Original Article

How Do Young People Who Have Offended in the United Kingdom Conceptualise the Term 'Family'?

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Abstract
Children and young people's understandings and experiences of 'family' have largely been ignored in research that concerns them. This article reports the findings from research that was generated in collaboration with young people who have offended to understand how they conceptualise the term 'family'. Key themes that were drawn from the research identified that the young people placed more emphasis on the emotional aspects of 'family life' than on the presence of specific 'family members'. The focus group discussions centred around the importance of love, trust and safety, in determining who should be considered 'family'. The language used by the young people was largely based on their own personal experiences of 'family' and 'family life', which for some of the young people, was significantly affected by their time spent in the care system.

Keywords
children's voices, collaboration, family, focus groups, lived experience, participation, positive youth justice, youth, youth justice

Introduction

'Family' has played a central role in theory and research concerning young people who have offended; however, children and young people's understandings and experiences of 'family' have largely been ignored in research that concerns them. This article presents findings from research that aimed to explore how young people who have offended conceptualise the term 'family'. The data collected from two groups of young people in the United Kingdom, draw on young people's voices, to demonstrate that young people who have offended use a variety of diverse and flexible ways to conceptualise the term 'family', which goes beyond simply relying on blood ties or who they live with. The language they used to describe the term 'family' was largely based on their own personal

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experiences of 'family' and 'family life', which for some of the young people, was signifi-cantly affected by their time spent in the care system. The findings from this research not only provide an original contribution to knowledge in the varied and dynamic ways in which young people who have offended choose to describe and define the term 'family', but also complement and add to the pool of empirical research conducted *with* justice-involved young people, which is increasingly important as a right to be upheld for chil-dren (Pleysier and Kilkelly, 2023).

Background and Context

The relationship between 'family' and youth offending behaviour

'The family' has always played a significant role in explaining young people's develop-ment more generally, and youth offending behaviour more specifically. Predominantly, the focus has been on the relationship between the young person and their biological parents. Increasingly, the focus has widened to also include other 'family' members, including siblings and grandparents (Dunifon and Bajracharya, 2012). A great deal of attention has been paid to the breakdown of the family and the short-and long-term impacts this may have on a young person's behaviour (Rebellon, 2002). The social control theory seeks to understand and explain the ways in which choices are made by young people and considers the influence that other factors, such as family relationships, may have over these decisions (Church et al., 2009). The degree to which the socialisation processes are successful largely depends on the quality of the relationship held between the parent(s) and the child. Research has found that poor or non-existent relationships can significantly impact on these socialisation processes that help to instil a sense of moral right and wrong (Hirschi, 2002). Family cohesiveness and emotional support from parents or other family members have been identified as significant protective factors for children and young people (Lietz et al., 2018), which are particularly important for children and young people who are more at risk of exposure to criminogenic environments. However, the degree to which core values are internalised and converted into self-control depends on how con-nected a young person feels to their family. Control theorists argue that holding a strong sense of belonging to a family unit encourages a young person to uphold good morals outside of the family house, influencing their decision-making processes, including whether to involve themselves in criminal behaviours or not (Boutwell and Beaver, 2010). Importantly, the 'weak' or 'broken' family has been repeatedly viewed as the most influ-ential factor in the development of youth offending behaviour. Since the early 20th cen-tury, notions of 'good' and 'bad' parenting have occupied a large part of youth justice practice that is concerned with tackling the 'problem' of youth crime (Muncie, 2015). Both parental behaviour and the family environment are commonly identified as the cen-tral factors in explaining youth offending behaviour from this perspective (Apel and Kaukinen, 2008). Empirical research to explore the social bond theory has found that repeated negative treatment by teachers at school and parents at home is highly correlated with weakened social bonds to society. In turn, young people who report low, or lack of connection to conventional institutions (school, family), also report high levels of

involvement in antisocial and offending behaviours (Bao et al., 2014). It is suggested that those with low levels of social bonding are more likely to engage in 'risky' behaviours more generally, often leading to increased exposure to both victimisation and instances of offending themselves (Chen, 2009).

