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«Becoming parents as mending the past»: care-experienced parents and the relationship with their birth family

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This paper studies how care-experienced parents, i.e. parents with a looked-after background, represent their relationship with the birth family. This relationship appears to be crucial in the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment and may enable an understanding of the dynamics that mediate its reproduction.
Materials and methods: Constructivist Grounded Theory approach was used in this qualitative study. I conducted online in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 care-experienced parents in Italy from May to November 2021. The interviews were analysed using open, focused and theoretical coding with the support of NVivo12 and the analysis itself was discussed with a board of care-experienced parents.
Results: The relationship with the birth family is an aspect that frequently emerges in the interviewees' narratives. Birth family is represented through the more physical dimension of its presence in everyday life, as well as in the more symbolic one linked to one's inner experience. This means that birth family is crucial even when contacts are sporadic or no longer possible. Interviewees see parenting as an opportunity to create new relational adjustments, particularly in reference to their relationship with birth families. In fact, an internal daily dialogue and renegotiation with their own complex family history appears to take place. New parents compare their own childhoods with their children's, with this placing further pressure on the actual relationship with the birth family. In this process parents show interesting resources, possibly acquired within the child protection system.
Conclusion: This study highlights relevant aspects of the relationship between the birth family and care-experienced parents. It represents a promising approach to a better understanding of the links affecting the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment, also vis-à-vis the role of the child protection system.

1. Introduction

This paper studies how care-experienced parents, i.e. parents with a looked-after background, represent their relationship with the birth family. This relationship appears to be crucial in the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment and may enable an understanding of the dynamics that mediate its reproduction. Parents who have experienced abusive and/or maltreating contexts within their birth families and the experience of removal are exposed to numerous risk factors (Murray & Goddard, 2014; Roberts et al., 2017) and to the long-term impact of traumatic experiences (Horrocks & Goddard, 2006). Outcomes are affected by the encounter with the child protection system, which can play a role both as protective and as risk factor, especially when institutionalization processes take place (Rutter et al., 2007). Studies on cycles of maltreatment have shown that parents are exposed to the reproduction of what they experienced in their childhood. Numerous

studies in the psychological field, for example, point to second-generation effects of the unresolved loss of attachment figures (Main & Hesse, 1990). Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2015), through an epidemiological study involving young mothers in Los Angeles County (n = 85,084), found that a maternal history of alleged or proven maltreatment was the strongest predictor of reported and proven maltreatment within the first 5 years of their children's lives, even after adjusting for other risk factors. This research is consistent with literature that recognizes that long-lasting relational effects can hinder parents' ability to nurture and care for children, leading to 'intergenerational cycles' of trauma (Chamberlain et al., 2019a).

Another dimension that has been investigated is the exposure of these parents to young pregnancies; this is in itself a risk factor on the socio-demographic side, as it is proved that children of teenage mothers are less likely to develop secure attachments and are more likely to develop behavioural problems (Madigan et al., 2006). Dworsky and

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Courtney (2010) followed the development of young people from foster care to adulthood and found that a third of young women were pregnant before the age of 18; this increased to almost half by the age of 19, a number more than twice as high as rates in a national sample of young people of similar age and ethnic composition. While the findings of this large longitudinal study describe a population exposed to several risk factors on the parenting front, they also highlight the need to understand the role of protective factors, including for instance child protection systems (CPS).

This issue opens up the question of how CPS interventions have (or have not) acted as support in the stories of these young mothers and their children. A prospective cohort study followed 85,766 girls in California who experienced maltreatment after their tenth birthday with the aim of understanding whether they were placed in alternative care and whether they became mothers as adolescents (King, 2017). The findings of this study indicate that experience in care cannot be read as a significant predictor of teenage pregnancy; a predictor is instead the timing of contact with the protection system, suggesting the need to further examine the modalities in which CPS intervene in supporting children's lives.

However, while research frequently highlights how experiencing ineffective parental contexts in one's childhood exposes a person to intergenerational transmission of stress and trauma, it would additionally be relevant to understand what factors and processes facilitate discontinuities in such transmission (Belsky, 1993; van IJzendoorn et al., 1995). On the one hand, care-experienced people represent a population with characteristics of great exposure to an accumulation of risk factors associated with parenting; on the other hand, research has also focused on numerous situations of positive parenting. These can provide theoretical insights of significance in understanding the relationship between childhood experiences and the undertaking of parental roles (Aparicio, 2017; Miller, 2007; Wilkes, 2002) through focusing on what contributes to the interruption of cycles of maltreatment. For example, Jäggi et al. (2022) conducted a literature review on the impact of the parental experience in care for both parents themselves and children. This showed that the most important factor for positive adjustment and breaking ITCM was social support. This for example involved having a stable romantic partner, or financial, practical and emotional support from in-laws or birth family (when present). More generally, the support offered by formal or informal networks was perceived by parents as «integral in breaking the cycle of maltreatment because it helped them to work through their past and get advice on coping with parenting stress» (Jäggi et al., 2022:10). Furthermore, Brännström et al. (2022), through a longitudinal study in Sweden, found that having completed high secondary school was a strong factor in interrupting the intergenerational transmission of out-of-home-care placement.

