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The Experience of Being a Foster Parent in Non-Kinship Placements:

Emotional and Psychological Impacts

Lindsay Michelle Tryc

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The Experience of Being a Foster Parent in Non-Kinship Placements:

Emotional and Psychological Impacts

Abstract

With a significant number of children in the foster care system in need of safe and stable homes, caregivers who are willing to provide such a home are vital. In 2010, almost fifty percent of foster homes were non-kinship placements with caregivers who had no biological relation to the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). As these caregivers voluntarily open their homes, they are also likely to encounter challenges with foster children due to previous traumas. The specific challenges addressed in this research study included the integration into the family, the management of behaviors, and the ability to make/break attachments. The intent was to identify the emotional and psychological impacts on foster parents as a result of these challenges, which was accomplished through the discussion of experiences. Given the volume of literature about attachment and foster care, the purpose of the study was to focus solely on the experiences and the identifiable emotional and psychological impacts as shared by foster parents, rather than an exploration of each potential risk and protective factor related to both attachment and foster care.

The data collection consisted of interviews conducted with foster parents, with an established interview protocol. The sample included fourteen participants, comprised of two single females, five heterosexual couples and one couple identified as house parents. The participants were Caucasian and broadly characterized as middle socio-economic status, employed, and educated with adopted/biological children. The interviews were transcribed and assessed for emerging themes, commonalities and discrepancies; psychological and emotional impacts were identified and discussed also. As the findings indicate, despite the intensity, these impacts did not serve to deter participants from continuing their role as foster parents in the

future. Overall, the findings were largely consistent with previously cited research and provided important implications including more stringent policies applicable to practice, continuous trainings for foster parents, and increased accountability, communication and sharing of evidence-based practices between families and the agency. In addition, the findings helped to determine if these impacts served as deterrents to foster in the future, and provided insight into how caregivers may better be supported for their invaluable service.

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Problem Statement

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, in 2010, there were 408,425 children in the foster care system nationally, with approximately forty-eight percent in non-kinship placements. This is in comparison to only twenty-six percent of foster children in kinship placements or with relatives (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Non-kinship foster homes are characterized as placements with individuals who are not biologically related to the foster child; and therefore, these individuals have various incentives and motivations to being a foster parent. Furthermore, as Rhodes, Orme and Buehler (2001) identified, "Family foster homes are increasingly crucial resources for agencies because federal and state funding for child welfare has not kept pace with the needs of children and families" (p. 85). Therefore, it is imperative for children who are victims of abuse, neglect and maltreatment to have access to homes such as these where they may be provided with stability and safety.

Being a foster parent is not an easy feat, given the extensive backgrounds of the children within the foster care system. As noted, the duties entailed with the role of a foster parent are demanding and challenging. Some of these duties include ensuring that basic needs are being met, coordinating with other services such as medical appointments, mental health care, as well as court dates. In addition, the foster parent bears the responsibility of communicating with the case worker as well as the biological parents, and possibly facilitating visitations with the families (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004).

In particular, two factors that may significantly impact the overall experience of being a foster parent are the presence of behavioral challenges as well as the family's attachment to the foster child. Because of the circumstances a foster child has likely been exposed to prior to being placed in the foster care system, there is an increased risk for mental health concerns, such as

depression, inadequate social skills as well as overt behaviors, such as aggression and anger (Harden, 2004). Attachment also has a significant impact on the foster parents and their families as there may be frequent transitions of foster children in and out of the home. Through constant interactions and through assuming the role of the primary caregiver, foster families may make significant attachments to the foster child, despite the impermanency and unpredictability of the placement. Therefore, these sporadic changes can frequently lead the family to experience feelings of loss and grief after the child is either adopted, returned to the care of the biological parents or transitioned to another foster care placement (Thomson & McArthur, 2009).

Thus, the intended purpose of this research study was to explore the emotional and psychological impacts that these particular factors have had on foster parents and their families in non-kinship placements, as viewed from the perspectives of the foster parents. At the present time, there is substantial research on the experiences of the foster children as well as their biological families; however, there is limited research on the experiences of foster care, as perceived by the other caregivers. The value of this research may then further contribute to the existing knowledge base to first identify the motivations of foster parents, in order to determine if they align and are validated by the lived experiences; secondly, as foster parents explore their overall ability to address and manage challenging behaviors, it serves to inform agencies how to alter trainings and provide valuable and relevant resources to better fit the needs of foster families. The findings may assist in understanding how challenging behaviors may impact the family's overall well-being through heightened struggles and individual experiences with stress and anxiety as well. Similarly, by exploring the family's experiences with attachment, the conflicting roles as a professional and as a parent can be further addressed and understood, from the perspective of the foster parent.

It should be noted that the scope of the study was limited to focusing on the breadth of the foster care experience, understanding behaviors and attachments, and identifying emotional and psychological impacts from a broader perspective, as shared by participants. As a result, all factors encompassing behavioral challenges and attachments with foster children and foster families were not thoroughly identified and addressed. Although there are an abundance of factors directly and indirectly impacting the foster care system and the individuals who comprise it, the intent of the present research study was to largely provide additional research in an area with limited literature and serve as a foundation for future studies.

Overall, through gauging how the experience of foster care may emotionally and psychologically impact caregivers, there are valuable implications for practice and policy. Foster parents are cherished assets as they commit to provide a stable home to children in dire need; however, due to limited resources and overwhelming obligations, foster parents are often overlooked and not given sufficient support by their associated agency. As a result, retentions rates may drop as the number of children in need of a foster care placement may continue to rise. Therefore, by developing an understanding of the challenges of foster care through the lens of the caregiver, this may inform practice and policy in order to ensure the welfare of not only the children in the foster care system but the individuals who serve them as well.

Literature Review

Pre-Placement Discussion

Prior to committing to the role of a foster parent, the motivations to foster are examined to gauge the underlying reasons why individuals initially choose to foster children. This is especially significant for those individuals who foster children in non-kinship placements, or those children who are not biologically related to them. The perceived risks and potential downfalls of being a foster parent are also discussed to better understand what is entailed with being a foster parent. Therefore, whether or not the motivations to foster are validated through their lived experiences may impact a family's decision to continue to foster in the future. In addition, any identified risks may contribute to the impacts on the emotional and psychological well-being of foster parents. As Seaberg and Harrigan (1997) identified, one of the four stressors that fostering has on the family dynamic is maintaining expectations of a placement that are improbable and unlikely. Therefore, the pre-placement discussion is significant to identify as well as understand the expectations of foster parents that may be influenced by their motivations and the perceived risks entailed with the process.

Motivations for Being a Foster Parent. When investigating motivations, it has been identified that individuals choose to foster because of a sense of social responsibility and obligation (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Also, as noted in one research study, many individuals become involved in the process in order to become a foster parent for several different reasons, which stem from the individual's inability to have children, the need for something else in their life, as well as the desire to help other children (Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2010). Other sources of motivation cited by Wilson, Fyson, and Newstone (2006) include the desire to provide a child in need with a family life that could be

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of worth to the child. Additionally, this same research study revealed the desire of individuals to provide companionship for the biological children of the foster parents. According to MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied (2006), regularly cited motivators for becoming a foster parent stemmed from "intrinsic, altruistic motivators of wanting to make a difference in children's lives and a desire to have children in the home" (p. 351). Similarly, many foster parents enter the realm of fostering because they wish to make a difference in a child's life or wish to see a child grow and/or develop (Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009). Finally, Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004) identified religious-influenced forms of motivations, the intent to foster to adopt, as well as the additional income that fostering provides. Overall, these are some of the motivations that propel individuals to initially enter the fostering process.

Perceived Risks of Being a Foster Parent. In addition to understanding the motivations individuals possess to become foster parents, it is equally important to identify the perceived risks. These risks may potentially impact an individual's ability to meet the needs of the foster child, in order to provide a safe and stable environment. As it relates to the present research study, these risks may further impact the emotional and psychological well-being of foster parents as well as their families. As stated by Brown and Bednar (2006), foster parents consistently experience levels of stress and eventual breakdown due to receiving limited acknowledgement and appreciation for the strenuous tasks involved in being a foster parent, not having appropriate access to substantial support, as well as having their initial motivations to foster misconstrued by others.