'The family' as a sociological concept

The term 'family' is part of everyday language, however, there is an ongoing debate about what a family is, and how to succinctly define the term (Weigel, 2008). Numerous studies explore the concept of 'the family', using different types of participants and applying an array of different data collection and analysis methods. Typically, research has used adults (Becker and Charles, 2006) or university students (Baxter et al., 2009) as participants, to explore how the term family is conceptualised, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitatively, personal narratives are explored, with both discourse and thematic analyses being conducted to identify not only what is being said about 'family life' but also the ways in which language is used. Quantitatively, secondary data sets have been the typical approach, conducting complex statistical analyses using data collected from large-scale, often nationally representative, household surveys. However, these types of studies have come under heavy criticism for a range of measurement issues identified (Casper and Hofferth, 2006). These include the way in which 'family' has been defined, or not defined, and then subsequently measured. Most commonly, 'family' has been measured according to the presence of children and how many adults are in the household, with the most basic of descriptors being 'single parent' and 'two parent' households. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research being conducted using young children as participants. Family researchers and child development practitioners have begun to rely on more creative data collection methods so that children and young people's voices may be heard through research (White et al., 2010), complimenting adults' perspectives (Darbyshire et al., 2005). Despite the wide variety of data collection methods and the participants that are used in family research, one group that are missing from the literature are young people who have offended. With 'family' being considered a major source of risk for young people's (re)offending behaviour, their experiences, and views on the construction of the concept must be considered. This is one of the main methodological gaps in the literature that was identified and where the research aimed to provide an original contribution.

Methodology

Aims and rationale

The aims of the research were concerned with promoting young people's voices, and in developing an understanding of how young people who have offended conceptualise the term 'family'. As previous research on defining family has primarily used laypeople participants (Baxter et al., 2009; Weigel, 2008) it was important to recruit participants from a more specific group. Young people who have offended are an important group to involve

in research concerning the concept of 'family', as family risk factors are repeatedly correlated with youth (re)offending behaviour (Farrington, 2015). To further understand why the 'family' environment might be so central in predicting youth offending behaviour, it was proposed that the young people themselves should be involved in discussions about their understanding of the term family. This aimed to not only fill a methodological gap in terms of the research participants who were used but also followed a 'child friendly' rights-based approach of placing the young people's voices at the centre of the research project, and facilitating their active engagement (Gray, 2016). The research question was:
Research Question 1: How do young people who have offended conceptualise the term 'family'?

Participants

The research was intended to be exploratory and with participants that are sometimes considered 'hard to reach'. Therefore, it was appropriate to draw on pre-existing, personal connections to gain access to participants. As such, the two groups of young people who participated in the research were sourced through the youth offending service in England and through a charity organisation that works closely with care and criminal justice experienced young people in Scotland.

At the England-based youth offending team (YOT) the young people that participated in the focus group were aged between 14 and 17 years old. The group consisted of six boys and one girl. All of the young people were currently attending the YOT as part of a prevention order, having been referred to the services as considered at risk of potentially committing crime. The focus group in Scotland involved young people that were slightly older. This is because the group in Scotland was already formed and engaging in youth work prior to the research taking place, so the age range was pre-established. The group consisted of six boys and five girls, all ranging between the ages of 16–24 years old. As the research was focused on the young people's understandings of the term 'family', it was deemed unnecessary to collect information regarding their offending or care histories.

For any research involving human participants, academic institutions and professional organisations state the need for fully informed consent to be given by the participants prior to data collection beginning (Goredema-Braid, 2010), which should be voluntary and without coercion. Emphasis should be placed on protecting the best interests of the participants in any case (Berry, 2009), with due diligence being paid to how participants are likely to be affected by engagement with the research process. When approaching young people as participants, there is an understanding that they may not have the literacy competencies required to read and fully understand a typical participant information sheet, which is a common concern when conducting research with young people who have offended (Hughes et al., 2017). As the focus groups in both London and Glasgow required input from the young people, active and formal consent was sought. A participant information sheet was developed and handed to all potential participants. Once the formal consent form had been signed and returned by the young person, they were invited to attend a focus group session. For young people who were under the age of 18, they were

