

The concept of family: Perspectives of Spanish young people in foster care

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Abstract

This article employs concepts from family sociology to explore how ‘family’ is conceptualised in 14 life narratives of young people in foster care in Spain. The article draws on a multi-method approach with young people who are in long-term non-kinship foster care. Seven girls and seven boys aged 10 to 22 took part in the study. The empirical material reveals an interplay between biological preference and foster family affective practices in young people’s narratives, illuminating a struggle to make sense of the concept of family in foster care. Most of the participants understand family as shared affective practices sustained through love, commitment, consistent care and reciprocity rather than blood ties. Some show a preference for biological connectivity, while others describe family as determined by rituals and family displays. The key practice implications highlight the importance helping young people positioning themselves in birth family relationships, and supporting their sense of family belonging.

KEYWORDS

family display, family practices, foster children, long-term, non-kinship, social work

1 | INTRODUCTION

... it’s just that Spanish people are very Mediterranean, very family-oriented ... very customs-oriented. I think; we like to spend time with the family, we do not uproot from it (Emilia, aged 21).

Emilia is a Spanish youth who spent years in foster care, and her narrative emphasises Spanish family culture and the value individuals attach to family. The policy in Spanish child welfare, as in many other countries, is that, if at all possible, children should grow up with their birth family. It prioritises foster care (in kinship and non-kinship families) placement when out-of-home care is necessary for children who, for example, suffered neglect, abuse or maltreatment (Jiménez-Morago & Palacios-González, 2008; Palacios & Amorós, 2006). Foster care provides a stable family environment and individual attention for

children who lack adequate care from parents (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). The Spanish Law 26/2015 on the modification of the child protection system includes three types of foster care according to their purpose: (1) emergency foster care, where the child can stay with the foster family up to six months; (2) temporary foster care—up to 2 years, and (3) long-term foster care—up to the age of 18, with the goal of creating permanence, and this can be prolonged after the age of 18. Furthermore, if birth parents are unable to care for their children, they may apply for temporary care of the child. Placement in foster care in Spain is a temporary arrangement with the aim at reuniting children with their birth family, and where this is not possible, extension and permanent care or adoption is recommended. Also, it is assumed that children stay in contact with their birth family (Law 26/2015 Article 20 no. 2).

Despite the growing body of research on foster care and foster families in Spain (del Valle et al., 2009), few studies have documented

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the views and voices of children (Balsells et al., 2010; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2013; Mateos et al., 2012). As noted by Casas and Bello (2012), Spanish children's voices are noticeably absent from the literature and in child welfare policies and practices. The United Nations Convention on The Right of the Child (UNCRC) promotes child-centric perspectives in all actions and decisions concerning them (UNCRC, 1989). In the United Kingdom, there is a growing body of research of foster children's voices and their care relationships (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Schofield, 2002; Schofield et al., 2012), suggesting that acknowledging children's views on family relationships is central to their everyday emotional and practical well-being. A direct engagement with children in research (Holland & Crowley, 2013) to better understand their views on and experiences with family life might improve foster care services (Schofield & Beek, 2009; Whiting & Lee, 2003). A recent review revealed that the growing body of literature on foster children's understanding of family is mostly restricted to Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries and points to the importance of understanding family meaning-making in relation to a particular state or local context (Ie et al., 2021). In this article, I asked: *How do children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain perceive and 'do family'?* The analysis draws upon concepts of family sociology.

The aim of the article is twofold. First, it fills a gap in the understudied topic of how children and young people in long-term non-kinship foster care think about family in Spain. Second, it responds to calls for the application of sociological theories related to family and intimate life with children and young people in foster care (Holland & Crowley, 2013). Family sociology can create new approaches to understand contemporary family life and advance professional discretion, communication and rapport in working with institutionalised children and their families (Ursin et al., 2017). I begin with a description of my theoretical framework and previous research in the field of foster care. I then provide the context of the child welfare system in Spain, followed by a description of the study methodology, findings and a discussion on the empirical material on children and young people's conceptualisations and 'doings' of family (Morgan, 1996) and familial relationships. Implications for social work practice are offered.

2 | THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Within the field of family sociology, there is widespread agreement that we need theoretical concepts that are sensitive enough to identify and explain the diversity and complexity of today's families. The focus within sociological family studies is primarily on relatedness as socially constructed (Chambers, 2012) rather than reflecting the traditional hegemonic discourse of how family 'should' be. Central to contemporary theorising of family life is the study of *family practices* and *doing family* (Morgan, 1996, 2011a), with 'family' being a socially constructed concept constituted by qualities, activities and everyday actions. The notion of *displaying family* (Dermott & Seymour, 2011; Finch, 2007) refers to family members communicating to each other and others that they 'do family', thereby confirming that these

relationships are "family relationships" (Finch, 2007, p. 67). Examples of 'family display' are weekly phone calls, family narratives and shared meals (Finch, 2007). These two concepts highlight social practices and communicative aspects in everyday life, providing an empirical basis for the analysis of interactions between family members that are not derived from naturalistic reproductive or socialisation functions (McCarthy, 2012; Smart, 2004). In this view, family is "a quality rather than a thing" (Morgan, 1996, p. 186), and a facet of social life rather than a social institution (Finch, 2007), recognising different family forms and practices that are historically and socio-culturally contextualised (Ursin et al., 2017). Analysing how people 'do family' is at the heart of valorising the lived experiences of family (Finch, 2007; McCarthy & Edwards, 2010).

