

Designing a Q Sample for a Study with Adolescent Foster Children

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Abstract: *Over recent years, we have witnessed an increasing focus on including children in research. In this article I share some experiences about including adolescent foster children in a Q study exploring what 'family' means for children in foster care. The main focus is on challenges in designing a Q sample to represent different aspects related to the research topic, in which making use of a Fisherian balanced-block design is central. The participants were invited to make comments about their Q sorts, and articulate to what extent they felt that the Q sort provided an accurate picture of their perception of family. The participating adolescents felt that the Q sort captured the different aspects of what family meant to them. Q methodology is shown to provide the flexibility that is necessary when including children in research. It offers a reasonably valid and concise way for children to express their perspectives.*

Introduction

There has been an increasing focus on the participation of children in research over recent years. This focus has contributed to bringing about an increase in research projects that include children as participants and has given room for the inclusion of children's perspectives in research (Christensen & James, 2008). Children's participation in research can be seen in relation to what several have described as an important shift in how to view children. This shift implies a greater readiness to view children as competent 'actors in their own lives' (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Schjelderup, Omre, & Marthinsen, 2005; Seim & Slettebø, 2007; Sommer, 2003). The 'child perspective' is also found in theoretical perspectives, in legal rights, and in international as well as in Norwegian literature on children. The UN Child Convention Article 12 states that children, depending on age and maturity, should have their say in matters affecting them (United Nations, 1989). In 2003, the Child Convention was incorporated into Norwegian law, which consequently led to changes in several areas of related legislation in order to harmonise Norwegian law with the rights laid down in the convention. Children were given an independent right to act as parties. The child's

right to be heard was emphasised in the Norwegian Child Welfare Act:

A child who is seven years of age or older, as well as a younger child who is capable of forming views, is to be informed and given the opportunity to be heard before making decisions in matters affecting him or her. The child's opinion is to be given weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. A child may act as a party to a case and have recognised procedural rights if aged 15 years or older and if the child understands the matter at hand. The county board may grant a child under age 15 procedural rights in special cases. In cases concerning measures or services to children with behavioural problems, the child is always to be regarded as a party. (Author's translation of Lov om barnevernstjenester [*Child Welfare Act*], no. 100, § 6.3)

Despite increasing acknowledgment of the importance of including children's perspectives, both in practical child welfare work and in areas of research affecting children and young people, much research is still carried out where the child is studied from an adult perspective. Exploring the child's situation is not necessarily the same as including the child's voice in research (Greene & Hill, 2005; O'Kane, 2008). In fact, taking the child's perspective may be understood in quite different ways. It may be understood as taking the child's perspective in order to give an airing to the child's *own* views and experiences. Another understanding would be to view the child from an adult perspective on what is important for the child who is the focus of attention (Omre & Schjelderup, 2009; Slettebø, 2008; Tiller, 1990). According to Slettebø (2008), both these perspectives are important in research. He underlines that it is not a question of either/or but, rather, both/and, where one perspective does not necessarily exclude the other.

There may be several reasons why children are made the object of concern in research instead of being included in research as active participants. The arguments may contain practical, methodological and ethical aspects. Firstly, many methodological approaches are designed for adult participation (O'Kane, 2008). The researcher always has to consider which methodological approaches are most suitable to answer the research question(s). Additionally, the researcher has to consider what constitutes the most appropriate method that allows for including children's perspectives when children are participants in research. James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) argue that children should have the opportunity to express their viewpoints in alternative ways and that a possible consequence of using methodological approaches that allow only for oral or written representation could be a reduction of validity. When small children are participating in research, visual research methods have proved to be eminently well suited, whereas

older children are able to more easily express themselves in other ways (Hart & Tyrer, 2006). However, either way, it is important to adjust or fine-tune the research design in consideration of participants' ages and levels of cognitive development. Q methodology can offer a good alternative approach because it can flexibly adapt for the participant sample, ages, and developmental stages. Although the statements in a Q study often are sentences, it is possible to use alternatives such as images, phrases, or single words instead of longer statements (Corr, 2006; Stephenson, 1980).

Children's participation in research is important primarily because the child's experience and 'voice' has its own and independent value. However, including children's perspectives in research can also have a value beyond this:

A growing number of advocates now argue that children's active participation in research is both a means to improve the quality and relevance for the data *and* make children themselves more visible within a particular community or within the broader society. (Hart & Tyrer, 2006, p. 15)

Therefore, including children in research may have positive effects that go beyond promoting children's perspectives. Research that includes children's perspectives may actually support an approach towards listening to children in other contexts as well. In child welfare, there is a focus on 'research-based practice'; consequently, such research may contribute to a stronger focus on the children's perspectives in practical child welfare work.