asked to also have a parent/guardian signature on the form. However, for young people who were over 18, they did not require this additional signature, only their own signature was required on the consent form. Before each of the focus groups officially began, a discussion with the young people about the research and how their data would be used, took place. This was to ensure that they were fully informed about the project, and to reaffirm their consent for the data collection to proceed. There is a need for children's informed consent to be ongoing throughout, 'as in-the-moment ethical challenges emerge' (Moore et al., 2018: 89). Morally, it was important for the researcher to reaffirm with the young people themselves that they fully understood what would happen in the session, and that they were comfortable with the tape recorder in the room. As it transpired, some of the young people in the first focus group (London) objected to having the discussions recorded using the tape recorder, and as a result, the discussion proceeded with the researcher making written observational notes instead. After the session had finished, the literature was consulted, to see if this reaction from young people to being audio recorded was a common feature in social science research. It was found that it is quite commonplace for young people who have offended to not give consent to being audio recorded in research (Holt and Pamment, 2011; Wilson, 2006). Despite the young people having already signed and returned the consent forms, and attended the group session, the researcher still felt a level of responsibility in ensuring they fully understood the purpose of the session, and how it would be running. With this new insight into young people's potential wariness of being audio recorded, this was approached with more caution for the focus group in Glasgow. Again, a discussion was held at the beginning of the session to ensure that everyone in the room was fully aware of the purpose of the discussion, and how their data would be used. This time, rather than telling them the session would be audio recorded, the young people were asked if they would be happy for the discussion to be audio recorded. A few in the room were hesitant, and so again, the tape recorder remained unused.

Data collection

The main aim of the focus group was to explore how young people understand and define the term 'family'. To encourage discussion during the focus group, a simple word-association activity was developed, which was based on the findings from a previous study (see Weigel, 2008). A list of words that were generated as part of Weigel's (2008) study were written onto flashcards and the young people (participants) were then asked to arrange these on the table as a visual representation of how they relate to, and help to define, the central term 'family'. However, this activity was designed and introduced to the participants as a suggested and interactive way of engaging them in a discussion about 'family' and its meanings. It must be noted here that participants were not required to complete this activity as part of the research, and as such, both groups approached the discussion and the flashcards in slightly different ways. For the England-based group, participants took it in turns to pick up a flashcard that they related to the word 'family' and then as a group, discussed the word on the flashcard. For the Scotland-based group, participants used the words on the flashcards to prompt and assist with drawings they did, which actually all

turned out looking like spider diagrams whereby they had organised the words into categories. The young people then took it in turns to explain the drawing they had made, and as a group, were able to discuss the term 'family'.

Often associated with market research, focus groups provide a unique setting to discuss a topic of interest. The setting is considered unique, as the interactional nature of the participants generates additional data (Devlin, 2018). This was one of the main reasons that focus groups were chosen as the main research method, over the one-on-one interview method. With the researcher approaching this topic from a social constructionist perspective, and the understanding that terms, such as 'family' are socially constructed through everyday life it was necessary to research this concept within a group environment. During semi-structured discussions, and particularly within group settings, it must be acknowledged that the participants have the power to redirect the discussions, and the research, to what they feel the researcher should be interested in the work of Kawulich (2011). This was considered to be potentially a major challenge when focus groups were chosen as a research method, rather than one-on-one interviews with young people. Of course, it was integral to the research question that the young people should direct the discussions in whichever way they saw fit, but that the central focus of the research was to remain on the topic of 'family'. The list of questions developed for the researcher were on hand during the focus groups, which is a method commonly used in group settings to ensure the conversation stays on track (Krueger and Casey, 2014). However, this problem never arose while conducting the fieldwork.

As the young people in the focus groups requested not to be audio recorded, the researcher made handwritten observational field notes throughout the focus group sessions. A key was also produced, with the real participant names recorded and next to them the allocated pseudonym, which would be used when the notes were typed up. In the long term, this eliminated the need for transcribing an extensive audio recording of the discussion, which did speed up the analysis process. Handwriting notes during the discussion also meant that additional, non-verbal information could be collected, which included observations on the group behaviour and individuals' behaviour.