1.1. Care-experienced parents and their birth family

An analysis of the literature confirms the wide diffusion of knowledge on parenting at-risk, while the perceptions and subjective experiences of such parents still seem less explored. Accordingly, my study aims to explore the subjective perceptions of parents who report positive parenting, i.e. who seem not to reproduce their childhood experiences. Furthermore, my research covers another aspect that has seldom been addressed, despite being deemed important (Wade, 2008): the relationship with the birth family.

Although I have found no paper solely focused on the relationship of care-experienced parents with the birth family, some research has highlighted the importance of considering this aspect. For example, Chase et al. (2006) interviewed 63 young care-experienced parents. The interviews revealed how the birth family can be a significant source of emotional, financial, and practical support, while also showing that this relationship is very complex and dynamic and cannot be considered a constant source of support. Biehal and Wade (1996) extensive study also highlighted some significant aspects of this relationship. In their sample,

one-third of young mothers reconnected with their family following the birth of their child; however, despite being welcomed by the parents, this reopened complex emotions in relation to their own parental role. Wade (2008) also found that the transition to parenthood sometimes meant a perceived improvement in family relationships and found that some families mobilized to provide help with babysitting, furniture, clothing and general reassurance. In contrast, in a mixed-method study with 81 care leavers, Rouse et al. (2021) found that women desired emotional support from their birth mothers at the time of birth, but did not receive it. As in previous research, after the birth of their children only some participants had received more support from their mothers, but for many this did not occur. In a recent review of the qualitative literature on experiences and views related to pregnancy, childbirth, and the early postpartum period of parents who experienced childhood maltreatment, Chamberlain et al. (2019b) further highlighted how studies assign the birth family an important as well as complex role. For some parents, the transition to parenthood represented a new beginning in which to come to terms with the past and establish new boundaries with the family, and for some also an opportunity to reconnect and heal. Other parents described the many challenges in these relationships, due to the need to rebuild trust amid ongoing conflicts. These studies highlight some relevant aspects of the relationship with the birth family; nonetheless, I think this topic should be further explored by devoting more space to parents' viewpoints. In this regard, Best and Blakeslee (2020:1), who have carried out related research on care leavers' perceptions, state that an increased understanding of how people define relevant relationships "can guide service providers to focus on helping to identify and support strong network ties based on the qualities of those relationships".

1.2. Current study

In conducting this study, I decided to use an approach oriented to 'family practices', namely, to explore how people describe and make sense of their daily activities as parents (Morgan, 2020). The choice of this theoretical framework not only enables the study of family life in its fluidity, but also an understanding of parenting through the ways in which the study participants recognize it, eschewing aprioristic and standardized views of how parenting should unfold. This approach seems to me to be even more significant for people who have been confronted with 'borderline' ways of 'doing family', insofar as they have experienced the (temporary) breaking of the family tie, and the support of figures with whom, in many cases, they have established relationships with family connotations. The emphasis on practices seems to me a useful lens for glimpsing these parents in their relationship with their birth families, as it avoids some of the risks associated with this type of investigation, such as that of situating the relationship in the univocal victim-oppressor dynamic. Although it can be said that these parents have suffered in their relationship with their birth families during their childhood, this may have taken on different connotations over time, and it is certainly important to understand persons' agency. In this regard, the study of everyday parenting practices illuminates how these parents not only suffer or have suffered in their relationship with their birth family, but also how they daily negotiate their roles within a situation which we would otherwise risk perceiving as an inescapable destiny. Indeed, Yoo and Abiera (2020) state that the birth family can also be read as a point of strength for those who do not repeat the cycle of maltreatment. Finally, a careful study of the daily and social dynamics in which parenting experiences occur highlights aspects that are not limited to the intimate and psychological dimension, but that, as in all parenting, are affected by people's socio-cultural context (Di Blasio, 2005; Fargion, 2021).

The research questions for this study are:

RQ1: How is the relationship with one's birth family represented within the parenting experience?

RQ2: How is this representation seen as intertwined with one's own parenting practices?

2. Method and materials

My study adopts a qualitative approach as it allows in-depth access to people's representations (Ghirotto, 2016; Gilgun, 2005; Silverman & Gobo, 2002), namely to the subjects' experiences of their parental role. My aim is to understand parenting of care-experienced parents and related processes of meaning making; I therefore set out to adopt a method that allows a systematic exploration of their viewpoints and that opens up an understanding of their subjective perspectives (Connolly et al., 2012; Denzin, 2008). Among the methodologies considered, I have chosen a Grounded Theory approach as the one that best fits my objectives. Grounded Theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism, with its research approach deriving from a focus on «processes and change over time, and the methods of making and analyzing data reflect a commitment to understanding the ways in which reality is socially constructed» (Richards & Morse, 2009: 61-62).