Q Methodology: An Effective Method for Enhancing Children's Perspectives in Research

In general, Q methodology represents an alternative method to more conventional research traditions within the qualitative and quantitative paradigms (Brown, 1991/1992). Many conventional qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, require participants with relatively good oral skills. In some fields, the research topics may be of a private and sensitive character; hence it can be difficult for participants to express thoughts, feelings and experiences to the researcher. Talking about sensitive and controversial issues may in fact be challenging even for people with good oral skills. The areas of social work and child welfare are, in particular, concerned with sensitive and rather complex problem areas, and recruiting participants is sometimes challenging (Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery, & Cooper, 2008) Additionally, the researcher can find that children's caregivers, including professionals, wish to protect them out of concern that participation will represent a negative experience for the child (O'Kane, 2008).

In this article, I discuss some of the challenges encountered during a study on what meaning 'family' has for children in foster care. Talking about what family means to them can be a difficult topic for some foster children. Therefore, to ensure that no one felt any sense of external pressure to participate, it was important to emphasise that any participation in the research study was entirely a matter of personal choice. Clarification of these principles was provided both in the written information about the research project and when the researcher met with the participants.

An advantage of Q methodology is that it can offer a non-threatening and easy-to-use means of obtaining the participants' stories; hence even small children can participate (Ellingsen, Størksen, & Stephens, 2010). That said, Q methodology is not only a good way to discover views and perspectives amongst children and adolescents, but anyone. The method aims at exploring subjectivity (views, feelings, opinions), and how subjectivity is patterned through shared perspectives (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Additionally, it is suitable to identify contrasts and divergences within groups, but also to generate new ideas and hypotheses (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005).

In Q studies, statements perform a central function in revealing subjectivity. Developing statements for the Q study is seen as a crucial step in the research process. In this article I share my experiences in the process of developing the Q sample, and the challenges faced in doing so. Moreover, some thoughts from the adolescents on the Q sorting procedure are also included. Certain theoretical strands are linked to these discussions.

The Aims of the Study

The study, "Foster Children and Their Families", is a doctoral project undertaken between 2007 and 2011. The overall aim of the PhD project is to explore how adolescents who live in long-term foster care experience their family. The study is concerned with family perceptions amongst foster children and elements that shape their conceptions. It is also concerned with aspects of family perceived as important and challenging by foster children. Additionally, the study explores how adolescent foster children's perspectives are understood by their birth parents and foster parents (for presentations of results, see Ellingsen, Shemmings, & Størksen, 2011. Although some researchers have explored the concept of family among foster children (Anderson, 1999, 2005; Gardner, 1996; Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005), there are no such studies using Q methodology.

There is a strong emphasis on nurturing the biological bonds in Norwegian child welfare policy, which makes it important to gain more knowledge on how children who live in Norwegian foster homes

experience family. Q methodology offers a good and valid way to compare views (Donner, 2001). Comparing views is also central in the current study in order to explore how the adolescents' perspectives are understood by adults.

Study Design and the Set of Participants

The project consists of several phases, in which the adolescent study represents the focal part of the project. The main objective is to explore young people's perspectives on family in relation to those whom they experience as a family, the elements that shape their conceptions, and aspects of family perceived as important and challenging by foster children.

Child Welfare Services in seven different municipalities in Norway initiated the contact with the participants. In cases where a court order is in place, the parents usually continue to play a part in parental responsibility. Consequently, these parents are entitled to have a say in whether their children may be involved in research. The Norwegian Ethical Committee for Social Research gave approval for the project, as long as consent was given by both parents and children. A total of 24 adolescents agreed to participate in the study. Three adolescents were interviewed to generate the statements for the Q study, one of whom also completed a Q sort, reducing the number of participants to 22 at the Q-sorting stage. In addition, in a parallel fashion, focus group interviews were carried out to derive Q-sample statements for foster parents and birth parents. The experiences presented here, however, are concerned with only the adolescents' participation in the research study. All of the adolescents were in long-term foster care, meaning they were in placement for more than two years. Several participants had been in foster care since early childhood. Most of the children were placed in 'ordinary' foster homes where there had been no social contact or family connection with the foster family prior to the placement.

