

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF(OUT-OF-HOME-CARE) FOSTER CARE (HOME) ON CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM AND ABILITY TO FORM SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: PERSPECTIVES OF ADULTS WHO AGED OUT OF FOSTER CARE IN AALBORG.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for whom the families in heaven and earth are named, for submitting this thesis today. I would also dedicate it to my father, the late Okenze M.C. Ugo, and my mother, Lolo Catherine Ugo. Also, thank you to my wife, Kelechi Ugo, for being a fantastic wife and mother to our son, Zikora. Thank you for your love and support.

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ABSTRACT

The attachment theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth believes that children experience the lasting impact of disassociation if separated from their primary caregiver. In Denmark, foster care placement is conceptualised as the remedy for compensating children for the turbulence in their biological parent's homes. However, little is known about the implication of foster care on self-esteem and social relationships with foster children, from the semi-structured interviews with foster care leavers at Baglandet, a non-government aftercare organisation in Denmark. The study explored how foster care leavers perceived the long-term impact of foster care placements on their adult social relationships and self-esteem. Data from the interviews were analysed through a phenomenological approach. The study acknowledges that the relationships between the foster caregiver and the foster child determined how they value themselves and interact with others as adults. Another part of the study examined how aftercare organisation provides general support and social interactions and improve their sense of family belonging to foster care leavers who already have limited resources in term of social networks. According to the study, social workers and foster caregivers need to recognise the relevance of attachment between a foster child and a foster caregiver and its function in developing a child's social relationships. It also calls on government organisations and municipalities to make aftercare available to all foster care leavers, regardless of age. It should not be based on their potential to grow positively.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 BACKGROUND

In out-of-home care in Denmark, placement is conceptualised as the remedy for compensating children for the turbulence in their parent's homes. Still, they often end up in the same situations experienced at home (Egelund & Vitus, 2009). Previous research on children with foster care experiences indicates that most may be unable to form healthy relationships and the skills vital to successful social networking (Bretherton, 1993). It is also observed that children/youths in foster care are more likely at risk of adverse outcomes associated with low self-esteem than their peers who are not in foster care (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2007). Some of these adverse outcomes they identified include diminished self or self-value, stigmatisation, the strain on interpersonal relationships, delayed independence and poor mental health like depression and anxiety (Kool, 1997; Holtan et al., 2005), which impair them from having successful social networking or relationships.

A foster child, as defined, "is a child that has been removed from their residence and placed in a foster home or out-of-home care when the situation in the biological parent(s) home becomes unsafe for the child's continued residence" (Jackson, 2003, p.12). Most foster children, once removed from their homes, and if the circumstances that led to their removal are not rectified. They might end up moving from one foster care to another before eventually ageing out of foster care. According to Wolanin (2005), on average, foster youths live in three or more foster homes before ageing out, while others might live in 10 or more placements before ageing out of foster care.

In Denmark, one per cent of Danish children between zero and 18 years old are placed in out-of-home care at any given point (Bryderup, 2005). Comparing this to countries like the United Kingdom and the United States of America that share similar social welfare and economic system, the number of children placed in out-of-home care seems to be higher. An example is in the United Kingdom and the United States, between 0.5 to 0.8 children are set to go into foster care at any given point in their lives (Sources: www.cildtrends.org and children in care, a report from National Audit Office).

There are issues associated with placing children outside of their homes; children in foster care in Denmark exhibit many challenges despite the country's reputation as a welfare-oriented state that is like those described in the UK and the USA (Kjeldsen & Kjeldsen, 2010). Some of These issues associated with foster care in Denmark are attributed to the positions given to foster parents, particularly the prohibition against developing an undue

attachment to their foster kids (Kjeldsen & Kjeldsen, 2010). This undue attachment could result in the loss of a strong bond foundation necessary for the growth of positive self-esteem and social skills, contributing to some of the difficulties associated with foster care. Studies in Denmark have shown that adults placed outside their homes as kids have more tendencies than others to have unstable labour force status (Andersen & Fallesen, 2010; Olsen et al., 2011). They also underperform in schooling and education (Bryderup et al., 2017; Bryderup & Trentel, 2012). They are psychologically more likely to experience social problems like criminal involvement, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction and hospitalisation relating to mental health issues than their likes who are not in foster care (Olsen et al., 2011; Egelund et al., 2008 & Vinerlyung, Hjern, & Lindblad, 2006). All these might result from the foster care system failing to fill the (lacuna) created by neglect and abuse experienced in their biological home that led to the placement, making them feel unworthy of love, abandoned, and not being wanted. According to Bretherton (1998), it makes them grow up without the necessary abilities to form healthy relationships and successful social networking skills. However, the context in which a child grows up has a longitudinal on his/her self-esteem development and children who grow up in foster care are at high risk of experiencing low self-esteem (Luke & Cayone, 2008). The abuse and abandonment experienced before or during their foster care placement and the loss of family ties, friends, and neighbours hurt their self-esteem (Unrau et al., 2008).

Adults' attachment tendencies are influenced by how they were attached as children (Kesner & McKenry, 1998). A secure youngster has a deep-seated conviction that he or she deserves affection and care, Bowlby (as cited in Bretherton, 1992). According to attachment theory, "for [an] infant and young child to grow up psychologically well, [he] needs experience a warm, personal, and constant relationship with his mother (or permanent substitute), in which both feel fulfilment and happiness" (Bretherton, 1992. p. 761). Individuals in adult relationships are still seeking the same sense of security and support from their partners that was significant in their safe attachment connections throughout early infancy, according to Kesner and McKenry (1998). (p. 213). Children and later adults with a stable internal working model balance their capacities for self-reliance with help-seeking. This balance is essential for relationship-building and social networking (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

A neglected youngster is more prone to develop an unworthy view of themselves than a child with a warm, ongoing relationship with a primary caregiver. Unfortunately, this abnormal mental development affects many foster children worldwide (Weber, 2003).

1.2 Problem statement

Research has shown that youths and adults who grew out of care seem to have a high rate of unemployment, limited educational attainment, homelessness, imprisonment, poor mental and physical health, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy compared to other adults in the same bracket (Spencer et al., 2010). They also have poorer conditions to prepare for independent living as healthy adults with prospects to pursue their objectives with the same odds as everyone else (Kling et al., 2016; Kohler et al., 2015). The poorer condition to prepare for an independent living could be a result of attachment disorder associated with prior experiences with the primary caregiver like the mother or during care in a foster home, such as neglect, emotional/physical abuse, sexual abuse, separation, or abandonment from either their biological parents or caregivers as stated by Weber (2010). This neglect made it difficult for foster children to develop healthy self-esteem to form healthy relationships, complicated transitions, and stability in the social aspects of life, like careers, family, friendship, or even romantic bonds.

Inapplicability of knowledge of attachment theory among foster parents and social workers, along with a lack of in-depth instruction for caregivers on the significance of the relationship between them and the foster child, on how to provide appropriate interventions to the experiences that lead to healthy self-esteem and social networking by foster children needs to be considered. This study is meant to fill the knowledge gap on the impact of foster care on foster children's self-esteem and social relationships. It could only be filled by the perception of people with foster care experiences who are the real experts in this case. Their experiences can help address the issues of attachment disorder and its impact on social relationships and social networking, which will benefit educators, social workers, and caregivers alike. A robust social support framework positively impacts children's experiences in foster care regarding increasing their social stability (Waters et al., 2000).

1.3 Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate adults who have grown out-of-home care, ages 18 and above, and who experienced foster care between the ages of 0 to 18 years through phenomenological inquiry. The study will examine experiences in out-of-home care adults' perceptions of their lived social experiences and relationships at foster care placements and their implications on self-esteem. Also, the description of their social experiences and relationships in their adult life, this research aims to understand the long-term impacts of out-of-home care adults' past social experiences and their present perceptions of their self-esteem and social interactions.

1.4 Research questions

This study will address the fundamental research question: What do adults who have been to foster care placement from age 0-18 perceive as the long-term impacts of foster care on their adult social relationships and self-esteem based on their experiences in care?

1. How does foster care impact a child's ability to form social relationships?
2. What impact does foster care has on a child's self-esteem?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examined the history of foster care and the legislation governing foster care placement in Denmark. Furthermore, the attachment pattern of foster children to a caregiver shapes their self-esteem and ability to create social relationships. The beneficial effects of mentorship and aftercare programs on social interactions were also examined. The chapter finished with a theoretical framework for discussing the interview findings.

2.2 The History of foster care in Denmark

The development of foster care in Denmark could be traced back to the Middle age, around 1200, when the responsibilities of catering to destitute and orphan children were held by different Christian orders (Øgendahl, 2000, pp. 13-26). According to Kjeldsen and Kjeldsen (2010), the exact time foster care started in Denmark could not be defined since foster care depends on what definition is used. Before the reformation of 1536, only the Roman Catholics were the primary providers of services to orphans until the Lutheran regime replaced it.

Furthermore, the system crisis of 1700 led to a high increase in the number of orphans and destitute children, which caught the attention of King Christian IV; according to him, the increase threatened the peace of respectable citizens. In 1710, through the order of His Majesty, the state opened a network of residential homes for destitute and orphaned infants and young adults (Kjeldsen & Kjeldsen, 2010). This residential home was later replaced with foster care, establishing the royal foster family foundation to find families devoted to caring for abandoned infants. The law of 1708 that gave birth to what is known as the Danish foster family also classified people as people worthy and qualified of care and those that did not. This condition only includes young infants as worthy of assistance from the community (Jonassen, 2003, pp. 58-59). In 1803, a new poverty law was added, making it possible for families that care for orphaned children to receive remuneration from the state (Jonassen, 2008).

The chronological development of foster care in Denmark reveals the transformation from being a charitable venture organised by religious bodies to a royal residence and later to state-led legislation.

2.3 Foster Care Legislation in Denmark

In Denmark, it is legal for those in public office to alert the officials if they believe a child or adolescent needs extra care or is in danger (Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs, 2007, para 1-3). This foster care legislation aims to ensure that children whose growth may be hampered are recognised and receive assistance right away to keep them from experiencing any disadvantage compared to other Danish children (Kjeldsen & Kjeldsen, 2010). The primary responsibility of the custody holder in Denmark is to ensure the child's welfare and decides on personal matters relative to his or her child's interest and needs. The law stipulates: "The child has the right to care and security; he or she should be respected for who they are and should not be subjected to any form of abusive treatment (Ministry of Justice, 2007, para,2)". Where this is not the case, the authorities must be informed to ensure early intervention by the welfare state. Any decision concerning the service provider must be made with the knowledge of the custody holder and the young person if he or she is 15 years and above. Also, when there is an obvious risk of harm to the child or adolescent, this provision of consent can be overlooked in placing a child in foster care (Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs 2009, para 50 & 58).

From the view of the Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs (2009, para 51), before a child or adolescent is given exceptional support, social workers are required to examine all the circumstances and assess the child's needs to determine if he or she goes into residential care, foster home. This requirement includes a comprehensive review of the child's development and behaviour, school and education history, physical and mental health, leisure activities, friendships, and quality of family and other significant relationships (Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs, 2009, para, 50). These are some of the law's provisions that guide foster care placement in Denmark.

2.4 The Importance of Attachment on the Self-esteem of Children in foster care

Self-esteem is the evaluation component of the self-concept, which originates in the internalisation of social interactions (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Hamacheck (1978), self-esteem with attachment theory as one of its theories focuses on inferiority in early childhood as socially constructed, as something that is learned or developmental rather than organic or innate. Adults have the most significant impact on self-esteem early on, and primary caregivers are the major source (Burn, 1979).

