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Experiences of parental regret among Australian foster parents

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Abstract

To date, research on parental regret has focused exclusively on parental regret among those who have given birth or whose partners have given birth. While in the context of foster parenting attrition has been a consistent focus in research, regret that does not necessarily lead to attrition has less often been a focus. The present paper reports on a study that explored experiences of parental regret among a sample of Australian foster parents who self-selected to participate in response to online advertising explicitly focused on parental regret. Interviews were conducted in 2023 with 28 Australian foster parents with a diversity of caring experiences. Transcribed interviews were analysed thematically. Themes developed focused on: (1) regret related to the impact of foster parenting on participants' birth children; (2) regret related to assuming that existing parenting skills would suffice in the care of foster children; (3) regret caused by a lack of support; and (4) regret resulting in feelings of shame and guilt and ultimately placement termination. The paper concludes by considering what these findings mean for foster care systems that are already stretched, with a focus on better training and support for foster parents so as to mitigate attrition.

Plain language summary

There are more and more conversations about parents who regret having children. Yet it isn't often that these conversations talk about foster parents. In this paper we look at interviews with 28 Australian foster parents who were asked to share their thoughts about regret. The people we spoke to primarily regretted the circumstances in which they were foster carers. Some regretted not receiving enough support. Others regretted the impact that foster care had on their birth children. A small number experienced guilt and shame because they stopped providing foster care. The paper suggests ways that conversations about parental regret may be undertaken with foster carers to reduce the likelihood of people ceasing to provide care.

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Introduction

Given that it is primarily cisgender women who give birth, the injunction to reproduce continues to fall upon this cohort, reinforcing the motherhood mandate and treating as normative the ideal that being a woman equates with being a mother (Russo, 1976). For decades women have pushed back against the motherhood mandate, yet with the recent boom in motherhood influencers (Chee et al., 2023), the continued impact of television shows that emphasise motherhood (Ex et al., 2006) and the stigma associated with being a child-free woman (Fatima et al., 2023), the reproductive expectations placed upon women remain salient in contemporary Australia. Research also suggests that there is an increasing emphasis upon 'active fatherhood'; however, this typically does not rise to the level of a mandate, with fatherhood (or at least active, involved fatherhood) still widely viewed as optional for men (Hunter et al., 2017).

In attempting to reconcile the push to reproductivity with critiques of the motherhood mandate, researchers have increasingly focused on what it means for women in particular to feel compelled to have children, only to subsequently regret their decision. This focus is especially salient given that research suggests that between five and 14% of parents regret having children (Piotrowski et al., 2023). As O'Reilly (2019) has noted, motherhood regret both pushes back against the normative ideal that all women want to be mothers, that all women find motherhood easy and that all women find joy in motherhood, while at the same time emphasising that women who express regret about motherhood often face, or fear they will face, stigma. To not want to be a mother is one thing, but to become a mother and express a wish that one had not constitutes an additional level of shame directed towards women.

Research on motherhood regret has grown over the past decade. The work of Donath (e.g., 2015) has provided a clear theoretical framework for much of the subsequent research on the topic. In her interviews with 23 Israeli Jewish women, Donath (2015) found that taking up the motherhood mandate, despite misgivings or a lack of desire for motherhood, resulted in regret. Yet Donath also frames regret as agency: as claiming a subject position beyond that typically expected of women who are mothers. Researchers since or alongside Donath have often focused on online discussion forums, where primarily women discuss regrets about motherhood. In the Finnish context, for example, Sihto and Mustosmäki (2021) found that women often experienced regret due to the overwhelming nature of motherhood, but also that regret commonly led to feelings of guilt. Exploring Reddit posts, Moore and Abetz (2019) found that a common form of regret was circumstantial regret: not necessarily regretting becoming a mother, but rather regretting the context in which this happened (i.e., the timing of motherhood or lack of support from a partner). Finally, Bodin (2023), in the Swedish online context, found a paired contrast between the expression of love for children and circumstantial regret. One study has focused on parental regret among fathers in the Spanish context (Meil et al., 2023) and found that men regretted fatherhood when it impacted upon their career or upon their intimate relationship with their partner.