Concourse: The Meaning of Family for Children in Foster Care

One theoretical foundation in Q methodology is the concourse theory of communication. Concourse can be explained as "the flow of communicability surrounding any topic" (Brown, 1993, p. 94). Stephenson (1978) describes concourse as "subjective communicability". Thus, concourse can be understood as communication about any issue in which the communication is subjectively rooted, such as a person's experiences, points of view, opinions, attitudes, feelings, etc. The concourse about family for children in foster care was obtained through interviews with the child participants and unrelated foster and birthparents, all of whom have

experience with foster home placement from different standpoints. The subjective communication can be expressed orally, but also in a non-oral form. It is required, however, that the subjective communication, in one way or another, can be conveyed or shared with others. This is derived from a central principle in concourse theory referred to as *consciring* (Stephenson, 1978; Thorsen, 2006). According to Brown (1991/1992), using interviews to identify the concourse is most consistent with Q methodology, but statements may also be obtained from other sources (e.g., literature or daily conversations). It is advisable that the researcher has an open-minded approach when interviewing for the purpose of identifying the concourse. For example, use of an unstructured interview guide may bring out more nuances and aspects in the interview situation when compared with structured interviews (Donner, 2001). An interview that is too structured may have a confining effect where aspects and nuances that are important to include in the concourse might get lost. Thus, in order to ensure a wide range of statements about family for children in foster care, an open, structured interview guide was used. For the same reason, unrelated participants were interviewed in order to obtain a variety of experiences across families. In contrast, participants who were included in the Q sort were related, in order to explore the understandings of foster parents and birth parents in terms of their child's perspective on family.

The initial interviews took about 1 to 2 hours. Although the foster children had many thoughts about family, and what family meant to them, they also expressed difficulty in finding the right words to convey their thoughts about family. One participant expressed it this way: "It is difficult to explain, because I do not know which words I can use". Here, the participant expressed that she had some thoughts, but that these thoughts were too difficult to find words to describe and explain to the researcher. Another participant put it this way: "I do not really think that family is so important. Well, I guess it's important, but I do not know why it's important". This indicates that there are also concerns about a lack of clear thoughts on family life, which is compounded by ideas and perspectives being quite abstract. This situation creates, in turn, some difficulties when trying to explain and articulate thoughts and feelings.

The child participants in the initial interviews were very different from each other, both in terms of what they thought about family and in relation to how they communicated their experiences and thoughts to the researcher. During the interviews, "do not know" responses to questions and issues posed seemed striking. However, when the interviews were transcribed into text, they appeared to contain far more richness than had first appeared during the interview phase. It was clear from the transcribed interviews that all of the participants had made contributions which contained many

important reflections, thoughts and perspectives on family and what family meant to them. It revealed that, in most cases, answers of "I don't know" were followed up with elaborations and amplifications. One of the issues discussed during interviews was who the adolescents thought would get the role as a grandparent if they had children of their own in the future, whereupon one participant replied:

I don't know . . . I think maybe my mum in [place]. I don't really know why . . . I guess it's because . . . she is going to care . . . about the baby . . . I don't know. Well, I guess the other ones [foster parents] will care as well, but maybe differently . . . I don't know.

The focus group interviews with the foster parents and the birth parents were characterised by clearer thoughts and reflections on issues than those raised in the children's interviews. This may be due to several reasons other than greater maturity and more life experience. In Norway, it is an aim that most people wishing to become foster parents undergo the PRIDE programme (Parent Resource for Information, Development, Education) before becoming foster parents. Becoming foster parents through this nationally accredited training course exposed potential foster parents to some of the same issues that came up in the focus group interviews. Birth parents have also previously expressed thoughts on these issues as part of the process they go through after losing custody of their child(ren). Additionally, focus group interviews may generate new thoughts, and existing thoughts and perspectives might become clearer to the respondents through discussion and dialogue with the others. The researcher will, to a greater extent, benefit from the unique dynamic that often occurs in communication between group participants (Bryman, 2004; Polit & Beck, 2004). The interviews with child participants were conducted on a one-to-one basis for reasons of confidentiality and to comply with the provisions of the ethical committee recommendations.

