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Original Research Article

Beyond professional terms – the family metaphor in staff descriptions of their relations to young people in Swedish secure care

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Abstract:

One premise for the organisation of residential care for youth is that staff are expected to relate to each young person individually, but also to the group of young people as a whole. The relational interplay between staff and placed youths in secure unit care is fundamentally based on asymmetry, with interactions taking place in a context of confinement. The aim here is to explore how staff working in secure institutional care for youths in Sweden understand and describe their relationships with youth in terms that extend beyond professionalism, and especially their use of the family metaphor. Fifty-three interviews with staff were analysed in a two-step qualitative analysis, which generated three themes that highlighted staff narratives focusing on descriptions of parenting, sibling relationships, and closeness without using the family metaphor. One conclusion is that despite an overall shift away from the family metaphor, in the direction of framing residential care in professional terms, the family concept seems to sit quite well even in an environment with ambitions to provide professional care. The family metaphor may not be the cornerstone of care, but it is eminently present.

Introduction

Institutions for young people are settings for intense interpersonal interactions and environments in which a multitude of relations are established. Interactions take place within a collective milieu of a group of staff workers and a group of young people. A basic premise of the organisation of residential homes is that staff are expected to relate to each of the young people in their care as individuals, but also to the group of young people as a whole. In this study we



elaborate on how staff view their relations to youth compulsorily placed in Swedish secure care (locked institutions, i.e. SiS¹).

The character of staff-youth relations is often highlighted as a crucial aspect of quality residential care (Harder et al., 2013; Nolbeck et al., 2023). These relations are complex and may be described – on both sides – in various ways (Andersson, 2020; Engström et al., 2020; Fowler, 2016; Henriksen & Refsgaard, 2021; Vogel, 2020). The staff-youth relationship may be framed in professional terms but may also be portrayed in a less formal way, such as in terms of family. Perceptions of these relationships can also range from basically positive and trustful to negative and hostile (Andersson, 2022; Engström et al., 2020).

The relational interplay between staff and youth placed in secure care is based on asymmetry, with interactions taking place in a context of confinement. The young people's placement in a secure unit is mandatory, and their problems, needs and care may be viewed in various and incongruent ways (Orsi et al., 2010). Thus, the dynamic of incarceration makes the units a site of both protection and punishment, both care and control. On the one hand, staff are to provide care and treatment; on the other, they also exercise control over young people who are placed in care against their will. This requires navigating between different and often incompatible logics. Yet staff workers in secure units generally have minimal training, and there have been recurring reports of insufficient levels of staff competence in Swedish secure units (Pålsson et al., 2023).

Working in residential care for young people, not least in a secure care unit, is emotionally demanding. It involves dealing with tensions and conflicts of various kinds (Andersson, 2022), and navigating between different logics, often described in terms of making a division between the professional and carer roles (Fowler, 2016; Nolbeck et al., 2023; Smith, 2020). One way of approaching the 'non-professional side' – the carer role – is to frame it in terms of staff being like a family or of the institutional setting as 'family-like' (Sallnäs, 1999). This may be an attractive framing: some children who describe positive experiences in residential care refer to it as being part of a family, and use kin terms for staff members, such as 'dad' or 'sister' (Kendrick, 2013). While a secure unit is far from a family-like setting, carer relations may still be inspired by the family metaphor (cf. Andersson, 2022).

In this article we analyse the ways in which staff working in secure units understand and negotiate their relations to the young people placed in these units. We highlight the intersection of the carer role with the professional role by exploring how staff understand and describe their relationships with the young people in terms that extend beyond the professional, and especially the use of the family metaphor. How is the family metaphor used and what kinds of

¹ The Swedish Board of Institutional Care (NBIC): <https://www.stat-inst.se/om-sis/om-webbplatsen/other-languages/the-swedish-national-board-of-institutional-care/>



relationships between staff and youth does it include? What are the implications of framing such relationships in terms that extend beyond professionalism?