Coopersmith examines how parenting behaviours may be linked to children's self-esteem in his research. The study suggested positive self-esteem is related to maternal affection and mother-child rapport (Coopersmith, 1967). Then negatively linked to parental indifference and lack of family support (Cooper et al., 1983; Liu, 2003). Since many of the children in foster care experienced neglect, abuse, and conflict, many have a damaged sense of self-worth, making them feel unlovable (Schofield & Beek, 2005a). Removal of these children from home because of abandonment and forcible separation, according to Ackerman and Dozier (2005), may re-enforce damage to self-esteem among foster children. Their self-esteem is further threatened when the placement is combined with losing parents, peer relationships, and community networks (Lyman & Bird, 1996).

Research has proven that children in foster care continue to suffer from low self-esteem while in care. They tend to score lower in self-esteem than non-foster children (Ackerman & Dozier, 2005; Gil & Bogart, 1982; Hick & Nixon, 1989). A study where samples were drawn from maltreated fostered children showed that low self-esteem is linked to anxiety, aggression, and teenage motherhood (Legault et al., 2006). In another study, low self-esteem was seen as a predictive of eating problems, depression, delinquency, adolescent psychiatric disorder, adult mental health problem and criminality (McGee & Williams, 2000; Rosenberg et al.; 1989; Guilan et al.; 2003 and Trzesniewski et al.; 2006).

Ackerman and Dozie (2005) reiterated the need for foster parents to have a preview of their foster children, to know in what capacity or in what way they can improve and maintain a positive lasting impact on their self-esteem. According to Ackerman and Dozie (2005) and Schofield and Beck (2005b), there is an improvement in foster children's self-esteem when foster careers provide acceptance, a secure base and sensitive parenting. This improvement could only be achieved if foster careers know the best practical way to actualise positive self-esteem in their children. Luke and Coyne (2008) express the importance of attachment to children's self-esteem development to be taught foster professional careers before assuming their foster care duties.

2.5 The impact of attachment disorder on social relationship

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory started in the 1930s with Bowlby and propounded a particular interest in maternal loss and deprivation. In the 1950s, Mary joined him in the research. Attachment disorder emerges because of the disruption of the child's tie with the mother and the mental defects that the child would subsequently suffer (Bretherton,

1992). According to Bretherton, the quality of early attachment relationships is correlated to future personality and brain development. Apart from maternity loss, deprivation, and personality development, another thing that interested Bowlby and Ainsworth is the importance of security in development. Attachment and security, according to Ainsworth, work together “Just as an infant feels afraid, his or her attachment behaviour is likely to be activated as well as fear behaviour; likewise, when he or she feels secure, his/her attachment behaviour may be at a low level of activation” (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p.22).

According to attachment theory, an infant needs a committed caregiving relationship with one or a few adult figures, which is central to healthy development. Psychological severe damage occurs in infancy if babies are separated from their mothers or primary caregivers, leading to attachment disorder (Bretherton, 1992). Another concept of this attachment disorder is what Hardy called Reactive attachment disorder (RAD). He described the diagnostic criteria for (RAD) to include a pattern of disturbed and developmentally inappropriate social relationships; according to him, attachment disturbances are associated with psychopathology in childhood and adulthood (Hardy, 2007). He further explained that the right hemisphere of the human brain influences infants’ personality and relationships with others throughout their life span and could be impaired when a child is not securely attached to their caregivers. Neural activities in the right hemisphere create and maintain communication of inner affective experiences amidst external changes (Hardy, 2007, p. 28). Hardy’s research was only conducted with institutionalised children. Therefore, the behaviours observed cannot be generalised to include those in foster care who may present with milder attachment disorders (Hardy, 2007).

2.6 The impact of foster care disruption on social relationships

Adverse life events such as parental divorce, untreated parental psychiatric disorder, loss of a parent(s), and abuse by a family member are some life-altering events in a child that manifest in adulthood (Waters, 2000). According to Waters, many foster care children are vulnerable to these life-altering events and their ramifications, including the ability to form a relationship and social attachment necessary for a stable and prosperous adulthood (Waters, 2000). As children are placed from one home to another, additional disruptions in care make this stable transition difficult (Stovall & Dozie, 1998). Studies show that children who experience multiple placements suffer from poorer psychological development than their peers and more emotional and behavioural problems than children with stable placement (Bryce & Ehlert, 1971; Fanshel & Shinn, 1978). It can be drawn from these studies that children who have

experienced multiple placements may demonstrate the inability to create positive social relationships in their adulthood.

2.7 The impact of mentorship on foster care leavers

Mentorship is one of the effective interventions for preventing social dysfunction in teenagers (Munson & McMillen, 2006). According to Gilligan (1999), a mentor supports, instructs, and provides young people with affection, time, and attention. There are various types of mentors, including one-on-one, peer, and mentor teams.

Mentorship was developed in response to the need to give social support to children who have suffered terrible childhood experiences such as abuse and the detrimental mental health challenges that the volatility of placement has on foster care children (Raviv et al., 2010). According to Scott et al. (2010), anxiety disorder, mental health, and mood swings are two to five times higher for children with foster care experience than for children without such experiences. Children who experienced maltreatment at home are more likely to have insecure attachment and negative representations of their birth parents when compared with their peers who have not been maltreated (Cyr et al., 2010). They frequently generalise their early caregiver experiences to new relationships, and exposure to inconsistent and poor caregiving may result in problems developing secure attachments with foster caregivers (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2000). According to research, most at-risk kids believe their lives have improved since working with mentors (Osterling & Hines, 2006). Foster care teenagers, it is widely assumed, require lasting, supportive emotional relationships with adults to manage the difficult transition to adulthood (Spencer et al., 2010). Mentoring has been shown to increase social and academic performance, reduce behavioural difficulties, and improve psychological and physical well-being in youths (McClain et al., 2021).

A community-based youth mentoring program in Denmark known as Children's adult friend (CAF) found that having a trusted adult friend for a year is likely to improve a child's well-being by serving as a good role model, assisting children in coping with school and peers and encouraging them to participate in socially acceptable and fun activities that empower them to reach their maximum potential while also increasing their quality of life (Damm et al., 2022). According to Osterling and Hines (2006), mentoring favours at-risk youths, such as improving positive self-concept, parent-child, and peer connections.

2.8 Who is a right mentor

According to Gilligan (1999), the right mentor for a child can be found within the child's own family or social network, such as their previous or current neighbourhood, school, youth organisation, volunteer social services, caseworkers, and a place of work that the youth has been involved. For children in foster care, past relational distress and abandonment experiences may provide a considerable challenge to forming a mentoring relationship based on trust and mutuality (Spencer et al., 2010). Some juveniles benefit little from being assigned to a mentor, while others may face premature termination of the mentoring connection, which may have negative consequences (Kupersmidt et al., 2017; Stelter et al., 2018). Weiler et al. (2022) believed that the impact of mentoring at-risk youth might be a function of youths' interpersonal experiences before intervention. Gilligan added that a mentorship relationship that is abruptly terminated or in which a mentor becomes untrustworthy may be heartbreaking for a foster child, particularly if the young person is still reeling from previous adult betrayals of trust. He advised mentors to be patient with the emotional and behavioural challenges of young people in foster care (Gilligan, 1999).

Garringer (2022) questioned the merits of the mentoring program, claiming that offering too much could cause more harm than good. He said it suffers when a mentoring relationship is infused with a broader range of services and program features. He wondered how mentoring connections be kept from getting lost in the shuffle, especially when programs begin to stray from their fundamentals (Garringer, 2022).

Mentoring has the potential to connect young people in foster care with a diverse group of caring people who can serve as a crucial bridge in higher education and employment. Mentoring can also be a resource for transitioning to independent living in adulthood (Rhodes, 2005).

2.9 The Impacts of Aftercare on foster care leavers

The limited social network available to foster care leavers makes forming social relationships complex (Bond & Van Breda, 2018). In Denmark, the aftercare was established to cater to adolescents and adults with previous out-of-home care experience who needed assistance adjusting to independent living (Oterholm, 2018). According to Andersen (2019), young people ageing out of foster care often require more resources and social support.

Aftercare programs are designed to assist young adults who have left the foster care system or have previous experience with a renewed need for foster care but are too old to re-enter the system. Depending on local or national eligibility, criteria, and age limits, the targeted group of those programs is 18 years or older, putting them in the demographic period of young adults or emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Most of the vulnerable population of emerging adults often lack the resources and support to navigate and make practical use of the opportunities available to them. Foster care leavers often struggle with emotional, cognitive, and behavioural problems (Committee on early childhood, Adoption and Dependant Care, 2000). Apart from these struggles, they are unlikely to access many resources in their social network, partly because this network is often tiny (Bengtssen & Mølholt, 2018).

The Danish Child Protection Services introduced the aftercare program to young people who needed it to address the limited personal resources and lack of social assistance accessible to foster care leavers (Anderssen, 2019). To assist these individuals in transitioning out of the foster care system and into independent adulthood by providing them with resources they do not have or are not available, such as steady parental support (Stewart et al., 2014).

In trying to explore support services available to foster care leavers in Denmark, Cudjoe and his team of researchers, they have discovered how a Non-Governmental Aftercare supported their subsequent movement into independent living. Through the support of the organisation, these foster care leavers were able to develop networking and social skills through informal interactions at the institution; they also received practical support like job seeking and education. The institution also provided a sense of family which most of them lack. They could do this through the help of social workers and interactions with people they share similar experiences (Cudjoe et al., 2020).

Knowing the importance of aftercare support in Denmark, Frederiksen and Laursen (2018) identify the age limit of 18 to 23 years placed on young people who are to receive aftercare services as a challenge, as is the lack of support from municipalities for care leavers who are older than 23 years but require aftercare services. They also questioned who is eligible for aftercare support because care leavers who are judged too disadvantaged are not eligible (Frederiksen & Laursen, 2018).

2.10 The theoretical framework

Attachment theory

The theory used in this study to look at the challenges adults who aged out of foster care as regards its impact on social relationships and self-esteem is the attachment theory. As the researcher explains earlier, this theory's primary interest is in the bond between a child and his/her mother and, for the children in care, the bond between them and their foster parents and other significant relationships and how it impacts their self-esteem and social relationships. According to attachment theory, early relationships between parents and children are crucial to a person's growth. As conceptualised by Bowlby (1977), attachment behaviour is any form of behaviour resulting in a person attaining proximity to another differentiated and preferred individual. The primary purpose of attachment is protection. According to Whiteman et al.; (2011), the importance of social relations is that it could help solve challenges that might affect the child during the transition, resulting in anxiety, depression, and stress. These children's attachment patterns during their time in care may impact their capacity to uphold ties in the future. This theory focuses on comprehending family dynamics, the development of the link between foster parents or caseworkers, and the general disturbance that occurs during the bond-formation process (Washington, 2007).

Children with more secure attachments are more socially competent and have higher self-esteem than insecurely attached children (Cassidy, 1988). Insecure attachments are associated with mental health problems like depression and anxiety (Bowlby, 1977). According to Whelan (2003), both good and bad interruptions in a child's life can affect their attachment style and self-esteem. Being placed in foster care and separated from their family are two examples of such occurrences.