2.1. Sample

My sampling strategy is theoretical because of its relevancy for Grounded Theory approach, as it allows the development of a conceptual framework from data (Tarozzi, 2008). This was initially based on purposive sampling, with the inclusion criteria as follows: having experienced alternative care, whether in residential or foster care; being parents not involved in CPS and perceived as well adjusted; lastly, having children under 18 years of age. In addition, the sample was constructed by seeking maximum differentiation regarding some criteria which have emerged as significant in the study of intergenerational transmission of maltreatment, namely parents' gender, children's age, education, characteristics of care experience (type, length and instability of care) (Buisman et al., 2020; Mertz & Andersen, 2017; Wall-Wieler et al., 2018).

I interviewed 17 parents, whose main characteristics are described in Table 1. Among these, eleven parents entered the care system before 2001, the date when all such Italian institutes were closed by law, although the deinstitutionalisation process had begun earlier. All the parents interviewed had not returned to their birth families at the end of the care process, and had started a process of autonomy; currently, most have relations with their birth families, when present. In many cases these relationships are sporadic but described as meaningful.

2.2. Data collection

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Trento. Recruitment took place mainly through care leavers associations and snowball sampling, and to a lesser extent through social services and the third sector. Parents were first contacted by phone and the nature of the initiative was explained to them, then the informed consent form and the data processing authorisation form were sent. In a second telephone conversation, the various aspects of the project were discussed in detail, including how the research would be conducted, and any doubts that arose were clarified. Specifically, each parent was asked to take part in an interview regarding their own experience and daily parenting: the main issues related to parenting, in particular the parent–child relationship, formal and informal networks. There were no specific questions about their experience in care, but I let the experiences emerge as the interviewees saw them as relevant. After the second telephone meeting, all parents I contacted chose to join the research; the interview was then scheduled to take place online between May and November 2021. The interviews lasted approximately two hours each, took place online and were audio-recorded. I also collected observational notes for each research participant.

Table 1
Participants' Demographics (N=17)

Characteristics	n (%)
Gender	
M	6 (35)
F	11 (65)
Age	
<30	5 (30)
30–40	6 (35)
>40	6 (35)
Education	
Primary school	5 (29)
Secondary school	10 (59)
Degree	2 (12)
No. of children	
1	7 (41)
2	7 (41)
3 or more	3 (18)
Children's age	
<6	8 (47)
6–18	9 (53)
Romantic relationships	
Single	2 (12)
Permanent partner	15 (88)
Years in care	
<6	3 (18)
06–10	5 (29)
>10	9 (53)
No. of placements	
1	6 (35)
2	7 (41)
>2	4 (24)
Type of care	
Foster care	2 (12)
Residential care	11 (65)
Both	4 (23)

2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and anonymized and were then analyzed with the support of Nvivo12 software. The data analysis was inspired by the methodology of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). This approach shares most of the methodological assumptions with positivist Grounded Theory, but differs mainly in relation to ways of conceiving data and the analysis process. Data are seen as constructed rather than discovered, and analyses are understood more as series of interpretive actions than as objective reports.

As with Grounded Theory, my analysis took place simultaneously with data collection. It consisted in the coding of materials, i.e. an inductive process of developing theoretical categories with each step increasing the level of abstraction. Specifically, Grounded Theory identifies three different coding phases (open, focused, axial) which I have used in my work without, however, performing them exclusively as a linear process, instead moving back and forth as I saw fit. I started with 4 interviews that I coded paragraph by paragraph, that is, I assigned each paragraph a label expressing the underlying concept. I then identified labels that referred to the birth family and aimed to focus, across the interviews, on how this relationship was represented. This work benefited from both the reading of all the other interviews, which I coded to enrich the analysis, and the feedback provided by my supervisor, who read the interviews and with whom I discussed my analysis. Therefore, through constant comparative work between codes and interviews, I constructed my grounded theory by aiming to understand the relationships between the identified codes and in order to construct more conceptually sophisticated categories. Finally, I presented my analysis to my advisory board made up of care-experienced parents, whom I met with in two groups composed respectively of 4 and 5 parents, to encourage more interaction. We jointly discussed the results, which parents broadly agreed with. Subsequently some fruitful discussions took place; for example, one group widely shared views vis-à-vis

the importance and complexity of building a positive relationship with their parents, and how this also engages them constantly and differently according to their children's life stages. These discussions were important in confirming the findings and interpreting the results.

3. Results and discussion

The stories collected in this study are very different from one another, both in the way participants relate to their birth families and in the way they interact with parenting practices. The narratives show how the birth family is represented through the more physical dimension of its presence in everyday life, as well as through the more symbolic dimension linked to one's inner experience, or in comparing with what are deemed 'normal' families. These double levels (physical and symbolic) show how the birth family is present even when contacts are sporadic or are no longer possible, as parents have died, or are far away, or the relationship has irretrievably broken down. The study results are summarized in Fig. 1, and will be presented in detail in the following paragraphs. The core category is that of «parenting as an opportunity for relational adjustments» (3.1), including in relation to the birth family. This is linked to two other categories that are represented by respondents as interwoven. The first relates to more intimate and psychological dimensions of their complex family history (3.2), and links to the subcategory representing the past as something that it is desirable to come to terms with (3.2.1). The second category refers more to aspects of everyday parenting experience, the absence of one's own relational network and the perception of a profound loneliness (3.3), which is linked to the subcategory of facing one's weakness (3.3.1).

