s onward has helped researchers understand how family relationships may be constructed, enacted, negotiated, and understood through "family practices" (Morgan, 2011). Sociological studies have also demonstrated how contemporary experiences of family do not depend on biological or marital ties and that we can "make" families with others, including through friendships (Smart, 2007). These understandings of family can be particularly pertinent for those whose family trajectories have not followed normative trajectories, including care-experienced adults (Rees et al., 2024).

Theoretical and empirical work on parent–adult child relationships provide rich and helpful frameworks for exploring the data in the present study. Nonetheless, they have some limitations due to the unusually disrupted family relationships that most care-experienced young adults will have experienced.

While noting the increased diversity of family forms, both psychological and sociological theories tend to assume that young adults have spent their childhood and adolescence living with one or both birth parents, and that a shift in economic and social conditions have led to many previous markers of adulthood—starting work, becoming a householder, and marrying—being acquired later than in earlier generations.

Both these assumptions are disrupted for many care-experienced young adults who often face an accelerated transition to adulthood (Stein & Munro, 2008) and relationships with birth parents often associated with trauma and separation. This means that their relationships with birth parents may be complex in that they may be characterized by the long-lasting impact of

periods of placement with alternative primary caregivers, reunions and rediscovery, or coming to terms with permanent loss.

Current study

The current study sought to further our understanding of young adult–parent relationships where there has been a separation from birth parents during childhood due to admission to foster care, and to help identify support needs of this cohort.

METHOD

Data analyzed for this article were drawn from young adult interviews with participants who had been previously enrolled in a longitudinal study of youth in foster care. The children were from one Western state in the United States (see Taussig et al., 2023, for additional information on sample, ethics, and study design). Participants ($N = 243$) at baseline were aged 9 to 11 years and living in out-of-home care; participation was voluntary. Follow-up interviews were conducted when the participants were aged 18 to 22 years (mean = 19.4 years). The young adult interview, which is the focus of this paper, included 215 of the original study participants, an average of 9.4 years after baseline—a retention rate of 88.5%. The young adult interview was held face-to-face or on the telephone and included quantitative measures and open-ended questions. The study received ethical approval from Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board, and participants' caregivers provided consent at baseline, with children providing assent. At follow-up, young adults provided consent.

Participants were 52.1% male and the rest female. Fifty-four percent identified as Latinx/Hispanic, 48.8% as White, 28.8% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 27.4% as Black/African American (nonexclusive categories). Most participants had experienced more than one type of living arrangement in childhood, with a large majority (87.9%) having lived with relatives, three quarters (75.8%) in nonrelative foster care, and just over half (52.9%) in group care settings. Almost half (45.2%) had reunified with birth parents at some point and just over a quarter experienced one or more adoptions (27.2%). Both adoptions and reunifications may not have been successful and, indeed, despite reunification and adoption being regarded as "permanency" pathways for children to exit state care, sadly, they do not always provide a permanent, stable home for children (White, 2016). It can be seen, therefore, that most of these young adults had experienced care from a number of different primary caregivers before reaching adulthood. Nearly a quarter (24%) were parents themselves by the time of the young adult interviews.

This paper presents an analysis of study participants' open-ended responses to the following question: How would you describe your current relationship with your biological parents? This question was one of a small number of open-ended questions asked toward the end of the survey. By this point, the participants had spent around 3–4 hours in the company of the interviewers. This means that many of the answers read as open and frank, although it is also possible that sometimes the interviewee might assume they have already explained aspects of this relationship in answer to previous questions, leading to briefer responses.

The data set of 191 codable responses to the question about the current relationship with biological parents is over 14,000 words. Responses ranged from one or two words such as "close," "non-existent," "bad," to responses of around 200–350 words that provide a vivid narrative of the historical and present relationship. Twenty-six respondents are quoted directly in this paper, illustrating the themes arising from all responses.

Fictitious initials have been used to accompany direct quotations, which maintain anonymity but are more human-centered than respondent numbers. Other demographic details are included only where relevant. For the purposes of this paper, we deem care experiences to be relevant for analysis and reporting.