During adolescence, the youth's attachment relationship grows concurrently with other developmental stages (Schofield & Beek, 2009). An adolescent ability to live independently after foster care placement may be impacted by whether the adolescent was able to meet various developmental tasks while in foster care. Their ability to meet these tasks can negatively or positively impact their self-esteem (Salalu-Din & Bollman, 1994). How one views their self-esteem influences their relationships with others, and high self-esteem leads to better social interactions and more enriching relationships, while low self-esteem is the opposite (Rosenberg et al., 1989).

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 Methodology

Creswell (2001) has defined *methodology* as an operational framework within which data are placed to better understand their meanings during the planning and execution of a research investigation. This part will emphasise the activities carried out by the researchers during the study, including the nature of the data and the procedures used to gather and arrange it.

Phenomenological inquiry in qualitative research, this form of inquiry according to Lester (1999), is an effective method to “understand the subjective experience, obtain insights into people’s motivations and actions, and cut through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom. The phenomenological inquiry gives the researcher more access to the lived experiences of these adults who were once in foster homes. Phenomenological inquiry, in Bulter-Kisber’s (2018) opinion, is the ability to enter the lived experience and perspective of the other person, to stand not only in their shoes but also in the emotional body – to see the world with their eyes. in a context—in this case, adults who grew out of foster care.

3.2 Research design

According to Bhattacharjee (2012), a research design is a grounded strategy for data collecting in an empirical research project that incorporates qualitative and quantitative research methods. The study design that was employed in this study is qualitative. Instead of presenting numerical data in a more aesthetically pleasing style, the objective of qualitative research as a method used in scientific analysis is to provide in-depth and illustrative material to understand the many components of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research stresses subjectivity, while quantitative research emphasises objectivity and is only appropriate when it is possible to derive quantifiable measures of variables from population samples (Queiros et al., 2017). Due to the quantitative inquiry’s lack of merit in deepening the understanding of the lived experiences of these adults, the study will consider the qualitative inquiry, which is not only objective but also a systematic way of collecting data.

3.3 Epistemological position

The epistemological position used in this study is a phenomenological inquiry method because the study aims to inquire into the lived experiences of these informants who passed

through the out-of-home care system. Given (2008) came up with two phenomenological approaches that are typically used in every phenomenological inquiry, descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. According to Moran (2004), descriptive phenomenology is applied when the researcher has no presupposition of the participant's studied lived experiences, freeing the researcher from bias in exploring their lived experiences. The researcher moved into the field with an "open gaze or novice mindset" and no assumptions, personal beliefs, or prejudices. Husserl, who introduced descriptive phenomenology, believed in the possibility of an unbiased and objective reality (Moran, 2004).

On the other hand, interpretive phenomenology argues the impossibility of a researcher going into the field with a "novice mindset". Shaw and Anderson (2018) believe that humans are bound to think towards the positions they have taken, and it would be impossible to deny the influence of the positions one has taken on their thinking. The researcher adopted the interpretive phenomenological approach, though he entered the field with "an open gaze" with no prior experience of the lives experienced in this group research. Still, his previous knowledge of the existing literature on foster children and how foster care impacts their lives provided him with some biases during the analysis and interpretation of data he was aware of. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to obtain information regarding the lived experiences of these formal foster children, 18 years and above. The qualitative study investigated four informants' experiences of foster care and their impact on their self-esteem and social relationships as adults.

The phenomenological approach helped the researcher to look at multiple individuals in foster care and make some accurate generalisations about the issue from the perspectives of insiders who experienced the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). This viewpoint allows the researcher to understand the essence of the participant's perspective on the phenomenon under examination (Creswell, 2009), in this case, the long-term impact of foster care on children's self-esteem and ability to build social relationships.

This study's findings secured information from those who have been foster children on the impact of being removed from their homes and moved around within out-of-home care on their development of self-esteem and social relationships. The study's results were examined through the lens of attachment theory. According to research, the relationship between infants and caregivers lays the groundwork for children's neurological development and ability to form social bonds as adults. (Hardy, 2007). According to Bretherton (1992), the quality of early attachment relationships is correlated with future personality and brain development.

This study will provide awareness of how out-of-home-care experiences may have impacted youths. The informant's openness and willingness to share their stories are essential to this phenomenological qualitative approach.

3.4 The participants

The researcher recruited (4) adults placed in different out-of-home care settings in Denmark from Baglandet to be part of the research informants. Baglandet is a non-governmental organisation that provides services to citizens who aged out of foster care or are about to transition out of care in Aalborg. The researcher considered Baglandet because most of their service users had multiple foster care placements (Baglandet, 2018). Creswell (2009) suggests an adequate sample size for a phenomenological study is 20 individuals with direct experience with the phenomenon. However, Charmaz (2014) argued that in-depth and thick data is more valuable than the number of participants in ensuring the quality of qualitative research. Therefore, the researcher recruited four adult foster care children to provide their lived experiences through an interview with the researcher.

3.5 The study context

Aftercare in Denmark was established to cater to adolescents or adults with previous out-of-home care experience who needed assistance adjusting to independent living (Oterholm, 2018). According to Oterholm and Paulsen (2018), the transition from out-of-home care to independent living can be sudden for young people, even when expecting it. Because of this adjustment to independent living and social networking, Baglandet was established in Aalborg Municipality (Baglandet, 2018).

Baglandet, translated to English as Backland or Backcountry, refers to their service users as Backlanders. It is a non-governmental institution funded by the government and was established in 2007. In 2010, the state granted it operational funding for its smooth operation. This institution aims to promote the condition of children, young people and adults placed outside their homes. To Strengthen current and former out-of-home citizens in coping with adult life both personally and at work. Baglandet also provides communication knowledge to everyone who personally works with or is interested in current or previously placed citizens, young and adults alike (Baglandet, 2018).

According to the researcher's gatekeeper, Baglandet or Backland in Danish stands for when someone has a family or someone behind a person as a support system. When there is a

family who helps when one gets into trouble, needs a hot meal, or someone to talk to or wash their clothes. These are the things most of the services users at the organisation do not have because of a lack of social and family networks, which they at Baglandet try to create in the lives of these individuals. The institution comprises social pedagogies, social workers and volunteers with social and environmental experiences ranging from social networking skills to taking these adults out in nature for relaxation and breathing exercises. The researcher purposively selected this site because it will enable him to obtain relatively homogenous samples (Anderson et al., 2017). Baglandet is a haven for more than one hundred adults with previous foster care experiences and their families, where they come together to drink coffee, talk, socialise, share their experiences, and connect with others with the same history.

In all, the objective of Baglandet is to give people previously in out-of-home care the opportunity to create a social network, a sense of belonging to a community, and the enablement to be fully equipped to maintain or work towards education or work. It also assists citizens with guidance and advice, legislative and social issues to go with them to the municipality, doctors or even school appointments (Baglandet, 2018).

3.6 Sampling methods

The sampling method used in recruiting participants due to the sensitivity of this research is purposive sampling. Creswell (2009) advised researchers to purposefully select participants or sites in qualitative research that will best help them understand the phenomenon under investigation. Since the study has to do with lived experiences of a particular group of people, that is why the researcher considers this sampling method. The researcher was able to investigate this by establishing trust with the assistant coordinator of Baglandet, who stands as a gatekeeper and through whom the researcher accesses their service users that later became part of this research.

3.7 Inclusion criteria

The research only includes service users who have aged out of foster care or those about to exit foster care, either from Baglandet or any other institution that provides services for citizens who have been in foster care in Denmark. The participants must be age 18 and above with a minimum of the compulsory Danish nine years of educational attainment, comprising essential primary and lower high school education. The research will include all genders to provide a holistic perspective of the long-term effect of foster care on children's self-esteem and social relationship building.

3.8 Recruitment (preparations for the interview)

The site where the study was conducted is Baglandet, a non-government aftercare organisation in Aalborg, Denmark. Through the assistance of my supervisor, I facilitated the data collection process by contacting the organisation's coordinator, which I was told before when he submitted his proposal would be the most challenging aspect of his research. As advised by my supervisor, on the 12th of February 2023, I sent the first email to the coordinator, introducing myself, what the research is about, and why conducting the study with the citizens at Baglandet is essential. After waiting without getting a response from the organisation, I wrote a correspondence email on the 20th of February 2023 requesting an audience based on the previous email sent, and a day later, I received an acknowledgement email from the assistant coordinator, who later became my gatekeeper, informing me of the willingness of their service users to participate in the study. Her role as the gatekeeper gave me first-hand information and clarification about Baglandet and the kind of services they give, and because the information on their website is written in Danish, meaningful information about the institution was lost in Google translation, an excellent example of that is the name "Baglandet." On the 8th of March 2023, I visited the organisation to familiarise myself with the gatekeeper and the potential research participants who are the organisation's service users, enabling me to introduce myself in person and the research focus to them (Given, 2004). Through this first and subsequent visit, I identified my research participants and notified them of how the interviews will be conducted. The familiarisation process with potential participants during this study lasted a month and one week. However, I recruited 4 participants within the first two weeks and continued visiting the organisation for another three weeks. These visits aimed to help me navigate the activities that take place in Baglandet and to gain an understanding of the social interactions that take place within that context. According to McGrath and Rudman (2019), this is one of the advantages of using participatory observation in research. I provided both oral and written informed consent to show the voluntary participation of the research informants.

I used one month and one week to conduct interviews and participate in social activities at the organisation. After each interview, I joined them in some of their activities. The activities include mentorship meetings, planning of summer events, playing cards, conversing with the service users, social pedagogies and people that volunteer at the organisation, interaction with their children, for some of them that come with their children on Tuesdays, making and having of dinner with them at the organisation. I was able to create rapport by participating in

the activities, which facilitated the familiarisation process, and according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), this helped me limit their reactivity, and the service users saw me not only as a researcher but also as a person who can be trusted. A good example is one of the service users who have autism. At the first meeting, he never said a word, but when I played uno (a card game) with him, he became lively and a talker. Participant observation has the advantage that roles shift from outsiders to “one of us”. Moaren refers to this shift in a role as a shift from participant observation to observant participation, and it allows a fieldworker to move from the front stage to the backstage in the study of an organisation, gaining information and knowledge that would otherwise be available only to insiders (Moaren, 2007).

3.9 Semi-structured interview

The researcher used semi-structured interviews, including open-ended questions relevant to the research interest. The interviews were conducted between the 13th and 28th of March, 2023. The interview guide consists of questions about participants’ lived experiences in foster care. The interview guide provided a structure that enabled participants to respond to questions relevant to the research focus. The researcher used the semi-structured interview because of its flexibility (Marvasti, 2004), as it helped him probe into new insights that would emerge from the interview while ensuring that attention did not deviate from the study’s primary objective. This probing allowed for divergent information on the topic that would enrich and deepen the study’s understanding. An audio recorder and field notes were also used during the interview.

The researcher developed an interview guide with eight questions based on works of literature and theory designed to provide enough data to answer the research questions. Later the researcher sends his interview guide to his supervisor for review and corrections. Before the interview, the informants signed a letter of consent which contained the purpose of the research and their rights to be involved in the study. This signing of the consent form showed that their involvement in the research was not imposed. The interview time varies between 25 to 1 hour and 11 minutes, and the data was gathered from the informant’s answers to the research questions. The interviews were recorded for clarity and accuracy. Also, field notes and reflections were taken during the interviews and field observations.

All the participants’ identities were protected using nicknames, and the information was taken from them during the interviews that might link to who they are to this study. The researcher conducted a face-to-face interview with the four informants using the interview guide. Before

the interview questions, the researcher took a demographic record of the informants ranging from their age, sex, marital status, number of children, if any, employment status (working or not working), past employment, the number of residences since the age of 18 and their highest level of education. The acquisition of this information provided backgrounds on the foster adults in this study. At the end of the interview, no harm was done because the researcher put their mind to rest about their safety and protection during and after the study was published.

