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### The wellbeing of foster children and their relationship with foster parents and biological parents

*a child's perspective*

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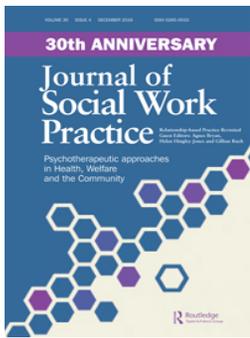
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# Anne M. Maaskant, Floor B. van Rooij, Henny M.W. Bos and Jo M.A. Hermanns

## THE WELLBEING OF FOSTER CHILDREN AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND BIOLOGICAL PARENTS: A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

*Most Dutch foster children live permanently in foster families. It is often assumed that foster children have ambivalent loyalties and attachments to their birth parents and foster parents and are torn between the two. In this study 59 children between 10 and 18 years placed in long term foster care completed standardised questionnaires on the relationship with their parents respectively foster parents and their wellbeing. Results show that, on average, foster children have positive feelings of loyalty and attachment towards both their foster parents and biological parents. However, their wellbeing appeared mainly related with stronger attachment representations towards their foster parents. This study found no indications for a competing position of biological parents and foster parents from the perspective of the child. Nevertheless, foster children who see their foster and biological parents as more vulnerable or experience stronger normative boundaries, feel worse compared to children who experience this feelings less.*

**Keywords** foster care; attachment; loyalty; wellbeing; child's perspective; child's perception

### Introduction

Foster care is of all times and all cultures. Traditionally, it was the policy in the Netherlands that, in principle, placement in a foster family is temporary and intended as a form of 'time out' from the original parenting situation. However, many fostered children for whom reunification with their parents appeared to be impossible are entitled to foster care with permanency (called long term placements). Nowadays, the majority (about 70%) of the current 21.606 foster family placements in the Netherlands are for longer than one year (Factsheet Foster Care, 2013). This study focusses on how foster children in long term foster care perceive the relationship with their foster parents as well as biological parents and how this relates to their wellbeing.

Growing up and being brought up in a foster family is a complicated situation. International literature recurrently shows elevated prevalence rates of negative developmental outcomes in various areas like emotional and behavioral development, and social relationships with parents and peers (e.g. Burns *et al.*, 2004; Leve *et al.*, 2012). These developmental difficulties of foster children are not without reason. Almost by definition, children have had troubling experiences prior to the placement. Mostly related to a situation of abuse and neglect, their experiences with close parental relationships are ambivalent and unsafe. Despite the intention of bringing such difficult situations to an end, in many cases an out of home placement means another traumatic experience for the child (Bowlby, 1973): the child is separated from his or her parents in a drastic way and it loses its familiar social and physical environment. Subsequently entering a foster family means a radical change of family structure and requires a considerable degree of adjustment on the part of all those involved (child, foster parents and parents); relationships need to be re-formed (child-parent) or established (child-foster parent) (Stovall & Dozier, 2000). Adjusting to a new foster family is a serious challenge for foster children and the outcomes of the process crucial to their wellbeing (Juffer, 2010). Practitioners responsible to support those who are involved in this process (such as the child, foster parents and biological parents) are often challenged to contain all the different and often conflicting interests and meanwhile remain focused on what is the best for the child. This study attempts to contribute to the empirical basis of supporting practice.