Previous research

The staff-youth relationship is well illustrated in the literature (Henriksen et al., 2023; Whittaker et al., 2023). Here we focus on two main themes: first, how the concept of family appears in this context, and second, the emphasis on professionalism in staff-youth relationships as a precursor to good outcomes for youth in residential care settings.

The concept of family in residential care

Fowler (2016) stresses that staff at residential care units for youths are expected to take on many different roles and duties in their day-to-day work. One of these roles is that of 'parent', which, however, is difficult to balance with their professional role. Using 'family-like' expressions for staff in residential care is hard to navigate, Fowler concludes. Kendrick (2013), however, argues for a wider conceptual framework that draws on sociology of the family to further understand the staff-youth relationship in residential care. Gradin Franzén (2014) shows that staff, for various reasons, describe their relationships with young people in terms of a mother/father or older sibling role, implying closeness. Building relationships also seems to have different meanings depending on the ward in question and the time frame (Ponnert et al., 2020). In one study of emergency wards at Swedish secure units, Ponnert et al. (2020) found that staff thought they should not work towards a deeper relationship with young people, viewing this as a job for staff in treatment wards where young people were placed for longer periods of time.

Staff-youth relationships as key to outcomes

In a key article, Harder et al. (2013) stress that a good relationship between staff and youth depends on the treatment skills of the staff and the motivation levels of the youth. They point to skills such as empathy, trustworthiness and reliability, and the knowledge we have about good therapeutic alliances as vital to the successful treatment of youth mandated to treatment/care. Yet, at the same time, research indicates that staff at compulsory treatment institutions are not well educated and trained (Pålsson et al., 2023), and additionally that young people in these kinds of institutions often lack motivation. Van Dam et al. (2011) studied staff behaviour in relation to the problems of placed youth, pointing out that the relationship between the staff and the youth is more important than the specific interventions that the staff make. Harder et al. (2017) highlights what young people identify as important personal skills: authority (balance between rules and freedom), empathy, availability, caring, listening, trustworthiness, honesty, and stress tolerance (cf. Anglin, 2002). In the same study, they report that parents of placed children believe that staff should not engage in power struggles. Young people say their own motivation is an essential factor for



change (pointing out the need for training in Motivational Interviewing for staff). Harder et al. (2017) also stress that staff working with young people start from their own ideals and personal styles, but it is preferable for there to be a common treatment model to start from.

In their systematic literature review, Steels and Simpson (2017) highlight the importance for staff of creating strong ties to young people, because these can have a therapeutic effect, although Wästerfors (2012) points out that the social bonds that are primarily strengthened during an institutional stay are those between the young people. From a prosocial development perspective this is not necessarily positive, as Cameron-Mathiasen et al. also note in their systematic review (2022), as well as Dodge et al. (2006) in their article on peer influence. Still, the working alliance is central to the effectiveness of treatment (Engström et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2022). Thus, the relationship between staff and young people is an important part of institutional placement as a whole – although, as Gallagher and Green (2012) stress, young people's experiences of their placement depend upon an overall caring attitude from all individuals with whom they come into contact. Further, Carvalho et al. (2022) conclude in their study that the development of emotional ties between staff and youth depends upon the staff member's advocacy for the role of reflexive practice and self-knowledge, and the young person's capacity for relating.

In sum, many scholars describe the relationship between staff and young people as fundamentally a professional relationship, using professional terms such as alliance. Yet the exact lines separating a professional relationship from its opposite seem unclear. This study is located in these borderlands. Thus, this article addresses how staff workers talk about the staff-youth relationship in terms that extend beyond the professional – such as through the use of family metaphors.

Secure units: The context of the study

In Sweden, the majority of young people placed in secure care units are between the ages of 16 and 18, with the girls being somewhat younger. Many of them report being subjected to psychological or physical violence by a parental figure prior to their institutionalisation (SiS, 2021). They also report a high degree of psychological vulnerability, including severe trust issues, depression, and suicidal thoughts (cf. Denison et al., 2018, for an international context). These young people are thus a vulnerable group with multiple psychosocial problems, including criminality, experience of abuse and domestic violence, and serious mental illness.

The Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (SiS) runs 21 different secure units in Sweden, and every year around 1,100 youth, mostly boys, are placed in these institutions. Staff have far-reaching legal authority over the young people, including, for example, controlling their calls and deciding whether to hold them



in isolation. Most secure unit workers are treatment staff.² They may have a range of backgrounds and work experience, including working with young people in schools or adults in prison. In Sweden, secure unit workers must hold a secondary school diploma; an additional two-year vocational degree in social work is considered desirable, but it is fairly common to lack the vocational degree (Pålsson et al., 2023). Most workers do receive continuing education in the areas of conflict management, suicide prevention, and Motivational Interviewing. In violent situations, staff are permitted to use physical restraint and seclusion rooms, but young people may be placed in isolation for a maximum of four hours. Secure units are often located in rural areas, away from other buildings, and are often fenced in. Youth are largely confined to their units, except for medical or district court visits. The most common reasons for placement are criminality, substance abuse, or other socially destructive behaviours. In Sweden, young people are placed at secure units by municipal social services (child welfare), not by the criminal justice system. While youth institutions globally tend to be characterised by the constant presence of control and safety awareness, compared to the UK and US (cf. Hill et al., 2007), Nordic institutions are principally characterised more by a treatment tradition than a retributive tradition (Enell et al., 2018).

Theory

The family metaphor

The good family is a potent image in society at large, and even more so in out-of-home care, including secure care. In contrast to foster care, secure units and other types of residential homes are professional settings. They are organisations created to take care of and/or treat children, where staff are paid to do this job, whose nature as a kind of emotional work has been stressed (cf. Andersson, 2022; Bolton, 2005). The children are replaced, and personnel come and go on schedule. Yet use of the family metaphor is also a common phenomenon in residential care. Historically, the idea of 'being family-like' has been deemed important, mainly based on the notion that it might temper the instrumental and impersonal sides of the traditional institution (Bullock et al., 1993). The idea of 'family' may be used both as an ideology and as an organising principle: in other words, activities inside the institution are intended to emulate a family or a foster home in various respects (Sallnäs, 1999). Obviously, such a setting impacts on how the relations between staff and children and young people are framed.

Hydén and Hydén (2002) distinguish between 'familyhood' and 'parenthood', arguing that these are two different functions in relation to children. When

² In some other countries, the profession in question is referred to as 'social pedagogy', and training takes place in the university system; see, e.g., Steel and Simpson (2017). See also Whittaker et al. (2023) regarding different countries' educational requirements.



children and parents are split apart (upon divorce or at placement in out of home care), these functions, which were combined when children and parents lived together, are separated. Parenthood must be reconstructed and reformulated when children and parents no longer share a family life. In cases of parents separating, the children may also be part of a new family. As we will see, use of the family metaphor when describing staff relationships to young people may include both parenthood and familyhood.

Method

Participants

The data analysed in this article were collected as part of a research project investigating staff perceptions of violence and emotions at secure units for young people in Sweden.³ In this manner, the research question in the current study has been retrospectively applied to the interview data (further discussed in subsequent sections of the article). Table 1 describes the interview participants.

	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	All units
Average age	38 (min: 24 max: 62)	36 (min: 27 max: 49)	43 (min: 27 max: 61)	39 (min: 24 max: 62)
Sex	74% men	55% men	50% men	64% men
Two-year vocational degree	56%	45%	100%	57%
Average length of work experience	4 years (min: 5 months max: 16 years)	3.5 years (min: 1 year max: 21 years)	9 years (min: 3 years max 19 years)	4 years (min: 5 months max: 21 years)
Number of participants	27 (of total 40)	20 (of total 70)	6 (of total 25)	53
Type of institution	Single-sex, boys – emergency, investigation, and treatment	Single-sex, boys – emergency and treatment	Single-sex, girls – emergency and treatment	

Table 1: Characteristics of interview participants (n=53)

As Table 1 shows, differences between the three institutions exist, but the focus of this study was not on comparing and contrasting the units, but rather on viewing the dataset as a whole. As Table 1 also indicates, staff work on different wards.