3.10 Ethical considerations

According to Creswell's (2009) view on the need to exclude the real names of participants from responses during the recording and coding process in research, the researcher intends to use pseudonyms throughout the research to protect the identities of his participants. This pseudonym is to avoid psychological, social, legal, physiological, and economic harm to the participants due to the sensitivity of the research, which is in line with Sieber's (1998) view. A letter of informed consent was sent to them, with a detailed explanation of the research and its implications in the body of knowledge and future policymaking and implementation. This letter has the complete information of the researcher, his supervisor, and the department of study. The participants were informed of their free will to discontinue the research at any point without explaining it to the researcher. This letter will make sure that they participate out of their free will.

3.11 Quality assurance

Quality assurance is all about reliability in qualitative research. Green and Thorogood (2009) refer to issues such as the accuracy of reporting, consistency of coding and thoroughness of analysis as essential to a qualitative study's reliability. According to Collingridge and Gantt (2008), the use of research methods accepted by the research community as a genuine way of collecting and analysing data to bring and meaningful description of any social phenomenon makes it reliable. Ways the researcher intends to ensure the study's quality include using an audio recorder and field notes during the interview to ensure quality interview documentation. The researcher will consider using an interpreter since he does not speak or understand Danish, the official language in Aalborg. After the interview and transcription, the researcher discussed the findings with his participants through physical meetings to know if they are their views.

3.12 Limitations of the study

The use of phenomenological inquiry guaranteed that follow-up questions were asked based on participants' responses to the interview guide. However, one of the constraints discovered in this study was language. Because emotions are best communicated in one's tongue, most meanings were lost due to the researcher's lack of Danish comprehension. Even though he tried to be objective, the researcher considered that his passion for the topic had blinded him and limited his queries to a narrow scope. Because of the small sample size and the study context, the conclusions may not be repeated in other contexts without modification. Another limitation considered by the study was the use of solely attachment theory. Other theories, such as symbolic interactionism, would have shed more light on the significance informants attached to their experiences and how they shaped their adult social interactions.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the results and analysis of the interview data collected, the study's finding as regards the perspectives of adults who aged out of the foster care system and how their experiences in foster care impacted their social relationships and self-esteem. The researcher, through interviews, collected audio-recorded interviews of four informants, which ranged from 25 minutes to one hour and 11 minutes, and another from the assistant coordinator of the institution. During the interview, the researcher asked his respondents the following interview questions:

1. At what age did you enter foster care, if you could remember, and at what age did you leave? Could you describe your relationship with your foster parent(s)? Could you give an example of bonding moments with your foster caregivers?
2. How did you maintain social relationships with your family and friends while you were in foster care? Could you give examples?
3. Could you describe your foster parent(S) as being supportive? And what are the implications?
4. What are you doing currently, and are you happy with that and why? Do you have a good relationship at work/school or with anyone you have any friends that you are closely related to?
5. Could you tell me about the person that has helped you succeed the most and why is the person important to your growth?
6. How do you feel about forming/making new social networks(friends) and what made you think that way?
7. Could you describe how Baglandet has helped you in your social networking and give examples?

8. Looking back at your life, how did foster care influence your life choices, social relations, and the way you see yourself in terms of how you identify yourself?

4.2 Data analysis

Through the qualitative data analysis process, the researcher gathered data on the phenomenological lived experiences of adults who were once in foster families or institutions as children (Creswell, 2009). The researcher could transcribe the audio-recorded interviews and notes taken during the interview. Each of the informants was assigned a code to protect their confidentiality, which aligns with Creswell's view on the need to exclude participants' real names from research for protection purposes (Creswell, 2009).

4.3 Coding

The transcripts of four interviews from the participants, including one from the management of Baglandet, were coded manually by the researcher. After reading the interviews repeatedly, the researcher started the coding process by highlighting key phrases from the question guides and statements from the informant's answers. He later placed these phrases into categories, and from these emerged topics explored in the literature review. The researcher was to name the themes with the data. The coding process and analysis helped him determine the narratives' themes.

4.4 Demographic description of the participants

All four participants interviewed came from Baglandet, which is a Non-Government Aftercare in Aalborg, Denmark, and it is a place where people with foster care experiences go, meet people, and socialise. They were all of Danish descent and were selected through purposive sampling. The study included two participants who identified themselves as females and two who identified as males. One of the four participants has kids, and the rest has none. Regarding their relationship and marital status, three are not married or dating, except one currently has a girlfriend living in another country. The age of the informant ranges from 18 to 42 years. Unlike other aftercare in Denmark that opens doors to people ages 18 to 23, Baglandet is open to anyone with foster care experience.

The educational background of the participants varied from one having a bachelor's degree (P2), the other a certificate as a property service technician (P4), one dropping out of high school because her life makes it difficult to school or work (P3) and the other still in high school, to become a social pedagogy someday (P1). Though their level of education is not part

of the cardinal point to be discussed here, it is to show the variety of participants involved in the research. There is a notable disparity in the number of them that are working during the time of this interview. The information they provided during the interview shows that participant number 2 is working and has stayed on the job for 18 years. Participant number 3 and 4 are currently at the job centre, with Participant 4 hoping for early retirement because of the inability to function in a work environment, while Participant number 1 is still struggling to get fixed up to work or education because her life makes it difficult for her to work. The one in high school is currently not working because he gets money from the Danish Government for being in school. The first participant spent 7 in one foster care, while participant number 2, 3 and 4 moved three times each during their foster care placement, and the number of years spent in foster care varies from 12 years (P2), 15 years (P3) and 7 years (P4). Participant number 4 reported having been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Though not addressed in the interview questions, it came up during one of the informant's responses to a follow-up question. On the family history issue, participant number 1 and 2 stated that one of their parents has drug and alcohol-related issues and Participant number 4 mom was diagnosed with mental health-related problems. P1, P2, and P4 came from homes where parents are separated or divorced, while Participant 3 is single parenting. All this information is presented in Table 1 below, as the researcher believes it could help analyse the study findings from the perspectives of these participants with foster care experiences.

Table 1

Participant	Sex	Age	Education	Number of placements	Years spent in foster care
P1	Male	18	Still in high school	1	7
P2	Female	26	Bachelor	3	12
P3	Female	42	Dropped-out	3	15
P4	Male	32	Certificate in property maintenance	3	7

4.5 Finding

The researcher came up with eight themes, each of which will be discussed as it relates to the research questions: How does foster care impact a child's ability to form social relationships, and how does it impact their self-esteem? The researcher could present his data with the following themes through the codes.

4.6 Themes and Quotes

In this analysis, themes and sub-themes emerged from pre-defined questions in the interview guide and from the researcher's analysis of the participants' narratives during the coding process. Themes that emerged from the interview guide include Relationships with foster caregiver(s), Maintaining a relationship with the birth family, foster caregiver(s) support, foster care influence, and the ones that emerged from narratives of the participants include, Job/school satisfaction, self-confidence or difficulties relating to social interactions, Mentorship, Aftercare support, family vibe, social interaction.

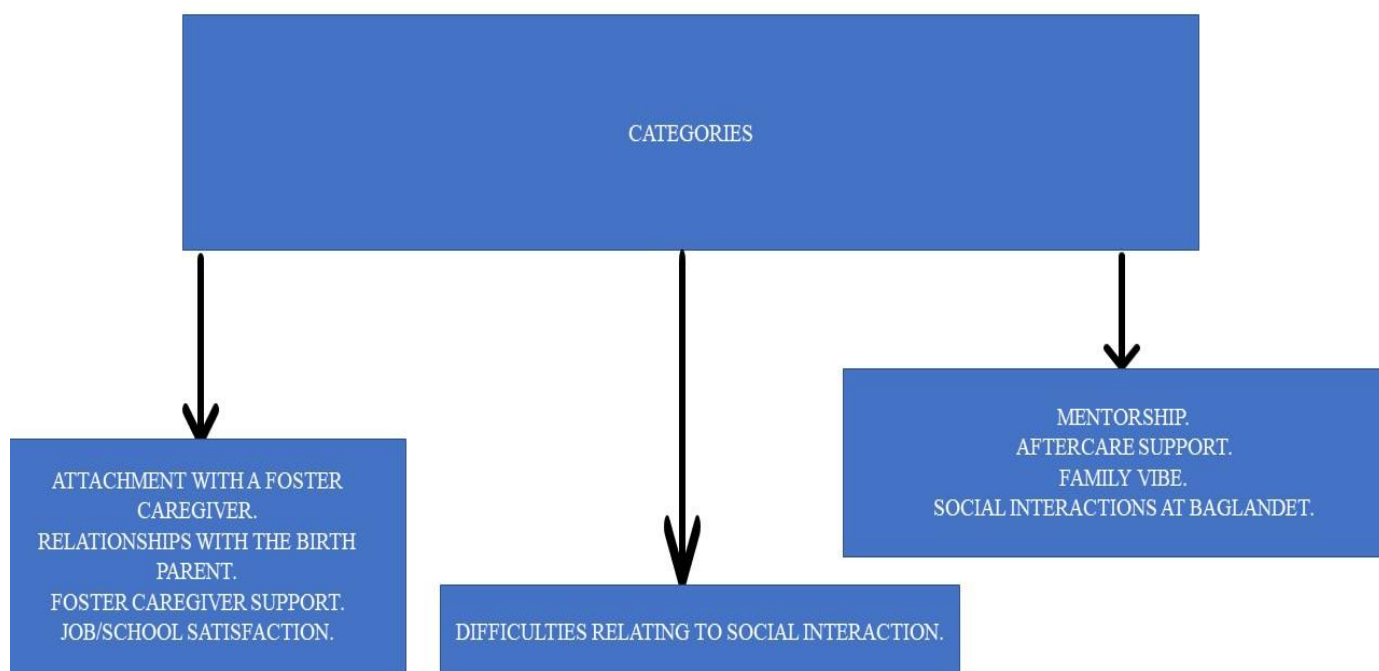
The themes are grouped into three categories, themes in the first category will analyse the first research question posed in this study, themes in category two will be used to answer question number two and themes in the last will be used to analyse the importance of mentorship and aftercare programmes on adults who aged out of foster care. The categories are as follows:

The first category and research question it addressed: How does foster care impact a child's ability to form social relationships?

The second category and the research area it addressed: How does foster care affect a child's self-esteem?

The third category and its area of focus: The importance of mentorship and aftercare programmes.

FIGURE ONE



4.7 Attachment with foster caregiver(s):

When the participants in this research were asked to narrate their relations with their foster caregivers, Participants 2, 3 and 4 described their relationship with their foster caregivers as challenging, with no form of love or attachment exhibited by their foster caregivers during their time in foster care. They identified differences in treatment in how the biological children treat their foster caregivers. These participants never felt they belonged or were part of their foster family. This early attachment they lost due to the conditions at home or being separated from their biological caregivers continued into foster care. Instead of foster care cushioning the lack of attachment created by this separation, they became contributors through the way they related and interacted with these children. Therefore, foster caregiver(s) need to be trained and debriefed on the kind of support and care a child needs before being placed by the social worker. That will inform and prepare the foster caregivers emotionally

and physically being a child is placed with them. This lack of attachment, they believed, made them feel like they were not wanted, insecure, unneeded, or valued and undesirable. It made them withdraw into their shells and find comfort in their solitude. One of the participants has this to say:

My foster parents had four biological children when I started to live there, and we are four foster kids, I noticed a significant difference in treatment in terms of love and care between us, the foster kids, and their biological children. I dreamed every day that the Kommune would come and say you can live with your mother again because I didn't feel any love there (P2).

