'What I really needed was a voice'
Steenbakkers, Annemarie Theodora

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CHAPTER 7.

General discussion
General discussion

This thesis aimed to gain insight into the psychosocial needs of children in family foster care and the impact of traumatic experiences on these needs. To achieve these aims, youth (formerly) in foster care were invited to elaborate on their experiences and needs in care; their voices were central in understanding their psychosocial needs. Before asking youth about their experiences, an extensive literature review was conducted to describe the current knowledge base on the needs of children in foster care, how the literature conceptualizes those needs, and the ways to satisfy them. This study was followed by two Q methodological studies examining the subjective viewpoints of youth regarding their psychosocial needs. The first study described the subjective viewpoints of youth regarding how they prioritize their psychosocial needs. The viewpoints of youth with and without a history of sexual abuse were compared in order to understand the impact of sexual abuse on the needs of youth in foster care. The second study investigated whether foster parents and care workers recognized the viewpoints of youth with a history of sexual abuse. The last two studies were in-depth investigations of the specific needs of youth that resulted from their traumatic backgrounds. The first study inquired youth about how they viewed the impact they experienced from traumatic events prior to foster care. The second study focused on how youth narrate their experiences prior to care and being in care in their day-to-day conversations with people. In this final chapter, the main findings of these studies will be summarized and discussed, followed by reflections on the methodology used for these studies, and the implications for future research and practice.

Main findings

The discussion of the main findings will be organized around the two central themes of this thesis, namely psychosocial needs in general and the impact of traumatic experiences on these needs. In each section, the chapters pertaining to that theme will first be summarized, followed by an integrated discussion of these chapters.

Psychosocial needs and how to satisfy them

According to Maslow (1943), children in foster care have five basic needs that promote their healthy development: physiological needs, the need for safety, the need to belong, the need for self-esteem and the need for self-actualization. These needs can be satisfied by environmental factors, or changes in individual or interpersonal actions, thoughts or feelings (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Maslow, 1943). Meeting the needs of children in family foster care is expected to enable them to make a positive developmental turn and repair the damage of previous adverse caregiving environments (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012; Nelson et
al., 2007). This thesis therefore aimed to understand what the specific needs of children in family foster care are and how these can be satisfied, with a focus on the perceptions and experiences of children.

**Chapter 2.** The literature review in chapter 2 showed that international studies mainly focus on medical needs (a subset of physiological needs), belongingness needs, psychological needs and self-actualization needs. The safety needs were not a clear category within the literature, but physical safety aspects were present within the medical needs and relational safety aspects within the belongingness needs. The medical needs category indicates that children need to be physically and developmentally healthy, or at least as healthy as their specific medical conditions allow them to be, which should be promoted by their caregivers and health professionals (e.g., Hill & Watkins, 2003; Kaltner & Rissel, 2011). Other physiological needs of children were not present within the current literature, therefore this category deviated from Maslow’s original theory. Regarding the belongingness needs, the literature describes the importance of a sense of belonging to the biological family, foster family, friends and other significant adults. Preferably, these relationships are characterized by secure attachments, a sense of permanency, mutual trust and emotional intimacy (e.g., Kufeldt et al., 1995; Mason, 2008; Schofield & Beek, 2009).

Contrary to Maslow’s theory, the foster care literature does not focus on self-esteem needs, but on psychological needs in a broad sense, such as mental health, coping and identity development (Coholic et al., 2009; Fernandez, 2008; Nathanson & Tzioumi, 2007). Attentive and sensitive parenting is important when satisfying these needs, as well as timely interventions when mental health issues are present (Cantos & Gries, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2010; Schofield & Beek, 2005). Finally, the self-actualization needs mainly pertained to children’s needs to receive an education, which can be supported by stability and connection to the same school (Piescher et al., 2014), by foster parents and other adults who stimulate and help them (Hudson, 2013; Mendis et al., 2015; Quest et al., 2012), and by implementing interventions when educational difficulties arise (Tyre, 2012; Zetlin et al., 2010).

In addition to these needs and ways to satisfy them, the literature review also displayed many problems and obstacles children encounter regarding their needs. These problems are also important to understand, because they can indicate needs that are currently not satisfied. However, the conceptualization of needs in many articles did not align with Maslow’s original definition, because problems and needs were used as synonyms. Meeting needs promotes a healthy development while problems impede this (Maslow, 1943). It is important to address this conceptualization issue, because this can initiate a shift from thinking about problems to thinking about what can be done to meet certain needs in a more holistic way, which can subsequently promote the healthy development of children (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000).
Chapter 3. How youth in foster care perceive their own psychosocial needs was studied in chapter 3. Based on interviews and focus groups with youth and care workers, 45 statement cards regarding the psychosocial needs of youth were constructed, which were subsequently sorted by 44 participants according to their relative importance. The results of this Q methodological study show that youth with and without a history of sexual abuse can both be grouped in four factors, each differentially valuing these cards and accordingly their psychosocial needs.

These eight groups differ in whether they indicated needing help or independence. The need for help highlights that children need the support of their environment to learn, grow and cope with distress (Maslow, 1943; Schofield & Beek, 2009). The need for help and support is not merely related to Maslow’s belongingness need, but youth also need help with safety, self-esteem and self-actualization needs, showing how social support can impact other needs as well. The need for independence illustrates the growing maturity and autonomy youth want to master. Youth who balance support and independence will possibly be better equipped to deal with everyday stressors. However, some youth do not want support from their caregivers, which might result in them losing valuable social resources when leaving care (e.g., Hiles et al., 2014). The second contrast among these eight groups of youth is a more retrospective or a more prospective orientation. While some youth express the need to actively process past experiences, which can reduce the negative impact of previous adversities (Bruskas, 2008), others indicate that they prioritize self-actualization needs and seem focused on their future, for example by wanting to finish their education and master independent living skills.