### *Attachment and loyalty*

From a psychodynamically influenced perspective, the wellbeing of foster children is, among other things, affected by two important theoretical concepts; 'attachment' and, related to this, 'loyalty'. Attachment can be defined as the innate inclination of individuals to form strong bonds to particular others (Bowlby, 1969) and develops in the interaction between a child and a consistent sensitive and responsive caregiver. Developing attachment can be seen as a milestone in the development of children (Bowlby, 1969). It provides the child with an internal working model – a relational network of internalised knowledge constructed on the basis of attachment relationships- which will qualify the child's perceptions, emotions, thoughts and expectations in later relationships (see Bretherton, 1992 or Fonagy, 2002). Fonagy expanded this concept of the internal working model by the further conceptualisation of 'mentalization', bringing the attachment theory and psychoanalysis into a closer relationship (Fonagy *et al.*, 2004). Mentalisation, or reflective functioning, is the capacity to understand and reflect upon human behavior of oneself and others in terms of internal, intentional mental states (Fonagy *et al.*, 2004). This mentalisation ability develops in relation to attachment figures who are themselves able to mentalise (Fonagy *et al.*, 2004). The quality of the attachment influences the child's mentalisation-abilities, which in turn influence the capability to regulate emotional distress (e.g. anxiety, anger, depression), exploration of the surroundings, cognitive development and psychological stability. Even if caregivers do not properly respond to the needs of the child or maltreat the child, most children become attached to one or more caregivers but the quality of this attachment relationship might differ in a wide range from secure to insecure (Cyr *et al.*, 2010). Whether the attachment is secure or insecure, the unwanted separation and loss of an attachment person brings about emotional distress and detachment (Goldberg, 2000), which can result in problematic behaviors such as aggression, delinquency and depression (Kaplan *et al.*, 1999). Bowlby (1973) argues this can only be resolved if children

are able to develop new attachment relationships with alternative caregivers. Research shows an attachment relationship is not only restricted to the biological parents, but can also develop between a child and other sensitive and response persons, such as foster parents (Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990). However, having original insecure attachment experiences, a foster child is still likely to have difficulties trusting adults and forming new attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1973). Supporting foster parents to enhance their own mentalisation capabilities and strengthen their sensitiveness and responsiveness, enables the development of a secure attachment relationship with their foster child (Dozier *et al.*, 2002; Ironside, 2012; Juffer *et al.*, 2014).

Next to attachment, loyalty is a second theoretical concept which is considered to have an important influence on the development of foster children. According to the founders of the loyalty theory, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner (1986), loyalty has to do with fairness and justice in human relationships. Key aspect is the balance between give and take. Other important aspects are feelings of trust, justice/fairness, recognition, vulnerability (feelings of empathy towards the parents) and 'superego binding' (the extent to which a child perceives its parents as setting rules and boundaries). Within the relationship between parents and their children there is a natural imbalance as the parents have to take care of their children to be able to survive and develop. Moreover, parents are responsible for the existence of their offspring and provide the child with kinship, a family history, and belonging. If there is an attachment relationship, a child will also acquire emotional loyalty by their parents' or other individuals' investments in the interest of the child (for instance, by providing care). According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner (1986) it is important for the child's balanced development that it can recognise its loyalty to the parents and express it in a realistic way. However, as individuals can acquire feelings of loyalty to different people, they can possibly also experience clashes of senses of loyalty. When a child is unable to reconcile feelings of loyalty, trust and affection to two sets of opposing parents, it is suggested that loyalty conflicts can occur (Poulin, 1986). Loyalty conflicts among foster children are a widely discussed phenomenon and are assumed to be related to high levels of anxiety and feelings of distrust and anger in children which often manifest as behavioral problems (Bastiaensen, 2001; Metha *et al.*, 2013).

### *Wellbeing of foster children*

The heightened risk of insecure attachment representations and loyalty conflicts in foster children contributes to the idea that they are easily torn apart between their parents and foster parents, which consequently can have a negative effect on their wellbeing. In general, professionals will try to make decisions about the child, for example encouraging or discouraging the extent of contact between foster children and their biological parents, in order to stimulate the opportunity to form (more) secure attachment relationships and to decrease or prevent loyalty conflicts. Longitudinal studies among long term foster children make clear that their developmental outcomes are determined by a complex interplay of histories, contexts and relationships (Schofield & Beek, 2005; Andersson, 2009). In practice, this makes it difficult to know how to act in order to diminish entangled feelings of foster children. Mostly two views are being expressed. On the one hand, there is a view that stimulating to maintain a close relationship with parents is of great importance to the child's wellbeing (Ryburn, 1999; McWey *et al.*, 2010). These authors emphasise, from the perspective of attachment theory, that separation and the abrupt severing of the emotional bond between parent and child is, in general, damaging for the child and maintaining this attachment should be encouraged along