Some research has used these sociological concepts as base for interpreting the multiple belongings experienced by children and young people who are in foster care (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Sità & Mortari, 2022; Wissö et al., 2019). Some scholars emphasise the continued significance of the collective views of what families should look like (McIntosh et al., 2011) and the idea of family as a pervasive cultural symbol (Jackson in McIntosh et al., 2011), particularly in 'familial' cultures. The lack of and shortcomings in public services, subsidies and interventions to support families in their caring activities and responsibilities for its members are features of familialism, such as in southern Europe. Historically, political and social actors assumed that care was provided by the family unit and that this contributes to the familial nature of the family in Spain (Flaquer, 2004; Moreno-Domínguez, 2004), further explained below.

For children in foster care, fluidity in family relationships is often discussed in terms of instability (Wissö et al., 2019). Removal from birth families and being placed in foster care might raise questions about children's identity as it relates to their families of origin and the degree of family belonging to the new family (Samuels, 2009). Studies emphasise the fluidity and diversity of children and young people's experiences of family and their engagement with it. Several studies have explored how children understand and perceive 'family', and findings suggest that most children and young people's understanding of family is based on genetic ties (Ellingsen et al., 2011, 2012; Sità & Mortari, 2022; Van Hoen et al., 2020; Wissö et al., 2019). Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018) also suggest that commitment to a biological family is not necessarily based on the quality of the relationship but to biological ties. Processes of care, support and love are primary criteria for the concept of family for many children (Biehal, 2014; Schofield, 2002; Van Hoen et al., 2020). Some studies also found that some foster children depicted a fluid understanding of family that was based on doing family things through everyday rituals such as spending time together, shared meals, vacations and celebrations (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Schofield, 2002; Van Hoen et al., 2020).

3 | CHILD WELFARE IN SPAIN

Child welfare systems in modern states can be loosely categorised into two types (Gilbert et al., 2011): a *child protection orientation* and a

family service orientation. The former is characterised by early intervention and family support, while the latter focuses on preventive family services through parental support. According to del Valle et al. (2013), child welfare in Spain was historically characterised by care outside of family, where institutionalisation was considered the only available measure for children in care. However, the authors note that much development in welfare in the last decades has occurred. Although child welfare systems are not often seen in connection with welfare state regimes (Pösö et al., 2014), common features seem to exist between the child protection orientation category and the Spanish Mediterranean welfare state system. Moreno-Domínguez (2004) argued that in such welfare model, family issues are considered as belonging to the private sphere, giving rise to a model of society and state based on intergenerational solidarity and family dependence. Moreno-Domínguez (2004) highlighted that family in Spain, although impacted by global and economic processes, is still a patriarchal system with strong and extended family ties along with the idea that care is a family responsibility.

The contemporary child welfare system in Spain is very much linked to the political situation that arose after the civil war (1936–1939) and the following dictatorship (lasting until 1975). Since the end of 39 years of dictatorship, there has been a move away from the charity-based child welfare model characterised by large residential care institutions run by religious orders (del Valle et al., 2009; del Valle & Casas, 2002). Following the Constitution of 1978, Spain was divided into 17 autonomous regions (*Comunidades Autónomas*), each with their own government, parliament and a range of administrative powers. Youth and foster care policies and services are exclusively carried out by each region, and each region has a public department that is responsible for issuing protection orders for children at-risk (Kosher et al., 2018). National Law 26/2015 regulates each region's child protection policies, aiming at ensuring an adequate legal framework for protection that is consistent with the international treaties ratified by the signatory countries, in particular the UNCRC (Massons-

Ribas et al., 2021). This law prioritises: (1) stable over temporary placements, (2) foster over residential care and (3) placements agreed to by parents and services over enforced placements. Exceptions are that children under 3 years old cannot be placed in residential care, and ideally children under 6 years not either.

In 2019, approximately 18% of the Spanish population were children (National Institute of Statistics, 2019). Among these, 0.5% were child protection users, amounting to 42,529 children. Of these, 55% (23,209) were in residential care, 29% in kinship care (12,600) and 16% (6720) in non-kinship care (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020). The vast majority of children in foster care placements in Spain are from the ethnic majority (del Valle et al., 2009). Of relevance to the analysis in this article is the fact that the number of children in non-kinship care has decreased by approximately 5% over the last 4 years (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020). As López et al. (2010) point out, non-kinship foster care has not proven as successful as expected since it began in the 1990s. The fact that over 50% of out-of-home placements are still in residential care reflects the challenges of the Spanish child welfare system. Almost half of Spanish children are placed in kinship foster care due to, among other things, strong family ties, comparatively low cost and positive outcomes (del Valle et al., 2013; Kosher et al., 2018). In the autonomous region of Castilla y León (northern Spain)—in which the present study took place—about 984 children were in foster care in 2019: 475 in kinship care, and 509 in non-kinship care (Servicios Sociales Castilla y León, 2020).