Chapter 4. Foster parents and care workers play an important role in satisfying the needs of the children in their care, as was shown both in the literature review and in the perspectives of youth (albeit not all youth view this role similarly). Moreover, foster parents and care workers often advocate for children and their needs in the decision-making surrounding their care. Chapter 4 therefore assessed whether foster parents and care workers recognized the needs of youth, and what the differences are between their “child perspectives” and the youth’s own “children’s perspectives” (Sommer et al., 2010). We specifically focused on youth with a history of sexual abuse, because this experience can be difficult to disclose and discuss for children growing up in foster families (Hepworth & McGowan, 2013; McElvane, 2015).

The results show that foster parents and care workers recognize some of the perspectives revealed by the youth. Foster parents mostly recognize the instrumental caretaking relationship some youth want regarding their emotional safety needs. Care workers on the other hand often align with the youth perspective that values the support of both foster and birth parents in shaping the future, while diminishing the importance of care workers’ own involvement. The youth perspective involving ambiguous feelings toward belonging to the
foster family and processing the past, and the perspective that reveals the importance of
autonomy and limited involvement of foster parents, are both barely recognized by foster
parents and care workers. The perspectives foster parents and care workers recognize
also differed in how youth view contact with their birth parents. The foster parents mostly
recognize youth who do not value birth parent contact, but most care workers perceive
youth who do want good contact with birth parents.

These results show a discrepancy between the children’s perspectives and the child
perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010), which might be explained by foster parents’ and care
workers own ideas of which needs should be important to youth, and the reluctance of some
youth to communicate their needs. Furthermore, foster parents and care workers might be
able to see the needs underlying the behavior of youth that youth themselves might not yet
acknowledge. These differences should be taken into account when foster parents and care
workers advocate for children in decision-making, and illustrate the importance of including
children in this process.

Discussion of main findings. As the studies above indicate, the psychosocial needs of
children in foster care and the ways to satisfy these needs are differently portrayed by
the literature, youth themselves and the people caring for them. Although the literature
is very diverse in the needs that are studied, a more clinical and problem-oriented view
seems to dominate, with a particular focus on mental health issues of children. Foster
parents are often suggested as the most important people to satisfy these needs, followed
by (mental) health professionals. Some youth also reveal more problem-oriented view of
their needs, indicating the importance of processing their past and receiving help from
their foster parents and other significant adults. Foster parents seem to acknowledge these
problems too, because they recognize youth who require their help more often than youth
who prioritize other needs. These results affirm the vulnerability discourse surrounding
children in foster care, who more often experience behavioral-, mental health-, trauma- and
attachment-related problems (Greeson et al., 2011; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Villodas et al., 2016). Youth’s motivation to work on the problems they experience can improve
the outcomes of interventions (King et al., 2014). However, the risk with this vulnerability
discourse is that too much focus on negative aspects can contribute to the stigmatization
of children and their feelings of helplessness (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000; Madigan et al.,
2013).

In addition to this so-called vulnerability discourse, both the literature study, and some
of the perspectives of youth and the care workers seem focused on the future possibilities
youth have when their needs for building lasting relationships, finishing their education,
and acquiring independent living skills are satisfied. This closely relates to solution-focused
therapy approaches, that utilize people’s future aspirations to achieve lasting changes in
their behavior (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). What the literature however does not often
describe is clearly communicated by the youth in this study, namely that they are also able to satisfy their own needs. Youth indicate the importance of having autonomy and agency regarding their mental health, education and relationships. Care workers more often seem to recognize the value youth attach to this, since they view youth as wanting mentors for the future and the freedom to explore their lives, although neither care workers nor foster parents recognize youth who want to be completely independent. These results align with the sociology of childhood, indicating youth perceive themselves as having agency in shaping their lives and society at large (James & Prout, 1997).

It can thus be concluded that children growing up in family foster care differ greatly with regard to their most urgent needs. As outlined by Maslow’s theory (1943), each child in each situation is unique and requires a thorough assessment of which needs should most urgently be satisfied. Since there are differences between and among youth, their carers and the literature regarding the needs of children in foster care, it is important to address these differences when trying to understand children’s needs in the most holistic fashion. Firstly, these differences can be assessed through triangulation of informants. In addition to the perspectives and narratives of foster parents and care workers, youth in this study have shown that they are very capable of indicating their most urgent needs. Although not all children might want to participate, it should always be the aim to include children’s perspectives whenever possible. Not only is including them in the assessment of their needs and the care decisions their fundamental right (United Nations, 1989), it also contributes to creating a more holistic understanding of their needs and how they want them to be satisfied. Moreover, when children are included in the decision making they more easily accept and comply with the decisions made, even when decisions are not in line with their wishes (Cashmore, 2003). Furthermore, the perspectives of birth parents, teachers and other significant adults can also contribute to understanding the needs of children in foster care, and might also show discrepancies that require consideration. Besides triangulation of informants, the methods assessing the needs of children in foster care can also be varied. The perspectives of the individuals involved with children in foster care can be supplemented with observations, family group meetings and questionnaires. Observations allow for an understanding of behaviors of children in their natural setting as they unfold in time, which does not rely on self-report or a verbal account of the needs of children (Pellegrini, Hoch, & Symons, 2013). Family group meetings have the advantage of having all family members and professionals negotiate and discuss their perspectives together, although for some children it could be more difficult to participate with many adults present. Validated questionnaires are often used in research and practice and can indicate where the most urgent current problems and unmet needs of children are. However, questionnaires focused on problem screening might miss other important unmet needs that are not easily captured in questionnaires, such as loyalty issues in relationships and too little or too much
autonomy. Moreover, they often intensify the vulnerability discourse, while possibilities and strengths should also be addressed. Therefore, questionnaires regarding resilience, strengths and quality of life can be implemented to counterbalance the problem screening questionnaires. Since each child is unique, each time the needs of children in foster care have to be assessed, thoughtful and reasoned decisions have to be made regarding which assessment methods are employed and which informants are questioned.