The next step in the research process was to select a set of statements that were representative of the identified concourse (Stephenson, 1978). The procedure of selecting the statements for inclusion in the Q sample is described as the most challenging and time-consuming part of a Q study (Brown, 1991/1992). A reduction in the number of statements is deemed necessary in order to make the number manageable for a Q sort. The quantity of statements the researcher chooses to include in a Q study will depend on the theme as well as the composition of the group of participants. In order to systematically reduce the number of statements while aiming to retain the different elements of the identified concourse, the Fisherian balanced-block design (see Stephenson, 1953) was used.

Selecting Statements

All the interviews with child participants and the focus group interviews with parents were transcribed. The statements were subsequently listed thematically, as they had emerged during interviews, and this resulted in 247 statements after taking away repeated statements and statements that were found not relevant for the topic. In order to deal with all the statements, they were systematically reviewed one by one, and new thematic headings or categories were made as they appeared. These categories were not defined in advance, leading to the emergence of twelve categories: (1) Defining 'family'; (2) Where I live; (3) How others understand 'family' for the child; (4) Identity and attachment; (5) Follow-up after placement; (6) Emotional expressions (how I am/how I feel); (7) Contact time with birth family; (8) Future perspectives; (9) Ambivalence; (10) Relationship and contact with birth family; (11) Relationship with foster family; and (12) Conflict.

The statements were still somewhat overwhelming and difficult to deal with, so further refinements were necessary. The Fisherian balanced-block design is particularly helpful when it comes to retaining the representativeness in the concourse (Brown, 1991/1992; Stephenson, 1953). Most of the statements were concerned with either the foster family, the birth family or both families, independent of the 12 themes or categories to which they were attached. Core categories were sought, which could embrace most of the statements. Besides dealing with family settings (birth family/foster family), some statements clustered around 'belonging and identity'. Emotional statements expressed both positive and negative feelings and also included statements about conflict and ambivalence. Moreover, issues of relationship and contact featured as two other key themes in the statements, both in terms of present-day relationships and also from a future perspective. Some statements were difficult to categorise. Hence, a residual category of accumulated miscellaneous statements was included. Nevertheless, statements in this last category were relevant to the topic and merited inclusion as part of the concourse. However, they were more multifaceted and touched on several additional themes, each of which contained very few statements. The procedure of using the Fisherian balanced-block design to select a representative set of statements (Q sample) is summarised in Table 1.

The purpose of using a Fisher balanced-block design is to select a variety of statements in a systematic way to preserve the different aspects, themes and nuances that are identified as part of the concourse. Hence, representativeness is not based on a ratio of the number of statements in a crossed category. Rather, the purpose is to bring up a

Table 1: Fisherian Balanced-Block Design

	A Biological family	B Foster family	C Both families	D Miscellaneous
E Belonging and identity	4 of 18 total statements	4 of 22 total statements	4 of 12 total statements	3 of 35 total statements
F Relationships in everyday life and in the future	4 of 25 total statements	4 of 44 total statements	4 of 14 total statements	
G Emotional statements	4 of 24 total statements	4 of 36 total statements	4 of 17 total statements	

Notes: Total statement numbers refer to the number of statements initially categorized in each block. Statements are in the Appendix.

representative sample to make the statements manageable for a Q-sort procedure. The representativeness is, therefore, independent of how many statements actually exist within each theme or cross-matched category. This is why the same number of statements is selected from each group. For example, the same number is drawn from cross-matched category B x F although this category contains the most statements (44) in total.

Some statements could naturally fall within more than one theme. A statement could be defined as an emotional statement and, at the same time, a statement about belonging and identity. For example: "I am very different from my foster family, and that means that I don't quite fit in as a member of the family". This specific statement could be seen as a statement about family belonging (or lack of belonging). However, it can also be defined as an emotional statement about the feeling of being different. Consequently, it can sometimes be a matter of the weighting given in terms of what to emphasise in the statement. Thus, the decision-making process was not always straightforward when considering statements that fell under two or more categories. One solution could be to add more categories. However, the purpose of using a balanced-block design was to make the selection of statements easier to handle. Therefore, I chose to add each of the selected statements under just one of the category headings, even in cases where it could fit another category. Is it possible that such choices could represent a bias in the study? The response to this would be "probably not". These statements were not excluded; rather, they were sustained as part of the concourse.

It is my experience that taking time to reflect on the most appropriate category heading is important, and the researcher needs to be careful and thorough in the process when developing a Q sample. If not, important aspects and nuances of the concourse might be lost and, consequently, the Q sample will not represent the identified concourse. The Fisherian balanced-block design facilitated a reduction from 247 statements to 39.