3.1. Transition to parenthood as opportunity for relational adjustments

Consistently with other research on care-experienced parenting (Aparicio et al., 2019; Chamberlain et al., 2019a; Dandy et al., 2020), the transition to parenthood is also represented in this study as an important developmental step, and as an opportunity to build «something new». For example, respondents report that they chose to become parents because they wanted to take care of someone in a different way from what they had experienced in their childhood, for instance a mother talked of «becoming parents as mending the past»; the experience of parenthood is told in the tones of a new beginning, as allowing a break with or at least a questioning of previous equilibria, as stated by a mother: «But because now I am no longer a daughter, I am a mother. I start from the assumption that…you gave birth and then the past becomes part of your memories».

This opportunity to create new relational adjustments is to a great extent linked to one's own parents, and to the relationship with them (Wade, 2008), e.g. the interviewees describe their parents as attentive and positive grandparents towards their grandchildren, unlike how they

had related to them as children. These relationships are not without complexity and require constant negotiation, as will be presented in the following paragraphs. However, opportunities arising from shifting roles from children to parents, and from parents to grandparents, also seem to affect the relationships the interviewees have with their own parents, as stated by one mother:

> She tries to be a grandmother in her own way. Having children has helped me to have a relationship with her as well. Let's just say it was a good chance to create a new relationship with her.

Additionally, such changes seem to afford new opportunities for the other members of the family, allowing them to develop new and positive identities as well. For instance, this father, talking about his brother, says:

> I had given him the opportunity to start again. Because it also meant a new role for him, being able to be an uncle, to create the new role of uncle, no longer that of brother or son. In a certain way to have something new, in another light.

Even though such attempts are not always described as successful, a strong perception emerged that with the birth of a child it might be possible to build different relationships, leaving behind the misunderstandings of the past. Such opportunities for creating new relational adjustments are described as resulting from a process, entailing ups and downs, that actively engages parents and is reactivated in the transition to parenting.

3.2. Ongoing dialogues with one's own difficult family history

The narratives of everyday parenting practices brought out frequent references to the past as children. An ongoing internal dialogue with the past is a common feature of the construction of parental knowledge and practices, as a process that «pushes into the depths of the self» (Fabbri, 2008: 47). The interviewees describe how this dialogue also concerns everyday aspects, in which parents are led to rethink and relive their hitherto not forgotten, but partly disregarded childhood experiences. As Fabbri also points out, each parent is led to situate and interpret their children within the framework of their own autobiographical space, which is characterized by pre-reflexivity, unawareness, and routine (ibid.). What seems to distinguish the interviewees' narratives is the daily effort towards greater awareness that frequently leads to attempts to move away from one's own experience as a child, as stated by a father:

> Because in the end, everything and every stage is an experience that I re-live, because I have already gone through it. I try not to judge the choices my parents made or the answers they gave me on certain occasions. But it is normal that one says, "I would give a different
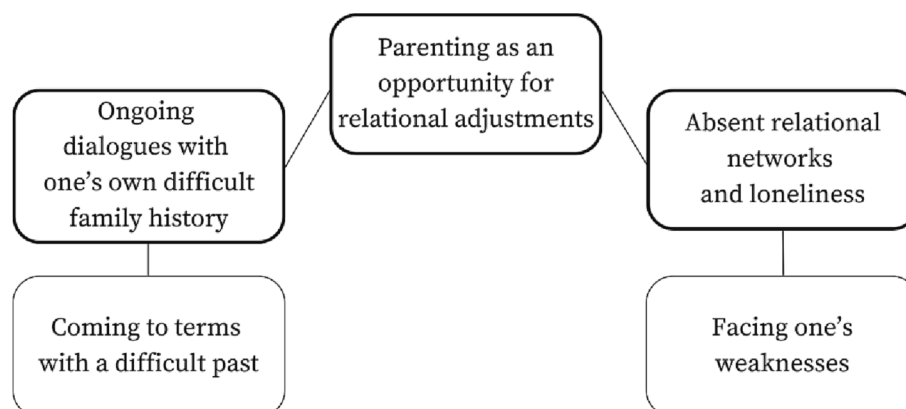

Fig. 1. How do care-experienced parents represent their relationship with the birth family?

answer at this moment, in this way, and I would behave in a different way".