The impact of traumatic experiences
The second central theme of this thesis is psychological trauma. Traumatic events in childhood, especially chronic events perpetrated by caregivers, can result in impairments in a multitude of developmental processes (Cloitre et al., 2009; Van Der Kolk, 2005). Children in family foster care have been disproportionately exposed to these traumatic events, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and domestic violence, prior to coming into foster care (Dovran et al., 2012; Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Children and their caregivers face the challenge of coping with the impact of these experiences. Since this is often studied from a clinical viewpoint, this thesis aimed to understand how children themselves view the impact of these experiences on their needs.

Chapter 3. In chapter 3 the psychosocial needs of youth with and without a self-reported history of sexual abuse were compared. Sexual abuse experiences can contribute to the vulnerability of youth in foster care, because this increases the chance of behavioral problems, traumatic stress, school problems and placement breakdown (Dubner & Motta, 1999; Edmond et al., 2002; Eggertsen, 2008; Pollock & Farmer, 2005). Moreover, foster parents can find it difficult to meet the needs of these children, because they are often unaware of this history and because children can have specific problems that can increase parenting difficulties, such as problems with giving and receiving affection, managing their personal boundaries, and learning about sexuality and appropriate sexual behavior (Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Pollock & Farmer, 2005).

The results of the comparative Q methodological analysis indicate that a self-reported history of sexual abuse has an influence on the needs of some, but not all youth. One of the four perspectives of youth with a history of sexual abuse was unique compared to youth without a history of sexual abuse. These youth want an instrumental relationship with their foster parents and care workers, focused on the help they need with processing the past. While they find an enduring relationship necessary for this, an emotional bond characterized by a sense of belonging is not. The needs of these youth for emotional distance and attention to their traumas align with other studies (Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Hardwick, 2005), but were not the most important needs for all youth in this study who report a history of sexual abuse.
Chapter 5. The every-day impact youth experience from traumatic events prior to living with a foster family, which includes the separation from their caregivers, was studied in chapter 5. Thirteen youth participated in this episodic interview study and were invited to talk about the impact they experienced in and after care. The thematic analysis resulted in three themes, namely Experiencing problems, Searching for stability and growth, and No impact.

Youth encounter various problems as a result from their traumatic experiences. Internalizing problems are reported, such as feeling depressed or closed off from their emotions or environment, as well as feeling angry about their experiences. Furthermore, the out-of-home placement specifically entails a physical and emotional loss of their birth parents and other familiar environments. Youth also experience social problems, such as trust issues, and traumatic triggers that remind them of their traumas. Finally, youth feel their past caused them to lag behind in their development compared to their peers. The perceived negative impact of these traumas confirm clinical studies indicating symptoms related to PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and dysregulations related to complex trauma (Cook et al., 2005; Van Der Kolk, 2005).

In addition to these issues, youth also indicate that their traumatic experiences can instigate a search for stability and growth. They search for stability within the foster family, and by preserving sameness in objects, people or situations. Stability and growth are also searched in finding answers to complete their trauma narrative, in turning negative consequences into something positive, and in shaping the future with lessons from the past. Together with the finding that some participants do not experience negative consequences from all of their traumas or not in all situations, these results show that youth feel the possibility for a positive change after traumatic experiences.

Chapter 6. Sharing stories about the past and about being in care can help youth to make meaning of their experiences and connect with their conversation partner (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Especially dialogues with caregivers about distressing events can contribute to the regulation of emotions and behaviors related to this event (Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2009). In chapter 6, the interviews with 13 youth were analyzed to understand how youth experience these every-day conversations about their past and about being in care. The thematic analysis resulted in two themes, each containing three subthemes.

The theme ‘When’ includes references to the prerequisites for talking and considerations made by youth. How often youth talk depends on whether they consider themselves a talker or not a talker, which indicates a general inclination toward being likely to share stories or not, and on how the conversation is started, either by themselves or by someone else. There were four conditions that make it easier to share memories: people showing interest in their story, trusting the person they tell, having accepted what they tell, and having the skills to share these details. The last consideration youth make before telling their story, is ensuring they have the ownership and control over their story.
The theme ‘Why’ includes references to the rationales for sharing or not sharing memories. Youth describe how refraining from talking sometimes protects themselves from getting overwhelmed by negative emotions, from jeopardizing social relationships and from thinking about the past while they want to focus on the future. Moreover, youth want to protect other people from experiencing negative emotions. In contrast, youth also mention how sharing stories can give them a better understanding of themselves, because they can learn about their past, their family and about how their past influences them today. In addition, many youth want other people to understand them better and to take their past into consideration when interacting with them. Finally, youth describe how they can process the past by talking about their memories. However, many youth also indicate that other activities, such as reflection and sports, can contribute to processing the past. These results emphasize how youth can benefit from sharing memories of their experiences, and what obstacles and negative experiences withhold them from sharing. Moreover, the importance of creating the appropriate conditions in order for youth to share their stories is highlighted.