with a developing attachment relationship with the foster parents (Haight *et al.*, 2003; Gauthier *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, the awareness of its parents and sharing concrete experiences with them, is also presumed to prevent children from fantasising and forming an (overly) idealistic picture of their parents (e.g. Hess, 1987) and helps to preserve family relationships (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000). On the other hand, it is also argued that maintaining a close relationship with the parents can be a threat to the foster-family placement and is therefore detrimental to the child's wellbeing (Quinton *et al.*, 1997; Moyers *et al.*, 2006). In practice, parental visits, necessary for maintaining the contact, are generally complex (Haight *et al.*, 2003) and therefore are often thought to be emotionally distressing for children (Moyers *et al.*, 2006). These authors assert that having a close relationship with both parents and foster parents may lead to more loyalty conflicts (Leathers, 2003). As Biehal (2014, p. 968) explained from a qualitative study among long term foster children: 'Their mental representations of their birth families influenced their thoughts and feelings about their place in their foster families, making it easier or harder for them to settle for 'belonging' to another family'. Therefore, uncertainty about the future and about who still belongs to the family system and who is not might put the wellbeing of the child at risk (Boss, 2004).

#### *Aims of the present study*

This study investigates whether the attachment representations and senses of loyalty (as expressions of the quality of the relationship) of long term Dutch fostered children and adolescents (henceforth all called foster children) towards their foster parents and biological parents are competing. Furthermore, we explore the associations of their perceptions of these relationships with their self-reported wellbeing. We address attachment representations, senses of loyalty and wellbeing from the foster child's perspective (in line with the emerging interest of children's perspective in research and policy, see also Fernandez, 2007; Fox & Berrick, 2007), operationalised with pre-defined rating scales (see also Chapman *et al.*, 2004). The following research questions were formulated:

- (1) Is there a negative correlation between foster children's attachment representations and senses of loyalty towards their foster parents respectively their biological parents?
- (2) Are there over-all differences between the way in which foster children perceive the attachment representations and senses of loyalty towards their foster parents and biological parents?
- (3) Are the foster children's attachment representations and senses of loyalty towards their foster parents and biological parents related to their self-reported wellbeing?
- (4) Is there a difference between the wellbeing of foster children who experience equal relationships (regarding attachment and loyalty) with foster and biological parents compared to foster children who experience contrasting relationships with their foster and biological parents?

## **Method**

### *Design*

This study is a cross-sectional survey study about the child-reported relationship between foster children (aged 10–18 years) and their foster and biological parents.

### *Procedure*

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Institute and the boards of the participating Foster Care Organizations. Foster children were recruited in several steps. With the help of several foster-care agencies the foster families of 324 foster children (age between 10 and 18 years) were selected for participation and received written structured questionnaires by post. Foster parents were asked to give the questionnaire to their foster child and send it back with the included prepaid envelope. Of the initial 324 children, 64 children filled out the questionnaire (20%), of which 59 children were selected for the current study (five children without any form of contact with their one of their biological parents were excluded).

### *Sample*

See Table 1 for the demographic characteristics of the foster children and their foster care history. Approximately one-third (34%) of the foster children had previously lived with one or more foster families, and almost half (46%) had lived in a residential care setting.

### *Instruments*

In order to obtain insight in the attachment representations, senses of loyalty regarding biological parents and foster parents and the wellbeing of the foster children who participated in this study, data were gathered by means of a questionnaire, which was compiled using existing scales.

*Attachment representations.* The attachment representations of foster children were measured using the Psychological Availability and Reliance on Adults questionnaire (PARA; Schuengel & Zegers, 2003). The PARA is a relationship specific measure focusing on basic elements of attachment: expectations regarding psychological availability of a care-giver and regarding reliance on a caregiver as a secure base (turning to the care giver for help), and feelings of an affective bond with the care giver. Previous research has shown that the PARA is a reliable and valid questionnaire (Zegers *et al.*, 2006; Harder *et al.*, 2013). In the original version the questionnaire was orally presented to adolescents using a similar Likert-scale (and paper-and-pencil versions to adults). In the current version adolescents filled out a paper-and-pencil version including clear instructions to assist them. Foster children were asked to state how far they agreed with the formulated items (1 = disagree – 4 = agree). They filled in the PARA for their relationship with both parents and both foster parents. The PARA consists of three subscales: (1) Perception of psychological availability of caregiver (six items, e.g. ‘you find it easy to talk to this person about your feelings and problems’), (2) Perception of turning to caregiver for help (seven items, e.g. ‘desire to say goodbye when you won’t see this person for a while’) and (3) Affective bond with caregiver (four items, e.g. ‘this person can offer true comfort when you’re sad’). Originally this subscale has six items. However, two items did not apply to their biological parents (‘You dread to maybe have other foster parents in the future’, ‘Also if you may have other foster parents, you would still want to visit your current foster parents every now and then’) and were therefore excluded. We computed a total attachment representation scale by calculating the mean of all separate items of the questionnaire. Cronbach’s alphas were sufficient to very good ( $.68 < \alpha < .95$ ), with the exception of .48 for affective bond regarding the foster mother.