Another participant experienced how he/she was treated as a third-class citizen who was worth no attention or being listened to or loved in a foster institution. He talked about how the lack of attachment from the social pedagogies and social workers who worked in the two institutions where he was placed added to the separation anxiety, he felt from being separated from his parents and impacted his social relationships. This showed how social workers relate to foster care children might impact their adult life with the social worker doing and expressed the need to show emotion and empathy towards their work. The participant stated:

The social workers are like mindless drones who show no emotion or attachment, rather only carrying out their official duties and smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee during breaks. They never take out their time to understand our feelings and what the child under their care is going through (P4).

The third participant, who was abandoned by her biological mother after birth and was adopted as a child, experienced a lack of attachment as time passed, making her feel vulnerable and outside in her foster home. This lack of a positive relationship with her foster mom almost made her go to her neighbours and ask if they could readopt her, and it has also been because of the lack of connection that led to her removal when she clocked 15 years. She narrated:

There was no closeness between me and my adopted parents, they neglect me and did not protect me when their son abused me, and my foster mother always abuse me with her mouth all the time and always get mad at me. I mean it was hard to be at home because it was not like home for me. They say that they are my parents, but I mean you cannot be my parents and be mad at me all the time because my adopted parents said I was a problem for them (P3).

Data from the interviews, participant number one enjoyed a strong attachment or relationship with their foster parents. Their relationship is characterised by love, where the foster mother always has his/her best interest at heart. In terms of helping with his schoolwork, serving as a listening ear, someone to confide in and talk to when he needed advice from an adult, which he could not get from his biological parents. This strong attachment he experienced while in foster care contributed to his strong personality and social interaction with others and has made him want to stand in as an advocate so that other children will not go through the experience he had as a child growing up under his biological parents. He informed the researcher that he has been able to talk two of his friends out of killing themselves because he was shown love and care for his foster mom, who is now late. In his words:

My relationship with my foster mother was like I had another mom to take care of me, I still felt like she was more mom for me than my real mom. Like I was her own son, she does not treat me like a foster child. Being in foster care was not what I felt, I felt like it was my third family (P4).

4.8 Maintaining relationships with biological family

Data that emerged from the participant's responses on how they were able to maintain family relationships while they were in foster care showed that participant number 1 and 3 of them had dysfunctional relationships with their biological parents before they were placed in foster care, while Participants 2 and 4 after being placed in foster care. Though they were allowed to speak to their parents and even visit them a couple of weekends in a month, it never made up for the gap the separation from their biological parent(s) created. Other reasons for their dysfunctional relationship with their biological caregiver were attributed to the drug and alcohol use of parents, the mental health of parent(s), and, in some instances, the foster caregiver(s) made maintaining these relationships with the biological parent(s) difficult, whom they thought is a bad influence on them based on their family history. The lack of attachment with the biological parent(s) is believed to have contributed to the lack of social capacity to uphold social ties as adults and the social anxiety and depression that some of the participants experienced.

One of the participants believed that the separation from his family made him feel cut off from his family and contributed to his social anxiety. He stated how his relationship with his family while in foster care was:

It was kind of dysfunctional. My relationship with my parents was crippled, I got really sad talking to them on the phone, the separation was tough on me, and the more I was kept away, the more I need my family. I don't think I recovered from that, and it made me broken and lonely (P4).

Another participant couldn't maintain a relationship with her biological mother because of the label placed on her family by her foster parents, who rewarded her with hugs and affection any time she spoke badly of her biological family because that was the only way she could only get the acceptance, love, closeness, and affirmation of an adult she yearned for as a child. She has a different story on the reason why she was unable to maintain an attachment with her mother:

My mom was removed from me and my sister after we moved to a foster home, I do not know what happened, but she started using many drugs and get ill. She was a good mother when we were in the institution, and she will visit and bring us presents. Then my foster would not allow me to talk to my mom. She thinks badly about my family, and she always says that my uncle is a murderer and my grandfather drinks blah blah blah. I felt like my, especially my foster mother if I said something bad about my family, she was very nice to me, and she gave me a hug. And you know, if I do something exceptionally good in school, maybe when I get a good grade, or I make a good drawing, she never sees it, and she never hugs me, but every time I say something bad about my mother, she always gives me hug, so that was an easy way to get a hug (P2).

One of the participants never knew her mother in real life until her death but only has a picture that serves as a memorial and the only thing that connects her warmth and attachment that comes from a mother. When narrating this experience, she broke down in tears. After the interview, she told the researcher that she cried because she had never experienced what is like to have a real mother. About maintaining a relationship with her biological mother, she stated:

My mother abandoned me at birth when I tried to reach out to her, and she agreed to see me, but every day cancelling our meetings that is not a good time. She was not a good person. She was drinking and changing locations all the time. I did not get to meet her until she died last month (P3).

The other participant described his relationship with his biological parents as casual with nothing serious because they never had any form of family activities together or showed

concern for his well-being before going into foster and after ageing out of foster care. This lack of a strong relationship with his biological parents contributed to his lack of trust and emotional affection towards them. Observing his body language during his response, the researcher noticed his face was neutral devoid of any emotional expression apart from anger which he detected in the pitch of his voice. He has this to say:

I only see them every second week because my parents are divorced. Maybe eat and sleepover, but we never had any form of strong relationship (P1).

4.9 Support from a foster caregiver(s)

This theme looked at the impact of social support provided by foster caregivers to their foster children because foster carers must provide social support and a stable living environment for foster children who couldn't get the same from their biological homes. Based on their response to this inquiry, Participants 1 and 2 acknowledged receiving social support from their foster caregiver(s), and Participants 2 and 4 stated otherwise. One of the participants placed in an institution could not identify any support rendered to him by the social workers, and the lack of this support hurt him as an adult. In his response to the question, he described the support he received at the two institutions he was placed as:

Most of the time, it was just scolding, or like there wasn't too much care, it wasn't there. No communication, but it was yeah, it was cold and distant somehow. It was not relatable. There were a lot of violent attacks down there you know. I just got the general idea that I was not worth being treated as a human, I didn't feel like I was good enough to be part of anything, I was not good enough to be part of anything or the attention of an adult (P4).

Another participant who does not feel that her foster parents have a significant good influence on her life described having this feeling as a child of being something that her foster parents had to handle. She also acknowledges the impact of their little support on who she is today regarding morality, religion and how she relates to people. In her narratives, she stated that:

Yeah, I think they gave me support like you know that I have this balance inside my mind, and they teach me that I must go to school, that I, you know, I have all the normal things in life I got from them. But I think for the rest, I don't think they supported me. They also taught me about God and religion and about you know, the way I am with people, I think I have from their perspective of life (P2).

One of the participants believed that receiving strong social support from foster parent(s) can serve as a secure base, which can be essential in human interaction, empowerment of foster children for a smooth transition and the ability to live independently as an adult without fear of the future. When describing how the support he received from his foster mom impacted him positively, He stated that:

She impacted me in diverse ways. I have been more social, I trust myself more because I know their ways, always one who could help me if I got into problems or whatever, and I am also self-secured, I am not scared about what will happen or if this happened, and I think that helped me a lot. Now that I am living alone in my apartment, I did a lot of stuff like washing clothes, because she taught me and because I wanted to be taught (P1).

4.10 Job/school satisfaction

This theme looked at how previous attachment patterns may have impacted their capacity to uphold ties in both school and workplace and their ability to function in the work environment. The researcher observed that the lack of attachment with biological and foster parent(s) experienced by foster children makes them not achieve the level of adult skills needed to live independently as adults, and in turn, makes them emotionally fragile and becomes a barrier to higher education attainment and a stable labour force status as adults.

From the participants' narratives to this inquiry, two gave an account of their experiences at the job activation centre that helps connect people based on their qualifications and capacities. One of the participants, because of his inability to function in a work environment and lack of mental strength to work, which he linked to the separation he experienced as a child and not having an adult to learn to function in a workplace while growing up is planning for an early retirement. He also related it to his relationships with the social workers in a foster institution, where he felt stuck in a constant state of not being good enough, valuable enough to be heard and listened to. He stated that:

The job centre wants to see how much mental strength it puts on me and see how many hours I can work, and that approach gives me a lot of anxiety. I tried, and I had a couple of jobs last few years, but it is like even though I try my best to communicate, to try to create a workplace that I can be in, it is like I am not being put in the right places, and like I never really a positive work experience (P4).

Participant (1) narrated how he dropped out of school because he was so stressed at the time, but it is now an easy school because that is the easiest way, he can get money from the Danish State while waiting to join the right grade after the summer break. He reflected on the issue of trust in relationships. Before he can befriend anyone, he needs to know if the individual can be trusted. This issue of trust can be linked to his own relationship with his parents, who never showed him love, support or paid attention to his well-being. When talking about his relationship with his schoolmates, he said:

It is not like good good, but is not like bad either, it is in the middle. Like I don't know them, it is like I just do not know if I can trust them or not, I need a little more time you know (P1).

Participant number 3, who is also at the job training programs organised by the job activation centre known as small jobs with big opportunities, has a similar narrative to that of Participant 4:

I am practising how to get a job in my life or education, I want very much to work, but sometimes my life makes it difficult for me to work (P3).

Another participant who has maintained a particular job for the past 18 years and loved what she does, even though she does not enjoy interacting with her colleagues, has this to say about her interactions at work:

My colleagues always irritate and ignore me, and I think it can be difficult for me sometimes with having co-workers because I have been by myself in the system for a long time (P2).

4.11 Self-confidence or difficulties relating to social interactions

Participants responded when the question on how they felt about forming a new social network. They all believed that making friends outside the aftercare organisation is very challenging. They feel more confident establishing relationships with people in Baglandet, whom they believe shared the same experience, and in a better position to understand their mood, feelings, and thought processes. The researcher took cognisance of this the first time he visited, he noticed most of the service users approached him to introduce themselves to him, asking him questions like his name, if it was his first time coming to Baglandet, with the belief that he was one of them, but the moment he introduced himself and what brought him to the organisation, most of them withdrew from him. When he kept coming and participating in most of the activities in the institution that some of them started talking to him again. A good example is one of the service users that looked distant and wouldn't exchange

pleasantries with the researcher on his first visit but started getting friendly when I joined him in peeling the potatoes for dinner on one of my visits. One of the participants used introducing herself to the researcher on their first meeting as an example which she wouldn't have done if she had met him in an office. This shows that they feel unsafe and insecure around people who do not understand what it is like to be a foster child. She stated that:

In this place where I am safe and secure, I am always happy about making new friends, but in I real world, sometimes I don't know, and I feel really tired. Maybe I don't see the point of it, but when it is within Baglandet, it is always a good thing (P2).

Sometimes, it is not that the participants hate social interactions. Still, because the attachment disorder experienced as kids make it difficult to interact with others, they always doubt being good enough to warrant one's attention and are sceptical in starting up conversations. This made social interaction a dangerous water that most fear swimming in. A participant who described himself as bad at starting conversations but good at keeping them going said:

I am socially awkward, but my technique is to sit in the corner until I get talked to, and it works for me, I wait for people to talk to me, and then it is going well (P1).