4 | RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

4.1 | Participants

Fourteen children and young people aged between 10 and 22 years (seven boys and seven girls¹), residing in non-kinship foster care, from four Spanish cities of Castilla y León took part in this study. An

TABLE 1 Overview of participants

Name	Age	Gender	No. of years in the foster family	Contact with birth family
Pilar	10	Girl	4	Mother
Lucas	14	Boy	6	Mother
Beltrán	18	Boy	7	Brother
Isabel	21	Girl	8	Mother, sister, great aunt
Alonso	13	Boy	5	Mother
Emilia	21	Girl	15	Aunt and cousins
Carmen	22	Girl	6	Mother, siblings
Olivia	15	Girl	7	Mother, siblings
Rodrigo	15	Boy	5	Brother: Filipe (who he lives with)
María	13	Girl	4	No contact
Emma	14	Girl	3	Grandmother, uncles
Mateo	16	Boy	6	No contact
Eduardo	11	Boy	4	No contact
Filipe	13	Boy	6	Brother: Rodrigo (who he lives with)

overview of participants' information is presented in Table 1. All names are pseudonyms. Participants were recruited in cooperation with the regional Red Cross, an administrative body responsible for child protection in Castilla y León, targeting approximately 28 children and youth. Participation criteria restricted the sample to young people who had been in a foster family for over 2 years. Spanish national and regional government lockdown restrictions in March 2020 due to Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts in social services made it difficult to recruit and conduct face-to-face interviews. Thus, recruitment occurred as follows: Regional social workers asked social workers and psychologists of each province to approach young people and their foster parents and ask whether they might be interested in participating in the study. They located 14 participants from four provinces, and none dropped out of the study. Most participants (eight out of 14) had been in their foster family for over 5 years and none with the foster family for fewer than 3 years. One participant (Carmen, aged 22) had left foster care at the time of the interview. Carmen and Olivia (aged 15) are siblings. Of the 14 participants, 12 had ethnic majority background. Most young people ($n = 12$) in this study came from residential care placement before being placed into non-kinship foster families and had some contact with their birth family. Some had contact only with their birth mothers or siblings, while others also had contact with grandparents and other relatives. Only a few ($n = 3$) had no contact with any member of their birth family. The contact consisted of regulated visitations by birth parents, telephone calls, WhatsApp messages and visiting and spending time with family members. For some young people, the lockdown introduced in Spain in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic limited time spent with families.

4.2 | Procedure

Informed consent and authorisation from the University of Valladolid Ethics Committee and permission from the Castilla y León child protection authorities were obtained to access children in foster families. In addition, the collaboration of regional Red Cross was requested through the Castilla y León child welfare authorities. An invitation letter was sent to Red Cross social workers to give young people and their foster parents, presenting myself as a female PhD candidate who is interested in young people's views on family. The letter also contained information about the aim of the study, young people's and

their guardian's rights to decline participation at any time and confidentiality by anonymising any identifiable information or material prior to publication. If interested, two consent forms were sent to foster parents by email for them and the child or youth to sign. Four young people who had reached the age of 18 at the time of the interview gave their own consent, and all participants gave verbal consent before the interview started. From an ethical perspective, I was wary of the risks of causing emotional distress that might result from the research (Ennew et al., 2009a). Different research instruments were administered to enable young people to share and express themselves freely (Article 13) so that knowledge generated reflects their lived family experience (Ennew et al., 2009a, p.1.23), see below for more.

4.3 | Multi-method approach

The study had a multi-method approach that included photos, drawings, social network map, recall and semi-structured interviews. The aim of photos as visual method (Punch, 2002) was to break the ice and start the conversation and elicit young people's perspectives on who belonged to their family. Before the interview, I asked participants to bring photos of the *most* important people in their lives. The drawing method (Punch, 2002) of 'family map' was introduced by the question: "Can you draw your family map with people that are most important to you and whom you consider family?" This is a way of visualising those they see as part of their family. The participants chose how they wanted to perform this activity. Some wanted to make sketches that assessed their relationships: "Well, I'd draw the family in a pyramid. At the base, which is what holds me up ..." (Beltrán, aged 18). Others wrote names of members of their families. Based on these drawings, participants were interviewed on what each family member meant to them. The social network method (Ryan et al., 2014) was used to access their everyday lives through their personal relationships and connections with family, friends and acquaintances. The recall method (Ennew et al., 2009b) was used primarily to understand which family members were part of young people's everyday weekly routines (see Figure 1). The drawings, social network map and recall activity provided information about people, interactions and events. In the interviews, participants were asked open-ended thematic questions about their perceptions of family. Examples of questions were as follows: What does family mean to you? Why do you

MONDAY	ACTIVITY	PARTICIPANT (S)
07:00-08:00		
09:00-10:00		
10:00-11:00		
12:00-13:00		
14:00-15:00		
16:00-17:00		
18:00-19:00		
20:00-21:00		
21:00-22:00		

FIGURE 1 'My week' recall activity used in this study

consider him/her as family? Have you always seen him/her as part of your family? Can you tell me about the time you spend together? The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min with an average of 60 min. Participants decided on the location of the interview. Six participants were interviewed at the Red Cross Head Office, four at the university campus, two online via Zoom and two in their foster home. The data were collected between March and August 2021.