Before administering the Q sort with the 22 adolescent Q-sort participants (and their birth and foster parents), a pilot study was conducted. Five people were invited to try out a Q sort. All of the pilot Q sorters had experience working with children in foster care. They were given instructions such as, "Imagine a child in foster care whom you have worked with, and sort the cards in the same way you think that the child would". Or, "Imagine a parent who has lost custody of their child, and sort the cards in the same way you think this parent would". And finally, "Imagine a foster parent and sort the cards in the same way you think this person would". The reason for doing the pilot study on an 'imaginary' level is that researchers in social work and child welfare can often find it difficult to recruit research study participants (Wilson et al., 2008). In this study, both birth parents and their children had to give their consent before participating in the study. This initially created some uncertainty as to whether the required number of participants was attainable. Some alterations were made to the statements after the pilot study in order to make each statement as clear and comprehensible as possible.

The Adolescent's Q Sort

Each statement was printed on a separate card in an easy-to-read font. When doing a Q sort, the respondents are asked to order the statements in a grid pattern. The instruction was to "sort the cards according to what you find to be most unlike/most like your situation". The participants were advised to start by doing a preliminary sort through dividing the cards into three piles, one with statements they found like their own situation or the way they felt, one pile with statements unlike their own situation of how they felt, and the remaining statements in the third pile. This preliminary ordering of the cards made it easier for the participants to sort the statements at a more nuanced level into the grid. The adolescents took about 20 to 60 minutes to complete the Q-sorting procedure.

Researcher's Presence

The participants found the Q-sorting procedure easy to grasp and the procedure of sorting statements was, in most cases, unproblematic. The researcher was present when the participants accomplished their Q sorts in 20 of the 22 cases. This allowed the researcher an opportunity

to capture comments and questions from the children while they were doing the Q sorts, as well as to observe whether they seemed to understand the concept of sorting the statements into the grid. One of the participants wished to have the social worker present during the Q-sorting procedure. The presence of the social worker did not disrupt the participant in any way while sorting the cards. Another of the participants chose to do the Q sort in the same room as her foster mother, although my suggestion was for them to do the Q sort in separate rooms. It is important for validity, reliability and confidentiality to ensure that participants can sort the cards in accordance with how *they* feel or understand their situation, and that they are able to sort the statements without interference from the researcher or others.

In the Q literature it is recommended that the researcher is present during the Q-sort procedure because of the opportunity such presence gives in observing the sorting procedure and receiving comments that can be valuable for the interpretation process (Brown, 1991/1992; van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). Additionally, it is important because of the subjectivity element that is essential in Q methodology: this also means that a statement can mean quite different things to different people (Stephenson, 1961). When present, the researcher obtains richer data through the addition of comments on how the participants understand the statements and why particular scores have been assigned in the Q sort.

Some of the participants found some of the statements difficult to understand. The presence of the researcher also makes it possible to gain awareness of such difficulties. In some situations, difficulties were solved by reading the statements out loud and clarifying the words and concepts which were found to be ambiguous. These concepts included those of 'visiting arrangements', 'independent', and 'home environment'. In these cases, the concept was discussed in order to clarify what the terms meant. However, when clarifying concepts, it was important not to influence the way in which participants sorted the cards but, rather, to focus their attention on how to understand a specific word. If such distinction was not made, the researcher would have risked influencing the participant on where to place the card on the grid.

Two of the participants sorted the statements without the research present. The participants received the statements printed on separate cards, the Q sort grid, and a step-by-step guide on how to do the Q sort. Further, there was telephone contact with these two participants immediately prior to and after they sorted the cards, to ensure that they understood how to do the Q sort, and to take note of the comments they might wish to make. These participants said that they found it easy to relate to the statements and it seemed that they understood the concept of sorting the statements into the grid.

The participants sorted the cards in accordance with the instructions and started by dividing the statements into three piles. It was interesting to observe how the participants concentrated on the task and how they systematically worked through all the statements. Card placement was fine-tuned and some sorters changed card positions until they were satisfied that the 'picture' was consistent with how they felt and experienced their situation.

Several of the child participants explicitly stated that the Q sort was a good way to contribute from their experience to research. Some said it would have been difficult to talk about their feelings concerning family, and that the sorting procedure made it easier to share their perspectives with the researcher. The comments participants made on their Q sorts were to prove valuable for the interpretation of the results. The Q-sorting procedure, as well as the dialogue about the sort during or after Q sorting, may be treated as an interview (Brown, 1991/1992), which can advantageously be audio recorded (Ellingsen, Størksen, & Stephens, 2010).