Although many of the young adults in our sample have complex care experiences, when quoting them in this paper we note their living situation at the age of 18 and whether they aged out of care. We also note any recorded move for them that is usually associated with permanency: adoption or reunification with birth family. If more than one move associated with permanency is recorded, this is noted. Where no permanency change is recorded, and they did not age out of care, we simply note their living situation at age 18 years. Many of the young people in this last group are likely to have spent time living with kin. In fact, the large majority (88%) of all participants report spending some of their childhood living with family members who are not their biological parents. We have not conducted analysis according to other demographic features such as gender or race/ethnicity and do not report these characteristics to aid anonymization.

All responses were uploaded to NVivo analytic software and standard iterative processes for thematic qualitative analysis were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A coding frame was developed, initially by the first author, after an initial read through of the data for familiarization. This frame was then discussed with the other two authors and modifications made to the codes. Further modifications were agreed by all three authors after the first 30 responses had been coded. The first author continued to code the whole data set and present initial analysis to the team. All three authors then continued to develop the emergent themes through regular cross-Atlantic online meetings, contributing different cultural, disciplinary, policy, and practice expertise.

A group of participants in the study continue to inform outputs and further developments of the overall study through regular meetings with the principal investigator. This Alumni Board provided advice on the practice implications of this study, and commentary on one of the analytic themes (forgiveness).

FINDINGS

Reference points for discussing birth parents

The analysis suggested that there was a wide range in how the young adults chose to describe the nature of their relationship with their birth parents to the interviewer. Some found it easier to describe one parent by contrasting them with the other. Just over a quarter of respondents structured their responses this way, as exemplified next:

> With my dad, it's kind of like if I see you, I see you, thing. With my Mom it's just, I'm always there, she's always there. It's more … healthier I would say.
>
> (LM, experienced reunification and was incarcerated at age 18 years)

> I don't talk to my mother, I'm still very angry at her, and I'm waiting for an apology on her side. My father however, I have a great relationship with him. He approached me when I was about 17 and apologized for everything that went wrong in my life, and told me that if he had the opportunity he'd go back and redo it.
>
> (SH, experienced nonrelative adoption but aged out of care; was incarcerated at age 18 years)

Small numbers of participants described their relationships by comparing them to "normal" relationships, either suggesting that their relationship had its ups and downs like all normal families (e.g., "It's ok. We have some rough patches but that's every mother and son type deal" [FF, was living with grandparent at age 18]), or that the way either of their parents behaved was not like a normal mother or father (e.g., "He says so many hurtful things to me that a dad shouldn't say to a daughter. My Mom as well" [KS, was living with biological parent at age 18 years]).

As has been found in other studies (Ie et al., 2022), a handful of participants chose to reference their biological ties with their birth parents when discussing their relationship. For example, DS stated that although they argue with their father because he tries to give advice despite not having been there for them, "at the same time it's … I do feel that sense of love there because, you know that is my dad and without him I wouldn't be here, you know" (DS, aged out of care and living in group care at age 18 years).

However, as has been discussed in a previous paper about the meaning of family for this cohort (Rees et al., 2024), the quality of relationships is likely to be more important than biological ties for many young people who have experienced family separations. We go on next to explore how the young adults in this study described their relationship with their biological parents. This falls under the following themes (a) loss and lack of relationship, (b) positive relationships and making up for lost time, (c) the impact of the past on the current relationship, and (d) protecting self and others by keeping biological parents at a distance.

Loss and lack of relationships

About a third of respondents reported that they have no relationship at all with one or both birth parents. This is likely to be an underestimate as some respondents only discussed one parent and it was not clear whether they were in touch with the other. Reasons for a lack of relationship included that the parent was deceased, they had never known their identity, the relationship was so poor as to not constitute a relationship at all, the young adult had decided to cut off from their parents, or they were unable to contact them. Sometimes there was a combination: "I don't talk to my Mom and my dad is deceased" (WA, experienced adoption [unknown if it was kinship or nonrelative] and was living independently at age 18 years).

The care experiences of those who described a lack of relationship with both parents were varied. This group included not only those who had been adopted or who had aged out of foster care (and who therefore might be less likely than others to have ongoing relationships with birth parents), but also those recorded as having reunified with one or both birth parents in adolescence and who had not subsequently reentered the care system.