4.4 | Analysis

The interviews were tape-recorded with permission of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. To adapt the verbatim material into readable communication (Lingard, 2019), all non-verbal or affirmative utterances were removed. All interviews were translated from Spanish into English. The transcribed interview material was analysed first by thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019) aided by ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software and guided by the research questions and theoretical concepts of 'family practices', 'doing family' and 'family display'. This enabled a layer of narrative to emerge and provided opportunity to give voice to different aspects that do not fit into a conventional narrative structure. The data were read multiple times to generate coding categories. Then the coding categories were clustered into related groups to generate initial main categories. To reinforce the value of including young people's views in research about their welfare (Holland, 2009), I strayed from Braun and Clark's process and returned to the data, examining each narrative in its entirety. According to Riessman (2008), thematic narrative analysis theorises from intact stories instead of across the corpus.

Emergent thematic categories are salient to narrative thematic analysis, but the focus is on how these categories comprise stories rather than how stories produce overarching three themes as shown in Tables 2-4.

5 | RESULTS

Three key themes related to how young people 'do' family were identified: (1) family as constructed through affective practices, (2) family as (in)visible biological ties and (3) family as everyday practice. These themes all relate to family being constructed in and through everyday interactions and functional processes.

5.1 | Family is constituted in and through affective practices

This section is constituted through a set of three interrelated themes: (a) Love makes a family, (b) Family provides stability, continuance, and predictability, and (c) Family is a place of reciprocity.

5.1.1 | Love makes a family

For most young people in this study, family is based on the way family members act and feel about one another. Young people described relationships with members of the foster and birth family, teachers, and friends, social workers, psychologists, boyfriends, and school