³ Approved by the Local Ethical Committee in Stockholm (reference number 2016/2165-31/5).



Youth are meant to stay in the emergency (acute) wards for only eight weeks, to interrupt very negative patterns of behaviour. During that time it is decided whether the young people should be placed for further investigation of e.g., neuropsychiatric problems or move to a unit providing treatment programs for drug abuse or crime prevention (Ponnert et al., 2020). The institutions included in this study do not differ in any way from other institutions run by SiS, in terms of target group, treatment, staff density, level of education of staff, etc. During the interviews, 31 out of the 53 interviewees spoke of and made reference to the concept of family in different ways.

Teller-focused interviews

The interviews were guided by Hydén's (2014, p.796) notion of 'teller-focused interviews', emphasising the relationship between interviewed and interviewer as one of facilitation and support. This interview procedure uses open-ended questions and encourages in-depth follow-up questions (i.e., 'Tell me about..'), with the result that, in contrast to structured interviews, each is unique. Hydén's concept of the teller-focused interview was also used to inspire the telling of narratives.

Analysis

The first part of the analysis drew on Emden's (1998, pp.35–37) 'core story creation' approach, which is a means of reducing full-length stories to shorter ones to aid the process of analysis. This process of emplotment, or plot creation, also serves as a way to manage and organise narratives. The first author read all the transcripts while focussing primarily on two questions in the interview guide that addressed how staff talked about their relationships with the young people. These questions were: (1) How would you describe the relationship you have with the young people? and (2) If you were to use any metaphor to describe the relationship, what would it be?

The second part of the analysis involved generating themes, following the narrative thematic approach of Lieblich et al. (1998). This part of the analysis proceeded via three steps. In step 1, selection of the subtext (cf. emplotment), the first author read every transcription and extracted 80 narrative excerpts based on the two questions from the interview guide. In step 2, definition of the content categories, the 80 excerpts were sorted into eight categories relevant to the research questions. In step 3, sorting the categories into themes, the eight categories were assigned to three larger themes. The technique of thematisation is well-suited to this study, as it too is concerned with story content: 'what' is being told, rather than 'how'. Further, a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures; rather, it can be understood as capturing something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning across the dataset. The extent to which staff members refer to different metaphors may depend on their age, their



own relationship with their biological family, or their education; however, no in-depth analysis was made regarding the reasons for their answers (along the lines of 'why that particular association?') due to the retrospective element.

Results

The analysis shows how and to what extent secure unit staff members use the metaphor of the family to talk about and describe the staff-youth relationship. This section is structured around three themes that all fit within a larger framing of family as a positive entity– expressed by one interviewee through the idea that the creation of family is a way to succeed. The three themes are: (1) The parent: 'The one who really sees, hears, listens, and asks'; (2) Siblings: 'You get very close to some of the young people, and I see myself as a big sister', and (3) Closeness without family: 'You should be close, but not personal'.

'When we succeed, we create a family'

The family metaphor clearly frames the themes discussed below. Malin, a staff member at a unit for boys, stressed the aspect of family, saying, 'older and younger, men and women – I think they need this brother, sister, mother, father, grandmother.' Further, as one male staff member stated: 'When we succeed, we create a family where we respect each other.' Opposite approaches also exist. Hamza, a staff member with experience of working with both boys and girls, expressed resistance to the family metaphor: 'then you have gotten too personal, then you are not professional.' More common, however, were descriptions such as John's, who compared work to home life: 'It's like having two families. I spend almost as much time with the boys here as with my family.'

The parent: 'The one who really sees, hears, listens, and asks'

Several interview subjects, both men and women, used the concept of 'a parent' as a metaphor or organising principle (cf. Sallnäs, 1999). Maria, a woman of around 50 who had worked for a couple of years with mainly boys, said:

I'm probably the mother role, I think...uh...the one who really sees, hears, listens, asks...uh, the one who is caring. Uh...but probably the strictest about rules, so it's probably a mixture and that's probably where you have some success...you're always treated very well, with respect [by the boys].