Despite the relatively comprehensive nature of this body of research, to date the focus has been almost exclusively on regret among people who conceive and birth a child. Overlooked has been regret among people who have children through other means. Monk's (2016) article is an exception, in her conversations with parents who experienced post-adoption depression and, for some, regret. Some of those interviewed felt a considerable disparity between their expectations and the reality of parenting a child who came with significant trauma, while others felt beholden to the expectation

that adoptive parents are 'saints' who should never express unhappiness about being a parent. Yet aside from this piece, a focus on regret among parents other than those who gave birth (or whose partner gave birth) is missing from the literature.

The study reported in this present paper sought to understand experiences of regret among foster parents living in Australia. In Australia, seven out of every 1,000 non-Indigenous children and 72 per 1,000 for Indigenous children live in out-of-home care, making for a total of over 44,900 children living in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2020). Of these children, 67% are in care long-term (two years or more), with the majority of these children being on long-term orders, meaning that they are likely to remain in care until they become adults (AIHW, 2020). The majority of children in long-term care are placed with kinship carers (i.e., a family member of their birth parents); however 39% of children in long-term care are in foster care (AIHW, 2020). People who provide long-term foster care are hence the primary parents for the children in their care.

While parental regret has not been an explicit focus in foster care research to date, there is most certainly a substantial body of research on attrition in foster care. Research has consistently found that it is primarily circumstantial factors that lead to attrition. These factors include a sense of powerlessness in the face of statutory systems, the responsiveness (or not) of statutory systems and the relationships that foster carers experience with statutory staff (see Hanlon et al., 2021, for an overview). Yet while these factors, following Moore and Abetz (2019), may be viewed as a form of circumstantial regret, they differ in that, in the case of previous research on foster carer attrition, they result in the termination of care provision. By contrast, in the present paper our focus is primarily on experiences of parental regret (and specifically circumstantial regret) where foster parents do not cease caring.

Method

Reflexivity statement

We are a group of non-Indigenous academics with a diversity of genders, gender modalities and sexualities. Some of us teach about child protection, some of us are involved in working alongside child protection statutory bodies or non-governmental organisations, all of us have conducted research on child protection, and some of us are parents, including in the context of child protection systems. While we engaged in bracketing to ensure that our lived experiences did not bias our interpretation of the data, we also undertook an approach to coding the data that relied upon our diverse experiences as people both with and without lived experience of parenting in the context of child protection systems.

Participants

The research reported in this paper was approved by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (no. 6400). Participants were recruited through foster and kinship care support organisations in Australia, with posts made on their social media and through mail-outs to their membership. Text in the posts and mail-outs was as follows: 'We are conducting research into foster carers' experiences of psychological challenges and parental regret in foster care settings.' People were eligible to participate if they had provided care to at least one child, were living in Australia and were aged 18 years or older. Upon contacting the second author, participants were provided with a full information sheet, a consent form and a demographic form, and were asked

to return the latter two completed, following which an interview time was then scheduled. Participants were provided with information about support sources should they find the interview challenging. Participants were given a $50AUD honorarium in recognition of their time.

Procedure

All interviews were undertaken by the second author. Interviews were undertaken between January and March 2024 either via video call or telephone. Interview questions focused on: (1) experiences of challenges as a foster parent; (2) experiences of parental regret; and (3) support needs in terms of parenting experiences. Interview questions analysed for the present paper were: 'Please share with me experiences and feelings about regret as a foster parent' and 'How did these experiences and feelings impact your relationships/sense of self/relationship with foster care systems?'. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent from participants. Interviews lasted on average 58 minutes (range 44–106 minutes). Interview recordings were transcribed by a professional service and pseudonyms were assigned. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts, but all declined.

Analytic approach

Responses to the two interview questions outlined above were collated and read repeatedly by the first author, following the approach to thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Through this process of familiarisation, the first author developed a list of codes that represented topics repeatedly mentioned by participants. Having developed these codes, the first author then condensed these codes into themes. While codes depict a diversity of topics within the data set, themes by comparison represent higher order conceptualisations of the data, focused on moving beyond simply the semantic meaning of the data and instead also exploring the latent meaning of the data as it sits within broader societal discourse. The first author then selected indicative extracts from the data to represent each theme and developed the analysis below. As such, the extracts included are indicative but not exhaustive of each theme.