**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics (N = 57)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>
Gender				
Boys	18 (30.5)			
Girls	39 (66.1)			
Unknown	2 (3.5)			
Age (years)		14.75 (2.10)	10	18
Length current placement (years)		8.29 (4.69)	1	16
<i>N</i> previous foster placements		.38 (.62)	0	3
<i>N</i> previous residential placements		.61 (.83)	0	4
Custody				
Yes	51 (86.4)			
No	8 (13.6)			
Contact biological parents				
Only mother	22 (37.3)			
Only father	10 (16.9)			
Both – together	2 (3.4)			
Both – apart	25 (42.4)			
Contact frequency (per year)				
Mother ( <i>n</i> = 48)		21.97 (21.79)	.50	4
Father ( <i>n</i> = 37)		20.38 (21.34)	.50	4
Total		19.47 (19.25)	.50	4

*Senses of loyalty.* The level of loyalty towards parents and foster parents was measured using six subscales from the Nijmegen Family Relations Test (Oud & Welzen, 1988). This instrument is based on the theory of Boszormenyi-Nagy (see Mathijssen *et al.*, 1998). The subscales were: (1) Trust (13 items, e.g. ‘this person protects me’), (2) Justice (12 items, e.g. ‘this person is honest with me’), (3) Vulnerability (seven items, e.g. ‘I think this person is lonely’), (4) Recognition (13 items, e.g. ‘this person says that I can really help him/her’), (5) Affective binding (10 items; e.g. ‘I think I need this person very much’) and (6) Restrictiveness (superego binding) (12 items; e.g. ‘this person thinks I should try harder at school’). Answers were given on a five-point scale: 1 = disagree – 5 = agree. We computed a total sense of loyalty scale by calculating the mean of all separate items of the questionnaire. Cronbach’s alphas ranged from  $\alpha = .56$  (vulnerability regarding foster mother) to .91 (recognition by father).

*Wellbeing.* The general sense of wellbeing was measured using Cantril’s Ladder (Cantril, 1965). The instrument comprises a 10-point scale that the foster children had to use to indicate how they were feeling at the time (1 = extremely bad – 10 = extremely good). The Cantril ladder is an established research tool, often used to measure subjective well-being, life satisfaction, quality of life, and overall happiness. It has been considered well developed in the literature with good validity and stability (Huynh *et al.*, 2013).

### *Analyses*

In total, 51 cases (86.4%) had one or more missing values on the outcome variables. Little's MCAR tests showed that the data were missing completely at random ( $\chi^2 = 2706.96$ ,  $df = 15987$ ,  $p = 1.000$ ), which allowed us using the multiple imputation procedure to overcome the missing data (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Five imputed datasets were created. In the results section we describe the results from the pooled data.

In order to assess whether there are differences in the way in which the foster children in this study perceive their relationship with their foster parents and biological parents, we first compared the results regarding the studied aspects of attachment and loyalty for respectively both foster parents and biological parents. We found moderate to strong significant correlations between all the subscales of attachment as well as loyalty regarding the mother and father ( $.45 < r < .87$ ,  $n = 27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and regarding the foster mother and father ( $.68 < r < .92$ ,  $n = 52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We therefore constructed composite measures calculating the mean score of both biological parents (if any form of contact was present) and both foster parents for further analyses. If the child had only contact with one of both parents, or there was just one foster parent present, we used the score towards this parent for further analyses. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to assess the correlation between the attachment representations and senses of loyalty regarding foster parents and biological parents. Next, the attachment and loyalty scores related to foster parents and biological parents were compared with each other by means of a paired *t*-test.