Data analysis

The very first stage of data analysis that was conducted, sought to highlight any key themes that emerged from the discussions. As the researcher was following grounded theory methodology (GTM) and a 'bottom-up' approach to analysing the data (Urquhart, 2013), the key themes at this point were vague and so grouping of these was not attempted just yet. For the second stage of data analysis, the key themes were organised into loose categories, as connections or 'relationships' between the constructs were beginning to emerge (Urquhart, 2013). From this, a template form was developed, so that, the researcher could organise the handwritten notes into the main themes that were beginning to emerge and that were associated with the central concept of 'family'. The final stage of data analysis drew together all 'slices of data' that had been collected, to identify key themes and concepts and to understand the relationships between them all (Urquhart, 2013).

Findings

Relationships and attachments

The first, and most important of the key findings from the research conducted, identified the variety of relationships that were considered by the young people to be significant in their lives. For the young people from the England YOT, they mostly referred to parents, grandparents and siblings, however, for the young people from the Scotland group, who self-reported as having spent time in the care system, they also referred to caseworkers, foster parents and friends. As such, during discussions about what the term 'family' meant, a much broader range of relationships were identified by the young people, which extended beyond the 'typical' relationships that are studied in research concerning young people and their 'families'. The finding that young people who have offended use the term 'family' to refer to a much broader range of relationships that they hold with others, demonstrates that the previous focus on the parental relationship and parent–child relationship in theories and research is limiting. As such, previous correlations that have been found between youth offending behaviour and poor parent–child relationships (Hoeve et al., 2008) may not be as significant as previously suggested, particularly if the young person at the centre of the research holds a stronger, and more influential, relationship with another family member or 'trusted' adult. Although attachment theory was first developed with the mother in mind, it can be applied to any adult person the child feels most attached and connected to. Therefore, this theory could be applied to explain the different relationships that the young people spoke of as being most important to them.

Not only did the young people identify a much broader range of relationships than simply the parent–child relationship, but they also spoke about varying qualities of these relationships. For all of the young people, across both groups, they spoke about 'trust' as being an important part of deciding who they would include in their definition of 'family'. This reflected what had been reviewed from previous research, where children and young people drew connections between those adults and significant 'others' who they trusted, and who they felt safe with (Moore and McArthur, 2017). Therefore, it was not simply the presence of relationships that were used to identify who they considered to be 'family', but it was the quality of these relationships, and the emotional attachment that was felt. This echoed what was reviewed in terms of the attachment theory, and how important strong and positive attachments are in children's development. With attachment theory identifying primary caregivers (such as parents) as integral, it is important to understand from the young people themselves, who they consider to be most influential in their lives, and who they are most strongly attached to. If researchers are to assume that parents are the primary caregivers, then subsequent findings may be skewed.

Further to this, throughout both the focus groups, the young people spoke about the people they considered to be 'family' and the varying degrees of love they felt. As such, love was a reoccurring theme throughout both the discussion groups and clearly played an important role in the young people's lives. The young people from the England YOT spoke about love as being a given within a family. This was discussed in relation to how family is likely to change over time, that things might happen, but that love should always be a constant. In particular, the young people spoke about parents and siblings as both

being important sources of love in their lives. The young people in the Scotland group also spoke about the expectations one might have in receiving love and protection from those they are closest to and how these expectations are likely to change over time. Despite being identified as a similar theme running through both groups, the way in which the concept of love was discussed, differed at times. For the young people in England, love was spoken about as if it were something that was always present among family members, regardless of the situation. In comparison, the young people in Scotland spoke about love as if it were something to strive for. They drew on their experiences of being in care, moving between various group homes and foster homes, and identified love as something that demonstrates a strong emotional connection to someone else. For most of them, this was an important thing to have in their life, and some even described feeling that sense of attachment to other adults throughout their life, in place of a parental figure. Again, holding a strong emotional attachment to others, who were considered 'family', 'like family', or the closest equivalent to 'a family' was seen by all the young people as an important quality for defining 'family'. From a social constructionists' perspective, these conversations with the young people about the importance of love and drawing on various experiences of 'family' and 'family life' are integral to developing a full understanding of exactly how young people who have offended use the term family.