Results

Sample

In the sample of 28 interviews, the majority of participants were women, three were men and two were non-binary. The majority of participants were heterosexual, with two reporting that they were gay, one queer, one bisexual and one pansexual. All participants reported that they were white. The average age of participants was 46 years. A majority of the participants reported that they were married, with five being single, and four being in a *de facto* relationship. Most of the participants primarily provided long-term foster care; however many had also provided respite and emergency care, and two had also provided kinship care. Between them participants had cared for 235 foster children (both current and former), with the average number of children cared for being four (range 1–138 children; excluding the one person who had cared for 138 children, the average number of children cared for was three). While the majority of participants were caring for non-Indigenous children who were born in Australia, a small number were caring for Indigenous children or children from a migrant background.

'Hierarchising the members of my family': Regret due to impact upon birth children

In this first theme, participants spoke about feeling regret about a particular foster placement due to the impact that it had on their birth children. While participants were often at pains to emphasise that they felt that they had done good for the children who came into their care, they were also often concerned about the cost of this to their birth children. Erika, for example, spoke about not regretting a placement for herself, but rather regretting it for her son:

> I could categorise regret in different categories because there's like personal regret, and then there's just the regret of the impact. For example, the last placement that we had, sometimes I feel like I regret taking that placement for my own children because of the impact it had on them. I don't regret it for me, but I know that especially for my son who had a traumatic incident with this boy, his life potentially could be changed as well. So I absolutely regret taking that placement based on the impact it had on my son.

In the interview more broadly, Erika was at pains to emphasise how beneficial she felt the placement was for the child who was in her care. Yet at the same time, she struggled to reconcile this with the potential harm caused to one of her birth children. This potentially 'traumatic incident' moved her own child into a similar realm to that of the child who was in her care, namely in terms of experiencing abuse (albeit for her child at the hands of another child, not at the hands of a parent). Due to this Erika experienced regret.

Audrey also spoke about how the needs of a foster child must at times be met through sacrificing the needs of birth children:

> My kids at home who need me because they're so little and then I'm not going to get home until two hours later because I'm trying to cram meetings in after school for my foster child. So there is a lot of anguish and stress in making those decisions and effectively hierarchising the members of my family. I don't regret putting the effort and time into him. But I can see that it does ultimately have a very negative impact on at least one of my children.

Similar to Erika, Audrey states that she does not regret 'putting the effort and time' into her foster child, but she nonetheless has concerns about the 'very negative impact' that the foster placement might have on her birth children, and one in particular. As we will see in the following theme too, regret may not necessarily relate to taking on a placement, but rather the assumptions that sit around taking on a placement and the impact this can have upon people in the home.

'It's kind of a humbling process': Regret due to being ill-prepared

In this second theme, participants spoke about feeling regret about their early experiences as foster parents, due to coming into the caring role with expectations that were either out of step with the likely reality of raising children in care, or thinking that their existing parenting skills would suffice when it came to parenting children in care. Faye, for example, described the realisation that her own parenting skills did not prepare her for raising a foster child as a 'humbling process':

> 'This isn't working like I expected it to work. And you're not doing what I expected you to do. And you're not responding to my superior parenting skills that I've proven I have. So obviously you should be the perfect child, and you're not. So what's going on?' And there's that kind of tendency to go, 'Well it's your

> fault', when actually I had to look at it and go, 'Well actually it's my fault. I've approached this the wrong way'. And so it's kind of that humbling process of being taken to your knees.

As Faye elaborates here, she had expectations both about what would work and what the child would do. The reality was that neither of these expectations proved to be correct, with the default response being that somehow the child was at fault. Yet with reflection, Faye is able to see that it was her expectations that were at fault, a 'humbling process' that took her to her knees.