Statements with Double Content

After accomplishing the Q sort, all participants were asked whether or not they wished to comment on their Q sorts. I asked the participants if there was any statement they found particularly difficult to place into the grid. Such statements appeared to be those that contained a 'double content', for example: "Even if my biological mother/mum can't take care of me, the love is there. In a way, the love endures".

One of the child participants made the following comment about the statement:

This statement is a bit difficult. I feel that my mum can take care of me and the love is there, but I don't feel that she cannot take care of me. I feel the first part of the statement is not right, but the last part is right. This one was a bit tricky to place into the grid.

Another statement in the Q sample was formulated this way: "I think quite a lot about moving back with my biological mother and/or father and I feel torn between my biological family and foster family". This statement also appeared to be difficult for some of the participants due to its double content. As one participant put it:

I think a lot about moving home, but I do not feel especially more drawn towards either my foster family or my birth family. The statement wording is just not quite right, since I don't feel torn in between.

These comments provide an explanation of why the statement was in the centre of the grid, which it perhaps would not have been if the content had been separated into two statements. However, comments on the statements provide a deeper meaning to statements in relation to

the situation and viewpoints of the child participant, which could easily have been missed out had the statements been worded differently or split into stand-alone statements.

To Deepen the Content of Statements

All young people contributed valuable comments on their Q sorts. Some had just a few brief comments, while others had longer comments with in-depth reflection on both the content and placement of the card. One of the participants commented on a statement about feelings of difference between the foster family and others:

I don't feel different; although I actually think a lot about the fact that I live in a foster home. Friends and people I know don't really think about it, still, they know I live here and they know the difference between my foster family and my birth family. They know when I go to see my mum, and I tell them what we have done and stuff. It is quite important for me to be open with my friends and I want them to know my situation; if not, it can be embarrassing or strange in a way. . . . For example if some topics come up, and they suddenly get to know that I live in a foster home without them knowing [before then]. . . . That can be awkward in a way, and they might feel bad because they'd never asked, and I can feel guilty because I never said anything.

Another participant said this about a statement concerning the thoughts of losing parts of their biological family:

I don't think that I've lost parts of my birth family. It might be foolish to put the statement in the middle [zero], really, because in a way I have lost . . . since I've lived here in my foster home, then I have lost parts of my birth family. But they have kind of come back, that is why I put it there . . . if not, I would have put in on -1. I haven't really had a family beyond the really close family; they have never been there.

These comments also elaborate on the meaning and content of the statements, as well as provide a reason for placing the statement into a specific column. The latter also says something about who this child participant saw as the closest family. Such comments can be particularly valuable when they concern statements that are indicated by the research results as being of significance or characteristic of an emerging factor.

As already mentioned, some child participants found it difficult to find the right words to express their thoughts and feelings about family in the initial interviews. Some of the participants also found it difficult to elaborate and comment on their Q sorts. One participant's Q sort revealed that good collaboration existed between the foster parents and birth parents, and I asked if more could be said about that, how this

shows in daily life, whereupon he replied: "I guess it is. . . . how can I explain it? It works quite well. . . . I don't know how to explain".

Although it can be difficult to elaborate on the statement, the participant has a clear opinion that there is a good collaboration between birth parents and foster parents that works well. A few of the participants did not want to comment on their Q sorts or the statements. Talking to an adult stranger (such as the researcher) can be difficult for adolescent children. However, the Q sorting provides an opportunity to participate in research without going into extensive detail about their situation and it allows people who find it hard to express their perspective verbally to express their views in other ways.

This study also revealed that some statements have an importance even though the child participants had never before reflected much upon the matter. One of the statements was about feeling part of the foster family with pictures of them on the wall, having their name on the door, and so on. In this way, everybody can see they are part of the family. Some participants placed this card on the outer positive edge of the scale ('most like my situation'). I asked one of them if this was something that he was very conscious of, upon which he replied: "No, but when I think about it . . . there have always been pictures of me on the wall and stuff. It is kind of a big part of our home".

Being aware and conscious about one's views and perspectives is also essential in concourse theory. Being confronted with different perspectives and views within a concourse, people may be aware of their own views and they may discover new parts of themselves that they were not aware of before (Brown, 1991/1992).