First of all, the overall lack of value for their role and the communication that foster parents experience has been linked to the fostering agency. From the perspective of several foster parents in a study conducted by Whiting and Huber (2007), many foster care parents disclosed

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individual issues related to poor communication with their foster care agencies. Furthermore, a study by Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France (2010) indicated that foster parents were faced with "high parenting stress and encounters with a wide range of children's mental health difficulties, including both uncommon and severe difficulties, which together represent an exceptional burden of care" (p. 149). Lastly, as cited by individuals, the amount of additional resources and support as well as training that foster parents receive from the agency is minimal (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004).

In regards to misunderstood and misconstrued motivations, a research study completed by Blythe, Jackson, Halcomb, and Wilkes (2012) addressed the role of labeling and stereotyping in regards to various foster care providers. The participants of the study were comprised of female foster parents who provided long-term placements for a varying number of foster children. Some participants in the cited study noted that foster parents were generally viewed as egocentric and money hungry by the community as well as being hard-hearted, uninterested, and deficient in their commitment to the foster child. Additionally, many individuals from this particular research study revealed attempts to conceal their status as foster parents; however, they were faced with perceived stigma, social isolation and status loss when they were unable to disguise their identity (Blythe et al., 2012).

Lastly, foster parents disclosed experiences with emotional ambiguities, such as forming attachments to the child in addition to being uncertain in regards to the future of the child (Whiting & Huber, 2007). Whiting and Huber (2007) also uncovered perspectives regarding conflicting roles experienced by the foster parents, such as "trying not to resent the birth parents for mistreating their own children" (p. 15). In a research study by Pickin, Brunsden and Hill (2011), it was revealed that the eventual removal of the foster child from the foster parent's

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home caused the foster parents to experience a sense of bereavement due to the formation of strong emotional bonds as well. Therefore, the present research study may further contribute to identifying and understanding the potential for emotional impacts that attachment may have on foster parents and their families.

Addressing and Managing Behavioral Challenges

The presence of behavioral challenges is frequent among children within foster care, which may be related to prior life experiences and exposures, in which they may have been subjected to significant abuse and trauma. Specifically in these cases, foster children may experience disorganized attachment; and as a result, children do not trust their immediate caregivers or foster parents as it pertains to the present research study. Their intent is to avoid exhibiting any type of dependency or weakness and as a result, the child may act in overt ways (Walker, 2008). Therefore, in order to further address the emotional and behavioral challenges of foster children, an overview of family emotional processes is addressed; in addition, the trainings and skills, specific to fostering, are examined.

Family Emotional Processes. As the role of being a foster parent may lead to situations of heightened emotional distress, it is important to discuss the family processes to best manage the range of emotions that are likely to be experienced. Research has suggested that it is imperative for the overall development and growth of children that parents and caregivers demonstrate appropriate emotional communication; this includes exhibiting forms of validation and empathy to the child (Stocker, Richmond, & Rhoades, 2007). As Stocker et al. (2007) further state, if a parent chooses to address emotions in adverse ways, such as through consequences, failing to acknowledge, or provoking, there is an increased risk for negative behaviors. It is also valid to note that the study found a variation between mothers and fathers; in particular, mothers

were found to express more feelings of support and identify the emotional challenges of children in comparison to fathers. Overall, if adolescents experienced validation and support from their parents and/or caregivers, they were then at a decreased risk for negative feelings, such as anxiety and depression (Stocker et al., 2007). The importance of appropriately addressing emotional experiences is especially valuable for foster parents as the need to empathize and validate is significant for children with traumatic histories; however, if foster parents are ill-equipped or misinterpret these behaviors, they are at an increased risk for responding inappropriately. In turn, this may perpetuate a cycle of stress and anxiety for both the foster parent as well as the foster child.

      Prior Training for Foster Parents. Among the multiple challenges and obligations entailed with fostering a child, foster parents further identified stress created by the fostering agency and the lack of preparation provided prior to having a child placed in the home (Cooley & Petren, 2011)**.** There are mixed perceptions on the overall value of the trainings provided by the agency that foster parents undergo prior to having a child in their home; nevertheless, this lack of preparation may largely contribute to a foster parent's inability to manage behavioral challenges as they are encountered as well as maintaining a level of awareness for the potential issues with attachments. Both of which may further impact the emotional and psychological well-being of foster parents. Although prior research has suggested that trainings facilitated by the foster agency may potentially contribute to a decreased risk for burn-out and an increased sense of support, a large number of foster parents expressed feeling ill-prepared for their experiences despite undergoing training (Cooley & Petren, 2011). In addition, research has suggested that foster parents who expressed an increased sense of competency in their parenting were positively correlated with higher retention rates as well as overall satisfaction (Cooley &

Petren, 2011). Therefore, it is valuable to understand how foster parents may feel better supported by their foster care agencies as well as more competent to limit the risks for detrimental impacts that may occur during and after the foster care placement.

Skills for Behavioral Challenges. Children in the foster care system are likely to exhibit certain behavioral challenges as a result of several factors, as previously addressed. The removal from the biological parents and the placement with families that the children do not have any prior relations with serves as one factor. Another factor encompasses the lack of services and support for foster children, as well as the inadequate training for the foster parents themselves, as stated prior. In addition, because of the uncertainty associated with placements and the lack of commitment on the part of the foster parents, the emotional stability of the foster child may be compromised as a result (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006).

Therefore, because of the nature of the foster care placements as well as the life circumstances and exposures that the foster child has endured, there are several skills that are recommended that foster parents should master to effectively manage the related behaviors (Walker, 2008). For children in the foster care system who have histories of trauma, abuse, neglect and unstable attachments, they are incapable of managing their feelings effectively. This skill is typically learned in infancy through the primary caregiver to self-regulate in moments of stress; therefore, these children will often utilize other ways to cope with these feelings, such as violence. For foster parents then, they must be capable of managing their own range of feelings sufficiently to assist the child in learning to manage their feelings as well (Walker, 2008).

Another skill for foster parents to achieve and master is known as reflective function. This is "the capacity to think reflectively about both one's own and others' experience" (Walker, 2008, p. 51). The behaviors exhibited in children with significant histories of trauma, neglect and

abuse may not always be linked to overt reasons or motivations. Therefore, the goal for foster

parents should be to consider the underlying motivations for any behavioral challenges. With this

insight and awareness, the foster parent is then better equipped to address the behaviors in a

more effective and healthy manner, in comparison to reacting negatively (Walker, 2008).

Making Attachments with the Foster Child

Attachment is an additional factor that foster parents encounter when fostering a child.

Entailed with attachment are the emotional bonds that are likely to form between the child and

the foster parents as well as the other family members during the course of the placement. As a

result, the dilemma that foster parents must address is whether it is more appropriate to nurture

these bonds, keeping in mind that the placement will end at some point in the future; or, to avoid

the potential emotional and psychological distress when the child transitions out of the home, the

foster family should maintain an emotional distance from the child (Broady et al., 2010).

Attachment theory and family boundary ambiguity theory are assessed as theoretical frameworks

to provide further insight in regards to making attachments within foster care placements.

Attachment Theory. The basis of attachment theory suggests that through lived

experiences with caregivers, children can then internally develop a foundation and basis for

future attachments. The child, the primary caregiver, as well as the immediate environment are

among the multitude of factors that influence and impact the ability for the child to make healthy

attachments with others (Ponciano, 2010). As it pertains to the present research study, children in

foster care are at an increased risk of exhibiting disorganized attachment, as previously

addressed, due to the instability of their attachments with their primary caregivers early in their

lives. However, upon entering the care of a foster parent, the child is more likely to be exposed

to stable and healthy attachment patterns, facilitated by the foster parents. Therefore, through

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these attachment patterns, the child may not only begin to attach to the foster family, but the foster family may begin to make attachments to the foster child as well (Walker, 2008).