**Discussion of main findings.** These results show that youth perceive a relationship between their past experiences and their needs, but that there is no clear one-on-one relationship between certain traumatic experiences and specific needs of children in family foster care. Although some youth with a history of sexual abuse specifically need caregivers who engage in an instrumental and help-oriented relationship with them, this does not apply to all youth with a history of sexual abuse. Moreover, youth report various problems they attribute to the impact of their traumas, but these problems were not solely related to specific traumatic experiences but could occur as a consequence of various traumatic experiences (with the exception of loss of their birth family due to the out-of-home placement). This illustrates the multifinality of traumatic experiences: these may lead to different developmental trajectories depending on contextual and individual factors (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996; Cloitre et al., 2009). The diversity of consequences following traumatic experiences can make it difficult for foster parents and care workers to relate children’s behavior to the traumatic backgrounds of children, making it more difficult to meet their needs when the underlying traumas are not addressed. It is therefore important to have a foster care system that is trauma sensitive and able to notice the various behaviors and expressions that could indicate children have been exposed to traumatic events (Fratto, 2016; Joseph & Murphy, 2013; Ko et al., 2008). Vice versa, when foster parents are aware of a certain background of the children in their care, for example sexual abuse, they should not automatically assume certain consequences. While this study showed that foster parents should be vigilant to the possible impact of the traumatic history of children and be prepared for a possible instrumental relationship with children who were sexually abused, they should keep an open mind towards the children and their behavior. This is clearly illustrated by McFadden, who states that ‘each child who has been sexually abused is first and foremost a child with all the normal needs of children’ (1989, p. 99).
It is important to meet the specific needs of children in foster care related to the traumatic experiences prior to care. Children value conversations about their background with foster parents, friends and other people close to them, as long as these conversations happen under the conditions set by children themselves. In addition to gaining a better understanding of themselves, by making others aware of their history they aim to increase the trauma sensitivity of their conversation partner. Youth in this study employed both active and avoidant coping with regard to the impact of their traumatic experiences (Billings & Moos, 1981). Active coping mechanisms such as seeking answers to complete the trauma narrative and self-reflection can be considered adequate, but many youth also indicated inadequate coping, such as heavy drinking, avoidance, and self-harm. Especially children who employ avoidant and inadequate coping need sensitive caregivers who teach them how to cope more adequately with their experiences to prevent more problems related to their past (Browne, 2002).

It is important to note that youth in this study could narrate how their past had an impact on them. This attribution of cause and effect can help youth not to blame themselves for certain problems they experience (Hanney & Kozlowska, 2002), and can also stimulate youth to seek help when these problems become too severe (King et al., 2014). In addition to children's narrations, screening for traumatic experiences and traumatic stress reactions could facilitate the timely identification of children who require additional interventions (Fratto, 2016; Ko et al., 2008). Trauma-focused interventions usually address behavior and emotion regulation, psychoeducation, coping skills, exposure to trauma related stimuli, and clarification of erroneous beliefs about the self, others or the traumatic event (Fratto, 2016; Hanney & Kozlowska, 2002). Therapists should also keep the particular context of family foster care in mind, for example related to attachment difficulties, the impact of placement change, contact visits with birth parents, and cultural and racial issues (Zilberstein & Popper, 2016). Youth in this study particularly indicated they needed to complete their trauma narrative and have a complete understanding of what had happened to them. Moreover, they indicated how non-verbal activities such as writing and sports can assist them with processing their past, and that the timing of conversations about their past is important.

Finally, the results of this study stress the importance of looking beyond the traumatic background of children in family foster care. First, in addition to having a negative influence on children, their experiences can also provide opportunities for a positive change. Youth indicated that they experienced positive aspects resulting from their past, for example in being more mature, being better able to cope with stressors and being keen not to repeat the past. This search for stability and growth shows the resilience and possible posttraumatic growth children in foster care can experience (Kilmer, 2006; Leve et al., 2009). Moreover, the results of the Q methodological study indicated that not all youth needed to process the past, but that some youth could focus on the future with the help of their support system.
These youth may be better equipped to handle stressors and independent living in young adulthood (e.g., Hiles et al., 2014; Leve et al., 2009). Finally, children do not want to be perceived as ‘a foster child’ with the accompanying traumatic background. They therefore do not disclose all aspects of their past or are very selective in what they share with whom (see also Madigan et al., 2013). This discretion is understandable, because internalizing the negative reactions and expectations of others can put children at risk for developing a stigmatized identity (Kools, 1997). In conclusion, children in foster care should be perceived as individuals with both strengths and risks; instead of only focusing on the problems they encounter, their psychosocial needs and how these can be (kept) satisfied should be the primary concern of their caregivers.

**Methodological reflections**

In addition to a discussion of the results of this study, this part of the discussion will reflect upon the methods used in this thesis. Specifically, the applicability of Q methodology will be scrutinized, as well as the participation of youth. Finally, other strengths and limitations of the study will be summarized.

**Q methodology**

While interviewing and thematic analysis are generally well-known qualitative data-collection and analyzing tools, Q methodology has only recently become more widely known within the social sciences (Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). The prominent aspects of this methodology will be briefly discussed in this section, related to subjectivity and shared group perspectives, to illustrate not only the applicability of this methodology in this thesis, but also its usefulness in other studies.

Q methodology is a method developed in the 1930’s to study human subjectivity (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The way people view a certain subject is shown in how they communicate about that subject and their actions in relation to that subject (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The concourse surrounding a subject are all the communicable statements surrounding that subject, which should be self-referenced in order to be relatable to one’s point of view. This is clearly illustrated in an example by the scientist behind Q methodology, William Stephenson, about the subject of rain:

“It is raining,” as a statement of fact, is singular; the information can be tested by observing the rain outside. Subjectively however, it may involve innumerable possibilities of thought and feeling—that one hates the rain, that it will spoil the picnic, that it will break the drought, and so on “ad infinitum”. (1978, p. 23)
Research with a positivist epistemology is interested in testing the factual statement. Q methodology on the other hand often can be positioned within a constructivist paradigm as it is interested in the experiences, feelings and thoughts of people related to a subject (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This subjectivity is important to study because it provides insights into the meaning-making of individuals, which can differ greatly from individual to individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As the example above illustrates, there are innumerable ways to make meaning of certain experiences (Brown, 2006). Subsequently, people will behave differently and interact in certain ways depending on their viewpoint, which is illustrated in the results of a Q methodological analysis. In relation to the field of social work, these results offer the possibility to attune approaches to individual clients (Brown, 2005; Ellingsen et al., 2010).