TABLE 2 First emerging theme in the analysis process

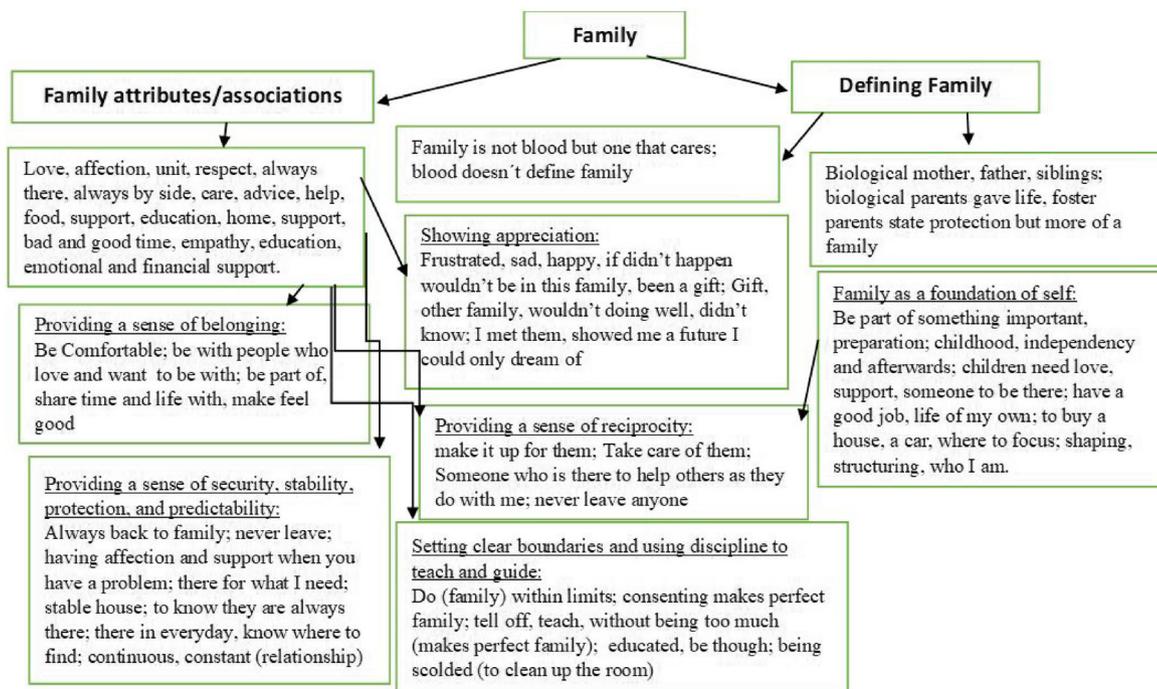


TABLE 3 Second emerging themes in the analysis process

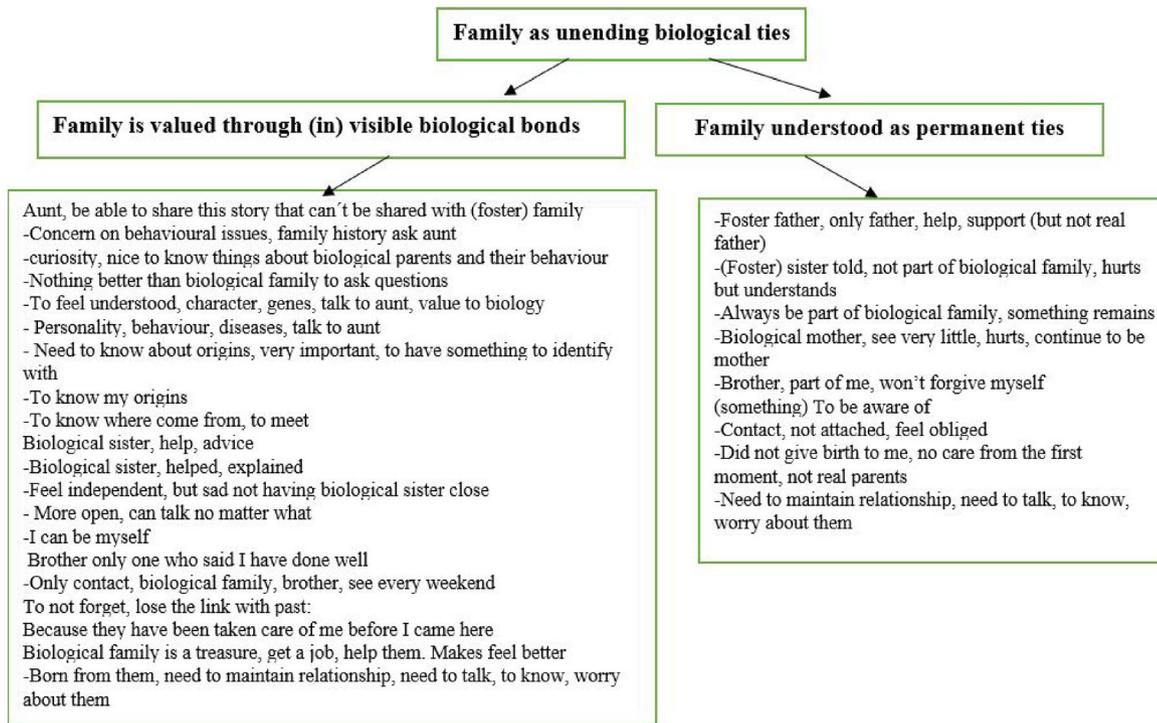
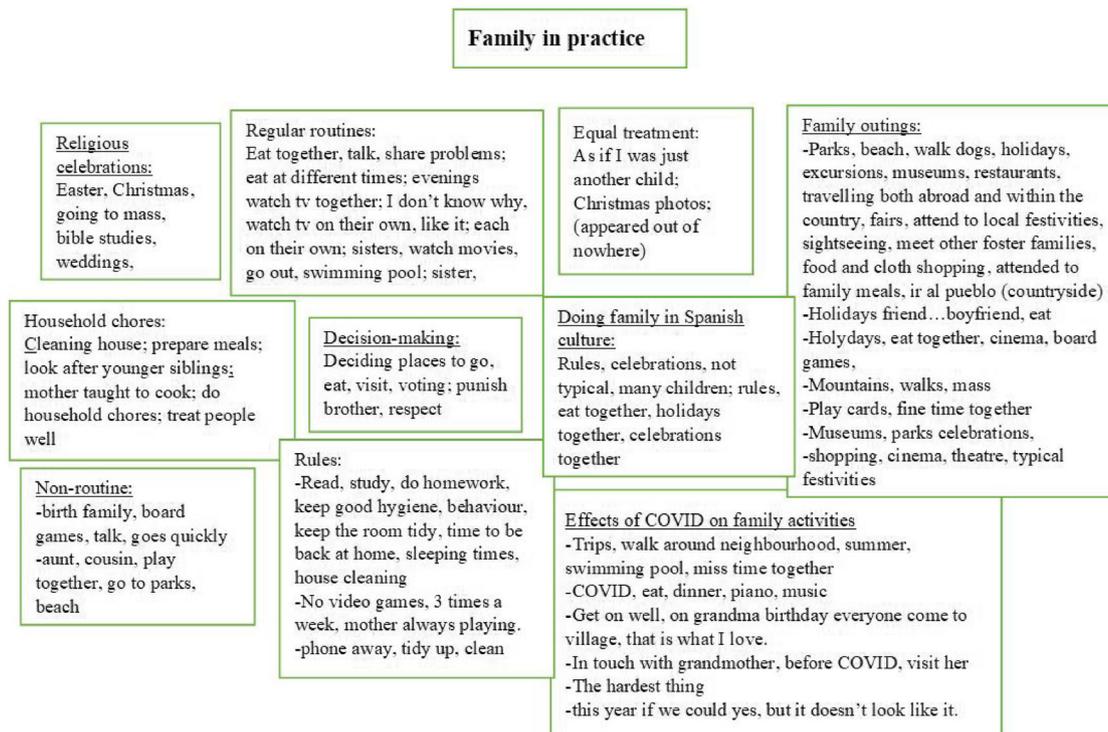


TABLE 4 Third emerging themes in the analysis process



friends, and love was the most common word to describe these relationships:

I think you consider your family [as] those you love.
For example, your friends can be your family. You can

choose your family. I consider them family but not genetically (Isabel, aged 21).

My dog [is my family] because he welcomes me when I arrive, he's a very loving ... and very affectionate dog (Emilia, aged 21).

I think of my sister Olivia. To me, family is her because she has given me everything. She has given me love, which I never had (Carmen, aged 22).

A family is people who love each other (Mateo, aged 16).