Impacts of Attachment. As the foster child seeks to attach to the primary caregiver, foster parents may struggle with their own attachments to the foster child that are developed concurrently. As stated by Broady et al. (2010), foster parents identified a heightened sense of attachment with the foster child as the placement progressed. Furthermore, foster parents stated that although they initially acknowledged that the placement would not be permanent, as the placement continued over time and the child became more integrated into the family structure, the family yearned for more permanency than they had initially intended (Broady et al., 2010). In regards to the research study conducted by Broady et al. (2010), attachment to the child was cited to be an inevitable aspect of the fostering experience; additionally, when the foster parent made an attachment with the child, the experience of being a foster parent, in turn, was more beneficial and rewarding (Broady et al., 2010). It is also important to note, as Ponciano (2010) states, "It is possible that a foster mother who is adopting her foster child may interact with this child differently than a foster mother who chooses to provide temporary foster care, thereby impacting the quality of the attachment relationship" (p. 99). Therefore, the type of foster care placement and the intentions of the foster parents are some of the many factors that may, in large part, impact the attachments created and the emotional impact on the foster family.

With the positive outcomes linked to making meaningful attachments to the foster child, negative impacts were identified at the closure of placements as well. The age of the child, the length of the placement, the nature of the transition from the home and the overall experience with the foster child were some of the factors identified that may impact the severity of the grief that foster parents expressed at the closure of a placement (Thomson & McArthur, 2009).

Younes and Harp (2007) found that foster families identified the end of a placement when the child transitions out as the most challenging aspect of the experience as additional feelings of overall loss and sadness were identified by foster families following the closure of the placement. As a result, foster parents have recognized the issues surrounding their conflicting roles as a caregiver and as a professional. As stated by Younes and Harp (2007), "Foster families struggle to find a balance between loving foster children enough that they feel at home and included in the family yet not becoming so attached that separation is too difficult" (p. 24).

As another caveat to this dilemma, research has questioned the consequences of limiting attachments, which may inhibit the growth and development of the foster child (Broady et al., 2010). Therefore, it begs the question if it is better for the foster child to be exposed to minimal attachment for the emotional and psychological well-being of the foster family, or if the foster family is more capable of handling the emotional distress that is experienced in order to mirror healthy attachment patterns to the foster child. Potential repercussions in either circumstance may include low retention rates of foster families as well as detrimental impacts on the foster child, who may either be forced to end a healthy attachment with the foster family upon closure or not be modeled appropriate attachment patterns at all, thus impacting future attachments.

Family Boundary Ambiguity Theory. An additional theory that may provide insight into the attachment with the foster child is family boundary ambiguity theory. As cited by Thomson and McArthur (2009), "The family boundary ambiguity theory suggests that the greater the dissonance between the 'psychological family' and the 'physical family', the greater the level of family boundary ambiguity, which is a risk factor for 'individual and relational well-being" (p. 73). This can be further interpreted as the psychological family, which encompasses individuals who are identified and recognized as family, in comparison to the physical family,

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which includes those individuals who are physically present. Thomson and McArthur (2009) further state, "Role ambiguity is a recognized and difficult feature of foster caring" (p. 69); and this type of uncertainty is frequently related to experiences with loss.

Impacts of Ambiguity. As it pertains to foster parents and foster families in particular, experiences with loss and grief are common following the closure of a placement or as the foster child transitions out of the home. Also in comparison to other losses in life, there is a lingering sense of uncertainty because although the foster child is no longer in the home, the foster parents and families do not have a sense of closure, as in instances with death, and the future of the foster child is not always confirmed to the family. An additional impact on the family may be contingent on the level of investment in the foster child that they possessed as well. Therefore, throughout the duration of the placement, foster parents may have had substantial input in the decisions and well-being of the child; however, upon closure, foster parents have limited influence as it pertains to the child's future, fueling an increased sense of ambiguity (Thomson & McArthur, 2009).

Thus, as the theory suggests, dependent on the level of uncertainty foster parents and families experience with a foster child is the ability for these families to accept, grieve and move on. In cases of extreme uncertainty and ambiguity, the family is at an increased risk for depression, anxiety and other interfamily confrontations. Similar to attachment, the family may also be conflicted in their efforts to identify who they consider to be members of the family, in order to avoid the emotional heartbreak that foster parents in a recent study frequently experienced (Thomson & McArthur, 2009). However, by facilitating closures more effectively, providing information on the future of the child as well as ensuring that foster families receive

sufficient grief counseling and other support if necessary, they may then be better equipped to process feelings surrounding closures in the future.

Retention of Foster Parents

In a review of the literature, it is important to understand the various reasons why individuals choose to end their roles as foster parents. According to Rhodes et al. (2001), there are five core reasons why foster parents discontinue their placements. The first being that of normal life changes in family circumstances, such as moving, fluctuations in employment, pregnancy, changes in health, and the death of a spouse. Secondly, foster parents may discontinue the use of their family foster home due to their discontent with agency relationships, poor communication with caseworkers, perceptions of caseworkers as being unresponsive, as well as receiving inadequate services from the foster care agency. The third reason revolves around the lack of preparation of foster parents; and the fourth includes overall stress as a result of problematic behaviors, exchanges with the biological parents, assertions of abuse, and a deficiency in respite care. Lastly, conflicts between foster children and the other children in the home were a final reason to discontinue foster care placements (Rhodes et al., 2001).

Similar to the study conducted by Rhodes et al. (2001), another research study indicated comparable reasons for the discontinuation of foster homes, including life events and potentially stressful changes that occur within the foster family itself and the lack of social work services, such as inadequate training (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999).Wilson, Sinclair, and Gibbs (2000) found that sixty percent of participants had deliberated giving up fostering at some point in the past. In addition, it was concluded that individuals who started fostering in the past eighteen months and then experienced a negative event, including breakdowns or disruptions,

allegations, family tensions, 'tug of love' cases, and disagreements with social services, were more likely to end the foster care placement (Wilson et al., 2000).

Other factors that were involved with the retention of foster parents, as identified by Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004), included the image of the child welfare system that is perceived negatively by the public, further deterring individuals from seeking to begin or continue placements. Overall cost and expense, fluctuations in the family structure as well as an increased number of women who hold professional positions, in comparison to stay at home mothers, further impacted the current retention rate of foster parents in non-kinship placements. On a final note, the experience of foster care, as individuals encountered, was too overwhelming as well as exasperating to continue after the initial first year (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). These are valuable considerations to further address the psychological and emotional welfare of foster families in non-kinship placements and the potential impacts on retention rates.

Gaps in the Literature

As a focus for the present research study, an identifiable gap in the literature revolves around the psychological well-being of the foster parents when faced with challenging behaviors from the foster child (Morgan & Baron, 2011). Morgan and Baron (2011) argued that there is an abundance of research on this topic, but the focus was on the psychological well-being of the biological parents of the foster child, not foster parents. Therefore, Morgan and Baron (2011) set off to research the psychological well-being of foster parents when faced with the challenging behavior of the foster child. Similar to the effects on the psychological well-being of birth parents, it was reported that foster parents experienced increases in stress, anxiety and depression (Morgan & Baron, 2011). Although Morgan and Baron (2011) conducted research on this

subject, additional research should be conducted to develop an empirically supported trend as a basis for practitioners, fostering agencies and policy makers.

Secondly, as suggested by Cooley and Petren (2011), future research should also be centered upon the experiences of the foster parents and the factors that comprise particular parenting styles as well as family processes. By placing more emphasis on the foster parents and their families more specifically, it can then be better determined the impact that these factors have on the foster child and the potential for stability and healthy development. In regards to the present research study, by focusing on the emotional and psychological impacts gauged through the experiences and perspectives of foster parents, this may also inform the research to determine if these factors negatively impact the outcome for foster children, in addition to the well-being of foster parents and their families.

Conceptual and Operational Definitions

Conceptually, the population of interest, foster care parents, was identified as in non-kinship placements and the intent was to gauge individual experiences with behavioral challenges and attachment as viewed from their perspectives. Contingent on these experiences then were any identifiable emotional and psychological impacts on the foster family that resulted. For the purposes of conducting and operationalizing the research, foster care parents in non-kinship placements were not limited by age, race, ethnicity, or other background information. It was important to include foster parents who had experience fostering children for a minimum of one year; however, the number of placements was not a required criterion. Overall, one year indicated a degree of experience and interaction with foster children and the fostering agency. The research study also sought to include both foster parents without biological children, and foster parents with biological children.