The Q Sort and Accuracy

In general, the participating adolescents expressed the view that the Q sort gave an accurate picture of how they felt and thought about family. Nevertheless, some child participants had certain reservations because of a predefined grid (forced distribution), commenting that they would have liked to place more statements under some columns than there was room for. Some said there should have been more cells under column +4 and -4. In these cases, we talked about which statements they would have moved in order to make the picture more accurate, which again gave valuable comments that added nuances into the sort. This is also an illustration of the importance for participants to be precise and accurate in their presentation of their perspective. Many of the child participants had clear thoughts on the accuracy of the statements, as illustrated by one participant's comments on two of the statements placed in the centre of the grid (zero): "Statements '#' and '# should be on the minus side. Remember, they belong on the minus side! The 0-column could have been smaller".

Some child participants also said that some aspects of family that were important to them were missing in the set of statements. These aspects were elaborated upon in their comments. However, based on the statements represented in the Q sample, they felt the Q sort gave an accurate picture of their perspective: as one of them put it: “based on these statements, it does!”

Despite some challenges in using a pre-defined grid and challenges in capturing the different aspects of what family actually meant for the children in foster care in the Q sample, most of them said the statements had provided a representative framing of relevant aspects of family. This is also underpinned by the following three answers to the question, “Does your Q sort provide an accurate picture of your situation?”

I think it gives an accurate picture of how I think. Actually, I think they do. We’re just a family, and I haven’t really thought much about it, it’s just the way it is, you know.

Absolutely, it gives a good picture of how I feel and of how I think. It’s not like . . . some statements can be read differently by different people, but I think they are on the spot, actually, the way I read them anyway.

Yes, they do. This was a really clever way of doing it. This way may actually give you a better feeling of what information you have given up compared to if you just sit and talk freely.

Giving a child participant the opportunity to articulate how they experience participating in research may be a good way, both ethically and methodologically, to reveal whether or not participants feel they have had the chance to say what they wanted to say in the interview or research setting. It is the responsibility of the researcher to protect participant integrity in research in a way that such participation does not become an offensive or invasive experience (Bryman, 2004). Hence, informed consent is important and it is vital that child participants have a clear understanding of what participation in research entails. And last but not least, what is implied by free will in participation must be of paramount concern.

The researcher also has to be aware of the imbalance in power between participant and researcher, especially when children and young people are participating in research. Children and young people can find it difficult not to answer questions that they would actually prefer not to answer in an interview setting. In a Q study, the Q sorter relates to something—the statements—which others have already expressed or formulated, and this may make participation in research less intense and intrusive. Ethical considerations are important in all research, independent of methodological approach. However, the comments made by child Q-study participants indicate that the Q method, as an

approach, contains a strength which can make it easier for participants to give their perspectives and express their views about family, and about being a foster child, which, for some, can be difficult to articulate using other methods.

Closing Comments

When doing a Q study it is important to be thorough when developing the set of statements for the study. Identifying the concourse and selecting a representative Q sample is necessary groundwork and fundamental to designing a good Q study. Statements need to be adjusted in a way that is sensitive to the requirements and qualities of particular groups of participants, in order to facilitate optimum cooperation and outcomes. I hope the report of one researcher's experiences with Q-sample methodology and undertaking a Q study on children in foster care will be of help to other researchers wishing to conduct a Q study.

It might be assumed that children who live in foster homes have a heightened awareness of issues relating to family and will have reflected upon and thought about what family is, arising from their own life experiences in foster homes. Presumably, these children have a greater ability to express aspects of family when compared with other children who might see family as a matter of course. However, this study indicates that this is not especially the case. Several of the child participants found it difficult to express what family meant to them. Nevertheless, they experienced the statements used in the study as relevant and found them easy to relate to their own situation. Many child participants conveyed explicitly that the Q sort was a good way of taking part in research and sharing their perspective. They elaborated on the statements, indicating that statements can also have a generating effect on the thoughts and reflections of the participants.

Currently, there is a strong focus on including children and young people in research. Hence, it follows that it is important to make use of and to develop flexible and easily adaptable methodological approaches, with respect to both the research topic and the participant group. It is unacceptable to allow methodological challenges to have an excluding effect that prevents groups from participating in research. This imposes a responsibility on researchers to adopt methodological approaches which allow children and young people to participate in research (Kelly, 2007).