This aspect is consistent with some research findings, such as Wilkes (2002), who hypothesises that among the factors that influence the ability to change and interrupt the cycle of maltreatment there is a conceptual restructuring of the parent–child relationship. According to the author, this process seems to be characterized by a radical revision of one's own assumptions, which enables parents to reassign «child abuse from an appropriate behaviour to an inappropriate behaviour» (Wilkes, 2002: 274). In my study, too, the interviewees highlighted how the daily experience of parenting triggered the re-emergence of some painful aspects of childhood, in many cases not understood. While this reliving of past experiences exposed them to complex emotions, it also led them to actively question what the most suitable and effective parental posture with their children might be. Partners are described as an important resource for dealing with these feelings and thoughts, but they cannot substitute the dialogue with the actual parents, which sometimes is impossible. In this regard, one father states:

…but it is a continuous dialogue, even on important topics, such as death, and sexuality. In general, I would say… Without someone to carry on your story with continuity, it is very complicated, you get hurt, you get burnt.

This complexity emerges particularly when interviewees account for difficult moments or incidents in their parenting, as their own previous traumatic experiences make it difficult to deal with current emergencies as they lack positive examples of solving them. This father, victim of abuse as a child, told me that when his child fell off the bed he was paralyzed by fear, and it took him two days to recover. More in general, juxtaposing past and present can cast a shadow on the very choice of having a child, as expressed by a mother who saw her own mother committing suicide when she was a teenager:

I must admit that in all this talking of having children, in some way of clinging to life, the fact of having in my life history someone who, more or less consciously, chose not to live any more, it's a weight on my heart.

There is a widespread feeling of strong responsibility for one's own behaviour, linked to the threat of history repeating itself. The same mother states:

Or sometimes there are moments when one really thinks that one can't do it anymore. And from time to time I've looked at my children and thought "maybe they're thinking they didn't want to come into the world".

The interviewees' own history as children and their relationships with their parents are present in their lives in the form of a daily inner dialogue with their own parental experience. This often takes place in solitude and is also an opportunity for new relational adjustments offered by the transition to parenthood. However, it is not without complexity, and in many cases seems to increase the burden of struggle and pain. All interviewees point out the fluctuating nature of such a burden, as their inner dialogue can interfere to a greater or lesser extent with their current personal lives.

However, interviewees express a common belief that it will be possible as well as desirable to live positively with one's past, as will be explained in the next paragraph.

3.2.1. Coming to terms with a difficult past

The complexity of the past is experienced by interviewees as something that needs to be taken care of in order not to repeat as parents their own parents' mistakes. However, it does not seem that there are any concluding stages in this process, which is described as an ongoing step-by-step process. In many cases, for interviewees, comparing what they have gone through as children, and what they have been able to achieve

as parents, is a source of pride: it can facilitate the acquisition of greater confidence vis-à-vis one's own parenting skills. At the same time, facing the challenges of childrearing, which are also present in positive situations, in some cases makes it possible to engage in a dialogue with their own parents' fragilities, and to be more aware of the difficulties they had to face. A mother affirms:

Or sometimes when I feel discouraged, I think of a moment that could be when she was 38, that's the moment when my mother couldn't take it anymore and decided to put an end to it. But then I think that when she was 25 she was left alone with us children and she tried her best for many years, she tried a lot […]. So, there are these moments in which I try and hold on to this awareness…

This mental work, when one has children, facilitates a reconciliation with one's parents, consistently with van Vugt and Versteegh's research (2020) which involved 15 vulnerable young mothers in mother–child communities. Also, for the research participants:

In some cases the birth of the baby helped to renew the relationship with mostly the mother's own mother. The mothers were sometimes able to make peace with the past, as they better understood what their own mother went through or expressed their loyalty towards their own parents (van Vugt & Versteegh, 2020:5).

The possibility of positively dealing with one's past is described by all the parents as being linked to a commitment they have undertaken, even if not always consciously. As they think back to their own history, also as parents, some key steps emerge that involved them in a work of sharing and re-elaborating what happened. These were, for example, the encounters with people they trusted and who enabled them to face the shadows of their past (friends, partner, parents of friends, etc.), or the chance to write down their experience, or the meeting with trusted psychotherapists. Particularly with psychotherapy, but also in many other circumstances, it appears that the starting point is not trust in the possible usefulness of these relations; rather, with hindsight, such relations are attributed a transformative role in connection with the personal commitment to «get to the root» of their stories. The benefits of these processes are largely related to emancipation from the shadows of one's past and to facing the fears related to it, as stated by a mother who wrote a book on her life:

Regarding my birth family, my history, many fears have been overcome. I'm not afraid, for example, like when I was younger, that my birth family could somehow overshadow my current life, because I've done a lot of emancipation work.

Such work (writing, psychotherapy etc.) is specific to the elaboration of difficult childhoods; however, in addition to the essential mental work, the interviewees related several strategies used to cope as well as possible with past trauma. The interviews are in fact full of such examples from everyday life, and it is possible, despite the diversity of the stories, to identify some cross-cutting aspects.

