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The View of Minority Youth on Cultural Continuity When Developing Their Identity in Majority Foster Homes

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ABSTRACT

Under national and international legislation, when choosing a foster home, continuity of upbringing and connection to the child's cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds is desirable. However, research shows that such considerations are only taken into account to a small extent and that children from minority backgrounds are often settled in majority foster homes. The Norwegian Child Welfare Service has been criticised for this. In this article, the focus is on youth with minority backgrounds living in majority foster homes and their views on cultural continuity. What is important for these young people when developing their identity in foster homes? The study is based on qualitative interviews with nine adolescents from minority backgrounds who live in majority foster homes. The analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology and shows that youth do not necessarily want cultural continuity in the sense of living in a culturally "matched" foster home. However, they want cultural continuity in other ways, for example as the continuation of food traditions and celebrations. It can thus be argued that cultural continuity is safeguarded to varying degrees by the youth themselves. Most important for adolescents is that they can choose for themselves who they want to be and that their foster parents support this. Understood in the light of childhood sociology, youth want to be considered as rational and competent actors with "thick" agency, also called "being". The need for self-determination in the development of the youth's own identity is central.

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Introduction

The cultural rights of children are highlighted in both international and national legislation. Article 20.3 of the FNs Barnekonvensjon (1989) states that: "When possible solutions are considered, due consideration shall be given to the desirability of continuity in the child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious and cultural and linguistic background".¹ In Norway, continuity considerations are safeguarded under Section 4–15 of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act, which states that consideration, is to be given

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when choosing a foster home (Barnevernsloven, 2021). In the foster home literature, continuity considerations are often understood as a cultural and/or religious “match” between children and foster parents. That is, the foster parents have the same country or religious background as the children (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). This study focuses on the importance of cultural continuity. However, the understanding of culture includes traditions that have religious affiliation (Berger, 1993).

It has been difficult to recruit cultural minority foster homes in Norway and many children from minority backgrounds must live in majority foster homes (Proba, 2017). Lack of consideration of the cultural rights of children has led to criticism of child welfare services (Backe-Hansen et al., 2010; Hofman, 2010; Paulsen et al., 2014). Researchers (Van Der Weele & Fiecko, 2020), immigrant organisations (Castello, 2019) and foreign media (Øverlien et al., 2018) asks whether child welfare services in Norway have an assimilating practice. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled against Norway in several child welfare cases, of which many concern violations of Article 8, the right to respect for privacy and family life (Sæle, 2020), where the right to cultural and religious identity is highlighted in several cases (EMD, 2021).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of hearing the youth voices in relation to cultural continuity in foster home placement. The issue is: What is important for youth with minority backgrounds when developing their identity in foster homes? Identity is understood as the subjective reality of the person (Berger & Luckmann, 2000). The study is based on qualitative interviews with nine adolescents from minority backgrounds who live in majority foster homes, which are homes in which one or both foster parents have ethnic Norwegian backgrounds. The young people thus have a cultural minority background and develop their identity in a cultural majority home.

In the study, adolescents are considered to be members of society and it is recognised that they negotiate identity based on both majority and minority culture (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). However, the article emphasises youth minority culture. The views of adolescents on continuity considerations in relation to foster homes are barely touched in research (Backe-Hansen et al., 2010; Hofman, 2010) and most studies concerning the needs of foster children are conducted in Anglo-American society. Research from other Western countries is limited (Steenbakkers et al., 2016).

Research on the views of adolescents on cultural continuity

Nordic and English research discusses whether the intentions of the UN Child Welfare Convention (Article 20, item 3) are followed when children with minority backgrounds have to live in majority foster homes (Egelund et al., 2009) and what significance continuity considerations will have for placement (Backe-Hansen et al., 2010; Selwyn & Wijedasa, 2011). Nordic research shows that continuity considerations are practised to a limited extent when choosing a foster home (Aarset & Bredal, 2018; Hammen & Jensen, 2010; Hofman, 2010).

Some qualitative studies shed light on what youth think about continuity considerations and show that adolescents are not concerned with cultural continuity in the choice of foster home, but that it is important for them that the foster family recognises and respects their background, so that they can choose what they want from their parents culture (Hansen & Flakerud, 2020; Larsen, 2009; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Proba, 2017). The same studies show individual variations in, and the extent to which, youth

believe cultural continuity is important in the sense of continuing parts of the parents' culture. Food is highlighted as an example of continuity that is desirable from the perspective of unaccompanied minors (Kohli et al., 2010; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015).

Other research points out that age is important to what ethnic and cultural background means for a person (Hansen, 2021; Hansen & Flaskerud, 2020; Larsen, 2009). Older children can maintain networks and have learned the language, traditions and any rituals of their biological parents. Interest in own ethnic and cultural background often arises at older age (Proba, 2017).