From the perspective of the researcher, he noted from one of the participants' narratives how lack of attachment and secure base as a child experienced from his biological parents and foster care institutions could lead to permanent emotional damage, resulting in being unsure of one's feelings and inability to maintain or keep romantic relationships. He stated that:

I am anxious about making friends because I am afraid that I might get outcasted, and it made me comfortable in being uncomfortable. I can have a good time with someone and then get away from the situation, and then a couple of days later, I won't feel the same bond in the same joy from it, and I might get unsure if the feeling about the situation were mutual, or if, you know if they don't even like me. It is good if I am in a group of people and like it when someone has introduced me to new people (P4).

In the third participant's view:

I think is difficult outside, because the people are closed-up when you meet new people outside, you don't know if they like you or not. But here, it is very easy to just walk to you and introduce myself, and we have a new relationship (P3).

4.12 Mentorship

As one of the chosen interventions to prevent social non-function among youths, mentoring emerged as one of the themes when the researcher inquired about the person that played a significant role in their lives. The researcher viewed mentoring as encouraging, caring, teaching, and giving time and attention from the participants' perspectives. Though the researcher observed that Baglandet has a mentorship program they organised for their service users, most participants looked inward to that person who played a part in their personality formation before they came to the organisation.

Participants during the interviews believed that having a positive mentor in their lives when growing up played a significant role in their life choices and how their social support helped them to adjust to independent living. A participant narrated how a social worker transformed and influenced her career choice:

My caseworker is the reason I am a social worker today, she is very special. Before I met her, I was very sad and cried for two years, and I didn't want to leave my life, she advised me that I must decide what I want to do with my future (P2).

The third participant also has a similar story about her caseworker:

My caseworker helped me to learn how to live on my own when I left foster care, as a young woman in Aalborg, you need someone to lean on their shoulders, otherwise, you will end up badly (P3).

The first participant interviewed believed his foster mother taught him how to be independent, and his grandmother, who has always been there when he needed help and the only one he trusted in his family as a child (P1).

The researcher understood from the narratives of a participant that a mentor can even be a younger member of the family who influences and inspires someone to be better. A participant has this to say about his brother, whom he identified as his best friend:

My brother has helped me succeed at being a decent person, he is the reason why I am here every day, being alive (P4).

4.13 Aftercare support

During the interpretation of the participant's responses on the impacts of aftercare support on foster care leavers. During the research interviews, it was ascertained that support is one of

the benefits provided at Baglandet to foster care leavers who use it as their aftercare service. This support ranges from helping the foster care leavers to live independently, sorting taxes, going to doctors' appointments, arranging meetings with the municipality, and even helping the foster care users stay away from illegal substances. The researcher observed that One of the rules is that you wouldn't come to a meeting intoxicated. A good example is during one of the researcher's visits to the organisation, he noticed a service user who was in a celebration mood, and the individual told him that he was celebrating his six months of being free from illicit substances. Everyone celebrated his victory by eating a unique cookie mixed with honey that is only eaten on special occasions.

During the interview, a participant responded:

If you drink and smoke any illegal substance during the day of the meeting, you cannot come in here, there are some good rules, yeah, I needed these rules in my life, if there is no place like Baglandet that expect me to come clean, maybe I would never be cleaned (P3).

Another example of support Baglandet provided in the participants' lives includes stability, clothing, feeding and the feeling of not being alone in the world. A participant expressed how the organisation supported him:

It helped me when I got back home, it saved me from the depression I always experience in the winter, I don't feel alone when I am here. They supported me on home fronts like taxes and those practical office types, and they have helped prolonged my sufferings (talking about prolonging his life) (P4).

Baglandet, as an aftercare organisation, provides other forms of support, like helping expectant mothers who use their services to be good, either by the social pedagogies or other service users who are already mothers. They also play an important part in socialising their children. Every Tuesday, they come with their children to enable them to socialise and build social networks with children their age while their parents interact. A participant stated that:

I am really proud of this place, I started coming here 14 years ago when I was pregnant with my son, and ever since then, I have been coming. It really helped me adjust to my new status of motherhood at that time (P2).

4.14 Family Vibe

The participants in the answers to the interview guide narrated a sense of family as one of the supports they received from Baglandet. They all agreed that the organisation feels like a

family network they never experienced while growing up, and like a family, members are not judged but accepted for who they are. They described Baglandet as a secure and safe environment where both the pedagogies and service users play a part in developing the service users. Also, meeting with people who shared the same foster experience contributed to the sense of family they felt at Baglandet. Like in the family, people do not care about your clothes, and you can always be your best self at Baglandet.

A participant gave an excellent example of a sense of belonging to a family at Baglandet, and she narrated how foster care leavers helped her move her things when she relocated from Hals back to Aalborg. In her words:

When I moved back to Aalborg from Hals one Saturday, I started packing from 8 am in the morning till 10 pm, I was getting so much help from all kinds of people from this place, that is family. They came in the morning, and everyone was working till the evening, you know, some of the big guys I gave them money and they said no, thank you, just give us food, and that was it (P2).

Through interaction with the participants, one of the participants stands out because of the family references, like referring to some of the social workers as mom and another participant as a big sister. The researcher observed a special relationship among the service providers, volunteers and service users, and the participant believed this family kind of interaction at Baglandet has helped her look at her experience in the adopted home with more brightness. She said:

The conversation with the people who work here, and my fellow foster children has influenced me so much, I now look at my past with more brightness, not so dark anymore, Baglandet has helped me to know how to cope with my life and be by myself (P3).

4.15 Social Interaction at Baglandet

It was revealed during the interviews with participants that participating in some of the activities at Baglandet boosted their social interactions, which they were able to do through informal conversations between them and the social pedagogies and fellow foster care leavers and the volunteers who help in some of the social activities like games, crafts, and nature breathing exercise. The participants believed that these informal social interactions, like talking with fellow service users and service providers, eating together, taking vacations, making crafts, and coming to the organisation every Tuesday, have helped them interact and

better understand each other at Baglandet. His gatekeeper told the researcher that service users made beautiful designs on the cups used in the house. A participant narrated how coming to Baglandet has helped her interact with others in her own voice:

We have summer holidays, where we spend time in each other's company, sometimes, we just go to the movies, but you know, normally in the routine, we come here on Tuesdays with our kids, get some food, talk with each other, play some cards, smoke cigarette, and drink some coffee (P2).

The first participant interviewed believed that some activities bring them together socially. During these informal interactions, they share their experiences in foster homes with each other, shared experiences the researcher observed solidify their bond and interactions, and they see themselves in each other. He stated that:

Sometimes, we meet where we have ice cream, and burn fire, once a month we go up in the country, getting to a park called First Summerland. In Baglandet, we have a summer weekend thing, where we travel, this summer, we are going somewhere, and you can bring a friend for like a week with other people here. I think it's good for my relationship with my girlfriend (P1).

4.16 qualitative observations during the Interviews

Body Language: The interviews were conducted at Baglandet, an organisation where the participants received their aftercare services. They specifically chose to be interviewed there because they feel safe and secure in Baglandet, and it is a secure environment. This aligns with the Publication Manual of the American Psychology Association 6th (2009) recommendation. On day one of the interviews, the researcher was able to interview three participants while the fourth participant was away, and there was no way he could call him without having his phone contact, so he left a message for me. The second time the researcher came, he didn't show up either, and my gatekeeper left a message for him, which he did not respond to. The gatekeeper later informed me that I didn't show up because he was emotionally unavailable, and another time was rescheduled for the interview. During the interviews, the researcher observed that the participants were economical with the information they were able to share even though they all volunteered to be part of the research until he introduced himself by telling a joke on how he got his name and a little story of the culture he came from. After that, they became more relaxed and freer to speak to him about their experiences.

Tone quality and direct speech: During the interviews, the participants usually pause in the middle of their speech and recollect their thoughts. This showed they have not thought about these experiences in the direction the research question takes them. The researcher also sensed a rush of emotional stuttering, and sometimes in they spoke in low tones as if it was a whisper when sharing hurtful experiences. He also observed the use of the Danish language in expressing emotions, which lacks vocabulary in English words to express. Two of the participants during the interview broke down in tears, which made the researcher pursue the interview. Still, he was urged to continue with the interview with the participants because they believed them sharing their stories with the researcher is therapy on its own.

Making eye contact: The researcher observed that most could not make direct eye contact during the interviews, especially when sharing heartbreaking emotional stories. They either look at the roof as if reading from a script, keep their heads down at their hands or close their eyes as if they are trying to focus their attention on the experience they are sharing at that moment. Sometimes, the participants look at the researcher to know if he is listening to their stories based on his facial countenance and the tone of gestures that he makes.

Keeping the conversation in check: The researcher carefully guided them to the research question when they deviated from the topic. Sometimes they are lost in their world and tell stories that are not in line with the research focus. He believes this is because they are comfortable sharing their stories with him. Even though he enjoyed listening to their stories, he was able to use his prudence to bring them back to the question of focus without hurting their feelings, and this he was able to do before they strayed too far into the conversation.

4.17 Summary of Findings

This study explored the following research questions: How does foster care impact a child's ability to form social relationships, and What impact does foster care have on a child's self-esteem? From the data collected, eight themes emerged. Relationship/attachment with foster parent(s), relationships with biological parents, foster caregiver(s) support and job/school satisfaction were used to analyse the number one question. In contrast, self-confidence was used to address the number two research question. Mentorship, practical support, a sense of family, and a social network addressed the impact of aftercare and having a significant adult(s) in a foster child.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the study's findings to theory and existing literature. The following discussion is about using theory and other research to situate the researcher's findings concerning the literature. The application of attachment theory to contextualise the study, help organise facts, and make sense of how foster care can impact a child's ability to build social bonds and self-esteem. The hypothesis was also utilised to illustrate the benefits of constructive mentoring and aftercare care programs for foster care leavers.

The impact of foster care on a child's ability to form social relationships

The first research question investigated how foster care affects a child's ability to form social relationships. In response to this research question, four themes emerged: relationships/attachment to foster caregiver, maintaining relationships with biological parents, job/school satisfaction, and foster caregiver(s) support. These themes imply the connections between foster caregivers and foster children and how they could retain relationships with their birth parents. If the foster parent(s)' support or help influenced their social ties and degree of social satisfaction at school/work.