A first aspect concerns the importance of self-knowledge to protect oneself from the dysfunctional aspects of the relationship with the birth family. The strategy of taking care of oneself and setting boundaries in the relation with the birth family is seen for many as originating from experiences in the child protection system, with adults who legitimized their need to build protected spaces. A mother recounts:

I had an inner mission, for me for many years it was just to save myself, to put myself in a safe situation, even at the cost of neglecting my birth parents. […] And I think this is important. When there is an initial fracture, when you are born into a family that then breaks up, you have to face a period alone and then you don't go back to your birth family, the initial crack is there and probably you will have to live with that sadness forever.

This process of negotiating one's own spaces is frequently assigned to the relationship with the birth family. Learning to build safe spaces, both

physical and mental, at the same time protecting themselves, is paradoxically seen as protecting the sometimes tiny but positive parts of the relationship with their roots, as stated by a mother:

> So I know who we are in the sense that I have also learnt to manage relationships with those of my birth family who are still alive. I have also found a space for my natural brother who visits us once a month. I have placed them in a way that I think is appropriate, so that I no longer have to feel the burden of these figures…

This learning also seems to represent an important resource in other relational contexts, which can for example concern friendship networks when they are experienced as excessively interfering in one's educational choices, as stated by a father. Parents stressed the importance of having been seen in their own needs and aspirations when they were children, and how this represented a source of learning vis-à-vis taking care of themselves, and thus their children. Here, educators and foster parents played a crucial role when able to wait and respect their needs as regards time, even in their relationship with the birth family.

Strategies for living positively with one's past and building good relationships with one's birth family are consistent with the findings of longitudinal research conducted by Andersson, (2018) with a group of 26 care-experienced, among whom some became parents. Despite the heterogeneity in life trajectories, the author highlights how

> the interviewees were still emotionally linked to their biological parents. As adults, they had to find ways of managing complicated relationships to parents and recurring bad memories. Some tried to keep in contact or renew contact, some kept parent(s) at a distance, and some had to deal with lost contact or the death of a parent (Andersson, 2018: 637).

This is consistent with findings from my study: the opportunity to build places where the interviewees felt protected did not mean cutting off relationships, distancing themselves absolutely from their parents, or assuming a totally negative judgmental attitude towards them. On the contrary, for many of the interviewees it was important to nurture the relationship with their birth family by trying, as already stated, to understand the difficulties their own parents had experienced. In addition, interviewees reported how important it was that professionals in the protection system did not judge their parents and at the same time helped them understand their difficulties. For some parents, this professional posture paved the way for reconciliations that occurred later in their lives, in some cases following the transition to parenthood. Many interviewees said that it was particularly helpful to be allowed by professional in the CPS to give voice to their own pain, even to talk about it with their parents but without being pushed into a relationship with them.

3.3. Absent relational networks and loneliness

Concerning the concrete presence/absence of the birth family in everyday parenting, a perception emerged that one's experience is fraught with far greater loneliness than those deemed 'normal'. This perception is also present among those who have relationships with the birth family, which is however perceived as less supportive if compared to other families, as stated by a mother: «I compare myself with other parents and see things that are far from my own experience. For me there is always an inner effort to be like 'the others'». It is from the earliest stages of their lives as parents, and perhaps more so in these first stages, that the interviewees say they have begun to experience the absence and/or distrust of someone to orient them and of trusted people with whom to discuss their parental roles. Parents highlight how unsettling it was to face this feeling; the apprenticeship character that characterizes all parenting experiences is perceived as more demanding for the interviewees, for example a mother wonders «this job would be lighter for me if I had a parent behind me to deal with. I do not know…». A first crucial point is the awareness interviewees expressed about the complex

emotions and strain of the daily parenting experience connected to the absence of and weaknesses in their family networks. A mother states in this regard:

> if only this solitude had been populated by someone, even just a mother or a sister, but not just any stranger, not the one you met at the playground and you chat with, but a person of trust, of the family. This person does not exist, but if there had been a family figure with whom to share this new birth, this new arrival would have been much less melancholic.

Other parents tell how it is not easy to escape the emotions generated by the absence of trusted people with whom to share what happens in the relationship with their children. This can cause, for example, anger or envy towards those who can count on their own solid networks, or perceived as such. For example, a father says:

> Even sharing good things (e.g. when the baby smiles for the first time), I could talk about them with my friends. But it is never like when my partner talks to her mother or sisters: they can share their joy. For me, paradoxically, beautiful things, beautiful emotions, become repressed emotions.

All the participants, in their narratives, mention strategies that have allowed them to face by themselves, without support, their sense of inadequacy and at times of bewilderment in the face of the momentous event constituted by having a child. The response activated by each parent required a great deal of energy, especially in the early stages of their children's lives. As a father says:

> At the time my mother was in prison, […] my father on the other hand was already living away, he had created another family. So, I didn't have any points of reference. It was a bit like discovering my way day by day, gaining experience.