Additionally, behavioral challenges were largely defined from the perspectives of the foster parents, encompassing aggression, anger, non-compliance, sexualized behaviors, as well as physical or assaultive behaviors. Behavioral challenges were dependent on the individualized experiences of foster parents and their identified struggles to manage these behaviors. Attachment was also dependent on the perspective of the foster parents and their described attachments to the foster child. This encompassed whether the foster parents identified a strong and emotional bond with the foster child, and whether the foster child was identified as a member of the foster family. The discussion of emotional and psychological impacts was then explored following the discussion that centered on these experiences with behavioral challenges and attachment. Therefore, the intent was to gauge if following the experiences with addressing behavioral challenges, foster parents and families recognized any psychological impacts such as

stress, anxiety, low self-esteem or feelings of incompetence; and in regards to experiences with attachment, it was discussed if foster parents identified any possible after-effects, depression, grief, as well as a sense of loss or uncertainty following the closure of the placement. The discussion was broadly based on the entirety of participants' fostering experiences; therefore, there were a multitude of additional factors impacting the foster care process, behaviors and attachments that were not included as a result of being outside the scope of the present study.

Furthermore, in regards to potential implications of the research study, foster parents may not have felt that their lived experiences aligned with their initial motivations to become a foster parent. In other instances, the emotional and psychological impacts may have weighed too heavily to continue to foster, despite substantial motivations. As a result, this may be further correlated to an identifiable trend in retention rates among foster parents in non-kinship placements as well as inform practice and policy to better address these issues.

Research Question

The research question for the present study was, "From the perspective of foster parents, what are the emotional and psychological impacts experienced by foster families in non-kinship placements as a result of behavioral challenges and the development of attachments?" In addition, it was further explored, "What implications, if any, may this have for the initial motivations and retention rate for foster parents in non-kinship placements?"

This research study was broadly characterized as phenomenological research. As described by Creswell (2007), the focus was centered upon "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). A common thread linked the individuals to gain a greater understanding of their experience collectively, instead of describing the experiences individually. The purpose of this methodology was to emphasize the portrayal and description of the collective experiences as a phenomenon and to deemphasize further analysis to infer why the phenomenon occurred (Creswell, 2007). This research study may be also identified as hermeneutical phenomenology. As described, "Phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also seen as an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59).

Research Design

The research design that was utilized for the implemented research study was a cross-sectional survey design. As a qualitative study, an intervention was not used for the purpose of the present study. More specifically, a change was not implemented by the researcher to determine any cause and effect. The particular population that was studied was foster care parents within non-kinship placements with the intent to gauge perspectives based on their experiences with foster care. In addition, the implemented research study was for exploratory purposes. Presently, there is limited research on the emotional and psychological well-being of foster parents in non-kinship placements; therefore, the goal of the research study was to enhance an understanding of the experiences with behavioral challenges and attachment among foster parents and their families within non-kinship foster care placements to identify any emotional or psychological impacts that may be detrimental to the family and their decision to continue to foster in the future.

More specific to the research study, multiple families were interviewed rather than one family in order to gauge a substantial understanding of their lived experiences as foster parents. Therefore, a common phenomenon among these individuals may be the emotional and psychological impacts incurred as a result of behavioral challenges and attachments with foster children in their care. After collecting their experiences through the course of the interview process, themes and commonalities were identified among the families and their various experiences to provide additional interpretations of the value of these themes and links. However, due to the limited research previously conducted, concrete reasons as to why families experience certain impacts were not established because of the small sample size; instead, the research may provide a foundation for further research to develop in the future.

Sampling

The intended participants for the research study were identified as foster parents within non-kinship placements. An age limit was not placed on potential participants or on the foster children themselves, as the foster child was not involved in any part of the process; however, it was important that the parents had fostered children a minimum of one year, to infer a degree of experience and interaction with foster children and the fostering agency. The desired sample size for the research study was approximately four to five families; this sample was supplemental to two previously interviewed families, as a part of an IRB-approved class research project that also served as a pilot for the current research study.

Overall, there were a multitude of additional considerations that did not exclude any potential participants, but instead provided necessary diversity to the study. In regards to the length of individual placements, the perceived experiences were potentially largely dependent on the extent of the interactions that the foster family had with the foster child or children. Therefore, with children who remained in the foster home for more than a year, the probability that the family created a significant emotional bond, thus being more impactful upon closing, was more likely than a foster child who lived in the home briefly. In addition, the type of placement may have served to influence the findings as well. In instances where the family was fostering as a pre-adopt placement, in comparison to a temporary placement, the foster family may have interacted and responded differently, acknowledging that the child would be a permanent member of the family. The number of placements and the level of experience may have further contributed to the foster parent's perception of their ability to manage behaviors and address attachment, in comparison to a family who may had been fostering for the first time. On a final note, the geographical location of the foster family may have been associated with the

accessibility to resources and support, which may have, in turn, influenced the foster parents'

ability to feel more empowered and competent than those who may have felt isolated and

undervalued. However, the location of the foster homes was not disclosed as a part of the

interview process. Similarly, specific demographic information and cultural backgrounds were

not identified and remained outside the scope of the current research study. This included

specific ages of the foster parents and any children in their care, racial and ethnic backgrounds,

religious beliefs, cultural values, occupations, and socioeconomic statuses. Some information did

become available regardless throughout the duration of the interview process. In addition, it is

acknowledged that these factors may have served as a significant variable to impact other aspects

of the overall experience, including the integration into the family, and change in family

dynamics. However, in regards to the present research study, these factors remained outside the

intended scope of the study and were not included in the interview protocol.

Furthermore, the research study sought to include foster care parents without children,

and foster care parents with biological children, preferably within the home, which would have

resulted in more frequent interactions between the youth and the foster child. In these cases, the

presence of other children in the home may have more greatly impacted the family dynamics and

overall relationship with the foster child by the foster parents. This level of diversity among

participants was valuable to gauge multiple perspectives; however, as previously stated, this did

not serve to exclude individuals. Additionally, foster care parents who may have fostered

children previously, but did not have any foster children presently in their care were also not

excluded. In these instances, their past experiences were most relevant to the research study.

In regards to access to participants, two methods were utilized for recruitment purposes

including availability as well as snowball sampling methods. Availability sampling involved

recruiting participants through personal contacts that did not possess professional boundaries. Therefore, personal contacts did not include the utilization of any supervisor or colleague from a professional setting in which clients were currently receiving services; personal contacts included previously established relationships through individuals in a more social context. In addition, snowball sampling methods were utilized through the established network of individuals who fostered children or individuals who were aware of someone who fostered children. As a result, it was possible to contact an individual who referenced another individual and so on. Individuals were contacted via telephone and e-mail and then given pertinent information in regards to the research; if they expressed an interest, they were provided an opportunity to contact the researcher to inquire further as well. As a secondary component to the snowballing method, participants were recruited through Grand Valley State University School of Social Work Listserv, through electronic mail contacts. This served to inform any interested individuals about the study and to contact the researcher if they wished to participate. After the initial contact, interested participants were provided with the detailed consent process before initiating the interview process. Informed consent was directly received from the foster parents. Any foster children, biological children or adopted children in their care previously or presently were not involved in the interview process. The intentions of the present study were focused on the experiences of the foster parents, and the involvement of any children in their care did not serve as a priority. Any potential participants were also not prompted to partake in the study without following appropriate protocol and ensuring consent.

Participants were selected on a first-come basis as a result of potential time constraints. Selected participants also served as an addition to four previously interviewed participants, as a part of an IRB-approved class research project and pilot for the present research study, as

formerly stated. As the research study sought to accomplish a level of transferability, a heightened level of diversity among participants was significant. Despite the use of availability and snowball sampling methods, a level of awareness was maintained to seek participants with varying perspectives based on presenting backgrounds, environments, family structure and experiences. However, as noted prior, there were limited criteria to exclude any participants.