This study examines what youth from minority backgrounds highlight as important when developing their identity in majority foster homes. Youth needs in connection with identity development are in demand in research (Steenbakkers et al., 2018). However, the study makes several contributions. There is a lot of research in the field of informants who have previously been foster children (Fylkenes et al., 2021). This study highlights the voices of nine youth, seven of whom were living in foster homes at the time of the interview. The fact that two of the informants are unaccompanied minors is also an important contribution, as we know little about the experiences of this group in the context of foster homes (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015).

Theoretical framework

Childhood sociological theory can contribute to our understanding of culturally minority youth experiences and views on cultural continuity when they develop their identity in majority foster homes. Within childhood sociology there are different theoretical perspectives on what a child is (Jenks, 2005). The notions of “being” and “becoming” are highlighted as two contradictory approaches (James, 2011). Seeing children as “being”, means they are considered rational and competent actors (Jenks, 2005; Tisdall & Punch, 2012) who get recognition for who they are in the present. Children have an active role and are co-constructors of their own lives (Corsaro, 2011). On the other hand, when children are seen as “becoming” they are considered unfinished, inadequate and dependent (James, 2011). This means that children only have a passive role, whereas the adults are considered competent “human beings” and the focus is on what the child should become, not on what the child is here and now.

This dichotomy has been subject to criticism; such as the “being” perspective for how competence is not dependent on context and that the view of children should accommodate the future experience of becoming an adult (Uprichard, 2008). The criticism has led to several attempts at merging the dichotomies (Lee & Motzkau, 2011; Uprichard, 2008) so that children are considered as both “being and becoming”, which takes greater account of children's agency by making children visible both here and now, while capturing the procedural aspects of being a child (Uprichard, 2008). However, Hanson (2017) points out that it is not sufficient to see children as “being and becoming”. To understand childhood and children, the child's past must also be embraced. For example, if children are considered as “been, being and becoming”, it is possible to investigate how the past affects the present (Hanson, 2017). Exactly how is relevant in the youth stories and in this study, children are considered as “been, being and becoming”.

The theoretical discussion of children and agency is relevant to the study of youth from minority backgrounds living in majority foster homes. Within different cultural

groups, there will be variations in the extent to which young people are expected to exercise agency (Hemming & Madge, 2012), as well as the extent to which youth have agency and the agency's impact on their lives. To highlight different degrees of agency, a distinction can be made between thin and thick agency (Klocker, 2007). Thin agency is decisions and actions conducted within restrictive contexts in which there are few viable alternatives. Thick agency is contexts with the latitude to make decisions and act within a range of options (Klocker, 2007). The choices made by actors can change over time, and become thicker or thinner within different contexts depending on their relationships to others. So, structures, contexts and relationships can contribute to making agency for youth thinner or thicker (Klocker, 2007, p. 85).

Thin or thick agency will influence the extent to which youth have the power to define who they should be, their identity. Erikson (1968) highlights that puberty is a phase where identity questions are activated. The phase defined in age 13–18 is not necessarily universal when it comes to identity development. Salole (2018) points out that the exploration of identity in cross-cultural children can take longer. This is because of all the impressions and influences they have from different cultures. In order to understand the youth identity development this study focuses on a general sociological identity theory. Development of identity is a social process in which there is interaction between the individual person and the surroundings. In this way, identity development is both procedural and relational (Mead, 1934) and in this process, the agency of the person can be either expanded or limited.

Youth often face different power relations and their choices are influenced by the exercise of power by others (Engelstad, 2009). Power relations take place in specific contexts. One factor is probably that the youth are in a minority position in Norwegian society. However, positions such as majority and minorities are not essentialist, but relative and relational (Eriksen & Sajjad, 2020) and can influence the young people's identity development. Adolescents see themselves reflected in the reactions of other people to their own behaviour and consider themselves in relation to expectations in the context (Cooley, 1964). Identity development is therefore based on both experience and context.

This study investigates the wishes of adolescents in relation to cultural continuity in the context of the foster home, with the main focus on the cultural minority position. Culture is understood as “characteristic, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise society or a social group” (UNESCO, *uå*). This cultural understanding includes traditions that have a religious affiliation (Berger, 1993). The cultural understanding previously characterised as more essentialist has now been replaced by a procedural understanding, which recognises that culture is relational and procedural (Gullestad, 2002). Overall, the dynamic understanding of identity, culture and the minority is applied in this study and characterises the understanding of continuity.

Method

This hermeneutical phenomenological study as a whole has been conducted by the author and has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The guidelines for research ethics are followed.