Some respondents reported their lack of relationship fairly neutrally (e.g., "I don't have one" [DQ, was living with a sibling at age 18 years]), whereas others conveyed a sense of loss and that they were thinking about their missing parents. This included several adopted young people, all of whom had been adopted (at least once) over the age of 9 years and may have had early relationships with their birth parents. An adopted young adult, JF, who was living with their nonrelative adoptive parents at age 18 years, responded, "I wouldn't really know cuz I haven't talked to my mother in forever. I don't know what she does really. I'd be awkward I think. But I would, I would be nice to them. Still my parents."

Another young person, CA, reported a positive relationship with their biological mother, with whom they were living at age 18 years in a multigenerational household. However, regarding their father, CA stated,

> I do not know my dad, I've never met him. I've tried to friend request him on Facebook and he blocked me, and so my Mom tried and he blocked her, so I have no idea where he's living, if he has another family, or whatever.

This quotation may be seen to illustrate both being thwarted from playing an active role in the relationship on the part of this young person ("he blocked me") and feelings of loss ("I have no idea where he's living, if he has another family"), and this was seen in other respondents' accounts too. Returning to DS, who was quoted discussing his father earlier in this paper, he described his relationship with his mother in this way:

> She kind of distanced herself away from me because she don't want to be hurt no more, you know. And I understand that, but it still hurts, you know, because I feel like that, other than God, that's the only other person I got. And now she, she, she kinda just wants to give up on me.
>
> (DS, aged out of care and was living in a group home at age 18 years)

These young adults who have lost touch or been actively blocked from pursuing a relationship had less freedom to exercise agentic personality traits described by Schwartz et al. (2005) as related to positive identity formation, including the ability to make choices in relationships, at least in relation to their biological parents. In contrast, and less frequently, the lack of a relationship was reported to have been a positive choice by the young person, displaying a sense of agency and control:

> I don't talk to them at all. It's just a personal choice. You just can't have people like that around your kids.
>
> (AL, experienced reunification and was living with partner's family at age 18 years)

> It got to the point where I don't wanna, I don't really talk to them, and well I don't talk to them at all, but I also cut communication, you know, for my safety.
>
> (CZ, experienced nonrelative adoption and was living with adoptive parents at age 18 years)

Narratives of loss and lack of a relationship were common in this data set, but for others there were happier accounts of current relationships, as are described next.

Positive relationships

At least a quarter of the cohort described their relationship with one or both parents in largely positive terms, in contrast to those who described mixed, up and down, complex, or wholly negative relationships. It is clear that many of these young adults gained support, companionship, and love from their birth parents. Young people with the whole range of care experiences described their relationship in this way, including those who had been adopted, reunified, aged out of care, or any combination of these.

The largest group of those describing the relationship mainly positively was those who were reunified with their parents before they were 18 and did not subsequently reenter and age out of care. One of these, a young woman who was also a parent, stated,

> My relationship with them is really good, we're really close … I talk to them you know basically every day. So we keep in contact and just make sure we're all ok

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and whether we need help or not they're there.
(RT, experienced reunification and was living independently at age 18 years)

However, young people with no record of reunification also described these relationships wholly or largely positively. For example, IL, who aged out of care and was living with foster parents at age 18 years, reported, "we have good times together, we talk, we laugh, we share the same interests in a lot of TV shows." And UM, who was living with a partner at age 18 years, said, "They're good. I love them. Even though me and my dad argue a lot, I still love him. And I always love my Mom. I'm a Mommy's girl. Haha."