As the interviews were conducted with each individual foster parent as well as the foster parents as a couple, when applicable, the number of total participants in combination with those previously interviewed was fourteen individual participants. This was comprised of two single foster parents, five foster couples and one couple who identified themselves as house parents for youth in a residential setting. This particular couple worked with youth who were removed from their homes as a result of abuse or neglect and were included to contribute to the diversity of the perspectives. In their specific role, they served to work with youth with similar life circumstances and traumas as youth in the foster care system; in addition, the participants resided in the home for extended periods of time and served as the primary caregivers. The most significant discrepancies between their role and the role of the foster parent included the lack of authority they held to make significant decisions for the youth, more intensive oversight by the agency, as well as more youth in their care at any given time.

Among the foster couples, the first couple was in their late forties to early fifties, having fostered for approximately eleven years with nine placements. The couple had two biological children in the home, both in high school, and was also in the process of adopting their current foster child. The types of placements that the family fostered were largely infants and young children, with one sibling group. The second couple was in their mid-twenties, having fostered two placements over the course of three years. Similar to the first couple, they fostered primarily

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infants and young children and had three of their own biological children in the home, all elementary-age. The third foster couple, both in their late twenties, was the house parents as described above. Their experience spanned over several years, having worked at two facilities; the couple had one biological child, under the age of five, while working in the facilities as well. The fourth couple, who were in their mid-forties, had fostered for about three to four years. The couple had also adopted each of their foster children, which totaled three. This particular couple did not have any biological children and had fostered solely adolescents. The fifth couple, in their thirties to forties, held several years of experience, having fostered approximately nine to ten past placements. In addition, the placement types spanned significantly from infants to older adolescents and sibling groups. The couple did not have biological children when they initially began the process but had two biological children under the age of six at the time of the interview and were in the process of adopting their current foster child. Similarly, the sixth couple did not have biological children when they began fostering but the female participant became pregnant during the course of their first placement. This couple, both in their mid-twenties, had fostered two young children over the course of three years.

In regards to the two single female foster parents, the first participant, in her mid-forties to fifties, initially began the process as a foster to adopt. However, she had fostered for several years before adopting, having worked largely with infants and young children. She had adopted three of her foster children, two of which were a sibling group. The other single foster parent, in her mid to late sixties, had over forty-five years of experience fostering children, beginning the process when she was in her twenties. Throughout her experiences, she had fostered infants to older adolescents and sibling groups; she did not have any biological children but had adopted seven of her previous foster children.

The sole consistency among all of the participants was that all were racially identifiable as Caucasian. For transferability purposes, it is identified that this consistency in this sample set may have limited the variation in perspectives and experiences as a result of the minimal differences in racial and cultural backgrounds. The consistency may be the result of the sampling methods utilized and the desired sample size. These observations and details are more thoroughly addressed in the 'Limitations' section of the present study and serve as important considerations for future research.

Data Collection

The data collection method that was utilized was one-to-one semi-structured interviews and all were conducted face-to-face. Additional interviews were also conducted one-to-two with participants who had fostered as a couple. It was important to develop a set of pre-determined questions to provide a framework and to ensure that the discussion between the interviewer and the participant was relevant to the research.

The interview protocol was comprised of a total of four categories: Pre-Placement Discussion, Managing Behavioral Challenges, Making Attachments, and Post-Placement Discussion. In the first category, Pre-Placement Discussion, participants were asked to describe their motivations and reasons to become a foster parent. In addition, it was inquired if there were any identifiable concerns or apprehensions prior to beginning the fostering process. In regards to the category, Managing Behavioral Challenges, the discussion was centered upon the types of behavioral challenges encountered, any identifiable feelings in relation to addressing those challenges, as well as any additional impacts that managing behavioral challenges has had on the participants. Making Attachments was the third category, which addressed the role of the foster child in the family structure. Furthermore, participants discussed the nature of the relationship with the foster child, any factors that may have impacted their attachments, as well as their experiences with closures and the after-effects when the foster child transitioned out. The final category, Post-Placement Discussion, revisited the motivations to foster and if they aligned with the lived experiences as well as any identifiable reasons that participants would either choose to continue to foster or end their role as a foster parent. Additional opportunities were also allotted for the participant to discuss other topics that were not identified by the researcher.

During the interview process, the interviews were conducted more conversationally and the protocol largely served as a guide and framework. As a result, there was more flexibility for the researcher to address follow-up questions that were relevant to the research study as well as increase the level of comfort experienced by the participants. By accommodating for a degree of flexibility, the interviews progressed more naturally, attuned to the direction of the conversation while ensuring the collection of valued data.

It should be noted that for the purposes of this research study, the intention was to gain the perspectives of the foster families, not of the biological parents. The topics regarding sex, alcohol, drug abuse, or other forms of criminal or 'unhealthy' conduct were not directly discussed as it was not included in interview protocol. Any perpetrators of the abuse and/or neglect in regards to the foster child were more frequently related to the child's relationship to the biological parents, which was also not included in the interview protocol. If under rare circumstances these topics were disclosed by the foster parents, the researcher would have redirected the discussion to the intended scope of the study. Furthermore, any disclosed statements of possible abuse or neglect of the foster child as perpetrated by the foster parents would have warranted a break in confidentiality and reporting to the appropriate, faculty and/or child protective agency, officials, which was discussed with participants when receiving consent.

The intention of the present study was to also provide a foundation for an under-researched area of practice. In regards to foster care placements and the foster care process, not all factors and aspects were addressed in the present study. More specifically, this included all factors associated with attachment and behaviors. Instead, the purpose of the present research study was to provide broad insight and understanding into the experience of being a foster parent

from the lens of the caregiver, allotting an opportunity to discuss any emotional and psychological impacts that are incurred.

For the interview process, participants were provided the opportunity to choose their most preferable location for conducting the interview. The interview process lasted between sixty minutes to one hundred and twenty minutes, dependent on the participant. Prior to initiating the interview, the researcher allotted time for the participant to thoroughly review the consent form and make inquiries if desired. The consent document covered the areas of the purposes of the study, the risks as well as benefits for their participation, the procedure for data collection as well as storage, the terms of confidentiality, and the dissemination of the findings. More specifically, an identified risk was the level of discomfort or distress that they may have experienced during the interview process; therefore, it was further emphasized to participants their individual right to refuse to answer any question or to terminate the interview without penalty as a result of the voluntariness of their involvement. It was also acknowledged to participants that there was no correct answer to any of the questions and the intent was to gain insight into their subjective experiences. During this process, participants were provided with more specific details of the intentions, purposes and implications for the study as well. In addition, participants acknowledged and agreed to being audibly recorded, which were destroyed following the transcription process.

For the process of data analysis, interviews were continually transcribed after being conducted. For the present research study, a basic word-processing program was utilized for the transcription process. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and participants were identified by a numerical value. After the interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed collectively and broken down by common themes within each category of Pre-Placement

Discussion, Managing Behavioral Challenges, Making Attachments, and Post-Placement

Discussion. Portions of each participant's interviews were examined and scrutinized for any

similarities, discrepancies, as well as emerging themes. Valued aspects of the interviews were

then compiled to provide additional insight into the experiences of foster parents in relation to

behavioral challenges, attachments and the resulting impacts on overall emotional and

psychological well-being of families.

Lastly, in regards to the dissemination of the findings, participants acknowledged and

consented for the collected data to be submitted for the purposes of a Master's thesis. The data

was combined with previously collected data from an IRB-approved class project. Participants

were also made aware that any identifiable information would not be included in the presentation

of the research.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis consisted of using the research question as the foundation to focus on the original intentions and purpose of the research study. Therefore, through data analysis, the perspectives of the participants may aid in further understanding if and how experiences with managing behaviors and forming attachments may contribute to the psychological and emotional impacts on foster families. The framework for data analysis in terms of content areas was the initial interview protocol which was broken into four primary categories of the Pre-Placement Discussion, Managing Behavioral Challenges, Making Attachments, as well as Post-Placement Discussion. The interview protocol was utilized throughout the coding process for organizational purposes and to remain within the scope of the study. However, there were a significant number of subcategories that emerged throughout the coding process which were combined and condensed to retain focus and relevance in order to effectively address the intentions of the study. Overall, the use of the interview protocol served as a valuable framework and tool for the coding process.