Sample

Since I wanted the youth experience I found a phenomenological gateway to be useful (Tanggaard, 2017). The main focus in relation to selection was that the youth both had experience from upbringing in muslim biological homes, and had lived in non-muslim majority foster home. The young people had these experiences in common, as well as experience with what it means to have a minority background in the Norwegian context. To get informants within the child welfare context is difficult (Redalen et al., 2013). Consequently, it was not possible to find informants who had further similarities than those mentioned above. Nor was it possible to increase the number of informants. Despite nine young informants, I experienced saturation in the last interview in that the main themes were recognisable (Thagaard, 2016).

Nine young people, five boys and four girls aged 13–21 years, were interviewed. One informant was over 18. She did not live in foster home at the time of the interview, but talked about the period when she lived in foster home at age 16. The religious identity of the youth is reviewed in another study (Hansen & Flaskerud, 2020) and religion is not the main focus of this article.

Interview

Interviews with the adolescents were conducted in the period from 2012 to 2013. Both the theme of the rulings by the EMD and the fact that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is unchanged highlight the relevance of the data. The basis for the interviews was a semi-structured guide, an interview form that provides some structure, while allowing the researcher to follow up on the interviewee's input (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The guide focused on the young people's experiences, and had six themes: you and your life, biological family, religion, foster family, gender and leisure time (see attachment 1). The themes were chosen considering that identity was the main focus in the project. The interviews lasted 1–2 h and a tape recorder was used.

The youth in the study have the status of children (only one was over 18 years of age) and a minority. As such, they belong to the “vulnerable groups” category (Liamputtong, 2007; Solbakk, 2014). Extra emphasis was placed on ensuring voluntary and informed consent by adapting the information to the recipient's ability to understand (NESH, 2016). Several methodological considerations were taken into account, given that youth are in a fluid position: they are not equal to adults, and they have a different competence to adults (James et al., 1998), but not necessarily less competence (Strandbu & Thørnblad, 2010). The information letter did not contain professional language or foreign words and each interview started with verbal information round in which the youth could ask questions about the project (Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

Voluntary consent requires that consent is not given under any “external pressure” (NESH, 2016). When caseworkers were used as gatekeepers, there was no control of how voluntary the consent was (Cree et al., 2002). Children obey authorities more often than adults (NESH, 2016). I therefore ensured that I had received verbal confirmation of the consent and informed the informant again before the interviews started

(Lambert & Glacken, 2011). In addition, I was sensitive during the interviews. During an interview an informant asked how long we should talk for. I got the feeling that there was only little interest in participating and therefore ended the interview earlier than I had wanted. Children must want to participate in the research, which can be reconsidered both before and during the interview (Cree et al., 2002). At the end of the interview, the interviews were transcribed and field notes were written up.

Analysis strategy

These data were first read through with the goal of having the text “speak” to the reader (van Manen, 1997) and provide an understanding of the whole. The interviews were then moved to the left in a two-part table. I read the interviews again while the essence of the text was highlighted in the right table. I worked on the left side text, sentence by sentence. Reduced the text and kept only what I considered important. In this way the informants statements were compressed. This was done manually. Afterwards, the points were compared to each other across the interviews. Five themes and 15 sub themes stood out and these topics were checked with the interviews to ensure empiricism (see themes in attachment 2). I went back and forth between theory and data throughout the analysis process, which is common in qualitative research (Wadel, 1991). This form of analysis is a hermeneutic phenomenology approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The phenomenology angle is appropriate because it is people lived experiences, which are the source of knowledge and must be studied (Husserl, 2015/1931, s. 51). The hermeneutic angle is relevant in the phenomenological interpretive tradition. In this tradition, pure descriptions are thought to be difficult because humans interpret the world (Gadamer, 2012/1960, s. 290). The researchers preconception is therefore central. The author has done phenomenological research and interviewed young people with minority backgrounds in other projects. The focus on the youth is, however, new. To ensure that both the information letter and the guide were adapted to the young people, I got a young person and two social workers to read through. Further I had one sample interview.

To ensure the credibility of the findings several steps were taken. I tried to get thick descriptions from the informants and have transparently explained my analysis and procedure. Further is the credibility increased by the fact that supervisors have seen many informant quotes, the author’s interpretations and categorisations. Critical readings and evaluations from both supervisors and reviewers also increase the credibility (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the research process I have challenged my preconceptions and experiences. To avoid unreasonable generalisations (NESH, 2016), it is important to highlight that some of the youth had experienced violence in biological homes. However, the experience of violence does not apply to all informants and is not a feature of either being Muslim or a minority.

Presentation of the young people

The anonymity is safeguarded by using fictional names, and by not specifying the home countries of the parents or the informant’s current residence (Table 1).

Table 1. Presentation.