Maria describes herself on one hand as a person who listens to and sees the boys, but on the other as the one who adheres strictly to the rules. Her 'parenting' includes both care and boundaries. She describes characteristics – such as being empathetic and listening – that are also highlighted in the research as relational qualities staff at secure institutions should possess (Harder et al., 2013). Several male staff members also referred to themselves as 'a father'. Stefan, aged almost 40, saw himself as a kind of extra father, he said:



It gets to be like a little extra father's role, in a way, not that big of a difference compared to having children at home. Maybe you have to be a little tougher ... and some of the youth have cultural backgrounds that vary when it comes to views on habits and hygiene.

Initially, Stefan does not express any major difference between his parenting at home and what could be seen as parenting within the context of his day-to-day work. However, he points out something Maria touches on as well: toughness and clarity. These are seemingly generic characteristics that have been highlighted in work with young people (Harder et al., 2017); however, the boundaries between a form of professional relationship and parenthood are not necessarily crystal clear, implying that perhaps a personal style will not always differ from professionalism.

This theme also includes the use of grandparenting as a metaphor, which adds a generational dimension to the analysis (Kendrick, 2013). Only staff over the age of 60 used this metaphor. Hans gives his view of what a grandparent in this context represents:

But I'd probably be a grandfather, a figure that is not so threatening, neither mother nor father. More like a grandpa who you can maybe talk to and who listens and who can maybe say 'yes, yes, I understand, your mother is like that'....

As Hans sees it, due to his age he does not become threatening, and in a way he becomes the one who listens to the potential conflict a young person could have with a parent. Here too, generic qualities such as listening and not working against an alliance (e.g., by being threatening) appear. Here again, we see that the metaphor of family can indicate a role that overlaps with professionalism, rather than being distinct from it.

Siblings: 'You get very close to some of the young people and I see myself as a big sister'

In this theme, the age difference between youth and staff is not as great as in the previous one. More staff members also bring up this metaphor, which, of course, could be due to the fact that many of the study participants were close in age to the young people. Ali said:

We are a team. We take care of each other, that's what we say every morning at our meeting. We have a part at the end called 'positive comments', and I usually say that we should respect each other and take care of each other, and the boys often say the same things because we want to stand up for each other. We are here together, we eat together, and we clean together, we live here, not us, I mean, but they do. So it turns into something like a big brother relationship, at least for me. It turns into: these are my guys.



Ali points out a close and strong relationship between him and the young people, but he also highlights a distinction: he can go home. Hence, from the youth perspective, for a restricted time, the secure unit becomes a home and thus a location where emotions have a clear place (cf. Andersson, 2022; Steels & Simpson, 2017). Secure units, then, are workplaces filled with many different emotions that staff must handle, including anger, despair, suffering, powerlessness, frustration, joy, fear, sadness, shame, guilt, curiosity, and anxiety. This fact also illustrates the similarities between the use of a family metaphor – in this case brother – and what could be thought of as a professional relationship. Both are about taking care of the young people’s emotional lives, which highlights the fact that no watertight boundaries exist between what is described as professional and a more common-sense approach.

Some female staff members referred to themselves as sisters, but not to the same extent that male staff used the term brother, perhaps due to the milieu within secure units, which is often described as masculine (Vogel, 2020). Mia, age 29, who worked mainly with girls, said:

You get very close to some of the young people and I see myself as a big sister to them. Some of them are so nice, and it is such a shame that they have ended up here and ended up in the wrong place in society. I have a pretty good relationship with them, they often respect me.

Mia’s use of the sister metaphor can be interpreted as suggesting that she partially identified with some of the placed girls, despite being around 15 years older. Furthermore, the sister image in a way suggests that the girls cannot be problematic in this context. As observed by Roesch-Marsh (2014), girls at institutions are often described as vulnerable and exhibiting risky sexual behaviour, while boys are not described as vulnerable but instead as acting out physically. However, exceptions have been discussed in the research literature in recent years (see e.g. Andersson & Øverlien, 2021; Vogel, 2020).