5.2 Relationships/attachments to foster caregiver(s)

The first theme in this study showed that the lack of secure attachment/relationships between foster caregiver(s) and a child impacts the child's social relationships, interactions, and general well-being as an adult. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory asserts that an individual's ability to form attachments during the formative years is determined by their caregiver's ability to provide comfort, nurturance, support, and stability, as well as the caregiver's ability to respond to needs in a way that provides the child with reliability and safety. When a caregiver neglects or abuses a child, he or she may develop an insecure attachment (Surcinelli et al., 2010), which is a predictor of mental health, relationship, criminality, and emotional instability throughout an individual's lifetime (Bos et al., 2011; Escolas et al., 2013). Most of

the participants in the research narrated how the lack of bond they experienced in foster care made them feel unlovable, unwanted, and not worthy of attention, which has followed some of them into their adult life. According to Howe's research, when a caregiver is sensitive to a child's emotional needs and responds positively, the child develops a sense of being loved and lovable, which makes them better able to cope with traumatic experiences in the future due to their previous experiences of being safe and protected as a child (Howe, 2005). When foster caregivers lack this sensitivity, the opposite occurs, and a lack of sense of being loved and beloved was discovered among participants in this study who lacked strong attachment to their foster caregivers. Other investigations on unstable attachment between caregivers and children discovered clinical implications. These consequences include an increased risk of psychopathology, depression, and anxiety, as well as trouble maintaining relationships throughout life and behavioural issues (Bos et al., 2011; Escolas et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2012, & Ponizovsky et al., 2013). This issue is consistent with the anxiety, depression, difficulties establishing social relationships, and bipolar personality disorder some of the study's participants reported. On another note, a participant narrated how love, care and support received from his foster mother played an essential role in his strong personality, social interaction, and feeling of safety and made him safe and secure, enabling him to live independently as an adult. Bretherton identifies the importance of committed attachment with a caregiver on a child's healthy development, and the lack of this attachment leads to attachment or social relationship disorder in the future as adults (Bretherton, 1992). According to Bowlby's attachment study, having a caregiver who gives consistent, responsive care assists youngsters in learning to recognise the nature of their emotions and regulate their behaviour and emotional state. He said that by receiving responsive and sensitive care, a kid develops social competencies, empathy, and emotional intelligence, as well as learning how to relate to others and comprehend what to anticipate (Bowlby, 1969). This view is reflected in this study where the participant that had a strong attachment with his foster mother reported how he was able to talk two of his friends out of killing themselves, which collaborated with the development of social competence, emotional intelligence, and the ability to relate to others as stated by Bowlby. Attachment provides children with the 'secure base' they need to explore, learn, and relate, as well as the well-being, motivation, and opportunity to do so. It is essential for safety, stress management, adaptation, and resilience. The length of childhood reflects the difficulty of the endeavour and the extent of the consequences of disordered attachment. A network of interconnected difficulties is typical, quickly leading to vicious spirals, with low self-esteem as an inherent component (Bowlby, 1969).

The Implication of this finding to social work and foster caregiver(s) is the need to understand the importance of secure attachment on prospective foster children who may have experienced a lack of attachment, separation, abuse, neglect, and inadequate parenting before being given up for placement or adoption. These experiences, according to Golding, will influence the early development of attachment connections and the later potential to create an attachment to the new caregiver. He said that understanding attachment theory can help social workers and foster caregivers understand the impacts of early abuse, neglect, separation, and losing the child's ability to build healthy relationships with new parents (Golding, 2007). Therefore, being aware of the importance of attachment to the general well-being in human development, before placing a kid, the social worker thoroughly examines the carers' personality traits, attachment style, and general awareness of the child's general needs so as foster caregivers can help them form the strong bond required in social interactions.

On the theme of foster caregiver(s) support to their foster children, the role of foster caregivers in supporting children in foster care is crucial. As the researcher mentioned, foster children often face unique challenges that make forming or maintaining relationships difficult. Foster parents can play an essential role in supporting these children, including shelter, food, and medical care, helping them develop social and the need for education that will benefit their adult lives. One of the participants described his experience in foster care institutions as devoid of the support of any kind, apart from violent attacks and the general knowledge of not being worthy of being treated like a human being. Other participants expressed that they received support while in foster care, though one never felt a sense of bond or belonging to her foster parents. This study augments previous studies on foster care support, which found that youths feel content with their foster placements. However, satisfaction usually does not equate to belonging and warmth. A study by Wald, Carlsmith, and Leiderman (1996) found that although their participants showed signs of positive relationships with their foster parents after living with them for two years, they never regarded their foster parents as a source of emotional support. Like this study, qualitative research by Whitting and Lee (2003) suggested that despite the challenges experienced by some of these foster children in foster care, most describe good experiences and support from their foster caregivers. These findings can also be identified in this current study as participants identified foster caregiver(s) support to have included teaching them the importance of going to school, as one of them narrated how his foster mother helped him in his schoolwork, which his biological parents could not do when he was at home. Other forms of support are the importance of God and religion, as another

participant identified, helping in finding balance in their life, social relation, how to wash and cook, and some of the basic things that prepare one for an independent living, which played a significant part in their transition.

This theme's consequence emphasises the necessity of supporting connections between foster caregivers and their foster children. It is critical for social workers who work in child protection to emphasise the importance of this support during foster caregiver training and how it helped foster caregivers develop trust and supportive relationships with their foster children because it played an essential role in their future relationships as adults. It also calls the welfare state's attention to the need for extra training in this area and provides them with the needed support and resources to help them better support their foster children.

The study investigated the lived experience of the participants on the theme of job/school attainment/satisfaction through their narratives of how the lack of attachment experienced because of separation/abandonment from biological parents or experience while in foster care impacted their job/school attainment and satisfaction. Only one of the participants interviewed for this study has been in a job for the longest time, 18 years. Even though she never considered herself a colleague type of person because it can be difficult for her to interact with co-workers, her motivation to stay on the job is her love of helping people as a social worker. Two participants collaborate with the job centre to see how they may be trained or find the proper career. Foster leavers who have access to supportive resources, such as employment training programs and mentoring, have better work outcomes than those who do not, according to Courtney and Dworsky (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Contrary to this, the participants, after being at the job centre for years, until the day of the interview, the centre is yet to find a job that they could fit in. One noted that the longest he has lasted in a job placement was two months, and the other still struggles to get fixed in a job. The participants attributed this difficulty to their experience of separation and lack of attachment as children, making it difficult to function in a working environment. One of them, who entered foster care institution at the age of 7, related how the separation anxiety he experienced after he was separated from his family led to his diagnosis of bipolar personality disorder later in life, which resonated with one of the characteristics of insecure attachment (Escolas et al., 2013). Coupled with the fact that he never had a working adult in his life while growing up who could teach him how to function in work settings contributed to his job challenge as an adult. This finding collaborated with Viner and Taylor's study, which found that men with a history of public care were less likely to attain a high social-economic class

and were more likely to be unemployed (Viner & Taylor, 2005). However, they did not specify if a psychological diagnosis could be a contributing factor. Other studies conducted in Denmark also supported this finding. Existing literature showed that foster adults have more tendencies than others to have unstable labour force status (Anderssen & Fallesen, 2010; Olsen et al., 2011). In his study of a cohort group placed in a foster care program, Newton discovered that foster care systems could produce issue behaviours in children in as little as a year. He stated that increasing self-defeating behaviours might be observed, influencing the children's motivation to do well in school and obtain a good-paying job, affecting their work ethics (Newton, 2006).

Another participant pointed out during the interviews how her life made it difficult for her to work, which she attributed to a lack of relationship with her adopted mother and the use of illegal substances. Though she no longer uses illicit substances because of coming to Baglandet, she still finds it challenging to handle job-related tasks. Ponizovsky et al. (2013) defined *attachment* as a bio-social homeostatic regulating system that offers a sense of security in times of stress and adversity. Because she lacked the stability from a strong attachment as she grew up, the participant resorted to destructive behaviour in times of stress that impacted her job functioning. Adlaf and Zdanowicz's study resonated with this finding, where they found that formal foster participants are more likely to report the use of illicit substances than those without a history in foster care. They concluded that it considerably impacted their ability to search for and obtain employment efficiently (Adlaf & Zdanowicz, 1999).

5.3 Self-confidence or difficulties relating to social interaction

Finding from the second category looked at how foster care impacts the self-esteem of foster children, and the theme that emerged based on the participant's response was difficulty in social interaction (self-confidence), which expressed how they felt interacting with people outside their formal foster care cycle. Self-esteem is the evaluative component of self-concept (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991), which is formed through the internalisation of social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). In all their comments to this research question on how foster care placement affects their self-esteem, which is the base of all human social interactions, most participants repeated that it is difficult for them to engage with others outside of Baglandet socially. Some interviewees described their difficulty internalising the lack of stability and protection they experienced as children. Because of childhood separation and abandonment difficulties, others have doubted whether they are worthy of someone's

attention, making it challenging to step out and connect with people outside Baglandet. Some participants' self-perceptions could be ascribed to what Ponizosky and colleagues called anxious-ambivalent attachment styles. It is an insecure attachment type that encompasses the "preoccupied and fearful" attachment styles, according to them (Ponizosky et al., 2013, p. 165). They characterised preoccupied attachment as having a poor perspective of oneself but a favourable attitude toward others. It is defined as being preoccupied with attachment needs and relying on others for validation, acceptance, and approval (Ponizosky et al., 2013), which may be the reason for their difficulties engaging with individuals outside their Baglandet social networks. One of the participants is unclear about his feelings because of the permanent emotional harm caused by dysfunctional connections with both birth parents and foster caregivers, which has made him uneasy being around new people or maintaining romantic relationships. This finding resonated with Bowlby's importance of secure attachment, and he stated that secure attachment in infancy predicts good social and emotional outcomes in the future (Bowlby, 1969).

Having a caregiver who is consistent, responsive, and sensitive to children's needs helps them learn to recognise the nature of their own emotions. By experiencing these, a child can develop social competencies that allow them to remember how to relate to other people and understand what to expect from them in social interactions (Bowlby, 1969). By Bowlby's explanation, the lack of consistent and responsive care that these participants experienced from their responses to the research question contributed to their difficulty in exploring their social world, and they were only confident in associating with people who shared comparable experiences with them. This finding necessitates a thorough examination of foster parents' earlier mental and domestic abuse issues, which may make focusing on and attending to the needs of foster children, who already have broken bonds that lead to their placement in care, difficult. According to (Dozier et al., 2001), foster caregivers' experiences as children and their mental image of parental relationships are likely to influence how they anticipate, respond to, and interpret their foster child's attachment behaviour. Dozier and colleagues went on to say that caregivers who do not have secure attachments may find it challenging to respond to a kid in a way that creates secure attachments needed with their world (Dozie et al., 2001).

5.4 Mentorship and Aftercare Program

The themes that the researcher discussed in this category looked at the importance of mentorship and aftercare programs for foster leavers, and the themes include mentorship,

aftercare support, family vibe, and social interactions at Baglandet. The participants identified people that impacted their lives, including shows of love and care, encouragement, paying attention to their needs, motivation and empowering them with skills to live independently. The mentors they identified are the foster mother, grandmother, as one of them narrated, caseworkers and a brother by one of the other participants. Because of their association, these natural mentors are already familiar with the foster youths. This association made them develop trust and lasting bonds with them without difficulties. For example, one of the participants has maintained a special bond with her case worker, who helped her transition and motivated her to become a social worker. Several studies have investigated the impact of natural mentors on the lives of former foster youngsters. Ahrens and colleagues (2008) examined whether adolescents in foster care who had natural mentors during adolescence had better young adult outcomes ($n = 310$). Mentored participants ($n = 160$) were likelier to have good overall health. They were less likely to have suicidal ideation, a sexually transmitted infection, or hurt someone in a fight the previous year. Munson and McMillen (2009) conducted a similar data analysis from a longitudinal study of older kids transferring from foster care in Missouri ($n = 339$). Youth with long-term natural mentoring ties were less likely to have been arrested at age 19 and reported fewer depression symptoms, less stress, and more satisfaction with life. Going from the roles of natural mentors in their lives, the participants also reflected on the impact Baglandet played in their social networks as an aftercare organisation which will be discussed in the following themes.

The next theme to be discussed is social interaction and family vibe. The data that emerged from the study showed how Baglandet played a significant role in the participants' social interactions. They identified how the interactions between them and the social pedagogies and fellow service users, eating and cooking together, watching movies, playing games, crafts and going for Christmas together at Baglandet, gave the social interactions and networks that most of them lack. Foster care leavers, according to Bond and van Breda (2018), may need help to build social relationships with others due to their limited social networks. Following this, it is not surprising that experts at the organisation involved foster care leavers in informal training activities to teach them some basic life skills that will help them develop cordial relationships with others. Because of the individualised mentality in Danish society, the family has frequently failed to meet their social requirements. Still, we Baglandet foster care leavers develop essential skills to enter general society. That explains the participants' family vibe whenever they are at the institution.