Name	Age	Background information	Time in foster home
Amina	13	Born in Norway	10 year
Hassan	17	Unaccompanied minor. Been 3,5 years in Norway	2 year
Abdul	16	Been 9 years in Norway	4 year
Husein	17	Came to Norway when he was 2 years old	8 year
Ali	15	Came to Norway when he was 3 years old	10 months
Sara	17	Came to Norway when she was 6 years old	9 months
Omar	18	Unaccompanied minor. Been almost 5 years in Norway.	Almost 3 year
Aisha	21	Came to Norway when she was 14. Came in foster home when she was 16 and lived there in 3–4 months. Then she moved to an institution, but had some contact with her foster parents in this period. After the age 18 she had lot of contact with the foster parent.	3–4 months

Results

What do the informants highlight as important? The results of the analysis are presented here in three parts: The importance of cultural “match” in the choice of foster home, the observation of food and celebrations and the importance of good relations with the foster parents (Table 2).

The importance of cultural “match” in the choice of foster home

The empirical evidence shows that youth have two different views of the importance of cultural “match” in the choice of foster home. Some say that it is not important to have a cultural “match”, while others do not want to live in a culturally “matching” foster home.

Abdul and the two unaccompanied minors, Omar and Hassan, say they do not care about the cultural background of their foster parents. Abdul says he just wants to move back to his biological family. Regardless of the background of the foster parents, he said it is “not home anyway”. Omar and Hassan point out that the most important thing is that the foster parents are kind. Hassan says: “If I lived in such a perfect Muslim family it would be very straightforward. But if you live in a really bad Muslim

Table 2. Themes in the data analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes
Friendship and leisure activities	-Being with friends and participating in leisure activities is central to the young people - Less opportunity for this in biological homes -They miss childhood friends
Roles and relationships in the foster homes	-The relationships are characterised by openness and support -They can choose themselves (religion, culture, friends) -Many do not know the religious position of the foster parents -They contrast the relationships in foster homes with those in biological homes
Contact with biological parents/family	-The contact has been full of conflict because they did not submit to religious and cultural rules -They have minimal contact with their biological family now, and miss siblings -They had to lie to parents
Self-understanding	-The young people’s relationship to religion changes in the foster home -There is a change in self-understanding -They would not live in a culturally or religiously matched foster home
External pressure	-They experience pressure from biological family, Muslim friends, and actors from the religious group -They experience pressure from foster parents

family, it's still hard. It's the same with Norwegians". The viewpoints of the informants reflect how Omar and Abdul have experienced living in majority foster homes where they were subject to extensive rules and pressure. About Omar's Christian foster home, he says he *had to go to* a Christian school, pray at school and pray every day before dinner: "We had to hold hands to pray to Jesus and say amen at the end." He goes on to say, "They were far too Christian, I had to go to church. I was told: Yes, you have to." The unaccompanied minors also point out some advantages to living in ethnic Norwegian foster homes. Omar says: "The best part is that you learn about the Norwegian people [...]. You get to know Norwegian society [...], how Norwegians are and how they live and how they think". The unaccompanied minors also emphasise that communicating in Norwegian is important for learning the Norwegian language.

On the other hand, Aisha, Ali, Samira and Sara tell us that they do not want to live in culturally "matched" foster homes. They link this to experience from biological homes and say that in their culture there are too many rules and too much pressure. Youth talk about both religious rules and other cultural rules, called restrictive upbringing rules. They say that in biological homes they had to believe, pray and practice religion as their parents did. In addition, several girls had to take the main responsibility for housework and care of younger siblings. "It's common in my culture," said Aisha, referring to her parents' homeland. The rules restricted the social life of the youth. Ali says he had to interrupt football practice or his time with friends to go home to pray. The girls were not allowed to make decisions about their own clothing or take part in leisure activities. Many were not allowed to have Norwegian friends or friends of the opposite sex. "Not having girlfriends was the hardest thing," according to Ali. Aisha says the following about the idea of living in a culturally "matched" foster family:

"I would have hated it [...]. I would have been very unhappy, because then I might as well have stayed at home because my problems would have continued. Because in a Muslim home, I would probably have had to have done those things, those rules [...], they know I was born Muslim, I probably would have to have behaved like that. All those things, I can't. I had, no ... I'd actually have run away."

The adolescents who experienced restrictive upbringing rules in biological homes say that discussion of the rules or violations of the rules caused them to be yelled at or hit. Samira says that she had been out with a boyfriend and lied about it, as she knew she was not allowed to have boyfriends. Her father found out and: "He became so angry, as we stood there arguing [...] he then cornered me and kind of hit me like that, knocking me to the floor." Youth who have experienced restrictive upbringing rules contrast these with the foster home experience. The empirical data shows that informants who experienced sanctions in the event of violation of these rules in biological homes, are they who say that their relationships with the foster parents are characterised by closeness. The closeness is highlighted through the use of such words as "I fit right into the family" (Aisha) and several of them call the foster parents Mum and Dad. The exception is Samira, who does not feel close to her foster parents.