Ways of describing the positive aspects of the relationship sometimes included referring to the relationship as being like siblings, or like best friends. The following four young people each experienced different pathways, including aging out of care, adoption, and reunification, but their descriptions of their relationships with their parents are strikingly similar:

> Me and my mother have a wonderful relationship. We are like twins; we do exactly the same things, we talk the same way, and we have a good time every time we hang out. We argue for ten minutes and then out of nowhere just bust out laughing. You know what I'm saying? Because that's how we live—all we do is laugh.
> (FY, aged out of care and was unhoused at age 18 years)

> Me and him are kinda like best friends.
> (BC, experienced nonrelative adoption and was living with adoptive parents at age 18 years)

> Amazing. Like I have my Mom back and I have a friend in her.
> (OH, experienced kin adoption and was living with adoptive parent at age 18 years)

> We are best friends, me and her are best friends. That's my best friend, we act too much alike, we, every time before we either on her off days—we just even though my stepdad's back in the house—we all just have fun. We wake up, well, usually I wake up because they makin' too much noise then I go in their room and we just all have a laugh. They're laughing; it's like one big happy family once again.
> (GE, experienced reunification and was living with a grandparent at age 18 years)

Although many young adults in the general population may describe their relationship with parents in terms of friendship or even like siblings, and a recalibration of that relationship toward mutuality is commonly observed in early adulthood (Buhl, 2008), what this cohort all experienced is childhood separation from their birth parents. Therefore, it is striking but perhaps unsurprising that some described the relationships with some excitement in terms of rediscovery and making up for lost time. In the last quotation above, we can see "it's like one big happy family *once again* [emphasis added]," and in the next quotation this recognition of having lost time was stated explicitly by QW, who was living in college at age 18 years: "I would describe it as … I don't know … I guess we're just *trying to get time back* [emphasis added] so we just like hang out with each other, do stuff, go out to eat or something like that. So, it's pretty good."

In many of the quotations above, the respondents alluded to difficult times in the past when describing current positive relationships: "I have my Mom back"; "one big happy family once again." The next section further explores the impact of the past on current relationships.

The impact of the past on the current relationship

The following threads can be discerned when exploring the impact of the past on the present: (a) parental past behaviors affecting the current relationship negatively, (b) relationships being positive *despite* the difficult past, (c) guilt and forgiveness, and (d) not forgiving in order to protect others.

Parental past behaviors affecting the current relationship negatively

Many respondents referred to difficult past events when describing their relationship with their parents, but this had a differing effect on the present. For example, for some, the past continued to have a negative impact on the current relationship, often because challenging parental behaviors such as substance misuse continued:

> I would just pretty much say it's kind of like a lost cause because they're still on drugs and they still…. I just think that like, I guess for me being a parent I just think that it was just a gateway from the world and having your kids taken away. Which is kind of like an exit from their life—like they could be their own people and we were just pretty much like extra baggage that they didn't want. So I don't know … I just don't have time for them.
>
> (HD, living with their child's father's family at age 18 years)

> My Mom every time she calls us she's just on drugs and so ok that's the same reason we got taken from you and you're still doing the same old things—don't change.
>
> (TN, living with their sibling at age 18 years)

Indeed, parental substance misuse was an enduring theme in this data set, consistent with the reasons many children in this study were admitted into care and the general care population in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). The negative impact of substance misuse on children is well documented (Staton-Tindall et al., 2014), but this data set is a reminder that young adults may be facing continued substance misuse by their parents and still be experiencing a negative psychological impact.

Positive relationships despite the difficult past

For others, the relationship was good despite the negative past. Some young adults felt that what they had gone through together as a family had shaped their current positive relationship. In some cases, past problems with their parents persisted into the present, but the participants had reached a way of maintaining a workable relationship despite this. In the following three quotations, participants reflected on how they have come to terms with the past and reached an acceptance, which, for them, enabled an acceptable or positive relationship.

> Um my Mom, we have a good relationship, great relationship. *If we didn't go through this*, we probably wouldn't even have a relationship, y'know, so I'm thankful for that.
>
> (emphasis added; FG, living with a sibling at age 18 years)

> And my Mom, well like I love her no matter what. No matter what she does, or what she goes through I still love her. And *no matter what we went through* when we were little, I still love her. And it's difficult for her, but I understand her.
> (emphasis added; JJ, experienced reunification and was living with a biological parent at age 18 years)

> Me and my Mom are pretty close. She's still on drugs but *I just have to accept her* the way she is. So we, we're, we're pretty good together. At first I kind of hated her being on drugs and I never wanted to talk to her but I just deal with it [laughs].
> (emphasis added; NB, reunified and living with a biological parent at age 18 years)

The last quotation above uses the phrase "accept her the way she is," and this process of acceptance, sometimes accompanied by expressions of guilt by parents and forgiveness by their children, appeared to have been an important process for some participants, as is explored next.