This sense of family belonging brought the researcher's attention to what a family is. According to Mckie and Callan (2012), family is the most permanent and salient social interaction that provides a site of connection, dependency, and the framework in which children experience their most intimate and significant interactions. Parker and Mayock (2019) state that children who have had several foster care placements frequently have complicated and multidimensional understandings and perspectives of the family. The fluidity of the family has been essential to sociological research, with an emphasis on "doing" family things rather than "being" a family (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011). This definition of family was seen in the data collected from the narratives of these participants; for example, one of them gave an instance when fellow foster leavers helped her move into her new apartment as what family is all about, always being there for each other. While others gave examples of cooking and eating together, accepting one for who they are without judgement, and sharing their experiences as what a family is for them. This finding was reinforced by a systematic study of foster children's views on the family. The review indicated that for some foster children, participation in particular events transformed people into a family. For example, family signs include having fun, engaging in meals, dining together, sitting about and cracking jokes, social gatherings, and holiday travels (Le et al., 2021).

In another research at the same organisation, Cudjoe and friends identified a sense of family which is like the family vibe identified in this study, as one of the social services that the organisation provides. They classified the sense of family as a "safe environment and felt at home" (Cudjoe et al., 2019, pp. 685-692). One of the participants narrated that this sense of family is reflected in being in the same house with the same people, the same coffee smell, and different activities at different times. The next theme will explain more about the organisation's support for the participants.

The participants identified that the organisation provided support that enabled them in their transitions, sorting of taxes, doctors' appointments, arranging meetings with the municipalities regarding their welfare benefits, and sometimes going to job centres and school with them. This finding collaborated with the kind of assistants the organisation provides based on the gatekeeper's description of the organisation. Cudjoe and colleagues' investigation in the same organisation validated this present conclusion; in their study, they recognised practical help as one of Baglandet's supplies. Their participants felt that experts within the organisation contributed to their overall well-being in terms of work and education, facilitating a smooth transition and socioeconomic independence (Cudjoe et al., 2019).

The benefits of aftercare shown in this study are an indication of why municipalities should open aftercare to everyone with a foster care experience rather than restricting treatment to a specific age, as the Danish aftercare statute specifies a maximum of 23 years (Frederiksen & Lausten, 2018). Also, not based on caseworkers' assessment of having the best perspective to achieve positive development (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2008; Egelund et al., 2009), the inclusion of participants over the age of 23 in this study is a testament to how people with foster care histories require social networks and safety that can usually only be found in association with fellow foster care leavers since most of them already have a limited resource in terms of their social network. In Norway, for example, it was decided in 2009 that all young people aged out of care should be entitled to aftercare by default, and if the caseworker believes otherwise, he or she must justify this decision based on the best interests of the young people (Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Storø, 2012). This contrasts with Danish law, which requires caseworkers to advocate for aftercare recipients based on a vaguely defined target group description, leaving room for interpretation (Frederiksen & Lausern, 2018). The study calls for the need to review and inclusion of who receives aftercare in the Danish legislation.

5.5 Conclusion

This section summarises the research by answering the overall research questions. The findings chapter addressed the specific research topics. The aftercare program's function in providing support and social networking, as well as the influence of foster care on children's self-esteem and ability to build and maintain social bonds later in life, were reviewed, and some recommendations were made. The study argues that irrespective of the benefits of aftercare placement of foster children, little is known of the experiences of foster care leavers on how it impacted their self-esteem and relationship formation. Foster children's lack of attachment to foster caregivers is identified as having a notable impact on their social interaction and the way they value themselves in terms of being worthy of love. Though attachment theory is rooted in psychology, there is a need for those in charge of safeguarding the child to educate prospective foster parents on the importance of secure attachment and how it helps develop a child's level of trust, self-value, self-identity, and ability to form close human relationships in the future before placing a child with them. Further research could look past attachment with foster parents and focus on how attachment with biological parents before placement contributed to their relationship formation and self-esteem.

Furthermore, based on the study context, Baglandet demonstrated how aftercare services in Denmark could provide foster care leavers with a sense of belonging, help them manage their addiction, job placement, social networking, and a substance of family, which many of them did not have due to the state's individualistic structure. Because of the benefits of aftercare services on social networking, Danish policy should focus on making it all-inclusive rather than limited to a few based on established criteria.

5.6 Recommendations for Practice

The study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of foster care leavers who received social assistants from an aftercare organisation and to determine whether their placement in foster care affected their self-esteem and ability to build and maintain social relationships.

According to the findings and discussion, the lack of attachment and bonding to foster caregivers influenced how they saw and valued themselves as unlovable and worthless.

Participants also recognise the importance of aftercare in providing them with general support and social networking, which most of them need more. During the interaction after the interview with the participants, the researcher asked them what they would change or add to the system if given the opportunity and their suggestions helped formed the recommendations for practice in this study.

Participant 4 recommended that the municipalities should screen children/youths who are in foster care or leaving foster care in a neutral environment where they feel safe to talk to casework without the presence of their foster caregiver. He said talking to his caseworker in from of his foster caregiver made him feel stressed and disassociate himself psychologically from whatever interaction with the caseworker. He further recommended that the municipalities screen foster caregivers before approving their status as care providers to ascertain their intentions to be foster parents to avoid people taking up the role because of the money involved instead of the child's best interest.

Participant 3 made her recommendations based on her interactions with the service providers at Baglandet. She recommended that the social worker that works with children in foster care should always have a listening ear because it is through listening to their stories that one develops unique competence to help them cope with their challenges by asking the right questions. She also recommended more research on the lived experiences of foster care leavers because sharing her experiences with the researcher gave her new perspectives on

some of her experiences with her adoptive parents and was therapeutic, which another participant affirmed.

Participant 2 hoped that her story could be helpful in legislation that improves foster care policies in Denmark or other parts of the world with a foster care system. She said, "I just hope my story could hold like a drop somewhere, and that would be amazing". I believe that their narratives and recommendations in the future as experts of their own lived experiences could help inform the training of foster caregivers, and social workers should have the patience to listen to their stories to understand how they feel in order to provide the right solution. Also, during my interactions with them, I saw how frequent change in caseworkers reinforces the isolation they initially felt when they were removed from their parents. It is essential to be aware of the impact of this when one is working as a child protection officer.

5.7 Recommendation for further research

This study can add knowledge to the study of foster care placement and its impact by being a reference point for those who wish to study in this direction in the future, an area that needs to be investigated extensively.

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APPENDIX ONE-CONSENT LETTER

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT.

ARE YOU INTERESTED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

THEME: “The Long-Term Impact of foster on Children’s Social Relationship: Perspectives of adults who grew out of foster care in Denmark”.

This letter is to inform you of the purpose of the project, and what your participation involves.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT:

This study is to investigate the impact of foster care on adults who grew out of foster on their ability to form social relationships or social networks. With your involvement in this research, you will share your foster care experiences as it relates to social relationships with the researcher.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

The project is conducted by Maximus Nzechukwu Ugo, A Master’s student of Nordic Social Work and Welfare (NOSWEL) at Aalborg University, Denmark (<https://www.en.soc.aau.dk/noswel/>). This Master’s Thesis is a pre-requisite to the award of a master’s certificate in the Nordic Social Work and Welfare Program. It will be performed under the close supervision of Professor Pia Ringø, an Associate Professor at the same university. The student and the supervisor are both responsible for this project.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE?

Your voluntary participation in the project will be relevant because, in this project, the lived experiences of citizens who passed through the Danish foster care system and is in aftercare are needed to ascertain the impact of foster care on social relationship building. Part of the criteria for participation in this study is that the participants are expected to have completed the Danish 9 years of compulsory education and are in foster care between ages 0-18.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE FOR YOU?

You must affirm your consent before participating in an interview as part of the research project. With your permission, the conversations, which last about 45 minutes, will be audio-recorded for later data processing. You will be questioned about your foster care experience and how it impacted your ability to form social relationships during this session. A few questions will serve as a guide for the interview, but the most important thing is that you provide your own viewpoint on what you think is essential to comprehend your experience.

PARTICIPATION:

It is optional to take part in this master's thesis assignment. You are free to stop taking part at any moment without providing a reason if you so choose. Your personal details won't be shared. If you decide afterwards to withdraw or choose not to participate, there will be no negative consequences for you.

YOUR PERSONAL PRIVACY-HOW WE WILL STORE AND USE YOUR PERSONAL DATA:

Your sensitive information will only be used by the research and supervisor for the stated purpose(s) in this information letter. Your sensitive information will be handled discreetly and in accordance with moral standards. The only people who will have access to your confidential information are the project's researcher and supervisor. Any identifiable information will be completely anonymized for privacy's sake.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR PERSONAL DATA AT THE END OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

The project is scheduled to end on the 12th of June 2023. Personal data like sound recordings shall be deleted to preserve privacy and transcripts (written data) stored on a password-controlled computer until the end of the project shall contain no personal data information.

YOUR RIGHTS:

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data be deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you be corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and

send a complaint to the Aalborg University Department of Sociology and Social Work regarding the processing of your personal data.

WHAT GIVES THE RESEARCH THE RIGHT TO PROCESS YOUR PERSONAL INFORMATION:

The researcher will process your personal data based on your consent.

Aalborg University Department of Sociology and Social Work has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation in Denmark.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE?

If you have questions about the project or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- Aalborg University via Professor Pia Ringø (Project Supervisor)
at ringoe@socsci.aau.dk.
- Maximus Nzechukwu Ugo (Student Researcher) at mugo22@student.aau.dk.

Yours sincerely,

Project
Leader
Student Researcher
(Researcher/supervisor)

Consent Form

I have received and understood information about the project [**A Study on the “The Long-Term Impact of foster on Children’s Social Relationship: Perspectives of adults who grew out of foster care in Denmark”.**] and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

☐ to participate in an interview

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, June 12th, 2023.

(Signed by participant, date)

APPENDIX TWO-INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE:

Demographics:

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Marital Status: (married), (divorced), (separated), and (never been married): _____

The number of children if any: _____

Employment status: (working) or (not working): _____

Past Employment (how long did it last): _____

The number of residents been to: _____

Highest level of Education: _____

QUESTIONS:

PAST:

1. At what age did you enter foster care if you could remember, and at what age did you leave? Could you describe to me your relationship with your foster parent(s)/caregiver? Could you describe family bonding moments in your foster care/institution? give me examples of such moments.
2. Could you describe how you were able to maintain your relationship with family and friends while in foster care? Could you give examples?
3. Could you describe your foster parent(s) as being supportive? What are the implications?

PRESENT:

4. What are you doing now? Are you going to school/ have a job/ something else? Are you happy with that? Why/why not. Do you have good relationships at work/school or in your spare time? Close friends/relationships, any friends or relations who are like a family to you?
5. Could you tell me about the person who helped you succeed most? And why is the person important to your growth?
6. Could you describe how you feel about forming/making new social networks (friends)? What made you think that way?
7. Could you describe how Baglandet has helped you with social networking? Could you give examples?

FUTURE:

8. Looking back at your life, how did foster care influence your life choices, social relations, and the way you see yourself in terms of how you identify yourself?