The empirical data can be taken to indicate two reasons why youth do not want to live in a culturally "matched" foster home. Their *experience* of restrictive rules, pressure, lack of options for negotiation and violence from biological homes are linked to aspects of their parents' culture and because they are in relationships that are characterised by

closeness. The informants who have not experienced restrictive upbringing rules in biological homes, but have experienced it in previous majority foster homes, point out that relationships are the most important. Overall, the experience and relationships of youth with foster parents are probably central to their point of view.

Observation of food traditions and celebrations

Although the young people are not concerned about a cultural “match” with the foster family, the empirical data shows that many are concerned about continuity in the sense of continuing parts of the culture of the biological family. What and how much they perpetuate vary. Some youth emphasise values or religion, while others talk about language, food or celebrations.² Aisha says: “It’s important to preserve my language [...] and food culture [...], which is a part of me that I like”. She observes language and food culture along with a friend.

Food and celebrations are what most youth highlight as important. Several say that in the foster home, they miss the food from their parents’ homeland. Some also say that they miss hot food at all mealtimes. Hassan has solved this by eating one meal a day in the foster home; hot dinner in the evening. “I like eating hot food better than cold,” Hassan said. Several informants say that they did not eat pork when they moved to the foster home and that they appreciate that the foster parents respected this. Sara’s foster parents stopped eating pork. Others say that the foster parents continued to eat pork, but this did not matter as long as the youth were given other food. The young people appreciate that the foster parents cook two dinners when they have pork on the menu. “It’s quite a lot of work so not everyone bothers, so I was very happy about that,” Omar said. One pair of foster parents occasionally took the youth out to a restaurant to eat food from their home country. Other foster parents did little or nothing in relation to biological family food traditions.

The adolescents link food to fasting at Ramadan and the Eid celebration. Hassan points out that it’s hard to come home when it’s Ramadan and the foster parents have cooked food he doesn’t like. “You get a little angry then. You have to cook for yourself,” he said. Others say they don’t fast during Ramadan. “I just take what I like,” said Aisha, who has opted out of the religious rules. The empirical data also shows that youth adopt the parts of more Western-oriented culture that they like, such as values regarding gender equality, the view that children should have a high degree of co-determination, and the celebration of other festivals and holidays.

Regardless of how informants view religion, many want to celebrate Christmas and Eid. Aisha and Ali celebrate Eid with their Muslim friend; they cook traditional food and enjoy themselves. Ali and his friend will also go to the mosque, if appropriate. Hassan marks the day with other unaccompanied minors. They rent premises, cook and play music from their home country. Hassan looks forward to these days since he gets to eat food from his home country, which he cannot make himself. Samira has no one to celebrate holidays with, as she has non-Muslim friends and little contact with her biological family. Abdul and Husein would like to celebrate the holiday with biological family, but say that the time does not coincide with planned meet-ups. Abdul says that neither the child welfare service nor the foster parents have asked what he wants to do when it’s Eid. He doesn’t think they know anything about Eid.

The stories can be understood as many young people perpetuating parts of their parents' culture in individual ways, while simultaneously adopting parts of more Western-oriented culture. The informants are active actors and facilitate cultural continuity themselves by allying themselves with friends. At the same time, some foster parents facilitate things for them. Yet more young people can be said to lack networks or expertise that enable the continuity they want.

The importance of good relationships with the foster parents

Empirical data shows that most of the informants live in foster homes where relationships with the foster parents are good and are characterised by openness and support, with some experiencing the closeness previously reported. Openness and support concern young people being able to express their own opinions, make choices based on these opinions and often getting support to do so. The youth emphasise that it is important to be able to express your own opinions and make independent choices, irrespective of whether this concerns adolescent life in general or cultural continuity. Omar says: "I will be free to decide for myself." Aisha also highlights self-determination as important:

"When I got to my foster parents [...] No one got angry with me or hit me for saying the things that I said. I really got to think and had my space [...]. And all those things combined are what make me happy, that I finally have the freedom to think: what do I want."

The fact that youth are in relationships in which they have self-determination allows them to focus on what is important to them. The empirical evidence shows that being with friends and participating in leisure activities is the main focus for most informants, who describe an active leisure time during which they participate in many sports and leisure activities, and spend a lot of time with friends. The exceptions are the two unaccompanied minors, Hassan and Omar, who say that school takes a lot of focus and that it is not easy to get to know Norwegian adolescents. However, most youth talk about both support and openness in relation to leisure activities and friends.

There is more variation in support and openness around culture. Although several foster parents facilitate and support the choices made by youth in relation to cultural continuity, empirical data shows that some foster parents do not talk about culture very much with the young people. Omar says: "Most people who have foster children don't know much about how the children think, how it's been for them in the country they lived in before, since they don't have such broad knowledge." He says the foster parents do not ask about culture much and on the subject of religion he says: "We just put it in the corner and don't touch it."