Olivia reported that love consists in the formation of a 'union', depicting it as the true meaning of what family is:

... it means a lot of people who love each other ... who have been born into it, or who have been fostered into it. It's like being part of that union.

Although Olivia talked of family as love experienced by people in their birth and foster families, her views of family fall within the traditional definition of nuclear family. When asked what comes to mind when she thinks of family, Olivia said:

Biological mother, father, and siblings. Although, I have not lived with it myself, it's something that became familiar to me, and I think about it because my whole classmate has it and other people are used to the normal family.

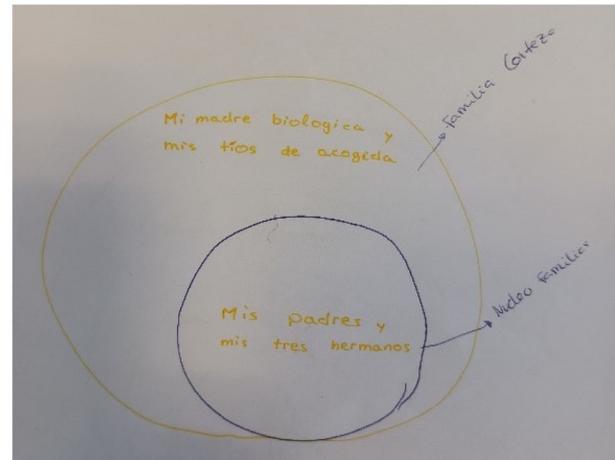
For Olivia and Mateo, blood ties define family. However, for Mateo, the existence of biological ties did not guarantee a sense of family. According to Mateo, birth parents are family "because of having the same genes, but not in sentimental terms". Some young people considered their love to those they consider family. For example, Filipe (aged 13) on his birth mother: "She also means love but like less". Filipe and Pilar (aged 10) recognised that having had not much of a relationship played a role in loving the mother less, but they still expressed a strong desire for regular contact.

5.1.2 | Family provides stability, continuance and predictability

Most young people reported that commitment and consistency in care and support are central to their perception of family, describing these experiences in foster families as making them a family. Such actions included family members 'being always there' if they had a problem or needed to talk, phone calls on birthdays or 'check-ins'. Lucas (aged 14), for example, explained why he considers his foster parents and his three foster siblings as family:

I think family takes care of you from the time you are little until you are older or you become independent, even after that. Family is there in difficult times... And if you have a problem, they give you advice according to what they think is best for you.

Lucas drew two concentric circles of his family map.



The small circle represents his 'nuclear family', which is composed of foster parents and three foster siblings. Lucas explained that these people raised him from a young age. If he had a problem, they were the first ones he would tell, and they would help him. Then I asked him why his foster uncles and birth mother were in the second circle, to which he replied:

Because I think they can help me as much as my birth mother but I do not have much contact with them so I think if I put my birth mother, I should also put my aunts and uncles. They're not always there but they care about me.

Other participants shared Lucas' view that care provided by foster family is unconditional and lasting. Both Rodrigo (aged 15) and Filipe talked about their previous foster parents with whom they stayed for two and a half years as their 'real family', explaining that

... they have taken care of me a lot, very loving people, they will always be there for me for whatever I need, said Rodrigo.

Emilia not only described foster family as providing her with a sense of continuance, but also outlined what seems to be at core of this relational endurance:

... they [social workers] introduced me to [name of foster mother] and [name of foster father] ... after a while and you see that they take care of you, that you are their daughter and that you go to school and when you are back they are there for you ... I thought I understood what a family means, but until then I did not understand it at all ... they are always there, and you always know that they are always going to be there.

I'm here studying, but I know that when I go for a weekend, they are going to be at home. So, for me that's stability.

For her, relational continuance indicated stability and predictability – all of which she associated with family. The young people made clear, however, that that this does not mean foster parents satisfying their every whim; rather they set boundaries to teach and guide them. María (aged 13) said:

With my [biological] mother I did not have any rules. I could do what I wanted and here I have to behave ... I have to study for my future and be a good person ... have an education ...

For María and seven other young people, foster family rules are important for ensuring their social and emotional well-being as well as providing them with opportunities for (formal) education or personal development: “I became more interested in studying and be able to be somebody when I grow up and have a family [of his own]”, said Rodrigo.

5.1.3 | Family as a place of reciprocal exchange

Some young people noted that they feel a strong sense of obligation to take care of people they know and who show emotional care and concern towards them, irrespective of shared residence and kin ties. Emma (aged 14) talked about her role in foster family as “someone who is also there to help others as they do for me”. When asked about how their ‘family’ made them feel, Pilar and María explained:

It makes me feel brave, it has made me know that I never have to leave anyone behind. I have to say positive things to people and encourage them ... and that I have to help those who need it, said Pilar (aged 10).

... be kind and respect others, said María (aged 13).

Individual obligations to others are not simply an abstract principle of firmly established norms; they are created through a set of family practices that are reciprocally “oriented to another family member” (Morgan, 2011b, p. 5) over time:

... they have done so much for me over the last five years and one day I'll make it up to them (Eduardo, aged 11).

Being with them until I'm 18 years and to take care of them (Filipe).