A related metaphor used by staff was that of the ‘play leader’. On one hand, this could be interpreted as an infantilisation of the young people by staff; on the other, it could also illustrate an older sibling taking care of a younger one. Simon said:

If you have a good group then it's like being a play leader, you manage things during the day. You fish, go to the sports hall, make sure that everyday life goes smoothly, make sure that they manage their routines... so... on a good ward, it’s a great job and you have good relationships. They open up, they talk...yes, you can tell that they are having fun.

Simon talks about his day-to-day work with the young people in a playful way, but it is also implicitly conveyed that the playfulness and calm only exist if the



group of young people can interact in a positive way. Premises for a good relationship are thus set up, and we can interpret Simon as expressing a desire for a conflict-free relationship, which probably does not exist in either a family or a professional relationship.

Closeness without family: 'Close but not personal'

This last theme contains descriptions of relationships that do not refer explicitly to family, but rather to other kinds of closeness. This theme should not be understood as a contrast to the two previous themes, but rather as broadening what could be described as closeness in a professional framing. Iris, who was about 30 and worked in a boys' institution, said:

You should be private, but not personal. Obviously, I'm going to tell things about myself, but I don't sit there and tell them where I live and I don't invite them over. I'm here as staff, I'm here to see them and their needs and try to help them find themselves and find the right tools and manage themselves.

Iris expresses the classic motto of 'close but not personal'. Proximity and what you communicate with each other is thus a matter of negotiation with seemingly clear boundaries. Hence, despite being in the role of staff, Iris here clearly talks about taking care of the young people. Perhaps it is possible to draw a parallel with some of the staff who talked about the young people as if they were their friends, where the distance that Iris highlights was also found. A relatively old staff member, Sven, used another non-family metaphor that nevertheless described closeness:

In a way, it could be like an orienteer who's trying to orient himself with a map. I am the map so they can find the right way, but then they still make their own decisions about which roads to take and then they get to whatever goal they get to. I see a lot of my job as providing opportunities for them to find their own inherent strength to change, because I don't believe so much in lecturing, in saying do this and it will be good. That won't work, but [what will work is] getting the change to come from the guys themselves.

The orienteering metaphor is quite similar to the family metaphor as it has been described above: the staff member is humbly guiding, but with certain reservations. A therapeutic relationship, too, indicates closeness, although not in exactly the same way as the family metaphor. Harald, age 47, described a relationship that was more about professional technique:

A good tactic that I think works to create an alliance is to listen: what is he saying? Is he just saying it because he knows I might be interested or are they saying it because he is genuinely interested? It usually creates a good alliance, you find a common denominator. What



else can make a good alliance? Feedback is also usually a good thing, when they ask me about something, can you call social services?

Harald describes things that can create an alliance: in other words, things conducive to a relationship. In this case, once again, it is the generic factor of listening that is highlighted (cf. Anglin, 2002).

Discussion

Interactions with youth, a generally low level of education, and not least the complexity of their work, all make the role of staff worker at secure institutions a multifaceted one. Concepts like family and professionalism are not easy to pinpoint. Staff at these institutions are ambiguous regarding their role and relationship to the young people they care for. In this way, there are significant implications for the front-line workers addressed in the study, which will be further elaborated upon in the subsequent discussion.

The aim in this article was to explore how staff understood and described their relationships with the youths in terms that extend beyond professionalism, especially using the family metaphor, which was frequently employed. Even if there is an overall shift away from this metaphor and in the direction of framing residential care in professional terms, as described by Lundstrom et al. (2018), the family concept seems to sit quite well even in an environment with ambitions to provide professional care. The family metaphor may not be the cornerstone of care, but it is eminently present. Or rather, it may be that several perceptions can exist at the same time, which is a crucial implication to consider. This may be important when it comes to for example education of staff (Pålsson et al., 2023). As Ponnert et al. (2020) identified, we observed that staff relate differently to young people depending on which ward they work at, something that also deepens and gives a more complex picture of the staff, which is important knowledge for managers and other decision-makers in relation to front-line workers. We also observed that family is largely presented in a positive way, although family relations can also be destructive and negative, which the young people obviously know because it is often one of the reasons for their placement in care.