    Within this theme of love, was also the notion of protection, and that an expected outcome of a loving relationship should also encompass some decent standard of protection. The young people identified this as an expectation that is held by children, and by society, that parents should love and protect their children from harm. This echoed what had been reviewed in the literature surrounding the concept of 'good parenting' (Hay et al., 2017). As discussions continued, and personal life experiences were drawn upon, it was highlighted that protection may be expected, but not always provided by family. This was primarily discussed by the young people in Scotland, who were very open in their discussions about their experiences of the care system and how these have impacted on their understandings of what 'family' means. They wanted to draw a contrast between what is expected of a family, and what might be the reality for some children, to highlight the importance of asking children and young people what they need. In contrast, for the young people in England, it was implied that their experiences were much more positive. These were reflected in the way that they spoke about relationships with family members, and the enduring nature of love as one moves from childhood towards adulthood. Again, recording these constructions about 'family life' from the young people's perspective are important, so that, youth justice practitioners may have a better understanding, not only of the role that 'family' plays in the young person's life, but also the important relationships they hold and what their expectations are of these relationships.

Care and belonging

The next key finding from the research conducted, identified the importance the young people placed on the giving and receiving of care among 'family' members, and the significance of holding a sense of belonging to a family unit. During the discussions about who might be considered 'family', many of the young people started with the notion of

care. For the young people from the England YOT group, they spoke very positively about family members caring for them, both when they were younger and now as they were older, this care was displayed more as support, particularly as they had become involved in the youth justice system (YJS). As such, the terms 'care' and 'support' were often used interchangeably by this group, signifying the importance of both in the young people's conceptualisations of the term 'family'. However, for the young people in Scotland, who were very open in sharing how their experiences of being in the care system had impacted on their lives, and subsequently on their understandings of the term 'family', led them to identify that when they were younger, they did not realise that who they considered to be family at the time, were not actually caring for them in the 'proper' way. Now that they were older and understood certain expectations that are held around parental responsibility and care, they could look back on their childhood and identify individuals who they no longer consider to be 'family', due to the lack of care that they had provided. Again, these findings echoed what had previously been reviewed, concerning parenting styles and general expectations that are held by society regarding 'good parenting' and 'bad parenting' (Hoeve et al., 2008).

It was also recognised by the young people, in both focus groups, that as children develop physically and mentally, they become less reliant on adults to care for them and start becoming more independent. Identified in developmental theories as an important life-stage of *adolescence*, the young people spoke about family members and important others who had, and who were still, providing support in a variety of ways. As such, support was differentiated from care, in that care was a necessity for young children, whereas support for older children and adolescents was not a necessity but was considered an important feature when deciding who they should refer to as their 'family'. The importance that was placed on this concept, was applied during discussions to both day-to-day life and also at critical points in their lives, for example, as they became involved with the criminal justice system as offenders. As with some of the other themes already presented there was a clear distinction made by young people in both focus groups, as to the differences between expectations and reality surrounding levels of support. Research has previously found that children and young people, particularly those who have spent time in the care system, experience a complex web of relationships, with every person in their 'web' providing varying levels of support and care, at various points in their lives (Thomas et al., 2017). This was similar to some of the ideas that the young people held about conceptualising the term 'family' and knowing who to identify as family members. Both social bond theory and attachment theory identify the importance of holding strong connections to others, as a way of desisting from committing crime. This was implicit in the young people's descriptions of the varying qualities they considered when defining family, particularly when they identified 'support' from parents and other caring adults as important. This therefore demonstrates the importance of asking young people to provide their own definitions for 'family', which are often based on lived experiences.

Finally, the young people identified holding a strong sense of belonging as integral to feeling like they were part of a family unit. Specifically, this discussion came from the Scotland focus group, who were keen to draw on their experiences from time spent in the care system. As such, they identified the constant moving between children's homes and

foster homes, as having a great but negative impact on their sense of belonging. Although this part of the discussion did not entirely focus on who they considered to be 'family', it was a feature that had been identified during the literature review. First, it appears in theories, such as social bond theory, as a way of building and strengthening bonds and connections with wider society and 'institutions', such as family and school (Bao et al., 2014). For theorists working within social bond theory, it is these strong bonds that encourage desistance from crime. Second, it appears in research that explores 'features of family life' rather than family structures, as a way of 'measuring' the concept of 'family' (King et al., 2018). Having a sense of belonging to a family unit, overlapped with several other themes that emerged from the data collected during the focus groups, such as love and relationships, suggesting that all of these qualities that were identified by the young people as important in their conceptualisations of 'family', are interrelated and reliant to some degree on one another.