By contrast, while Natalia spoke about feeling prepared for 'challenges or some trauma', she was not prepared for raising a disabled child:

> I guess it's just how my life's kind of different. And it's not so much having a foster kid, it's having a foster kid with additional needs. So I think if like I was expecting having a child with some challenges or some trauma issues, or any of that kind of stuff, I wasn't expecting like some child that's got no problems whatsoever, I was expecting all of that, but I wasn't expecting the disability. Which is my stupid fault I guess.

Again, like Faye, Natalia attributes her assumptions and expectations to her own 'stupid fault'. Also like Faye, Natalia does not regret having a foster child, but she regrets the fact that her own expectations mean she was potentially ill-prepared for raising a disabled child.

David too regretted assuming that he was smart enough not to have to question what lay ahead in terms of welcoming a child into his home:

> It's complex because it's a number of things. So I regret thinking I was as smart as I thought I was and not questioning more, not questioning what would be expected of me, not questioning how I would be treated, not questioning you know simple things like, you know, oh you're having a new child placed with you, okay, and then they'd dump the child off with a garbage bag full of clothes and there's nothing.

David expected that his first placement would come with information that would help him to know what to do for the child now in his care. This expectation again did not translate into reality, with David left regretting that he had not done more to question what was to come. As we will see in the following theme, regret related to support often sits hand-in-hand with regret related to feeling ill-prepared.

'It's kind of like a forced error': Regret due to lack of support

As we saw in the previous theme, some participants both overestimated their skills in raising a child in care and underestimated the potential challenges. In this third theme, participants spoke about how even if their expectations and estimations were more in line with the reality of raising a child in care, they nonetheless sometimes experienced regret due to not receiving the support that they needed. Farrah, for example, was amply prepared for the challenges that were likely to come with her child, but the lack of support left her feeling overwhelmed:

> So I think the main overarching thing for – probably after about two months after we had [child] and the writing was starting to come on the wall. When you bring a baby home, particularly a baby like her, I was not aware of the day or the time or whatever. And then suddenly you're sort of like, 'Where's all this support they promised us?' Just never coming. And then of course then you move into overwhelm.

In her interview more broadly, Farrah spoke at length about how much work she and her partner put into preparing for the placement. Yet this preparatory work was done in collaboration with statutory agencies, whom she expected would provide ongoing support. When this support did not materialise, Farrah was left regretting the decision she had made to care for the child. Importantly, the regret was not about the child, but about the context in which the care was provided.

Em too spoke about not regretting the placement, but regretting the way in which the placement played out in terms of support:

> So that's why I don't think I regret the decision to take on the placement. Because I think regret is based off mistakes. And I don't look back at that and go, 'I made a mistake'. I look back at that and go, '[statutory agency] made a mistake because they did not complete the referral to the degree that it needed to be completed'. It's kind of like a forced error. I regret how it turned out, but that was their doing, not mine.

Here Em makes a clear distinction between regret based on her own decisions and regret caused by the mistakes of others. As she states, it is like a 'forced error'. We might suggest that this claim by Em constitutes a form of agency in regret, in that she reasonably refuses to take the blame for the actions of the statutory agency, instead suggesting that her 'mistake' was forced upon her by others. This does not mean that Em does not feel regret; rather it means she situates the cause of the regret outside of herself.

Sarah too spoke about agency in response to a lack of support:

> I think there's a lot more room for regret in fostering families because there's a lot more decisions to be made. Some of that is about all of the supports the kids need. And like can you afford all of them? Because [statutory body] isn't going to cover all of them. I am good at juggling of this, but I don't think it mitigates regret completely, but I think it reduces it. But it still requires so much work. My job is not always super supportive, but then I know I'm entitled to use carers' leave, even though they don't want me to all the time. So you know, like, I have to be able to advocate for my own rights in my own workplace as well as the kids' rights in their schools.

As Sarah notes, the high levels of support needs that often come with children in care open up the possibility of regret, especially when support is not forthcoming and foster parents must negotiate it and pay for it themselves. Yet as Sarah notes, her own advocacy means that she can apportion responsibility for regret outside of herself: it is the statutory body and her employer that cause her hardship, not herself or her child.