In regards to the Pre-Placement Discussion, through data analysis, three subcategories emerged including the family's initial motivations to foster children, the level of support that was received prior to beginning the process as well as any additional considerations and apprehensions that the foster family identified. An additional primary category that was not originally identified was the foster child's Integration into the Family which encompassed the establishment of rules, the initial attachment of the family to the foster child, the change in family dynamics as well as other noted impacts. Following the Integration into the Family category was Managing Behavioral Challenges. Key areas that were addressed in this category included the types of behaviors, any factors that may have influenced the manifestation of certain

behaviors, the foster family's ability to manage the behaviors as well as the emotional and psychological impacts. The fourth category of Making Attachments, similar to behaviors, covered the types of attachments as well as factors that may have influenced the ability to attach; in addition, terminations and closures and the emotional and psychological impacts were discussed. Lastly, the Post-Placement Discussion provided an opportunity for participants to identify their motivations to continue to foster as well as any deterrents that may have contributed to their decision to end their role as foster parents. Overall, the intent of the research was to identify the key concerns of foster care including behaviors and attachments, the emotional and psychological impacts on foster families, and the potential impacts on retention. In order to better understand the perspectives of foster parents, it was important first to examine motivations and other factors prior to serving as a caregiver for foster children.

Pre-Placement Discussion

The purpose of the Pre-Placement Discussion was to gauge the perspectives of participants prior to immersing themselves in the foster care process. It was important to discuss motivations as they may or may not have been validated by the experience, and if initial motivations were significant to overcome encountered challenges. Another discussion participants frequently engaged in was about their decision to foster with their natural supports. Lastly, participants shared their apprehensions that they experienced as well as other considerations in regards to placement types and perceived impacts prior to beginning.

Motivations to Foster. There were several consistencies among participants as they identified their initial reasons to begin the fostering process. One of the motivations shared by the majority of participants was their natural attachment toward children; many participants, both male and female, shared that they loved working and spending time with children. A male

participant noted, "…it was kind of a natural easy thing for us to do." More importantly, participants recognized the need for foster homes to provide children with a place of stability and safety. One female participant stated, "…there are so many kids out there that just need the love and attention that you can just give them…and the security and the safety." Several participants identified the desire to invest in children in order to provide an opportunity for a more productive and successful future, which may have been limited by their prior life circumstances as perceived by participants. These perspectives were expressed by both male and female participants.

Influenced by their individual life and occupational experiences, these served as additional forms of motivations for participants. Three participants identified working as missionaries in other countries; as a result, they felt more compelled to do similar work in their own communities when they returned home. Another participant worked as a detective at a local law enforcement agency and in his position, he frequently encountered child abuse cases as well as sexual assault cases. Therefore, when he transferred to another unit, he shared that he wished to continue to work with children who were victimized in some capacity. Other participants identified prior work experiences as teachers and social workers that perpetuated their desire to become a foster parent. As a female participant who worked as a behavioral specialist at a fostering agency shared, "…once you…work with this population, you kind of, it's just…in your blood. You know…you can't really not be involved." Overall, the majority of the participants identified prior life or occupational experiences working with children in some context before becoming a foster parent which further contributed to their desire to begin the fostering process.

A small number of participants attributed the opportunity to add to their current family structure with the potential to adopt as a form of motivation. One couple shared that foster care provided an opportunity to work with other children as their own biological children were getting

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older and more independent. A single female foster parent shared that her initial intention was to adopt as she had previously learned, it was more difficult for single parents to adopt in the traditional manner. As she stated, "…traditional agencies weren't willing to work so I thought, with a lot of little kids out there, and I could have gone with international adoption but…there are a lot of young children right here that also need good…strong family homes so that's what I decided to do." Another couple shared their infertility issues encountered early in their relationship and therefore, they also identified the possibility to foster to adopt.

An additional motivation that was voiced by all participants was their desire to do something for the greater good. As many participants shared, they focused on the community-based need for foster care and individuals in unfortunate circumstances. One female participant stated, "There's something more out there than just our little ole' perfect bubble"; another male participant verbalized, "You can't change the world, I wanted to change a little piece of it." All interviewed participants shared similar motivations to work with oppressed populations and the desire to give back with what they had.

Level of Support. Among participants, it was frequently cited that their immediate family as well as their extended family had limited knowledge of what was entailed in the foster care process. With the exception of two participants, the majority of participants did not have any prior connection with other individuals who had served as foster parents. Only one female participant identified that her sibling as well as her own parent fostered children prior to her involvement with foster care. Therefore, overall support from families was described as mixed; participants noted that much of their families were supportive whereas others expressed more resistance and hesitation. Families stated being confused, were unable to understand motivations,

and lacked clarity on what the process would entail. Both female and male participants also shared that their families did not want them to complicate their lives.

Considerations and Apprehensions. An initial consideration of many of the participants was the types of placements that they intended to foster. Among those participants that had children in the home, age limits served as a significant factor. Several male and female participants set a limit to solely foster children younger than their own. Other participants stated that they wished to foster younger children, primarily infants, and preferably one child at a time in comparison to larger sibling groups. This was consistent in the case with single mothers and couples. As one single foster mom recalled, "I wanted children fifteen minutes old to a year old. Now I would say, since being in the…being a foster parent, it doesn't matter if that child is fifteen minutes old, they still have experienced more times than not…trauma…" In addition, several participants expressed a strong opposition to foster children with sexualized behaviors as well as sexual abuse histories; these feelings were more prevalent among male participants.

The stipulations on the types of placements that were discussed were largely linked to the participants' desire to safeguard their own children, when applicable. Participants articulated their concern for the potential influences that foster children could impose on their children as well as the risk of victimization. As one male participant stated, "I just don't want them acting on my kids, I want to help those kids but I can't sacrifice my kids." Female and male participants also shared apprehensions regarding the lack of knowledge of a foster child's history and their background, which could impact their interactions with the other children as well. All participants addressed the potential victimization of other children within the home.

Lastly, one participant expressed concern regarding her personal ability to detach when a foster child transitioned out of the home. Three participants identified apprehensions regarding

their abilities to manage behaviors as well. As one participant stated, she "worried about the types of abuse that the children would have endured and how we would be able to help them try to find out what was more normal." One of the single female participants voiced more concern from the perspectives of her extended family in how they would perceive particular behaviors exhibited by the foster child and in turn, her ability to address these behaviors.

Integration into the Family

In the circumstances of foster care, children enter into a home with a preexisting structure and dynamic. Therefore, participants discussed how the foster child assimilated to the rules and expectations of the home, the family's initial attachment to the child, any change in family dynamics as well as additional impacts on the family, individually and collectively. Overall, this was a valued discussion to determine if and how the foster child's ability to integrate into the foster family may have impacted future attachments.

Establishment of Rules. Among the majority of participants, the rules and guidelines of the household were largely established when the foster child initially entered the home, dependent on their age. One participant shared that her intention was not to overwhelm any foster child with an abundance of rules and expectations; however, for the benefit of the family and the foster child, it was significant to set the foundation. This was also attributed by participants to ensure the safety of the foster child as well as the family. Despite setting guidelines and rules, several male and female participants identified that various behaviors and incidents required attention on an individualized basis; therefore, participants noted that much of what was encountered was handled as it occurred. One female participant stated, "There's no way that you can address everything nor should everything be a no you can't, then as things come up, say oh now remember we don't do or remember what we do do sort of thing."

Initial Attachment. Participants were fairly consistent in how they addressed attachments as well. One participant stated that the foster child became an immediate part of her family upon their arrival into her home, and her role as a temporary caregiver was largely deemphasized. As another participant shared, her intention was not to show partiality for the foster child over her own children and vice versa. It was frequently expressed that the foster child became a brother, a sister, as well as a son and daughter for the majority of the participants, both male and female. Participants also recognized that the foster child became largely incorporated within the family structure upon their arrival and the goal was not to provide special treatment over the other children. One female participant shared, "…when you bring them in your home, you make them part of the family. You don't take care of them, you just make them part of the family."