To analyse whether the wellbeing of the foster children was associated with the attachment representations and senses of loyalty, we used Pearson correlation tests. Furthermore, to explore whether the wellbeing of the child differs for those with more equal relationships towards foster and biological parents, compared to those with more contrasting relationships, we first divided (by the mean) the sample in two groups with the highest scores and the lowest scores for attachment representations and senses of loyalty (towards foster parents and towards biological parents). Second, we combined these groups into four categories: (1) highest scores towards foster parents as well as biological parents, (2) highest scores towards foster parents and lowest scores towards biological parents, (3) lowest scores towards foster parents and highest scores towards biological parents and (4) lowest scores towards foster parents as well as biological parents. Subsequently, using the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis one-way between-subjects test, we analysed whether the children in these four categories differed among their self-reported wellbeing. We repeated this step for the various subscales of attachment representations and the senses of loyalty towards foster parents and biological parents. In the results section we describe the results from the pooled data of five imputation rounds.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive analyses*

Table 2 gives an overview of the mean scores of foster children regarding their sense of loyalty and attachment representations towards their foster parents and biological parents. All the means of attachment representations as well as senses of loyalty fell in the positive side of the scale.

**TABLE 2** Attachment representations and senses of loyalty of foster children towards their foster parents and biological parents: Means, standard deviations, Pearson's correlation and paired t-tests (N = 59)

	<i>Foster parents</i>		<i>Biological parents</i>		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Pearson's r</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df<sup>a</sup></i>
Attachment representation	3.36 (.50)	2.77 (.67)	.33*	-6.47***	2538
Affective bond	3.38 (.59)	3.20 (.81)	.38*	-1.61	140
Turn to for help	3.20 (.63)	2.49 (.71)	.35*	-7.00***	6315
Psychological availability	3.49 (.55)	2.85 (.71)	.33*	-6.52***	1563
Sense of loyalty	4.00 (.44)	3.97 (.51)	.48***	-.41	242456
Trust	4.31 (.75)	4.03 (.85)	.36**	-2.28*	31229
Justice	3.90 (.61)	4.08 (.56)	.20	1.85	6115
Vulnerability	3.38 (.86)	3.89 (.88)	.59***	4.91***	5498
Recognition	4.47 (.64)	4.37 (.63)	.49***	-1.17	5954
Affective binding	4.28 (.69)	4.13 (.73)	.55***	-1.62	3443
Restrictiveness	3.37 (.92)	3.27 (.99)	.47***	-.80	24441

*Note:* Loyalty is measured on a 5-point scale, attachment representations on a 4-point scale.

<sup>a</sup>df related to paired *t*-tests.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Correlations between attachment representations and senses of loyalty regarding foster parents and biological parents

### *Attachment representations*

The stronger the total attachment representation regarding the foster parents, the stronger the total attachment representation regarding the biological parents ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and vice versa. All the dimensions of the attachment representations questionnaire showed a significant positive (moderate) correlation between the foster parents and the biological parents (see Table 2).

### *Senses of loyalty*

Children with a high total sense of loyalty towards their foster parents, also reported a stronger total sense of loyalty towards their biological parents ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Except for the subscales trust and justice, all the loyalty subscales showed positive (moderate to strong) correlations (see Table 2).

## Differences in attachment representations and senses of loyalty regarding foster parents and biological parents

### *Attachment representations*

Foster children reported a significantly stronger attachment representation towards their foster parents compared to their biological parents regarding the total scale (total scale:  $t = -6.47$ ,  $df = 2538$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as two subscales (turning to (foster)

**TABLE 3** Correlations between attachment representations, senses of loyalty and self-reported wellbeing (N = 59)

	<i>Wellbeing</i>	
	<i>Foster parents</i>	<i>Biological parents</i>
Attachment representation	.41**	.11
Affective bond	.32*	.02
Turn to for help	.45**	.19
Psychological availability	.32*	.06
Sense of loyalty	.01	-.08
Trust	.28*	-.03
Justice	.35*	.11
Vulnerability	-.30*	-.33*
Recognition	.38**	.25
Affective binding	-.05	-.26
Restrictiveness	-.55***	-.10

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

parent for help:  $t = -7.00$ ,  $df = 6315$ ,  $p < .001$ , and psychological availability:  $t = -6.52$ ,  $df = 1563$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No difference was found for the dimension affective bond.