In consequence, parents grasp whatever support they find, even by chance. For instance, the theme of trust resonates in the narratives of many mothers who also link it to the possibility of feeling legitimized in one's parental role. Not having a "trusted woman" for oneself, that is, someone who trusts her own way of being a mother and who can be trusted, can in fact have repercussions on exercising one's role in everyday life. However, there are many examples of parents who express strategies for dealing with this absence, for example through the search for new alliances outside the family network. A mother told of the complexity of breastfeeding in the early stages of her child's life, and how this had pushed her to feelings of profound malaise, to which she tried to react by asking for and managing to make use of help:

> And I remember that I went to her [midwife] and I told her that there was this problem, that the baby was not growing, that a paediatrician had suggested that I was starving him… And I remember she did a complete check up on the baby, she called him by name all the time and I burst into tears. Then I went to see her every week and thanks to her we recovered. In fact, I lacked a person who was there for me.

For parents it is important to have somebody they feel is on their side, who trusts them and their way of parenting, and who respects their wishes (Best & Blakeslee, 2020:6). Having experienced in the CPS that it is possible to ask for help seems to play an important role in this. In fact, parents said that it was important to have professionals to help them understand their difficulties by looking for solutions together, or identifying together whom they could ask for support. Many report that this attitude is less present in other parents, and they trace such learning in themselves precisely to their time outside the family – a learning that in their turn they set out to teach their children.

Finally, another aspect of loneliness concerns the fear that such a dearth of family networks might impact their children's lives. For example, a mother affirmed:

My biggest worry every day, my ghost, is linked to the possibility that my son may not have… there's only me and my husband. We are good but it is just us. There is always the worry that he might end up alone, so I would also like to give him a brother in the future. These are my main insecurities, linked to not having a family around who cares about him.

This fear, for many parents, leads to feelings of guilt, and for some it is also the source of the responsibility they attribute to themselves to compensate for the absence of a family network, as we will see in the next paragraphs.

3.3.1. Facing one's weaknesses

The absence or fragility of the birth family on the one hand affects emotions, as highlighted in the previous paragraph; on the other hand, it entails for many of the interviewees a lack of practical and daily support for parenting. In a family welfare system like the Italian one (León & Migliavacca, 2013), in which grandparents represent the primary resource available to parents in caring for their children, care-experienced parents face the difficulty of managing complex daily care practices in solitude, a first dimension of one's weak position. A mother says in response to a question about the specificities of her experience: «I'm a bit disadvantaged from an organizational point of view, I can't rely on others very much». For many parents, the lack of support also affects their finances, as highlighted by a mother:

Of course, when faced with an economic problem, we know that there's no lifeline. And that certainly makes you more responsible in your relationship with work, since we are people who have always had work as top priority. Just think that I used to suffer from nightmares for many years, and they disappeared when I had a permanent position.

The lack of practical and financial support begins to outline what many parents describe as a position of weakness also with respect to the visibility of their family from the outside, for example in the relationship with the partner's family or with their social network. In this regard, interviewees report they feel more exposed through the lack of a family to "display" (Finch, 2007), as indicated by a mother: «And yet the children, especially the youngest, ask me about my sister: "But is Olga really our aunt?". Whereas they feel my husband family much closer».

Although in some circumstances, especially those of personal struggling, these shortcomings seem to weigh more than in others, most interviewees underline their efforts not to surrender to what they sometimes perceive as predestined. They express the drive to compensate for the absence of a family network – in a mother's words:

My commitment and also my endeavour sometimes is just to build around us at least a network of friends […], but at the same time I have to accept that my son doesn't have an extended family and that his path and his relationships will be created in time, when he is older.

Many of the interviewees also have the feeling that their position is weakened because of the fact that there are shadows on their origins, in terms of family, and that this affects their negotiating power. A mother affirms:

I realize that it is difficult to defend my ideas. In the sense that the only reference is provided by my husband's family, as a family tradition, and it is difficult to defend my ideas with no background, while instead maybe having my family behind me would have made everything easier.

The perception is therefore that a fragmented family history makes one's ideas, values, choices less credible and defensible, especially in relation to the education of children.

This is not to say that interviewees undervalue their intrinsic abilities in relating to their children. On the contrary, for them, one's own history

as a child becomes a resource when it allows a higher empathic competence than that of other people, as stated by a mother: «having suffered can also be almost enriching. You have got to know life even in its hardest side and you acquire a depth, you see things with a more compassionate look towards others».

Therefore, the lack of negotiating power, related to this weak position on many fronts, seems to clash here with the competence that many parents recognize and in which they invest heavily, namely the ability to attend to emotional aspects in caring for their children. In fact, the interviewees spoke about the risk that their position of weakness in terms of family roots, associated with a strong investment in the educational relationship with children, could expose them to strong pressures, when they do not feel recognized, for instance by school teachers or even their partners, particularly when there are tensions in the relationship with their children, or facing tantrums. A father said that when his child has a tantrum, he knows that there is something behind it, but when he takes it seriously the environment treats him as too understanding or anxious.