'I put my hand up to do this thing and I failed': Regret, shame and guilt

While in the previous themes participants spoke about regret in ways that allowed for a reconciliation of regret with their own commitment to providing care going forward, in this final theme participants spoke about how regret that resulted in the end of a foster placement led to feelings of shame or guilt, or at least that considering ending a placement would lead to such feelings. Liz, for example, spoke about living with 'deep shame and deep guilt' after terminating a placement:

> Well, my personal regret is – and I have deep shame and deep guilt, which I am continuing to work on and process but that I will likely live with for the rest of my life – is that I couldn't cope and that I abandoned

> [child]. And, for me, there's a familial tie to that. My dad abandoned me. Lots of parents abandon their kids, it happens. I had to save myself because I was drowning. But I still regret not being able to cope.

For Liz, her regret about terminating the placement is compounded by the fact that her own father 'abandoned' her. While she tries to reconcile her own repetition of this pattern with the claim that 'lots of parents abandon their kids', and that she had to 'save herself', she is nonetheless left with feelings of regret about 'not being able to cope'.

Ayla too shared that leaving her family (and hence the child in her care) amounted to a 'social faux pas':

> When I left, that sort of initial leaving, that's shit for anyone. Doesn't matter what your family is. To be the one that leaves, I felt the guilt of that and the social faux pas, because you're meant to stay for whatever – I know there's all the trauma-informed bullshit memes around – 'make sure you do what makes you happy' – but really, when you leave your family, there is a judgement. I think a social judgement comes with that. And then there's that feeling of failure. I failed. I put my hand up to do this thing and I failed at it.

In this extract Ayla positions leaving her family as a 'failure', and one that she believes is likely to come with 'social judgement'. This judgement, she suggests, is a product of the normative ideal that 'you're meant to stay for whatever', and that even if there is also the contrary suggestion that you are meant to 'do what makes you happy', ultimately the normative injunction to stay in one's family is likely to be the salient issue, and hence the cause of potential judgement.

Discussion

In this paper we have explored how a sample of foster parents living in Australia spoke about regret in regard to caring for children. In some respects, aspects of the findings echo the broader literature on parental regret. For example, and similar to Donath (2015), we identified examples of the expression of regret as constituting a form of agency. Different to Donath, however, whose focus on agency emphasised resistance to the normative expectation that all women should want to be mothers and enjoy being mothers, in our sample participants spoke about agency in the form of positioning regret as caused by external parties, rather than by their own actions. Similar to Moore and Abetz (2019), we also found examples of circumstantial regret, such that some of our participants did not regret taking children into their care but rather regretted the lack of support they experienced and its impact on their parenting. This also echoes the literature on foster carer attrition, where it is most commonly circumstantial factors that lead to foster placement termination and the cessation of care (Hanlon et al., 2021). In terms of the final theme, shame and guilt as a result of parental regret that ultimately led to a placement termination also echoes the substantial literature on foster carer attrition.

Yet beyond these similarities, we also identified unique aspects of regret among the sample. The first among these were experiences of regret related to the impact of foster children on birth children. Certainly, there is an extensive body of research on the experiences of the birth children of foster parents (e.g., Thompson et al., 2016), and while the language of regret is not commonly used in this literature, it is nonetheless the case that recognising the impact of foster children on one's birth children can indeed constitute a form of circumstantial regret. For participants in the present study, such regret did not lead to the termination of a placement, but it is nonetheless important to consider the costs of caring to birth children, including in terms of their own

traumatisation which may lead to birth children themselves experiencing regret in welcoming a foster child into their home.

Further, in terms of the unique findings of the present research, while previous research on parental regret has explored the differences between expectations about parenthood and the reality of parenthood, the findings of this study suggest additional aspects of such forms of regret as they pertain to foster parents. Specifically, for foster parents who have previously raised children they have birthed (or a partner has birthed), there may be the assumption that their existing parenting skills will suffice. While training is obviously provided to new foster parents, and ongoing training is typically offered, it is important to consider the preparedness of existing parents to become foster parents, as will be explored below.