#### *Senses of loyalty*

No differences between the foster child's sense of loyalty towards foster parents and biological parents were found on the total scale and the subscales (see Table 2), except for the subscales trust and vulnerability. Foster children reported that they trust their foster parents more and see them as less vulnerable than their biological parents (trust:  $t = -2.28$ ,  $df = 31229$ ,  $p < .05$ , vulnerability:  $t = 4.91$ ,  $df = 5498$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Relationship between wellbeing and the attachment representations and senses of loyalty regarding foster parents and biological parents**

#### *Wellbeing*

The mean reported wellbeing was 7.86 (SD = 1.94). Foster children with a higher sense of self-reported wellbeing, reported stronger attachment representations towards their foster parents on the total scale ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and all the subscales (see Table 3). Regarding the dimensions of senses of loyalty towards their foster parents, three significant positive and two significant negative correlations were found with the child's wellbeing. Children who trust their foster parents ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ ), experience them as fair ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .05$ ), or feel accepted by them ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .01$ ), reported a higher sense of wellbeing. If they see their foster parents as more vulnerable and imposing, they had a lower sense of wellbeing (respectively,  $r = -.30$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $r = -.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Except for the subscale vulnerability, no correlations between wellbeing and attachment representations as well as senses of loyalty towards the biological parents

were found. Children who see their biological parents as more vulnerable, reported lower senses of wellbeing ( $r = -.33, p < .05$ ).

### **Differences of wellbeing between children with more equal relationships regarding foster and biological parents regarding to children with more contrasting relationships**

We divided the sample into four categories regarding attachment representations as well as senses of loyalty: (1) strongest feelings towards foster parents as well as biological parents, (2) stronger feelings towards foster parents and weaker feelings towards biological parents, (3) weaker feelings towards foster parents and stronger feelings towards biological parents, (4) weaker feelings towards foster parents as well as biological parents. The wellbeing between these groups of children significantly differed (see Table 4) for the total attachment representation scale:  $\chi^2(3, N = 59) = 10.49, p < .05$  and the loyalty subscales vulnerability:  $\chi^2(3, N = 59) = 10.09, p < .05$ , and restrictiveness:  $\chi^2(3, N = 59) = 13.42, p < .01$ . Pairwise comparisons showed that the wellbeing of foster children with strong attachment representations towards their foster parents as well as biological parents (group 1), was significantly higher than the wellbeing of foster children with weaker attachment representations towards their foster parents as well as biological parents (group 4). Furthermore, children who experience both their foster and biological parents as more vulnerable (group 1), reported lower wellbeing rates than children who experience both their foster and biological parents as less vulnerable. Children who experience lower normative boundaries (restrictiveness) from their foster parents and stronger normative boundaries from biological parents (group 3), reported a higher sense of wellbeing compared to children with stronger normative boundaries from foster parents (group 1 and 2).

### **Discussion**

Attachment and loyalty are two important and recurring psychodynamically influenced theoretical concepts when trying to understand the development and wellbeing of children raised in foster care. This study aims at contributing to the research field by investigating the feelings of attachment and loyalty from the perspective of 59 fostered children towards their foster as well as their biological parents. In conclusion, we found that these youths, on average, reported positive senses of loyalty and attachment towards both their foster and biological parents, however, their reported wellbeing is mainly related to the relationship with their foster parents. With a history of insecure early life experiences, the development of a secure relationship with sensitive and responsive foster parents, empowers the capacity of a foster child to reflect upon and understand the mental state of oneself and others, makes them better able to regulate emotional distress and subsequently heightens their psychosocial development and resilience (Fonagy *et al.*, 2004).