One thought-provoking theoretical aspect that could potentially be further developed is that we observed a broadening of the family concept through use of the concepts of siblings and grandparents, creating a three-generational dimension that in a way also creates a wider network for the youth. Today, however, there are growing demands on social services in general, including residential units, to provide professional, even evidence-based care (Pålsson et al., 2023). A general shift has been described in the field of residential care 'from a family logic and milieu therapy to a professional logic and evidence-based interventions' (Lundström et al, 2020, p.7). One might say that faith in family being a sufficient principle for residential care has weakened. This leaves less



scope for framing the organisation of the day-to-day environment and the relations between staff and young people in family terms, or at least for using that as the cornerstone of 'the care'. However, as we have shown, the idea of family-like relations between staff and young people is far from having disappeared, which is important to embrace, both in training programs for staff and in the everyday practice of front-line workers.

Anglin (2002) identifies various relational approaches that staff need to be able to use during their workday: for example, listening and responding to youth with respect, and establishing structure and routines. These attributes and skills align with this study's findings with respect to how the concept of family is conceptualised in the current context by staff. Further, Anglin points out that the more regulated the institution, the greater the risk that intimacy will disappear, and along with it the familial nature of the environment, possibly increasing the risk of violence. Nevertheless, as Andersson (2022) notes, staff believe that the tougher they could be on young people, the better the relationship was, which departs in some measure from how a good and progressive relationship and work alliance is described in the research literature. Anglin (2002) stresses that institutional care is partly about creating an extra family environment. However, this can be problematic because it is a starting point for the staff more so than the young people. More research is needed to address this question from the youth perspective. Furthermore, how the family metaphor is used may be connected to how staff view the family relations that the young people actually have. Do they have a family to lean on, or is it an empty space that staff think they should try to fill? Or do staff portray the relationship more in terms of adding an extra family member? All of these questions merit further research.

Limitations

An important limitation to address is that the research questions in the current study were not conceived at the time the interviews were conducted. In other words, the research queries pertaining to the family concept were retrospectively applied to the material. However, we do not perceive that the current design has influenced our results or the interpretation of the interviews. Instead, the present study should be aligned with previous research on violence and emotions, highlighting how professionals' perceptions of their profession may be significant (cf. Andersson, 2022). This approach also underscores aspects of the qualitative method, in that interview data seldom exclusively encompasses the explicit focus of the investigation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Furthermore, in this context, the narratives of the staff do not depict the entirety of the dataset. Although this circumstance might potentially diminish the general applicability of the staff stories, limitations are rarely asserted within the framework of qualitative methodological approaches (Riessman, 2008). As emphasised by Clandinin and Connelly (2004), a tension arises concerning certainty due to the undeniable reality that diverse interpretations coexist.



Nevertheless, narrative analysis has limitations, one being that these forms of representation all have text and talk that represent the story incompletely, selectively, or imperfectly.

Conclusion

In this context, the metaphorical depiction of relationships through the lens of a family can be perceived as a counterpoint to professionalism. However, an alternative perspective suggests that the utilisation of familial terminology serves as a means to convey intimacy and a compassionate demeanour within an environment characterised by stringent regulations and numerous constraints upon the youths. On the whole, the family metaphor carries favourable connotations, representing an avenue to position connections with young people within a constructive conceptual framework. When staff employ familial language to characterise their relationships with youth in care, they allude to an 'ideal family' and the supportive connections that can manifest within a familial context, essentially portraying an idealised model family. It is crucial to bear in mind that actual families are inherently more intricate; nonetheless, if the deployment of the family metaphor predominantly aims to articulate positive relationships outside the realm of professionalism, references to the paradigmatic family structure are likely readily available.

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