Change in Family Dynamics. After the arrival of the foster child, the overall intention of most participants was to ensure their time was distributed equally among their own children and their foster children. Furthermore, several male and female participants indicated that they sought to maintain a level of consistency to avoid the impact of any significant changes to the functionality of the home. Regardless, the most frequently indicated change in family dynamics by both male and female participants was the time constraint, additional time management, as well as constant feelings of exhaustion. As several further indicated, a disproportionate amount of time was given to the foster child in order to manage behavioral challenges and other crises. Exhaustion, stress, and petty arguments among partners were experienced by several of the participants who fostered as a couple as well. Other minor changes in dynamics noted by participants was the incorporation of an additional member of the family in regards to daily routines, such as getting ready for school and eating meals. One female participant recalled with

a foster child, "…we weren't going to eat unless we were sitting at the table cause that was how our family functioned, and I think she spent her first meal under our table while we ate just because she was processing and trying to figure out what it meant…"

Additional Impacts. Participants further shared the impact on the entire family, on the partner relationship as well as on the other children in the home particularly. In regards to the family overall, several female participants recognized positive impacts which included the enhanced cohesiveness and unity of the family. In addition, one of the single female participants noted the capability of the family to learn and demonstrate compassion since fostering. For those participants who fostered as a couple in particular, there were consistent feelings of unity, increased strength and overall cohesiveness among male and female participants. As one foster couple shared, "it's been really hard on our marriage I think, but also really helped us. I think we've unified, and like…just grow stronger in our trust for one another and…just figuring things out together." Additionally, participants identified being capable of developing problem solving skills, communication skills as well as their ability to manage behaviors demonstrated by their own children with their partner. Lastly, in regards to the impact on the other children, one participant recognized more challenges during the adjustment period as the children were exposed to certain behaviors exhibited by the foster child. In these instances, the children did not always immediately comprehend or understand the underlying root of the behaviors. Nevertheless, it was cited largely by female participants that they felt that their children would benefit greatly from the experiences. Several male and female participants also noted that it was important for their children to understand the needs of others, and their ability to assist others less fortunate. Male and female participants further recognized the long-lasting effects that these

experiences of fostering children may have; however, they expressed that it would be more helpful than hurtful to continually built character and compassion in their families.

Managing Behavioral Challenges

As reiterated throughout, behavioral challenges are frequently encountered with children in the foster care system, which may be largely influenced by their individual backgrounds and histories. In the present study, participants shared the types of behaviors most frequently encountered in placements, the potential factors that may further influence the expression of these behaviors and the ability of participants to manage behaviors. Additionally, the emotional and psychological impacts on the foster family as well as the nature of terminations as a result of behaviors were discussed.

Types of Behaviors. Upon entering the home initially, one female participant identified a "honeymoon period"; as she shared, "…behavior can be wonderful at the start because everything is new and then the child understands that, you know, this is more of a….so there's a honeymoon period and then the child settles in and then you get to see really a lot of what has been bothering them from what they went through..." During this initial time, behaviors were largely described as being positive and appropriate. In addition, another participant described the excitement of the foster child as a result of being in a new home. However, as time progressed and the comfort level increased, she noticed the foster child more frequently engaging in behaviors potentially linked to their backgrounds, as they began to test their surroundings and the individuals in it. Some participants described foster children who expressed a strong desire to be reunited with their biological parents and less with the foster family. As a female participant noted, "…at first they're excited cause everything's new and they don't realize the impact that tomorrow they won't go home or next week they won't go home. So at first it's like, oh yeah, I

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get this new pink dress, and I get this and that and new bed and my own room and…so at first, it's really exciting, but then after a couple of weeks, it's kind of like, okay, I'm ready to go home. I'm missing my mom…"

Therefore, the types of behaviors cited by participants included screaming, yelling, kicking, and throwing severe tantrums in public places. Participants also recalled foster children becoming destructive in the home, in addition to spitting, biting, and other assaultive tendencies. One male participant shared instances where the foster child threw possessions which would break or damage other parts of the home; and physical aggression, attitude and anger were frequently encountered as well. More specifically, he recalled, "Spitting was kind of the first thing….spitting, biting…and then, he kind of, it just escalated until he left….he was incredibly assaultive and destructive…we could probably show you some marks on the wall from where he like threw stuff." Another female participant addressed issues with promiscuity and manipulative behaviors among females; whereas with males, she was more likely to encounter physical aggression directed toward her and her partner. Furthermore, several participants stated the severity, the intensity and the depth of the behaviors were more unexpected than the behaviors themselves. As one male participant disclosed, "…to think you can't control this three-year old because there's such intense physical aggression, that's pretty surprising."

Factors Influencing Behaviors. As placements progressed, participants identified their ability to make correlations and links between the exhibited behaviors and the histories of the foster children. As one participant shared, he was capable of gaining insight into the environment the foster child had been previously exposed to as a result of certain behaviors and mannerisms; this included their demeanor, anger, self-esteem, manifestations, as well as the ways in which they were seeking to be perceived. Another female participant described, "…their

abuse definitely affects them forever. Forever, whether it's just that the parent didn't come home nights or if they had been beaten, it definitely affects them forever. The foster children I have now I will find them taking a doll or the dog or something and start yelling and shaking them and beating them." Trust was an additional challenge that participants recognized with various foster placements; one participant stated, as a result of the foster child's life experiences and prior relationships, she was required to earn the child's trust before any significant progress could be made. She shared, "So here we are…another two adults in their lives and maybe we wouldn't be trusted either…they had to learn that hey, you know, if I do this, I am not going to be, you know, abused…that took a long time for them to realize that cause they've already they're already older, and they've already experienced a lot."

As male and female participants identified the correlation between behaviors and individual histories, they expressed their understanding and sympathy for the foster child as well. One male participant conceptualized the cycle of abuse that foster children are exposed to; therefore, the foster children have limited knowledge of anything other than their previous traumas. Similarly, another female participant expressed a heightened level of empathy for the foster children and their horrific life circumstances. Therefore, several participants further recognized the level of training required to address and possibly diminish some of the behaviors that have been influenced by prior life experiences. One female participant acknowledged that it was more realistic with younger foster children to change behaviors because their experiences were not as long lasting. Another female participant identified the need to provide comfort and solace to instill in the foster child that it was not their fault, regardless of the types of behaviors they exhibited. She stated, "It breaks your heart…at the same time, you comfort the child. You figure out a way to let the child know that it's not their fault. Because…to them, it is their fault."

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Ability to Manage Behavioral Challenges. Participants discussed various ways in which they addressed the behavioral challenges they encountered. A frequently cited method was to count and reach a state of calmness before reentering the situation. As one of the single female foster parents stated, it was significant to allot an opportunity for the foster child to process; and other participants valued the use of their partner in stressful situations. As one participant recalled after getting spit in the face, it was important for him to have his partner step in to allow him to step away from the situation before becoming reactive. One female participant described, "Walk away and then if you have to go back in and talk to them about it, or if they aren't ready to talk, or to be able to process it yet, then you have to wait. You may be late for something that you're going to do or whatever but…you have to wait for the child to be ready to process it and come out of it." Other valued skills shared by male and female participants included engaging in deep breathing, leaving the immediate environment, or taking a walk or a ride somewhere. Overall, there was a tendency to separate oneself from the situation in order to reenter the situation calmer. Both male and female participants largely emphasized relying more on skills than emotions, as well as finding the balance of discipline and love.

In addition to skills used in the immediate moment, the majority of participants recognized utilizing a period of time to debrief following incidents and crises. One female participant noted the importance of readdressing the incident, seeking to understand why it occurred and then processing ways that it could have been handled more effectively. One of the single female foster parents described the need to be open minded, to utilize sources of knowledge as well as being capable of acknowledging when outside help was required. Nevertheless, as one male participant stated, "…it's part of parenting…with the foster child it is a higher level, if you don't understand or realize that, you're going in with rose colored glasses."