The diversity of people’s subjective viewpoints can be immense and it is likely impossible to accommodate each individual’s point of view. The strength of Q methodology is that it identifies clusters of shared viewpoints among people, without excluding uncommon viewpoints of a minority (Brown, 2006). Through correlating the viewpoints people reveal in sorting the statement cards, people who generally feel similarly strong about certain subjective aspects of a topic will be grouped together (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). This aspect of Q methodology illustrates the biggest difference between thematically analyzing interviews and the by-person factor analysis of Q methodology. Thematic analysis searches for recurring themes across individuals. While not every theme necessarily has to be mentioned by each participant, themes are generally mentioned by a substantial part of the participants of a study in order to be perceived as meaningful. Moreover, individual characteristics of participants are often not attended to (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In Q methodology, the analysis results in an understanding of the similarities of members within certain groups. This group membership is not something the researcher ascribes, but through sorting the statements the participants group themselves (Billard, 1999; Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). These individuals rated the same statements as most ‘psychologically significant’ from their perspective, agreeing on what they find most important and most unimportant about the subject under investigation. In addition to grouping individuals with similar viewpoints, these groups are simultaneously contrasted, showcasing the differences among the subjective viewpoints (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). This dual result of exploring the viewpoints of groups of people holistically and understanding the differences between groups, made this methodology a good fit with this thesis aiming to understand differences in the need of children in family foster care. The resulting factors provide valuable insights in how youth value their needs, allowing foster parents and care workers to attune their assistance to satisfying the individual needs of youth. However, it should be kept in mind that these groups of youth in family foster care are not stable over time. People can change their point of view through new experiences (Brown, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2005), which might be especially relevant during childhood. Moreover, although the individual characteristics of
youth play a role in how they sort the statement cards, these demographic and case specific
characteristics are not directly included in the analysis, such as age, placement trajectory
and quality of birth parent contact.

The comparing feature of Q methodology was used in this thesis to make some additional
comparisons. As well as understanding the needs of children in family foster care, the needs
of children with and without a history of sexual abuse were also compared by employing
second-order factor analysis. Furthermore, it was explored whether foster parents and
care workers could recognize the need profiles of youth with a history of sexual abuse,
by employing manual rotations toward the shared perspectives of youth. These types of
comparisons are not commonly performed in Q methodological studies (see Dennis, 1990;
Ellingsen, Stephens, & Størksen, 2012, for exceptions) because most studies do not aim to
distinguish the more nuanced differences in viewpoints between different groups (defined
by researchers). Q analysis already results in a comparison of perspectives within groups
(i.e. foster children or caregivers), but then groups that participants construct themselves
through the sorting task. Although the researcher influences the number of factors to
extract and which factors to compare, the composition of the factors (revealing the shared
perspectives) are solely based on the way participants have sorted the statements (Cross,
2005). As the results of chapters three and four illustrate, the perspectives of participants
can also be revealed when perspectives are compared across different groups. These
comparisons show the flexibility of the method to answer specific research questions and
the sensitivity of the method to uncover the perspectives of minority viewpoints.

Participation
This thesis employed a participatory research design from a constructivist paradigm. The
participation of youth in research regarding matters that affect them is their right according to
the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and it provides researchers
the opportunity to capture the lived experiences of youth (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Langhout,
2010). Since the participation of youth can be facilitated across various degrees, from design
consultation to being included as co-researcher (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Kirk, 2007), this
section will reflect upon the level of participation in the conducted studies.

First, youth can participate in the starting phase of research, contributing to the aims
and scope of a study (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Kirk, 2007). In the studies of this thesis, the
participation of youth in the starting phase was limited. We did consult a group of youth in
family foster care about the set-up of our study and asked them advice on the execution of
our study, but the main research question and methods were already chosen prior to this
meeting. Research has shown that children are rarely asked to help determine and define
a problem that should be investigated in research, risking research to follow an adult vision
and adult perception of what research is necessary to improve the situation of children
Nevertheless, the open and qualitative nature of this thesis made it possible for youth to define their needs from their perspective. In addition, the open nature resulted in the unexpected research question that was investigated in chapter 6, because references to talking about their lives was often mentioned by youth without an explicit research focus on this subject.

Secondly, youth can participate in the data-collection phase of a research study (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Kirk, 2007). Youth were the primary contributors to this phase of the study. Through interviewing youth and having them sort the statement cards, they were given the space and opportunity to give their viewpoint on the subject under investigation (Lundy, 2007; Pölkki et al., 2012). Since people differ in how easily they can put words to their experiences (Flick, 1997), these two research methods are complementary in how they provided youth the opportunity to participate. In both studies we tried to reduce the emotional burden for participants, for example by not directly asking them about maltreatment by their birth parents. Especially Q sorting can make it easier for youth who do not like to talk about their experiences to express their viewpoint (Ellingsen et al., 2010). Although it may seem that sorting the statement cards is a more restrictive activity because the cards are predetermined, participants ascribe meaning to each card during the sorting task. This opens the possibility for disclosing a variety of viewpoints, because youth relate each statement to their own point of reference (self-reference) and how important/unimportant they find each statement (psychological significance). Moreover, the sorting task can be performed in more than a million different ways (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2005).

Another important participatory aspect of the Q methodological study is that the cards were constructed based on interviews with youth and selected in cooperation with youth in a focus group. Although adult researchers prepared an already smaller set of statements than were drawn from the interviews, the youth in the focus group provided additional insights into which statements were most representative and which statements were missing. The final selection was sent to the focus group members to check whether they thought this final selection was representative of the focus group discussion. The resulting statement cards reflected the concourse adequately, because youth who participated in the Q study felt their viewpoint could be properly displayed in the card sorting. Only some youth indicated they missed a specific statement (for example related to foster siblings, which we did not include because this does not apply to all youth). Furthermore, many participants indicated that the task made them more aware of their own perspective and that they learned more about themselves through participating in the study, which was also indicated by youth who were interviewed.