Q methodology offers a supplemental or alternative approach to more commonly used research methods in the social work field. One of its strengths is in providing the flexibility that is necessary when children's perspectives are the focus of attention. The researcher then has to consider the children's age, level of intellectual development and

maturity when designing a research project. The Q sample in a Q study can be developed as images, text or other expressions of meaning (Brown, 1991/1992). Experiences from others are that the participants often feel they have played an active part in research using Q methodology, and that they find such participation quite engaging (Donner, 2001; van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). In this study, Q methodology was experienced as a good method for exploring foster children's family perceptions, because the statements were found to capture central aspects concerning family for children in foster care. The views that were discovered in the study in many ways resemble categories described in studies from other countries (Anderson, 1999, 2005; Gardner, 1996; Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005). However, the Q factors contain many details that easily may be missed using conventional qualitative approaches. Additionally, the sorting procedure helped the participants to elaborate on important issues in the statements. Hence Q methodology seems to offer a valid and concise way of expressing subjective views and feelings.

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Appendix: The Q Sample

No Statement

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 1 | I feel that both my foster family and my biological family love me very much. |
| 2 | I miss my biological home environment. |
| 3 | Cooperation is not good between my biological parents and foster parents. |
| 4 | I have the feeling of belonging to a family in my relationship with my foster family and the relatives there, and it is only my name that connects me to my biological family and relations, and not the feelings. |

No Statement

-
- 5** I am sometimes afraid that my foster parents will let me go.
-
- 6** I have good memories of my biological family, and that means I am attached to them.
-
- 7** Even if my biological mother/mum can't take care of me, the love is there. In a way, the love endures.
-
- 8** It is important for my foster parents that I have a good relationship with my biological family.
-
- 9** It is important for me to be open with my friends about the fact that I live in a foster home. If not I feel that I am hiding something from them and fooling them.
-
- 10** My biological family thinks that I am more a part of their family than I think in relation to them.
-
- 11** It is important to feel as a part of the foster family, with pictures of me on the wall and my name on the door and things like that—then everybody can see that I am part of the family.
-
- 12** Even if my foster family and biological family actually are two families, they are like one family—my family.
-
- 13** I am sometimes afraid of turning 18, because the bonds to the foster family are more fragile and uncertain for me than for children who live with their biological parents.
-
- 14** Both foster parents and biological parents will be the grandparents of my children if I have my own children some day.
-
- 15** When I am spending time with my biological parents, it's as if they suddenly become my parents again.
-
- 16** I will never let go of my biological mother and she will always be an important part of my family even if it's the foster family I relate to most as family.
-
- 17** Actually, I would like to have the same family name as my foster family.
-
- 18** I will always be able to go to my foster family if I need help with something—even after I have grown up
-
- 19** Child Protection [child welfare services] should find a foster home in the child's own family because it is important to live in the family they have a biological connection with.
-
- 20** It is not important for me to know my history or where I come from.
-
- 21** I actually think a lot about the fact that I live in the foster home and I feel different from other children/young people.
-
- 22** Siblings are family for me regardless of whether it's a biological sibling or a sibling in the foster family.
-

No Statement

-
- 23 My experience is that I can choose who will be my family—neither my biological family nor foster family thinks it should only be them.
-
- 24 My biological family will mean more to me as I get older.
-
- 25 Contact time is stressful for me and contact time is more to satisfy the needs of my biological family than to satisfy my needs.
-
- 26 The older I get, the more I think that the foster family is my family.
-
- 27 I think quite a lot about moving back to my biological mother and/or father—and I feel torn between my biological family and foster family.
-
- 28 My foster parents have a major influence on what the contact is like with my biological family.
-
- 29 I feel that I have to take my biological parents into consideration so that I don't hurt them.
-
- 30 Now and again I get the feeling that I must choose parents, and no matter whom I choose, I will hurt somebody.
-
- 31 I am very different from my foster family and that means that I don't quite fit in as a member of the family.
-
- 32 It's important to me to know that my biological parents are ok.
-
- 33 It's important to me that the foster family and others say good (positive) things about my biological family.
-
- 34 I feel secure that my foster parents will take care of me and meet my needs. They want the best for me.
-
- 35 I feel like two different people: 'myself' when I am with my foster parents and somebody else when I am with my biological parents.
-
- 36 It's important that I have my own time with my biological family without other people needing to know what we did or talked about.
-
- 37 Friends and people around me don't think that I actually come from another family—they think that my foster family is my family.
-
- 38 I don't feel that I have lost parts of my biological family.
-
- 39 My foster family is more a place I live than a family to me.
-