This interconnection of psychological and social aspects in the interviewees' stories highlights the importance of keeping together the many aspects of the parenting experience. Such aspects thus foreground the numerous areas of life that continue to be influenced by the relationship with the birth family and the importance of understanding how this is experienced within daily life.

4. Limits

As often seen in qualitative research, the sample for this study is very small and non-probabilistic. This makes it difficult to generalize the results to the same population of Italian care-experienced parents. Moreover, although I found many common elements in the interviews, individual life trajectories reveal great diversity. For example, some participants have graduated while others have not reached high school; some enjoy job security while others face highly precarious economic situations. Some have experienced domestic violence from which they have survived and emancipated; among those in stable relationships, some voice dissatisfaction, while others feel fulfilled. Another limitation is that positive parenting is not based on objectively assessed data, but on the evaluations of people, mainly care-experienced parents and professionals, whom I asked to collaborate in the recruitment. These aspects are, however, compensated by a thick analysis of the interviews, which confirms the cases as examples of positive parenting. The analysis was validated through a discussion with a supervision committee and with a group of care-experienced parents. It seems to me, therefore, that the value of these data for understanding the experience of these parents is supported.

5. Implications and conclusion

The results of my research show how a strong bond and at the same time profoundly conflictual feelings and ambivalence in the relationship with the birth family coexist in these positive parenting stories. What emerges is that it is precisely the transition to parenthood that reactivates in many parents the connection with their own childhood experiences. In particular, and in a novel way compared to previous studies, a need emerges for care-experienced parents to redefine their relationships with their own parents in order to maintain their well-being.

Although the past of the interviewees is characterized by fragmented family contexts, and the present exposes them to confrontations with their difficult experiences as children, such parents nevertheless seem to face the relationship with their own parents with many resources, some of which have been built up or strengthened thanks to their experience in the care system. It appears important to see their pain legitimized and to find protected spaces - conditions that for many of them are assured thanks to the support of the professionals they met during their experiences in care. Parents also highlight the importance of encounters with

professionals who, while supporting their need for protection, did not force them to cut off or conversely to keep up the relations with their birth families. In fact, in positive parenting, the relationship with one' s family remains and strongly re-emerges in the parental experience, and in participants' views, it is necessary to learn to live with it, often accepting it.

These results are strongly related to a frequently discussed topic relating to the removal of children from their families, namely how to treat the relationship with the birth family (Berrick et al., 2011; Broadhurst & Mason, 2017; Cantos et al., 1997). Although in my research I involved adults, in fact this appears to remain a strong concern for those who have been taken into care. Despite differences in the various systems, it is the duty of the state to put in place safeguards for children to live with their families safely. At the same time, in cases where it is not considered possible for children to remain with their birth family and a temporary alternative care placement is decreed, the orientation of many countries, including Italy, is to create the conditions to sustain the relationship with the family. However, this aspect of social work remains a challenge for CPS, for example a recent study in Italy involving 454 care leavers showed that more than half of the interviewees (55%) believed that when in alternative care they had perceived no improvement in their relationship with the birth family (Belotti et al., 2021).

This issue is the focus of a great deal of research that has highlighted its complexity and the frequent ethical dilemmas practitioners experience in relation to it (Bertotti, 2020; Turnery & Ruch, 2018). Because of the many aspects and dimensions that must be taken into account in relation to the lives of children and their families, some authors (Atwool, 2013; Biehal et al., 2010; Osborn & Delfabbro, 2009; Sinclair et al., 2005) maintain that although there is a strong belief that contact with birth families is beneficial to children, no strong evidence confirms it. The complexity of the issue is addressed in depth by Baker et al. (2016) who conducted a paper review of qualitative studies of the views of children in care in relation to their birth family. The theoretical framework used to conduct the analysis of the papers was attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). They reflected on the outcomes of studies in order to understand the attachment relationships that children experience with their parents once they have been removed from home. The analysis showed the strength of this relationship and of children's emotions:

> For the vast majority of studies in which the topic was addressed, children were reported to miss and yearn for their abusive parent (100%), felt afraid at being separated from that parent (83.3%), blamed themselves for being removed from home and/or minimized the bad behaviour of the abusive parent (93.8%), and yet experienced relief and/or gratitude at being placed in out-of-home care (93.8%). (Baker et al., 2016: 181)

What emerges, therefore, is that supporting the re-elaboration of the relationship between children and birth family and understanding how to enable it are very important aspects in CPS, particularly if looked at from the perspective of the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment. My study of care-experienced parents moves in this direction.

The possibility of re-elaborating one's past and positioning in relation to the birth family is confirmed as a helpful factor in preventing the reproduction of intergenerational cycles; this study provides relevant and innovative findings into how this is experienced and represented by the participants themselves. This reinforces the role of CPS in caring for children in their relationship with their families as well as helping in its re-elaboration, which may also mean, for some, distancing and learning to protect themselves, thus accepting the limits of their family; for others, it may entail the possibility of keeping up relations with them. This support appears to be crucial throughout life, but especially in the transition to parenthood.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Diletta Mauri: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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