Empirical data shows that some foster parents speak negatively about the youth background, which the youth consider important that foster parents do not do. Samira says of her foster father:

"Then he says, "Oh my God, religion is so stupid"[...]. It was [...] on TV [...], it was forbidden to wear religious headgear [...]. When they know I'm sitting nearby they can just shut up about it [...]. I'm sorry. [...]. A lot of the values of Islam are pretty nice, so when people start putting it down [...], then [...] I become like some sort of super Muslim. Otherwise, I walk around, don't pray, fast, drink and smoke, but when people start attacking those values [...], then I'm there. Then there is knowledge from the Quran and all that."

Omar has similar experiences from his foster family: “It’s not nice to sit and hear the people you love, whom you live with [...] saying that “you come and we work and pay taxes, and you get it”.” He says that this makes him uncertain of who they really are.

The stories can be understood as young people wanting relationships that give them self-determination and room to manoeuvre, to choose who they want to be. This allows them to focus on what is important to them: friends, leisure activities, school or aspects of their parents’ culture. It is also important that they do not encounter prejudice towards their own background.

Discussion

Based on childhood sociology and identity theory, I discuss how for young people thick agency provides great room to manoeuvre in identity development. I also discuss how an understanding of the cultural concept as something static can contribute to ensuring that the cultural rights of children are safeguarded in foster home placements. Both discussions to illuminate the issue: What is important for youth with minority backgrounds when developing their identity in foster homes?

Thick agency provides great room to manoeuvre for identity development

The analysis shows that youth are not concerned with cultural continuity in the sense of living in culturally matched foster homes, which is consistent with other research (Larsen, 2009; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Proba, 2017; Hansen & Flaskerud, 2020). However, in this study several adolescents point out that they prefer majority foster homes to culturally “matched” foster homes. How can the viewpoints of youth be understood?

Several adolescents link their own views to their experience of pressure and violence from biological homes. Other research shows that violent experiences can increase the distance from one’s own culture (Scott Jr. et al., 2006). The experience of neglect has consequences for how youth view their parents’ culture. Adolescents that do not have negative experiences from biological homes are more open to living in minority foster homes, although they also see benefits from living in majority foster homes.

The desire to live in majority foster homes is probably also coloured by the youth’s experience of current foster care. Youth live and thrive in majority foster homes. In a study where unaccompanied minors live in both majority foster homes and “matched” foster homes, Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh (2015) find that the youth viewpoints are characterised precisely by their experience of the foster home they lived in. The aspect of identity seems to be central to the understanding of the youth’s viewpoints.

The context of growing up is probably one reason why many adolescents do not want a cultural “match” in the choice of foster home. The analysis shows that several informants have encountered prejudice towards the parents’ culture and background from the foster parents. That minority children experience prejudice is pointed out in other research in the foster care field (Fredriksen et al., 2012; Larsen, 2009). Furthermore, both Norwegian and international research shows that Muslims are particularly exposed to prejudice and discrimination (Royal Norwegian Ministry of Culture, 2020-2023). Larsen (2009) points out that prejudice makes it difficult for youths to develop

a positive self-understanding in the foster home. The desire to live in majority foster homes, therefore, may to a greater extent concern avoiding the attribution of a more vulnerable minority identity.

The youth situation and the reasons for their rejection of cultural “matching” in the choice of foster home are both complex. Empirical evidence shows that good relationships with the foster parents are important. Other research shows the equivalent (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Youth want their foster parents to recognise and respect their backgrounds and allow them to make independent choices (Larsen, 2009; Proba, 2017; Hansen & Flaskerud, 2020). It is thus important for adolescents to be able to express their opinions and to have a high degree of self-determination. Youth probably want to be considered as “being” and seen as competent and rational actors (Jenks, 2005; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). The young people are in relationships where they can play an active role in decisions concerning their own lives. This self-determination in relation to their own identity development suggests that youth have a thick agency (Klocker, 2007) and the power to make decisions about their own identity. Both the relationships and the structures (age and gender) can be said to make the agency thicker (Klocker, 2007). Youth can generally choose their own leisure activities and friends. The thick agency also allows them to make individual and independent choices in relation to which parts of the minority cultural background they perpetuate. Yet the context of majority foster care can weaken some of the agency of the youth in relation to minority culture, by exposing young people to prejudice from the foster parents. Such prejudice can also be regarded as a type of minority stress that minorities experience by virtue of their minority position (Meyer, 2003).