Despite these efforts to have youth participate during data-collection, there are ways this could have been strengthened. Both studies relied on youth who chose to participate in the study. Although there was much variation among the participants regarding their foster care
background and current living situation, it is likely that some youth did not want to participate, did not feel comfortable or capable of participating, or were not reached by our recruitment methods. Therefore it is possible that some youth were not given the opportunity to voice their opinion, for example youth who were experiencing many current problems. Moreover, the data were collected by adult researchers, but could have been cooperatively collected with youth as equal co-researchers, which contributes to the sensitivity of research to reveal the lived experiences of youth (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Langhout, 2010). Unfortunately, the resources of this study limited this type of youth participation.

The third phase of research where youth can participate is data-analysis (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Kirk, 2007). Youth were not involved in analyzing the interviews or the Q sort factors, which also related to the lack of sufficient time and resources. While some technical aspects of the conducted analyses require specific scientific knowledge that is not easily learned by youth in a short amount of time, youth could have contributed to the interpretation of the results in this study (Billard, 1999). Regarding the two thematic analyses, youth could for example have participated in merging subthemes into themes, naming the themes and interpretation the meaning of the themes. The analysis of qualitative data can be very extensive and time consuming. As a researcher, you first dissect the accounts of participants and subsequently restructure their accounts in a thematic manner. You not passively ‘give voice’ to participants, but actively engage with the interview material, and therefore risk deviating from the original meaning of participants because of theoretical or personal assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Checking with participants if the analysis aligns with their ‘life as experienced’ can contribute to a more adequate depiction of ‘life as told’ (Bruner, 2004). In the Q methodological study of chapter 3, the youth provided the structure by sorting the cards as opposed to the thematic analysis of the interviews done by researchers. Together with the statistical analyses that calculate the best fit of the data (Varimax rotation), Q analysis limits the bias of researchers in this respect (Billard, 1999; Cross, 2005). However, youth associating with a factor could have been invited to assist with interpreting that factor and think of how they differ from the other perspectives (Billard, 1999; Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012).

Finally, youth can participate in disseminating the results of research (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Kirk, 2007). The impact of scientific research, even when youth participate throughout the study, can be difficult to perceive for youth (Kirk, 2007). Although the results of this thesis were not disseminated by participants directly, it was our main concern to communicate the voices of youth in family foster care there where they could have the biggest impact, namely to practitioners and back to youth. Therefore, in addition to the scientific articles presented in chapters 2 to 6, the results of this study were summarized in a Dutch report (Steenbakkers, Grietens, Wubs, & Van der Steen, 2017). To increase the accessibility of this report, it was written in non-academic Dutch and formatted in a magazine style with clear subheadings
and an inviting lay-out with images and pictures. Moreover, the magazine was sent to all participants, foster care agencies and other relevant practice organizations. It is also freely available online. One of the foster youth groups that assisted us with recruiting participants shared the report on their Facebook page with the caption ‘really worth a read!’ In addition to the report, the results of this thesis were presented at national conferences and local foster care organizations.

In sum, the voices of youth and their participation were leading in this thesis, and especially prominent in the data-collection phase. However, youth could have been included more prominently in other parts of the study design, especially during data-analysis.

**Strengths and limitations**

In addition to the strengths and limitations related to Q methodology and the participation of youth, some additional strengths and limitations will be outlined. First, through the use of two different methods, the results of this study complement each other and are sensitive to the diversity of the participants. The thematic analyses resulted in insight into recurring themes among the experiences of participants, showing the importance of different aspects of the lives of youth in foster care. The Q analysis resulted in profiles of groups of youth in family foster care, indicating what differentiates youth from one another. Moreover, both methods were not solely focused on the problems youth experienced, but also incorporated their strengths, possibilities and resilience, which reduces the stigmatization participants can experience in research. Despite our efforts to incorporate diversity by including youth with various backgrounds, only their traumatic experiences were prominently taken into account in the analysis. The placement histories of youth could have been more clearly included, since the number of placement breakdowns and the duration of a placement are often indicative of the well-being of youth in care (Eggertsen, 2008), as well as the quality of the parent-child relationship between youth and their foster parents (Bernedo, García-Martín, Salas, & Fuentes, 2016). However, it should be noted that these aspects influence the experiences of youth and therefore are indirectly included in the results of this study because of their relationship to the needs of youth.

Another important aspect to discuss is the cause and effect relationship between the traumatic backgrounds of youth in family foster care and the impact they experience. A strength of this study is that it focused on how youth experience this relationship, which, whether or not they are correct in their assumptions, provides important implications for practice in how to assist youth with this impact. However, the traumatic backgrounds of youth were acquired through self-reports. Youth can forget various placement settings because of their young age, and studies have shown that abuse experiences are inconsistently reported (Hardt & Rutter, 2004; Langeland et al., 2015). Moreover, the conducted studies did not aim and are not able to establish causality in the association between traumatic experiences
and impact, because it cannot be assessed whether these consequences follow from these experiences, or whether these youth are specifically vulnerable for both experiences (Ai, Foster, Pecora, Delaney, & Rodriguez, 2013). Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that many of these youth were in contact with various carers and social workers, which could also have an impact on how they view the impact of their background and how they discuss this during an interview.