Comparing the relationship towards foster parents and biological parents, the foster youths in this sample have stronger attachment representations towards their foster parents than towards their biological parents. They feel that they could turn more easily for help to their foster parents, and that their foster parents are more psychologically available for them, compared to their biological parents. This study found no indica-

**TABLE 4** Differences of wellbeing between children with more equal or contrasting relationships regarding foster parents and biological parents

	<i>Group<sup>a</sup></i>				$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>Significant pairwise comparisons<sup>d</sup></i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>			
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>			
Attachment representation	8.45 (1.48)	8.27 (2.05)	7.36 (1.34)	6.72 (2.10)	10.49 <sup>*b</sup>	3	1 > 4
Affective bond	8.05 (1.98)	8.45 (1.50)	7.91 (2.48)	7.06 (1.14)	6.80	3	
Turn to for help	8.46 (1.59)	8.15 (2.01)	7.47 (1.07)	6.79 (2.18)	7.58	3	
Psychological availability	8.33 (1.50)	8.30 (2.23)	7.08 (1.17)	7.06 (2.25)	7.53	3	
Sense of loyalty	7.85 (1.44)	7.50 (2.07)	7.80 (2.56)	8.42 (1.64)	2.15	3	
Trust	8.29 (1.37)	8.40 (1.66)	6.98 (3.00)	7.26 (1.98)	4.12	3	
Justice	8.23 (1.39)	8.57 (1.75)	7.22 (2.71)	7.40 (1.93)	4.83	3	
Vulnerability	7.06 (2.17)	7.92 (1.38)	7.60 (2.16)	8.83 (1.26)	10.09 <sup>*b</sup>	3	1 < 4
Recognition	8.49 (1.24)	8.06 (1.61)	7.63 (1.96)	6.26 (2.82)	7.39	3	
Affective binding	7.64 (2.21)	8.19 (1.48)	7.08 (1.73)	8.38 (1.53)	3.24	3	
Restrictiveness	6.95 (2.31)	7.24 (1.57)	9.29 (1.06)	8.44 (1.29)	13.42 <sup>**c</sup>	3	3 > 1 3 > 2

<sup>a</sup>Group 1: strongest feelings towards foster parents as well as biological parents ( $n = 20-29$ ). Group 2: stronger feelings towards foster parents and weaker feelings towards biological parents ( $n = 7-18$ ). Group 3: weaker feelings towards foster parents and stronger feelings towards biological parents ( $n = 5-15$ ). Group 4: weaker feelings towards foster parents as well as biological parents ( $n = 10-22$ ).

<sup>b</sup>Four out of five imputation rounds showed significant results.

<sup>c</sup>All imputation rounds showed significant results.

<sup>d</sup>Reported if three or more imputation rounds showed significant results.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

tions for competing senses of loyalty when comparing the relationships with foster and biological parents. We found, however, that foster children experience their biological parents as more vulnerable and trust them less than their foster parents, which is comprehensible considering the problematic background and living condition of most parents. It appears that feeling well for foster children is mainly related to the relationship with their foster parents (attachment as well as loyalty), and to a much lesser extent

with the relationship with their biological parents. This is also emphasised by Gardner (1996), namely that foster children in a stable foster-family situation with enriching opportunities regard foster parents as their most important caregivers to whom they feel closest. If this relationship is a good one, the child feels well. This finding may also partly be explained by the relatively long mean length of placement of our study sample, assuming that a sustainable extent of adjustment to the foster family goes along with stronger family relationships (in line with Strijker & Knorth, 2009) and more positive developmental outcomes (Newton *et al.*, 2000). Eventually, children with strong attachment representations towards their foster as well as biological parents benefits the most, their wellbeing is significantly higher than children with a lower attachment representations towards foster parents as well as biological parents. Regarding their sense of loyalty, specifically children who see their foster and biological parents as more vulnerable, feel worse compared to children who experience this feelings less. Children who perceive their daily relationship with their foster parents as very restrictive with strong proposed norms, expectations and rules (superego binding), feel worse, than children with less restrictive foster parents. This latter finding might be explained by the developmental period of the participants. Adolescents appear to have more difficulties with dealing with proposed norms, expectations and rules, which might result in lower wellbeing when having stronger feelings of superego binding (Wenar, 1994). The degree of restrictiveness of their own parents appear of less influence to their wellbeing, probably because they are not daily confronted with these restrictive norms, expectations and rules.