Understanding the concept of culture and safeguarding the cultural rights of young people

When the cultural rights of children are emphasised in legislation, a link between children and their parents’ cultural identity is assumed in a misleading way and the understanding of the concept of culture is updated. Culture is not static and immutable (Eriksen & Sajjad, 2020). Both this and other studies show variation in the extent to which youth perpetuate the culture of their parents (Larsen, 2009; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Proba, 2017; Hansen & Flaskerud, 2020) and understand that youth with minority backgrounds develop their cultural identity based on both the majority and minority cultures (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Salole, 2018). Consequently, youth cultural identity will be individual and will differ from the culture of minority parents (Salole, 2018). The cultural rights of youth are individual rights (Eriksen, 1997). If consideration is not given to culture as a procedural and relational phenomenon, the rights of parents will be emphasised. Research shows that the needs of the family are often favoured over the child (Bredal, 2009; Sjöblom, 2002). This may lead to youth with minority backgrounds not being equal to and given the same rights as majority children (Smette et al., 2021).

A lack of equality for youth with minority backgrounds can also arise from excessive emphasis on cultural background. This involves the risk of culturalising and ignoring other factors important for the youth, such as where they want to live (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Most important for the youth in this study is to have thick agency

that gives room to manoeuvre so that they can spend time on friends, leisure activities and schoolwork. This desire for self-determination is also highlighted in other research on adolescents from minority backgrounds and in child welfare services (Larsen, 2009; Proba, 2017; Fylkenes et al., 2021; Hansen, 2021) and on majority foster children (Backe-Hansen et al., 2010; Bufdir, 2014). This indicates that the adolescent phase is when young people explore who they are and what they stand for (Strandbu & Øia, 2007). Yet we cannot ignore that the youth themselves believe that this self-determination is difficult to achieve in homes with many religious and cultural rules. There will be variations within different cultural groups regarding the degree of agency the youth are expected to have (Hemming & Madge, 2012). Research also shows that there are more parental restrictions and control in some minority families (Følner & Johansen, 2018; Ghadimi, 2019; Smette et al., 2021). Such families may have a stronger orientation towards their home country and a more religious orientation (Friberg & Bjørnset, 2019), which is consistent with the findings of this study. There are also more parental restrictions in Christian communities, but parental restrictions are also related to parental length of residence, degree of integration and socioeconomic status (Smette et al., 2021).

Final considerations

The Norwegian Child Welfare Service has been criticised for not giving enough consideration to the cultural rights of children when choosing a foster home. This article highlights the importance of emphasising the voice of the youth, which is also pointed out by others (McGregor et al., 2021). Many adolescents in this study will live in majority foster homes where they are considered as “being,” and as active actors who to a large extent achieve the individual continuity they want. Since neither culture nor identity is static, the focus on life “here and now” is not sufficient. There are three prominent reasons. First of all, we need to help youth ensure equality with majority children living in majority foster homes. They must have the skills to participate as family members, such as preserving the mother tongue so that they can talk to family both in Norway and their home country (Skytte, 2008). Secondly, youth are not only active actors, but also vulnerable. The adults in the youth network should therefore have an expanded view and ensure both equality and the future perspective (“becoming”) by talking about culture with the youth and making an effort for them to exercise the cultural practices they want. Thirdly, to fully understand the youth, it is necessary to embrace the past of the youth (“been”) (Hanson, 2017); to grasp how the past characterises both the present and the future. Some of the youth had experienced neglect and link this to the culture. These youth can be encouraged to stay in touch with someone from the network (Van Der Weele & Fiecko, 2020) who does not have direct contact with the biological family, if the youth want some distance from them (Aarset & Bredal, 2018). Young people can then see and learn positive aspects of the minority culture, giving them a thicker agency both now and in the future. As research shows, interest in cultural background may come after adolescence (Proba, 2017).

The study is limited to nine young people with Islamic minority background, and can be advantageously followed up by quantitative method to obtain more generalisable findings. Future research should also focus more on the youth category across religion, majority and minority affiliation.

Notes

1. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers, associate professor Bodil Olsvik and Dr. Ingvild Flaskerud for valuable comments to the article.
2. The relationship of the young people to religion changes in the foster home in three different ways: Some are not religious, others are ambivalent, while some continue to believe but practice Islam in a different way than the biological family does. This finding is described in a previous study: Hansen and Flaskerud (2020).

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Attachments

1. Guide for interview

Introductory question

- 1) Do you have any questions related to the interview or the project?

Topic 1 – You and your life

- 2) Could you please tell me something more about yourself?

(How old are you? Do you go to school? Which school and grade? Who do you live with and how long have you been living there? Did you live other places than with your parents before you came here??? (Norway??) Did you always live in Norway?)

- 3) Please tell about a ordinary day – What do you do from you get out of bed until bedtime?

F.ex yesterday (Who wakes you up – and what do you do? Who do you walk to school with? What do you talk about when walk to school? What do you do after school? Tell about your afternoon: Sport? Activities? Do you help out with dinner? Do you have other duties at home? When do you go to bed and what do you do in the time before bedtime?)

- 4) Could you please tell about once you were happy?
- 5) Could you please tell about once you were sad?
- 6) How were you as a person two years ago?
- 7) How do you think you will be as a person in two years from now?
- 8) What are the biggest challenges you face right now?