Maintaining reciprocal relationships within the foster family is expected by Eduardo and Filipe, and failure to meet these

expectations is likely to weaken their family relationships. For example, Rodrigo talked about wanting to work and help his biological grandmother:

... with a little bit with money [because] ... above all [she] is the one who has taken care of me the most when I was there, supported me and fed me. I owe it to her basically.

Rodrigo's economic reciprocity is not only associated with his grandmother's finances but also relates to how young people position themselves within the foster and birth families. This sense of duty to birth family members can result in young people not always having close or even healthy relationships:

I'm there because I have to be there ... and when the time comes, then I leave. I mean, I do not think that I enjoy the time I spend with her, said Isabel.

Isabel's mother is not in good health, and she is committed to her mother, believing her mother's health will deteriorate if communication ceases. However, she finished:

I want to have contact without feeling obliged. I want to have contact without feeling like I have to.

She then reflected that these mixed feelings could be a result of having been, at times, uncomfortable being around her mom. Likewise, Carmen could not explain why she “will always be there for her” mother even though she does not consider her to be family, saying:

I cannot explain to you or tell you why because I do not know. It's a feeling that's there. I've never been able to identify it.

Regardless of the state of the relationship, Isabel, Carmen and others voiced obligations to their birth family, specially to their birth mothers, highlighting the strong sense of one-way relationships.

5.2 | Family is valued through (in)visible biological ties

For six young people, blood and genetic familial ties provided a desire to have a relationship: “... I was born from them, so I need to maintain a relationship with them in some way” (Olivia). They talked of being forever connected to parents not only biologically but also through extended family networks. Olivia and four others talked about appreciating being related to their parent(s) because other family members linked them through information. For example, Emilia recounted:

... there are times when you need to feel understood in the sense of, for example, your character, right? It's

inevitable that you get it from your genes. I talk to my aunt like [and she says] “your mother had that temperament too” and you feel recognised. These are things that I value of biology. Things about personality, behaviour, even diseases that run in families. Those things that, for example, when I talk to my aunt, she can tell me about it. Also, I ask about things about my mother out of curiosity. Not about my father because she knew him very little. It's good to know things, curiosities that you have about your biological parents ... my biological family, we are very intense.

We've all been through something; my aunt also had a bad time with her mother ... we feel we can identify very well with each other and we talk about it, and that's nice ... and there's nothing better than them; your biological family who have lived through it ... It reassures me to say well, this character [laughs] ... it's normal to us because biologically it's very noticeable ... my parents [referring to foster parents] are super calm, and I ask myself who do I look like, and I go to my aunt and we talk about it and Ah! I look like you or my mother.

Emilia explained that by reaching out to her aunt, she learned about her mother and about important psychological, behavioural and medical information to help chart her own identity formation. Likewise, Isabel explained why keeping contact with her birth family is important:

So that I do not forget how I'm right now. I do not want to lose that link with my past and with my biological family.

For Isabel, the link to biological family is a reminder of her life trajectory. Others expressed concern towards their siblings. Beltrán admitted: “... having six siblings sometimes without wanting to, I like to know a little bit about where they are and what they do because not knowing kills me”. He explained that the only brother he has a close relationship tells him about his other siblings. When participants were asked whether they were told things that made them feel different from their foster family, Olivia said when her foster mother passed away, her foster sister told her that although she is not part of their biological family, she is part of their family. Olivia favoured blood relatedness and at the same time expressed sadness for being viewed as less valid than biological family members.

5.3 | Family as everyday practices

The young people's accounts of foster family life included family activities such as spending time in the *pueblo* (village), family holidays and outings, taking part in (religious) celebrations and watching television

together. However, three mentioned a lack of shared interest in family practices, yet they felt obliged to take part, as they thought of it as strengthening a sense of family belonging. As Olivia revealed about her mass attendance: “It's something that I've never been interested in, but I go because apart from having to, I also try to be more involved in the family”. Young people talk about being included in and contributing to the household chores: “If my sisters had to do something they [foster parents] would tell me; “you too, Isabel, now you're part of this family””, recounted Isabel. They also talked about feeling close to the extended foster family, and of fighting with their foster parents, siblings, and other family members as ‘real’ family do.

While family narratives conveyed acceptance and an acknowledgement of young people's relationships with members of the foster family, the photos in young people's home reinforced meanings about these relationships. Photos were referred to by several as a meaningful illustration of the level of acceptance and the feeling of togetherness in the foster family. Emilia recounted when she first joined her foster family, she felt different because there were family photo albums of all her cousins but not of her, and during family gatherings, they would tell stories from before and she is being not part of any:

I felt like I suddenly appeared out of nowhere, there are no photos of me. It's like I've my own story and they have a different story together.

Emilia recounted that her foster grandmother hung three photos of her on the living room walls (one as a child, one on her uncles' wedding and one when she graduated from high school), so that she is represented in the family. Beltrán said that before joining his foster family, he lived in the residential care and could not choose anything, not even the bed sheets. However, due to Covid-19, he missed his graduation trip. His foster parents know of his love for decorating and gifted him the money meant for the trip so he could redecorate his room. They also paid for his drivers' licence when he turned 18 years old. For these young people, these everyday family practices, communications, display and ‘just being together’ during family meals shaped how they make sense of, and attach significance to, family and familial relationships.