Guilt and forgiveness

Abbott (2024) has argued that analyzing how people experience forgiveness in personal relationships helps us understand, in everyday language, how this common social phenomenon is used to maintain, repair, or end a relationship. In this data set, understanding and acceptance were phrases used alongside forgiveness, and as emotions they may be seen to be serving similar functions of making sense of the past and finding some peace.

> [The relationship is] excellent. *He's feeling bad about what happened* and now that he's clean and everything he's wishing he could go back but you know *me being understanding* I'm like "hey it's all good … I understand it's not that easy to remove yourself from drugs like that."
> (emphasis added; AS, aged out of care and was living with a foster parent at age 18 years)

Forgiveness doesn't just serve as a function in relationships with others, it may be an internal process of making sense of the past and others' behaviors that have affected oneself. It can help to make sense of hurt and conflict (Abbott, 2024). Cmurová and Záhorcová (2023), in a small-scale, qualitative study of 10 young adults who had grown up in institutional care in Slovakia, found that those who were able to forgive their parents' earlier behavior benefited in terms of their own mental health and their relationships with others.

One participant did not have a current relationship with either parent, but forgiving their mother had had a positive impact on themself:

> My current relationship with my mother is non-existent. For a while there was a lot of hard feeling, a lot of hate there … it's not that anymore, it's not hate. It's forgiveness, it's understanding and it's a little bit of pity. And in order for myself to grow as a person I had to forgive her for all the things that she did. Because forgiveness isn't honestly for her it's just for me because if I hold on to those grudges for so long you know those continue to eat away at me and that's not something I need.
> (ED, aged out of care and was living with a relative at age 18 years)

Another participant stated overtly that they forgave their mother, but the overall response suggests continued negative feelings about their parents' behaviors, which is a reminder that

forgiveness is not a simple fix for finding peace with the past. After stating that they had no relationship with their biological dad who had provided everyday care but was also abusive, they went on to say the following:

> So, she really didn't care for us or anything and when they gave her the chance to have custody with us, she blew it off, she didn't even care, she didn't want it, she just gave up her rights right away and wanted to restart her whole life. *Honestly, I do forgive her, but* I don't see her as my Mom. She has tried to come into my life a couple times now, to try and be Mom, and *I'm just like you're not my Mom anymore*, you're my biological Mom but you're not Mommy to me.
>
> (emphasis added; VB, living with a relative at age 18 years)

Not forgiving as an act of protection

The 19-year-old participant quoted above, VB, was also a parent. Becoming a parent is a significant moment in any individual's life, and may be more so for those who experienced separation from their own parents and may have experienced abuse and neglect at the hands of their parents. Other studies have found that care-experienced parents may describe themselves as making an overt attempt to parent differently than they were parented. They may also see it as an opportunity to have a different relationship with their own parents, who may find the grandparent role easier (Mauri, 2023; Wade, 2008). Parenthood appears to have affected how some participants in this study assessed their parents' behaviors, with some overtly stating this:

> And my Mom, she's always in jail, dad's still hooked on drugs, so I just, I don't, you know, put my kids in that situation.
>
> (LL, living with partner's parent at age 18 years)

> It's good with my dad, but me and my Mom are on bad terms because she's not the best person. Yeah, she's kind of a bad person. I don't know I don't think I'll let her be around my son ever. She'd have to like change some things.
>
> (CN, living independently with spouse at age 18 years)

Several participants used their birth family as a point of reference for how families can display the wrong behaviors and values. This has also been found in many other qualitative studies of care-experienced young adults, such as Wade's (2008) study in England and Sting and Groenig's (2020) research into educational aspirations in Austria.