Finally, while across the literature on parental regret it is common to see parents speak about circumstantial regret in the form of a lack of support (e.g., Moore and Abetz, 2019), this is typically regarding a partner. In the present paper we found that for foster parents, lack of support from statutory bodies and non-governmental agencies often compounded or indeed caused regret. While, as we noted above, some participants were able to reconcile this through asserting their agency (i.e., by attributing blame for regret to other parties), it is certainly the case that some foster parents may not be able to do this. That, for some participants, a lack of support resulted in a placement termination would suggest the vital importance of increased support for foster parents, and the proactive identification of the potential for regret.

Implications for practice

The findings summarised above present clear implications for practice. First, there is the potential for improved assessment of foster care applicants, such that those who already have children are better supported to explore how a foster placement may impact upon their family. Foster parent attrition and placement terminations are undesirable outcomes in the context of an already overburdened system. Any approaches that seek to mitigate, in advance, the potential for regret leading to placement termination are vital. The Mockingbird Family programme, for example, currently running in Australia, offers a model for potentially mitigating regret leading to attrition (McLaren et al., 2024). The programme connects carer households to an experienced carer who provides paid support to all of the households in a particular 'hub'. This approach ensures that all family members are provided with adequate support and fosters the creation of extended (foster) family networks. The programme has been shown to reduce attrition among foster carers enrolled in the programme as compared to foster carers who are not part of the programme.

Second, and relatedly, it is important that initial foster care training provides a specific focus for applicants who are already parents. Such applicants should be supported to examine how their assumptions about their existing parenting skills might be mismatched to parenting a child in care. Such an approach will help to ensure better preparedness for this cohort of foster parents. The Australian Childhood Foundation, for example, provides training to foster carers focused on understanding and responding to trauma, emphasising the specific experiences of children in care (McPherson et al., 2023). In many ways, training provided by the Foundation focuses on the specific skill sets that foster carers are likely to need in order to ensure their own wellbeing via a realistic assessment of the likely impact of caring for a child who has experienced trauma.

Finally, the fact that some foster parents may regret fostering so much that they terminate a placement, and subsequently experience guilt and shame, requires specific attention. While counselling in such situations should be made available, the findings reported in this paper about agency in the face of regret may afford unique avenues for supporting foster parents to process

regret-related shame and guilt. This would not involve apportioning blame *per se*, but rather supporting foster parents to examine the circumstantial causes of regret and to recognise that in some cases 'forced errors' are the issue at stake. This type of approach is evident in examples such as loss and grief support groups run by Connecting Foster and Kinship Carers South Australia – groups that focus on restorative approaches. As documented in an evaluation of the groups, a restorative approach shifts the focus away from apportioning blame and instead focuses on learning from past experiences (Riggs et al., 2022).

Strengths and limitations

The findings reported in this paper are novel in that they focus on parental regret among foster parents. The sample was diverse in terms of genders and sexualities, and the inclusion of men makes a substantive contribution to our depth of understanding of men's experiences of parental regret. Unfortunately, however, the relatively small number of men who participated did not allow for the examination of men as a separate unit of analysis. Further, in terms of sample limitations, the fact that most of the participants were white means that specific aspects of regret that may be shaped by cultural background beyond those who are white may have been missed. Further research is needed with a more diverse sample, in addition to further research with larger samples that attempt to quantify factors that may lead to parental regret among foster parents (such as through use of the Parenthood Regret Scale; Piotrowski et al., 2023).

Conclusions

This paper has provided an in-depth investigation of parental regret among Australian foster parents. As the body of research on parental regret continues to grow, it is vital that research focuses beyond solely those who give birth (or for whom a partner gives birth). While there are likely similarities across differing cohorts of parents, as identified in this paper, there are likely also unique cohort differences. For foster parents specifically, the institutionalised nature of foster care, and the challenges of working in an overstretched system, likely compound the potential for regret. Research that helps to identify why regret occurs, and helps to facilitate ways to speak about and respond to regret among foster parents, is thus important. Given that growing numbers of children are entering the foster care system in Australia, it is vital that attention continues to be paid to ensuring foster parent retention and to addressing aspects of the fostering experience that may lead to attrition.

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