6 | DISCUSSION

This article has drawn upon concepts of family sociology (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996, 2011a) and analysed how family is conceptualised by Spanish young people in long-term non-kinship foster care. The empirical material reveals that most young people attached family meanings to behavioural practices and expressions of affection. They included multiple relations as constituting their family, as found in the study of Wissö et al. (2019). Young people felt valued and appreciated and associated these to their physical, social, intellectual, identity and emotional needs being met (Schofield, 2002) by different family members (including family pets). Young people felt they can love and be loved within these relationships, highlighting the emotional aspects as

natural and essential when doing family (Ursin et al., 2017). In line with other research (e.g., Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2020; Wissö et al., 2019), some young people considered biological ties in defining family. However, young people in this study acknowledged that birth family members could lose the status of family if they are not supportive and if contact becomes infrequent. Their understanding of family seems to be grounded in cultural symbolism discourse of blood ties (Allan, 2008) that became 'familial' to them rather than perceiving family in terms of consanguinity as suggested by Mahat-Shamir et al. (2018). In line with Jackson (2009 in McIntosh et al., 2011), I argue that although the traditional family living arrangement is declining, the concept of family as an ideology is not for young people in long-term foster care in Spain.

In general, most young people in long-term foster care were remarkably satisfied with the foster family and considered them as 'real' family. This corresponds with research findings in other countries (e.g., Ellingsen et al., 2011, 2012; Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020). This is encouraging because of the caring, supportive and continuity of relationships with the foster family that offered security and predictability (Schofield, 2002; Van Holen et al., 2020), and feeling safe, having a stable environment including school, friends, leisure activities and other supportive adults (Wissö et al., 2019). In line with other research (e.g., Biehal, 2014; Van Holen et al., 2020), the general feeling of connectedness with the foster family was linked to young people feeling "valued for all aspects of the self" (Schofield, 2002, p. 262). As family scholars point out, family is formed through different social settings through love, care, support and quality of relationships (Chambers, 2012; McCarthy, 2012; Smart, 2007).

For young people, family functions in long-term care were not only based on care and support (e.g., Van Holen et al., 2020) but were also coupled with a sense of loyalty and responsibility, grounded in the strength of emotional, social and material reciprocity of their experience in their foster family as well as in birth family relationships. These young people engage in care and support with members of their families, and they present family as a place of reciprocity and care-giving practices. In these reciprocal expectations, some young people's relationship with the birth mother was compromised, and in repeated cases, the biological mother was excluded in their family representation. The birth mother experience was mostly one of inadequate care, neglect or abuse as also found in Schofield (2002). This supports Finch and Mason's (1993) argument that caregiving is a process of negotiation in which the specific needs of all parties involved are considered in a framework of affection and reciprocity.

A key finding of the current study is the interplay between biological preference and foster family affective practices that young people in long-term foster care experience in both families, thus providing a nuanced understanding of meaning of family in long-term foster care through a family sociology lens. Some young people valued foster families' affective practices, even in their attempts to privilege biological relatedness, as a means for their identity construction. Others valued biological ties but felt sad for being viewed as less valid than biological related family members. This sheds light on the fluidity of the concept of family (Finch, 2007) and on the struggle to make sense

of it in long-term foster care. In addition, young people's account of foster family life supports what family scholars have noted concerning 'doing family things' (Morgan, 1996). In accordance with previous research (e.g., Mahat-Shamir et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2020), shared holidays are typical family events that build and maintain family identity (Jones & Hackett, 2011), attending celebrations is of high importance (Chambers, 2012; Ursin et al., 2017) and the giving of gifts "carefully selected for a particular individual to convey the meaning of the relationship" demonstrate (good) family relations (Finch, 2007, p. 77) for young people in long-term care. As found in other studies (Biehal, 2014; Christiansen et al., 2013), young people talked about being treated as any other member in the foster family and feeling close to them.

7 | STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Although the perception of the concept 'family' has been examined frequently in long-term foster care, this is, to the best of my knowledge, the first study in the context of Spain. A strength of this study is its exploration of young people's views by applying visual and task-based methods to a more 'direct' representations of their family life in variety of ways, not only verbal. In particular, looking at the photos of family members and recalling family moments was a popular method among many young people. The fact that participant selection was influenced by social workers might have caused bias, for example, by selecting young people who are content with foster care placement. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised. However, findings point to general themes and questions on how contemporary family concepts can shed light on young people's perspectives in long-term foster care in Spain.

8 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The young people's experiences of family in long-term foster care, including their feeling of being in close and warm family relationships, should be viewed as potential indicator of the strengths of non-kinship foster care in providing children sense of stability, family belonging and identity through adulthood as well as a sense of membership of and relationships with birth family. While it is important to acknowledge the importance of young people's relationships with their birth family, helping young people positioning themselves in birth family relationships and supporting their sense of family belonging to their long-term non-kinship foster families should be of value for social work practice and policy in Spain.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by Valladolid University Ethics Committee and Castilla y León child protection authorities.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants provided written and verbal informed consent before participation. The consent was audio-recorded.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

The materials in this study do not require permission to reproduce.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared for ethical reasons.

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ENDNOTE

¹ For this article, the term 'young people' will be used to refer to the participants.

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