Earlier in this paper we noted that some of our participants appeared to lack power in their relationships with their birth families. They reported being blocked or rejected by parents, or simply not having forwarding addresses shared by them. Forgiveness, whether granted or not, can be a way for young adults to exercise some agency in their relationships, after a childhood in which they may have lacked an ability to assert choice or control in fundamentals such as a change of primary carer and household. In lives where the acts to be forgiven may have breached social norms of the parent–child relationship, not forgiving may not be the social transgression it could be in other circumstances. Indeed, it may be viewed as a responsible and positive choice, for example, when leading to protecting one's own children.

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DISCUSSION

Although previous research has provided some insight into how care-experienced young people understand and navigate relationships with their biological parents (Holland & Crowley, 2013; Sting & Groenig, 2020), these studies were smaller in scale than the current study. The data set used in the current study presents the experiences of a larger number of participants with varying permanency outcomes, but all with some experience in out-of-home care. The participants' responses to an open-ended question about their relationships with birth parents provide valuable insights into an area in which not much is known.

First, the analysis suggests that the care experiences of the individual, for example whether they were reunified with family, adopted or stayed in foster care up to adulthood, does not determine that individual's relationship with their biological parents in young adulthood as some might hypothesize. In our study, this was the case even when all parental rights had been removed through adoption, with the probable assessment that no viable long-term relationship with biological parents was desirable. Some of the adopted participants had ongoing relationships with birth parents, including living within the same household, and some of the "reunified" relationships were by now negative or nonexistent.

Second, we can see that, whether or not the current relationship was positive, mixed, or negative, it was significant for most of the young adults, and most had something to say about it. Removal from a parent's care may be popularly or even professionally understood as a rupturing of that relationship, but in addition to those later reunified, for those who stayed in foster care, were adopted, or were placed with wider kin, these relationships often continued or were reignited in adulthood.

Third, we can perceive that our participants' childhood experiences can loom large in their adult navigations of relationships. In this paper we have seen how experiences of parental neglect, abuse, factors such as mental illness and substance misuse, and prolonged separation can lead to a need to reevaluate the past through now-adult eyes. Varied current responses included excitement at making up for lost time, acceptance or forgiveness, and decisions to cut ties. However, not all had the ability to play an active role in forging these relationships because their parents had died, disappeared, or rejected them. There are some poignant accounts of loss in this data set.

The psychological and sociological studies and theoretical frameworks briefly reviewed in the opening section of this paper can aid us in understanding the diversity in how young adults in the general population recalibrate their relationships with their birth parents as they continue to develop their own identities and life choices. That diversity can be seen within this study's cohort, despite their shared challenging experiences of childhood separation, in common with Koepke and Denissen's (2012) observation that quality of relationships will depend on intrapersonal as well as interpersonal experiences.

In line with sociological theories of family as practice rather than simply a structure (Morgan, 2011), many of our participants can be seen to be active in shaping their adult networks, which may include or exclude one or both birth parents, to form a sense of family that works for them (Smart, 2007). However, some participants were thwarted in their attempts due to the lack of response or unhelpful responses from birth parents. Schwartz et al.'s (2005) conclusion that some young adults will require external support to navigate early adulthood seems particularly apt for our participants.

Policy implications

The main policy implication from this paper is that those planning and funding therapeutic and practical support services should anticipate that services for care-experienced young adults

should not simply be available to those who age out but also those who were adopted or reunified. Although not all young adults will need or desire professional help with their family relationships, our findings suggest that many will, and this is not predictable according to care pathways.

Research studies, as reviewed in this paper, coupled with the findings from this study, emphasize the complex, dynamic, and often central role that birth family relationships play in the lives of care-experienced young adults, whether they aged out of care or did not. Despite this, policies for supporting this population tend to focus on those who age out of care only, rather than those who experienced care but were adopted, reunified, or placed long term in the care of kin.

Strahl et al. (2021), in a comparative policy paper, noted that the United States is only one of a handful of nations globally that have well-developed policies for supporting young people aging out, but the findings from this paper serve as an important reminder for those developing policy in the United States and other nations about the emotional and practical support needs of *all* care-experienced young people as they enter adulthood.

Driscoll (2019) adapted the concept of "reparatory justice" to note that some policies are geared toward making reparations for the care-experienced young person's early life difficulties and, sometimes, continued poor experiences in the care of the state. She suggested that this should be conceptualized as not only referring to economic and practical assistance but also "repairing young people's access to, and ability to make and maintain, close familial or quasi-familial links" (Driscoll, 2019, p. 547), and our data support this call.