A final aspect to discuss in light of this thesis is the retrospective study design. This design allowed us to capture the experiences of youth throughout their placement in foster care. Moreover, participants were able to reflect upon their experiences due to their maturity and for some also due to (physical) distance from their care experiences. One of the disadvantages of the relatively older age of participants, as also mentioned above, is that memories are not stable. Certain experiences can be forgotten, unknown to children and what is reported in interviews to some extent depends on the current state of mind of participants (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Specifically related to the Q sorting, participants made the sort reflecting upon the entire duration of being in foster care. However, the needs of children in foster care are not constant but may change over time, which could have also been taken into account by having participants make multiple sorts or asking them to sort according to a more specified time frame (Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). The results of the Q methodological studies are therefore not specifically related to specific moments in foster care, but represent a general overview of being in foster care.

Recommendations for future research

Maslow’s need hierarchy provided a useful framework to understand what the specific needs of youth in family foster care are and how these can be satisfied. This theory states that meeting the needs of people leads to growth and well-being, and that the needs lower in the hierarchy require satisfaction before higher order needs can be satisfied. Future research could assess whether meeting youth’s needs indeed results in higher levels of well-being. In addition, the influence of different perspectives between youth and their caregivers regarding the most important needs and how to satisfy them can be studied applying different methodological approaches. Narrative methods can be employed for the aim to understand the lived-experiences of youth and their caregivers, whereas a standardized questionnaire could be developed to determine the level of need satisfaction within each need. This should incorporate the various needs youth have indicated in this study, such as quality of relationships, coping, identity and future aspirations, and not solely focus on mental health and education.

Furthermore, future research can assess if it indeed promotes well-being when satisfying the lower order needs before attending to the higher order needs. The hierarchical structure
of Maslow’s theory has been critiqued (Neher, 1991), and strictly applying this hierarchy risks the neglect of satisfying higher order needs. The results of this study have shown that the various needs of youth are often intertwined, and thus perhaps a more broad orientation toward meeting the needs of youth in foster care is warranted, especially when a minimum level of satisfaction has been achieved in each need. Large-scale longitudinal studies are necessary to understand these dynamics, preferably following a group of children throughout their care experiences. Longitudinal studies minimize the potential bias inherent in retrospective studies related to memory retrieval (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Such studies should take the abuse history of youth into account since this can impact their needs, and could try to understand how poly-victimization and the severity of abuse impact needs. In addition, future studies could more prominently consider the placement experiences of youth, such as the relationship with foster parents and breakdowns.

Youth in this study not only indicated the problems they encounter due to traumatic experiences and being in care, but also the importance of future possibilities and positive changes. Future research could further explore these positive aspects of the experiences of youth and how these can be stimulated. Surprisingly few studies focus on factors related to resilience among children in family foster care (P. A. Fisher, 2015), let alone on posttraumatic growth. However, mental health issues and neurobiological changes caused by stress are not universal among children in foster care (P. A. Fisher, 2015; Goemans et al., 2015). Research could investigate which aspects of children’s lives promote resilience and posttraumatic growth, while being sensitive to individual trajectories. It is important that these studies determine whether and for whom an increase in psychological functioning stems from posttraumatic growth (Kilmer, 2006). Especially supportive interpersonal relationships have been linked to resilience of youth in foster care and should be incorporated in these studies (Leve et al., 2009).

Finally, youth in this study have indicated the importance of forming their narrative identity and understanding their (traumatic) history, and the possible benefits of talking about their experiences. Although life story work is a well-known practice in foster care, which often consists of making a life story book (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007; T. Ryan & Walker, 2007), there is only limited empirical evidence for the beneficial effect of this practice (Shotton, 2013; Watson et al., 2015; Willis & Holland, 2009). Future research could assess if and how life story work contributes to forming the narrative identity of youth in family foster care and which aspects of this exercise contribute to this. Moreover, alternatives to life story work can be explored, especially practices that are ongoing during foster care and incorporate the participation of children, since story books are criticized for being susceptible to incompleteness and handing children their story instead of co-constructing it (Watson et al., 2015). Since youth in this study emphasized how day-to-day conversations could stimulate their understanding of their past, alternatives to life-story work could incorporate...
instructions for foster parents and birth parents in how to have these conversations with youth.

**Practice implications**

The needs reported by youth in family foster care vary. This requires foster parents, care workers and other people to be attentive to this diversity. Each youth in each situation has unique satisfied and unsatisfied needs. Consequently, thorough assessments are necessary that identify the needs that should most urgently be satisfied, and the strengths youth have. This assessment, as indicated above, should be multi-informant and multimethod to prevent biases, and include the perceptions of youth themselves. The results of this thesis imply that it is important to not only assess the needs of youth regarding their past and helping them process this, but also attend to the needs regarding their future development and independence. This requires a shift from thinking about problems and screening for these, to thinking about needs and focusing on changes for the future. This not only pertains to professional conduct and youth’s care plans, but should also be visible in the systems professionals work in. For example, many Dutch youth care facilities employ routine outcome measures to track the well-being of youth, which often include measures such as the Child Behavior Checklist and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001; Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 2003). In order for these systems to capture youth’s experiences in a more holistic manner, measures regarding future aspirations, independence and quality of life should for example also be incorporated. In addition to questionnaires, the perceptions and opinions of youth and their caregivers could also be incorporated in these systems, as this too provides information about the well-being and outcomes of youth.

This study furthermore showed that youth differ in how they want their needs to be satisfied. Foster parents are important support figures for most youth. However, even when the relationship with them is valued, youth differ in how close they prefer this relationship. Furthermore, some youth value support from professionals or their birth parents, or do not want support from anyone. It is important for foster parents and care workers to understand where youth find support and make sure these people are equipped to support them. In the Netherlands, while it is common practice to train and support foster parents before and during a placement, improving these efforts is still one of the main targets of foster care organizations (De Baat et al., 2017). Also, in situations where youth want other people to support them, it should be considered whether these people require some form of training to increase their ability to satisfy the needs of youth. Since foster parents and care workers do not always recognize the viewpoints of youth, it is important that they communicate with youth about their expectations and preferences. Even youth who value independence might
require support at some point, but this might be difficult to perceive for carers when youth keep them at a distance.