Problematic terminology

The final key finding from the research conducted, identified that the term 'family' itself is potentially problematic, due to the assumptions that it holds. This was explicitly identified by some of the young people in the Scotland focus group, who explained the difficulty that they had experienced, both at the start of the focus group and more generally in everyday life, on who to describe as their 'family'. When asked to explain what they meant by this, it became clear that it was the word itself, 'family', that they had issues with, as they did not feel that it 'properly' described the people who they felt closest to emotionally, and who had provided them with support when they needed it. This part of the discussion reinforced the need for research, such as this to be conducted, as children and young people's understandings of the term 'family' is largely missing from previous research that concerns them. Furthermore, these findings echo and lend support to some suggestions that have previously been made by sociologists, and the problematic nature of the word 'family', instead proposing other terminology to better suit the requirements of specific groups or individuals in society. This alternative language has been explored by other researchers, drawing on concepts, such as 'personal life' and 'kinship', which allow individuals to encompass a wider range of relationships and other beings into their network (Smart, 2007). This same approach of seeking alternative language was described by the young people in the Scotland group, as a process that they had already completed unconsciously; preferring to describe people they were close to as 'my people', or simply using the word 'relationships' when identifying others.

    However, this finding of 'family' as a problematic term was also implicit in the discussions held with the young people at the England YOT. Unlike some of the young people in the Scotland group who had actively chosen not to use the term 'family' when describing others they felt close to, the young people in the England group never raised this as an issue. Throughout their discussions all the young people used the term 'family' and did not identify alternative language that they used in its place. However, it was implied several times throughout the session that the term 'family' can prove problematic. The first example of this was early on in the discussion when one young person asked whether by

'family' we meant the people who he lived with. This echoed previous research that takes a more positivist approach and attempts to quantify and measure something as dynamic and flexible as 'family', choosing to categorise their participants based on who they live with, or the marital status of their parents (Casper and Hofferth, 2006). With young people assuming this is the 'measurement' of family that they were expected to use during the discussion, is reflective of the much wider use of the term 'family' in everyday life, and perhaps even how it is portrayed to them through the media. The second example of how the term 'family' proved problematic during the discussions with the young people based at the England YOT, was when a young person pointed to all the flashcards that were laid across the table, to provide his definition of 'what family means'. The flashcards contain a wide range of words, including specific family members (mother, father, etc.), emotions and 'features of family life', such as love, trust and care, and also included some more negative words, such as criminal, abuse and neglect. Importantly, the fact that the young person suggested all the words were relevant in describing and defining the term 'family', demonstrates and supports other research that aims to expand the concept of 'family'.

Discussion

There are several main conclusions that can be drawn from the research, which are all contributions to knowledge. Some build on findings from previous family research, and some offer new insights into how young people who have offended understand the concept of 'family' and the implications this could have on policy and practice.

The concept of 'family' is dynamic and flexible

Typically, research that includes 'family' as a variable, often treats it as a static and measurable variable, with common categories of 'family' being, single parent and two parents. From a methodological perspective, this is problematic. For quantitative research, it is assumed that 'family' can be measured, given a value, and be subjected to statistical analysis. For qualitative research, it is assumed that both the researcher and participants hold the same shared definition of 'family', and that both are talking about the same 'thing' when recording discussions. Building on findings from previous family research, this research has demonstrated that the concept of 'family' is dynamic and flexible and that who is considered to be 'family' is highly likely to change over time. The young people in both research locations drew on this common theme of change throughout the discussions. Change in the level of care and support a family member may provide a child with as they develop and grow into young adults. Change in the level of safety a family may be able to provide young people, depending on different circumstances. Change in the amount of love a mother may choose to display towards their child. All these elements were considered important by the young people in defining who they considered to be family, and how their own family circumstances had changed over time. This was particularly pronounced in the Scotland group, as all the young people here had disclosed their experiences of being in the care system, and the impact that this had on their understanding of the term 'family'. Again, how their concept had changed over time was largely dependent on their personal experiences of being moved around in the care system.