Transition planning policies in the United States and internationally for those leaving foster care tend to acknowledge that birth families may be part of the picture, but this is often oriented toward families supporting the transition, or being part of planning (see, for example, Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; Department for Education, 2022), although both of these documents make some reference to the fact that young people may need help with developing supportive relationships. Findings from this study, in addition to other studies reviewed within this paper, reinforce the need for such support, and the complex ways in which care-experienced young adults may understand and experience those relationships over time. They may need support at different times with negotiating, reconfiguring, and conducting the emotional labor of this relationship well into adulthood. And, although there are established and mandated processes designed to support care-leavers' transitions to adulthood, there are fewer established routes to support relationships with birth parents for those who have been adopted or who were reunified with their parents before reaching adulthood. Our data suggest that many may need this support.

Practice implications

Three key implications may be drawn for practitioners from these findings.

Care-experienced young adults may need help with family finding

It was reported in this study that many participants noted that they had no relationship with one or both parents, and that this was due to death of a parent, the participants' choice to forego contact, or not being able to find or get a response from a parent. Some care-experienced young people may benefit from assistance to find or re-connect with significant members of their family or network that they have lost contact with. This is a service most commonly associated with adults adopted in infancy, but our findings remind us that others affected by out-of-home care may also need this practical support.

Emotional and therapeutic support can empower young adults to "do" family on their own terms

Our findings remind those who offer emotional or therapeutic support to young people of the diversity of patterns of relationships with birth parents following childhood separation. Counselors, therapists, and those who plan and support transitions to adulthood can help empower young people to navigate and negotiate the relationship with their birth parents that work for them. Some young people may hold a sense of self-blame for why they ended up in out-of-home care, and that reconciling with, or sometimes forgiving, parental past acts can help remove that self-blame and empower young people. Our findings suggest that some young adults had, indeed, found this forgiveness to be liberating and sometimes reparative. This would not work for all and other participants had taken a positive decision to distance themselves, especially when negative behaviors continued.

By helping young people understand that there is no one way of doing or being a family, and that family relationships may change across the life course (Morgan, 2011), practitioners may help care-experienced young adults negotiate and form the relationships that work for them. As was the case for some of our participants, this could include making a decision not to have a relationship with birth parents, or to come to terms with the fact that they may need to find other, fulfilling ways to 'do' family, if they have been rejected by or lost their birth parents.

Family contact should be viewed as a lifelong project, even when parental rights have been legally severed

Our findings concur with those of Boddy (2019) that decisions about family contact for children in care should consider the relationship with the family as a lifelong project, especially when considering terminating all contact. She further noted that there is no single story of care-experienced families, just as there is no single story of any individual family. Families are not static, and none are two dimensional, despite the rather simplistic and highly stigmatizing narratives of "troubled" or "bad" families whose children end up in care (Boddy, 2023).

This lifelong trajectory should be borne in mind for planning, even in situations where the safety of the child means that face-to-face contact is unwise for at least a period of their childhood. A parent who was not able to be a good-enough parent to an infant or child might be capable of having a mutually beneficial relationship with a son or daughter who is an adult. This might also be because they themselves have changed, or because the care needs of the child will not be as high as they enter adulthood.

LIMITATIONS

A strength of these findings is that they provide qualitative insights from a relatively large number of participants, in comparison to many qualitative studies. However, what this data set gains in breadth, it loses somewhat in depth. The data were generated during a structured interview, with no opportunity to probe or follow-up on responses. This leaves some responses too ambiguous or brief to analyze effectively using qualitative means.

Some information is missing or unclear about the care experiences of participants in the study, and therefore we could not conduct subgroup analyses. Additionally, the participants in this study entered care in the early part of this century, and some practices regarding maintaining and repairing relationships with birth parents may have improved.

Nonetheless, we believe these findings provide insights that can contribute to continuing discussions about how best to support young adults who have experienced separation from their birth parents during childhood, particularly regarding their relationship with their parents.

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