Some youth in this study balance getting support from close relationships while also striving for independence, and might thus be best equipped to thrive as young adults (e.g., Hiles et al., 2014; Leve et al., 2009). To stimulate this balance, foster parents and care workers do not only need to promote independent living skills of youth who are preparing to leave care, but also focus on them building supportive interpersonal relationships (Leve et al., 2009). This also underpins the importance of assisting youth during the transition from foster care to independence and helping them transition to the adult (mental) health care when necessary (Mares, 2010). Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of the possibility to extend foster care beyond the age of 18, as is already possible within the Netherlands and other Western countries (e.g., Government United Kingdom, 2014; Nederlandse Overheid, 2015; Peters, 2012), since this provides additional time to satisfy these needs. Despite the legal possibility to extend foster care until the age of 23 and awareness of the transition period, in practice there are still worries about the continuation of care for youth who are at risk (Juffer, Popma, & Steenstra, 2016). These new policies and legal frameworks should therefore be closely monitored and improved if the outcomes of care leavers remain worrisome.

The results of this thesis indicate the impact youth experience from their traumatic background and their ability to narrate this impact. Trauma-informed systems of care are essential in helping youth with the impact of traumatic experiences (Fratto, 2016). Stimulating their awareness of these processes helps them understand their own behavior and reactions, and could stimulate them to seek help when needed. Caregivers should also be alert to the impact of traumatic experiences that are not remembered by youth, especially when they become more aware of their histories. Moreover, when foster parents are aware of the history of youth, they can try to prevent triggering intrusion and help youth understand their past. Furthermore, youth can be made aware of the growth they are already experiencing or could experience in the future. This requires caregivers who do not only focus their attention to the problems youth encounter, because this negative image of their abilities can be internalized by youth (Kools, 1997), but who can also help youth to find stability and growth.

It is important that youth adopt appropriate coping skills, because this proved difficult for youth in this study. Foster parents can assist youth with this in order to prevent further problems from inadequate coping (Browne, 2002). Examples of adequate coping skills from youth in the studies can be stimulated among other youth, such as sports, hanging out with friends, talking about their experiences and religion. Youth who employ inappropriate coping, such as heavy drinking, avoidance and internalization, can be helped by their foster parents to develop other tools for dealing with their experiences. When youth have
difficulties with processing their past or adopting adequate coping skills, interventions aimed at helping youth with these processes should be implemented. Youth in the interview study most prominently struggled with internalizing problems, anger, social problems and traumatic triggers. Interventions should not only address the problems youth experiences, but also align with the abilities and wishes of youth. For example, interventions differ in how much verbal communication is required, and while some youth are able and willing to narrate their experiences, others might want more non-verbal interventions. In addition to focusing on the problems youth want to change, interventions should also focus on the processes youth feel underlie these problems, such as fear of rejection and powerlessness. Besides more formalized interventions, youth indicated how (non-verbal) activities such as writing and reflection can assist them with processing their past.

Conversations with people about their past could help youth to complete their trauma narrative and find support from their conversation partner. Youth could be informed about the possible benefits of sharing their stories, while at the same time be warned that they can receive negative reactions from others, especially from peers. Together with for example foster parents, youth can consider aspects of control and ownership related to sharing their experience. Even more important, foster parents, friends and other caregivers can create the appropriate conditions in order for youth to feel the opportunity to talk about their past experiences. This means showing an interest in them, building a relationship of trust and if necessary teaching youth conversation skills. Furthermore, timing the conversation is important, since some youth find it difficult to discuss events that they have not yet accepted and processed. Constructing the life-story of youth in foster care and completing their trauma narrative can furthermore be supplemented with life-story work in which youth visually represent their lives before and in care (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007; T. Ryan & Walker, 2007). Foster parents can assist youth in this process by retrieving information from child welfare organizations about youth’s previous care histories, and can advocate for youth to enable them to find other answers to their question, for example by having them visit previous carers or extended family members. Moreover, foster parents can be supported in this process by care workers, by receiving training and parenting tools specific for the needs of the children in their care.

Lastly, this study has shown that youth and young adults are capable of indicating their most important needs, and that their perspectives on these needs can differ from their caregivers’ perspectives. It is vital that youth’s perspectives are known to their caregivers and that they are provided the opportunity to participate in the decisions regarding their care (United Nations, 1989). Although youth can differ on how intensely they want to participate, they should at a minimum be timely informed about their right to participate in decision-making and given options on how to make their viewpoint known (Lundy, 2007; Pölkki et al., 2012). An important consideration to make is who is present when youth participate
and share their views. Since a relationship of trust is important for youth, having a person present that youth do not trust might prevent them from sharing openly. Also, issues of confidentiality should be thoroughly discussed with youth. In addition to a more traditional way of asking youth to discuss their needs and the ways they want them to be satisfied, other methods could also be employed. Examples of these methods are having youth write letters or having younger children perform the Three houses or Fairy/Wizard tool from Signs of Safety (Turnell & Murphy, 2014). The Q sorting procedure used in this thesis could also be implemented as a tool, since this provides youth a non-verbal way to express their needs. Moreover, this tool can also be employed to understand the different perspectives within the care system, by having not only youth but also their carers sort the cards.

In sum, youth who participated in this study provided us with tremendous insight into their lived experiences, strengths and worries. Therefore, while it might require creativity to establish the appropriate conditions, it should always be the aim to provide children and youth the possibility to participate in the decisions regarding their care. Their voices provide foster parents and care workers with valuable insights, which can promote the development and well-being of children in foster care who deserve a happy and successful life.