There is a difference between expectations and lived experiences of 'family life'

When asking people to define the term 'family', it is also important to ask them to explain why they use that definition. Upon further interrogation, it may become clear that the definition they give is very different to their own lived experiences of family life. Understanding this difference between expectations one holds about family life, compared to their own lived experiences, is important. Negative emotions about family life and problems with developing interpersonal relationships with others may persist if the difference between expectations and lived experiences are too great. Understanding the complexity of the long-term impacts of ambiguity and negative experiences during childhood are slowly building. However, research within this area has a tendency to reduce lived experiences down to measurable factors, quantifying personal experiences rather than exploring with the individual from their point of view. Although not explicitly discussed by the young people participants, analysis of both focus group sessions identified this as a main theme and an important finding. When reading back through the observational field notes made during each of the group discussions, it soon became clear that there was a marked difference in the way that the young people spoke about how family should be, compared to their own experiences of family life. The difference between these two views was more noticeable in the Scotland group than in the England group. For the young people in Scotland who were quite at ease drawing on their looked after child (LAC) identity, talking about how family should be, used predominantly positive language, whereas talking about their own experiences of family life growing up, used more negative language. Research that considers the impact of media on children and young people's perceptions and expectations about family life would be interesting and important to develop this finding further.

Affective factors are more important in defining who is 'family'

With the term 'family' very rarely being defined in research papers, it is difficult to know precisely who or what the researchers are talking about. The problematic nature of this results in the term being open to assumptions, with researchers assuming that those reading their articles know who or what they are referring to when they use the word 'family'. It has been demonstrated that people will draw on a stereotypical, nuclear family typology when a clear definition of 'family' is omitted. From this perspective, it is the presence of certain (biological) family members that defines a group of people as a family unit. However, as the findings from this research demonstrate, this is simply not the case for the young people concerned. For the young people who participated in this research, much of what was discussed in relation to the concept of 'family' was concerned with emotions. It was the presence of certain emotions, and displays of affection, that the young people mostly drew on to define who, or what, they considered to be 'family'. Love, trust, care and support were just some examples that were discussed, in both groups. Love, in particular, was a reoccurring theme throughout both discussion groups, highlighting the importance of allowing young people to explore and explain how they understand the world, in their own words. Similarly, trust was discussed in terms of identifying family

members, or 'like family' members; those who can offer advice and who are less likely to lie. Both these traits were considered important aspects of family life, something which friends were not always able to provide the young people.

Experience of the care system can have negative impacts on the concept of 'family'

Many children and young people who come into contact with the YJS, also have some experience of the care system (Bateman et al., 2018). The high correlation between these two groups means that consideration should be given to each on their own merits, but also what the combination of the two may mean for the individual concerned. As the same scenario can be experienced differently by different people, it is important to explore with individuals what the impact of past experiences is having on their present, and future selves. For the young people in the England setting, they primarily drew on their offender identity, when discussing family and family life. For them, it was important that their family – those who they were emotionally close to – could still provide a source of trust and support during the time they were spending on a community court order. In contrast, the young people in the Scotland setting drew heavily on their LAC identity. The findings that this discussion generated focused on the negative repercussions that poor experiences of the care system can lead to. Most research that explores the short- and long-term impacts of experiencing the care system during childhood, focuses on issues, such as mental health, educational attainment and offending behaviour. However, the findings from this research have highlighted the importance of exploring the impact on word-association and concepts. With the importance that 'family' often plays in both policy and practice concerning young people who have offended, it was necessary to explore what this concept means to the young people themselves, conducting research in collaboration with the young people and placing value on their voices (Case et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Alternative language is needed