Finally, comparing the children with a similar type of relationship towards foster parents and biological parents (i.e. both stronger, or both weaker), with children with a different quality of this relationship (i.e. stronger to the one and weaker to the other), we hardly found any differences for their self-reported wellbeing. This contributes to the conclusion that the children in this sample do not seem to suffer from conflicting loyalties or competing relationships between foster parents and biological parents.

This study had some limitations. In the first place, the response rate was low and consequently the research group was small. In general, the Netherlands is known for its low response rates to surveys (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2002). Moreover, low response rates and loss of subjects among foster children are common (e.g. Murray, 2005). The foster children in our study were (at the request of the foster care institutions) approached via their foster parents and this might have restricted their accessibility (gatekeeper role). The small sample and low response rate might have influenced the external validity of our study. The reported positive perceptions of the relationships with both foster parents and biological parents might be an indication for/of such a bias, as based on the often adverse pre-foster care experiences of foster children in general, less positive relationships (attachment) to their biological parents and their foster parents could be expected (Bowlby, 1973). Therefore, caution should be taken with generalisation of the results beyond this sample. Furthermore, the sample involved a specific age segment of foster children (between 10 and 18 years). Children in this age group can think for themselves and are able to give their view on the subjects raised. However, based on this study no claims can be made regarding younger foster children.

In this study we used pre-defined rating-scales to measure the perceptions of foster children. It should be noted that this is a limited way of focusing on the child's perspective, as this didn't give foster children themselves the possibility to define the

concepts and meanings (Holland, 2009). Moreover, we did not ask foster children directly about feelings of conflicting loyalties, but classified them based on their different scores regarding their foster and biological parents. It could be argued that children may or may not feel conflicting loyalties, although being classified otherwise in this study. To our knowledge there are no existing instruments directly measuring loyalty conflicts.

Some cautiousness interpreting the results of this study regarding the attachment representations is necessary. Firstly, the mode of administration of the PARA to children differed from the original administration mode (paper–pencil vs. orally presented similar questions). This might have had an influence on the validity of the instrument (Bowling, 2005). On the one hand, in a paper-and-pen version you can't check if children really understand the items and how to answer them, which might reduce the validity (cognitive perspective). On the other hand, situational factors like social desirable answers and interviewer biases might be of less importance, resulting in a better quality of the answers. (Bowling, 2005). Secondly, the used instrument (PARA) does not provide a classification of the attachment in terms of secure or insecure, so we cannot draw conclusions about the type of attachment. To our knowledge, there is no validated self-questionnaire available for children which reliably diagnoses a secure or insecure attachment relationship with parents or other caregivers. However, the development of the PARA is based on a widely accepted definition of attachment (Zegers *et al.*, 2006; Harder *et al.*, 2013). It is also true that our operationalisation of the wellbeing of foster children is limited. The study did not consider more specific psychological and behavioral problems, family functioning and school problems (as for instance McWey *et al.*, 2010). The average wellbeing in the group of foster children is slightly lower than that of the average Dutch child (Ter Bogt *et al.*, 2003). The slightly lower score is probably affected by their problematic background and the fact that almost half of children had spent time in a children's home and one in three of them had already lived in one or more foster families. The number of times a child moves to a new foster family is a strong predictor for later psychological and behavioral problems, irrespective of the level of behavioral issues that exist at the beginning of the placement with the first foster family (Rubin *et al.*, 2007). However, placement stability not always predict the quality of the child's relationships with their foster carers (Sinclair *et al.*, 2005).

In short, regarding long term foster care youth, a good relationship with the foster parents is essential for a foster child's sense of wellbeing. If this relationship is good, the relationship and contact with parents need not compromise the child's wellbeing. This practically implies that support can be as well focused on enhancing the relationship between the child and its foster parents, as on adherence to the relationship with the biological parents, without necessarily having a competing effect on the child. Since individual cases differ in many ways, this study especially indicates the relevance of focusing on the perception of the child about its interpersonal relationships within the foster and biological family (also in line with Cooley *et al.*, 2014). The child perspective needs to have a central role for practitioners deciding who needs to be involved, or which relationship needs to be the main objective, in support or therapy.

### Disclosure statement

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