- 9) **All people have strengths and weaknesses (and I do not mean physical). What is your strengths and weaknesses?**
- 10) **If anyone asks where you come from – What do you reply?**
- 11) **What is the best about the Norwegian society?**
- 12) **What is the worst about the Norwegian society?**

TOPIC 2 – The foster family

- 13) **Could you please tell about the day that you got to know that you were to move in a foster home?** (What happened when you got to know that you were to move? What did you think about it?)
- 14) **How is it for you to live in this foster home? Please tell ...** (What do you call your foster parents? How is your relationship with your foster parents/-siblings? How do you feel about them? Who do you feel the closest in your foster family? Why? How do your foster parents speak about you to other people? Do you feel that the relationship you have to your foster family have changed since you moved here? In what way? What do you like best with living here? What do you like the least with living here? Is there anything you miss in life with living here? Is there anything that is difficult with living here? (past and present) Which view would you say that your foster family have towards religion?)
- 15) **Can you please explain the difference between living in foster home and living with your parents?**
- 16) **Could you please tell me about the contact between the foster parents and your parents?**

Topic 3 - Religion

- 17) **Could you please tell about your daily relationship to religion? (past and present/why)** (Is there any food you do not eat? – Something you do not drink? Do you pray? If yes, when? Are there other things you feel you do that has to do with religion? What do religion mean to you? How have the parents and foster parents included you in religious traditions? Are there any difficulties with your relationship to religion? How is your parents relationship to religion in the everyday life? How is your foster parents relationship to religion in everyday life?)
- 18) **Please tell about your relationship to festivals? (past and present/why)** (Do you celebrate festivals? What happens? What do you think about the things that happens during festivals? What do you enjoy about that/those festival(s)? What do you not enjoy? Do you mark the Ramadan? What do you do/not do? How is the relationship of your parents to festivals? How is the relationship of your foster parents to festivals?)
- 19) **What does your foster parents say about your relation to religion?**
- 20) **What does your parents say about your relation to religion?**
- 21) **Have your relation to religion changed after moving to foster home?**
- 22) **Who decides, or influence/guide you in your relationship to religion?**
- 23) **Is there anything in religion you feel is difficult?**
- 24) **If you were to think many years ahead – Which relationship do you think you will have to religion in the future when you are an adult?** (In your everyday life? Religious celebrations? What do think will be important to teach your children?)

Topic 4 – Your biologically family

- 25) **Tell about your family?** (Do you have siblings/sisters-brothers- how old are they? Where do they live? Does your mother and father live far away? Other family, relatives in Norway?)
- 26) **How is it to meet your family (please tell ...)** (How often do you meet them/what do you speak about? Do you only meet when it is a part of the visiting arrangement? What do you do when you meet? (past and present) What is best with being together with them? Are there anything you do not like when you are together with them? Have your relation to your family changed in any way after you started living in foster home? How do you look upon

your family after you came to foster home? Are there anything that is difficult when you meet them? How do you feel when you come back to the foster home after seeing your parents? Who do you talk with about things you find difficult? Why? Who can you ask for permission when there is something you cannot decide yourself? Parents or foster parents?

27) **Are there any similarities between living in foster home and with your mother/father?**

Topic 5 - Gender

28) **What would you say is important in order to be a good man/boy?**

29) **What would you say is important in order to be a good woman/girl?**

30) **What do you put in the words femininity and masculinity?**

31) **Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend? If yes, who is he/she?**

32) **How do you wish your boyfriend/girlfriend to be?**

33) **If you think ahead – How do you want the person you will marry to be?**

Topic 6 – Leisure time

34) **Who are your best friends? (past-present)** (What positive/negative with your friends? Who are you mostly with? What do you think your friends think about you living in foster home? Have anyone said anything about it? What do you think your friends think about your relationship to religion?)

35) **Could you please tell about the things you like most to do in your leisure time? Past and present?** (Do you participate in any regular activities? What do you do in the afternoon and evenings during a week? What do you do in the weekends? Do you read? If yes, what do you read? Do you play? If yes, which game and how often? Do you spend much time at internet? How much time and what do you do there?)

36) **Are there anything you hate doing in your leisure time? (past and present)**

37) **How do you think your foster parents looks upon your friends and your activities? (past and present)**

38) **How do you think your parents looks upon your friends and activities? (past and present)**

Closure

39) **Are there other things you are occupied/engaged of or thinks that you feel that I did not ask about?**

40) **In the information letter I write that this interview is about identity. What do you put in the word identity?**

41) **Are there any questions you feel is important to ask the youth which lives in foster home – that I did not ask you about?**

42) **Do you have anyone to talk with after this interview – If you were to sit with thoughts afterwards? If yes, who?**