There have been many academics over the years who have written theoretical papers, and who have concluded from empirical research, that alternative language for describing 'family', 'family members', and 'family life' should be sought. With the aforementioned assumption surrounding the meaning of the word, 'family' is a very ambiguous and vague word. Without adequate understanding of how different people conceptualise the term, from a methodological perspective, research findings are difficult to interpret. Over the years, there have been many different suggestions for alternative language to be used. The findings from this research support the need for alternative language to be used, particularly when dealing with young people who have offended and/or young people with experience of the care system. The young people in the Scotland setting, who had also chosen to disclose some of their negative experiences of the care system, were very clear on the need to use alternative language when discussing others who they felt emotionally close

to. For these young people, the negative experiences associated with being removed from their own biological family, and being placed in 'other' family settings, had resulted in their outright rejection of the word 'family'. After much discussion around the term, it was interesting to see them come to this conclusion as a group. Mostly, they just wanted a way to identify those significant others in their life, who were considered important. In contrast, the group in England did not reject the use of the word 'family' and they seemed quite content with using the word and did not verbalise any issues with it. However, when asked to decide on a concise definition of the word, many of the young people struggled. The vastness of the word, and all that it may encompass, was succinctly summed up by one young person in the England setting who announced that 'family means everything': both literally and conceptually.

Limitations of research

While this research offers valuable insights into the voices of young people in England and Scotland, it is essential to acknowledge its inherent limitations. First, the research sample was drawn from small, selective groups within these regions, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives among young people in the broader population. Consequently, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of these specific groups rather than generalised to all young people in England and Scotland. Furthermore, the focus of this research was limited to understanding the voices of young people within the context of English and Scottish societies. The perspectives of young people from other geographical regions, such as Africa or Asia, or from indigenous communities, were not explicitly considered. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable to these contexts, and caution should be exercised when extrapolating the results beyond the studied populations. Despite these limitations, this research provides a foundational understanding of the voices of young people in England and Scotland, shedding light on their experiences. There is significant scope for future research to explore the perspectives of young people in diverse cultural contexts, allowing for comparative analyses and a more comprehensive understanding of youth voices globally. By expanding the scope of inquiry to include a broader range of societies and communities, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of youth experiences and inform policy and practice on a global scale.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings from this research demonstrate the need for clear definitions of what 'family' refers to, especially in policy documents in the United Kingdom that concern young people. Ideally, these definitions should be based on what the young people themselves consider to be family, and not what the adult policymakers consider to be family. If this is not possible, then there should at least be some form of definition provided, to make it clear about who the policy document refers to under the subject of 'family'. Furthermore, the recognition of young people's understanding of the term needs to be extended beyond youth justice policy. With a high percentage of young people who enter the YJS also

having experience of the care system, it is imperative that children's social work policy also be reviewed. With the high probability of this crossover occurring, both types of policy need to work in collaboration with one another. As the YJS moves towards a 'children first' approach, the likelihood of new, or renewed policy documents being released is imminent. Now is the ideal time for policy makers to consider including a clear definition of 'family', using words and concepts that children and young people incorporate in their own understandings of the term.

Providing opportunities for children and young people to explore the concept of 'family' and what it means to them is vital to identify other people that are important to them. The implications of this research highlight the fact that how young people understand the term 'family' may vary considerably compared to the adult practitioners who work with them. Therefore, it is important to provide them with a safe space and opportunity to discuss it. Through these discussions, other issues may well come to light, that need dealing with first before attempting to deal with the offending behaviour. As such, this scheme would work in tandem with the 'positive youth justice' movement (Haines and Case, 2015). The importance of opening these discussions about 'family' with young people entering the YJS is further demonstrated, when considering the young people who also have experience of being looked after in the care system. As the findings reveal, young people who have experience of both systems are likely to associate negative emotions with the term 'family' and in some cases, even reject the use of the word all together. It is extremely important to consider using alternative language with these young people, once the initial discussions about 'family' have been conducted. If established that the young person does have negative experiences attached to the word 'family', they should be asked what word they would like to use when discussing other people that are important to them. Giving young people this space to choose the words they use, rather than having to adopt the language used by the youth justice practitioners, it can help to develop a better relationship and rapport, building trust and reassurance.

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