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Emotional and Psychological Impacts. In addition, emotional and psychological impacts were recognized in the process of managing behavioral challenges. As participants identified feelings of inadequacy, the perceived magnitude of the behaviors to manage was significant leading to feelings of apprehension and uncertainty related to utilizing the "right" approach. Participants, both male and female, further internalized feelings of failure if little to no progress had been made, in addition to self-doubt and questions of personal ability. Those participants with prior experience working with similar populations and behaviors in particular stated that their feelings of inadequacy were impacted by their perception that they should have been capable of knowing what to do. One female participant who recalled feelings of "inadequacy" shared, "I think especially being a social worker…feeling like I should have all the answers, and I should be able to figure out like, I was a behavioral specialist helping kids…with some of these same problems….definitely inadequacy, just not knowing what to do…"

In the immediate moment of a crisis or incident, participants identified feelings of anxiety as well as frustration. Despite seeking to not personalize the attacks, male and female participants reported feeling hopeless and uncertain regardless. One of the single female foster parents also identified the need to maintain feelings of being in control in order to keep the other children in the home safe and calm in the midst of a crisis. As a male participant shared, "You start to see the worst part of you when you're getting spit on and hit….I wanted to hit him back and he's five." Another female participant described her experience of feeling stressed and overwhelmed as the foster child negatively reacted despite her effort to demonstrate love and care. As she stated, "…I would have to go in my bedroom and literally scream into a pillow when they would be just so rude…" This particular participant recognized her inability to react negatively; therefore, she described the importance of becoming removed from the situation. She

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further identified similar feelings when the foster child intentionally hurt the family dog; as a result, the participant felt heightened anxiety and emotional distress toward the child while recognizing the need to be removed from the situation to relieve the tension.

Following the behaviors and incidents, participants also recognized feelings of isolation due to the lack of natural supports aware of what the family had experienced. As one male participant shared, the feelings of frustration, helplessness, being overwhelmed, desperation, as well as exhaustion may linger following an attack. Although he also acknowledged additional feelings of anger toward the foster child, he also recognized this as not fair to the child.

Termination of Placements. Participants shared few instances in which placements were terminated. One of the single female foster parents identified that she had terminated two placements. More specifically, with one placement, the foster child failed to comply with the rules of the home, and failed to remain in as well as return to the home when needed. As the participant described, she was not equipped to handle these particular behaviors and as she recalled, "…that was just more than I bargained for". With the second placement, she stated that the foster child had been placed in two different schools, and both reported being incapable of managing their behaviors. While the child was in the home, he was reportedly destructive as well, and made threats to her and her family. Therefore, as the participant identified, the foster child had to be removed as a result of the severity and risk that was posed to her and her family.

Another female participant shared a similar experience in which her safety was comprised while the foster child remained in the home, thus leading to a termination. As she disclosed, the participant was seven months pregnant while being physically attacked by the foster child. Therefore, the need to protect the baby as well as herself became a priority. However, as the participant described, "….it felt like a failure, it felt like failing us, it felt like

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failing him." The emotional impact on the family associated with this particular termination was guilt, as the foster child had already transferred through four previous placements; and as she stated, "...we didn't want to let him down".

Making Attachments

Due to the nature of foster care, families spend various amounts of time with children as they serve as their primary caregiver until they are adopted, transitioned to another home, or reunified with their biological family. The duration of time may span from a weekend to several years as the foster child becomes a member of the family. As participants discussed experiences with various placements, they shared the factors that may have influenced their ability to attach to the foster child, as well as the emotional and psychological impacts of breaking attachments after they have been made.

Factors Influencing Attachments. There was a multitude of factors that influenced the types of attachments developed with the foster child that participants recognized. The first identified factor was the age of the foster child. As noted by several female participants, the attachment with infants was established more quickly and was much stronger in comparison to older children. Participants described this attachment to be a result of the lack of strong attachments to other primary caregivers early on in their life; therefore, the attachment and relationship was described as more "mothering". In comparison to older children, male and female participants also expressed less behavioral challenges and resistance by an infant, making the ability to attach much easier. However, as noted by a female participant, "…the little ones, they're not always sure what's going on and…they tend to bond a whole lot quicker which can be good or bad, because you can tell that they haven't necessarily made a firm, strong attachment

which isn't good." The initial attachment by older foster children, on the other hand, was described as "mechanical" as well as "superficial" by several male participants.

An additional factor that impacted attachment, as identified by male and female participants, was the length of placements. As several noted, the attachment and bond was not immediate. One male participant stated, "Bonding doesn't happen in weeks or months, it happens over years, it's one day at a time…there's no magic formula or anything other than provide enough attention and love as we can and hopefully it goes somewhere." As a female participant described, the longer a foster child remained in the home, the likelihood that they formed a strong attachment increased significantly. Furthermore, with longer placements, there was an increased chance that the foster child would recognize the love and care as well as the safety and stability the foster family was looking to provide, as experienced by several participants. However, one female participant recognized that time did not serve to impact her attachments; she noted that she would be likely to form a strong attachment regardless if the length of the placement was a month or a year.

Behavioral challenges served to impact the ability to form attachments in some cases as well. One male participant addressed challenges to attach with a foster child who was described as manipulative, and consistently stole and lied. The participant also identified his difficulty to attach to children when there was a lack of similarities to bond over as the foundation. In another instance, a participant expressed his difficulty to attach with a foster child who expressed inappropriate feelings toward younger children. Aggressiveness was an additional characteristic that negatively impacted a female participant's desire to make an attachment to the child. Several participants further recognized the ease to attach to children described as sensitive and gentle with more loving temperaments; this was in comparison to foster children who were more likely

to demonstrate opposition and defiance. Regardless, several male and female participants noted that despite challenges, they were capable of forming strong attachments to the foster child. One female participant identified, "She was a hard one to handle but yet, I can't say I love her any different than the cute little ones in the ruffle dresses that are good"; as another described, "Even though his behaviors were destructive and hard, we still loved the kid to pieces."

Additionally, the role of the biological family served to influence the ability of the child to attach to the foster families. Several participants recognized the foster child's tendency to differentiate between their biological parents as well as the foster parents; and in these cases, the relationship was typically maintained with the biological parents and regular visits were made. In one circumstance, a male participant noted that the foster child did not wish to be removed from their biological parents' care and as a result, the child set clear boundaries with the foster family. Another cited factor was the level of loyalty; male and female participants recognized the loyalty that foster children maintained for their biological parents and their innate desire to be reunited with their families. Therefore, participants identified some confusion for foster children who felt it would have been disloyal to refer to their foster mom as their "mom" or if they were to enjoy being at their current placement. As a participant described, she acknowledged that the foster child may have felt that they were "betraying them", in reference to their biological parents, and was fearful of being "vulnerable". Another couple stated, "…we tell them we're not here to take their place. We can love on you, we can provide for you, we can help you, we can encourage you, we'll be there for you, but we're never going to be them…that's important for them to hear because foster kids are loyal. No matter how bad the other parents have been, they're loyal."

Lastly, the participants' perceived roles and duties as foster parents was a factor to potentially impact attachment. One couple set their limitations immediately and acknowledged

that they had no intention of adopting any of the children they fostered. As they shared, "…we kind of see ourselves as kind of a pass through of being a place for kids while they are in need…I think that does make the relationship a little bit different." The couple also acknowledged their feelings of being more of a temporary caregiver, with no intention of making a placement permanent. In a similar manner, a male participant identified his tendency to distance himself more frequently and emphasized the importance of maintaining boundaries. Another couple described their role as to provide a safe home for foster children and recognized their individual decision to form attachments. As a female participant stated, "…it's hard to love someone else's kids, it's more a choice that you make…it's not just built into that relationship…when they walk through the door, you're not like instantly in love with them, or instantly attached to them. It's definitely a daily choice, sometimes one that you want to make and sometimes….no." Other participants expressed different perspectives as they further emphasized their goal to be a more permanent structure in the foster child's life regardless of long term permanency. As one male participant argued "…if you are not going to commit and you are going to say, this is a child I'm babysitting, then you are probably doing it wrong." Another male participant identified that he do not view himself as a "hotel" for foster children and his intention was to incorporate the foster child as much as possible, regardless of permanency.

       Emotional and Psychological Impacts. The emotional and psychological impacts as a result of attachments were prevalent after the foster child transitioned from the home. As participants recognized, the most emotionally impactful transitions were of those children who had been in the home for prolonged periods of time. As a male participant shared, short term placements did not have the same effect as losing a long term placement, in which he described, "…you lose a little bit of yourself." Following the closure of a long term placement, various

male and female participants experienced a mourning phase in which they cried and sought help from a counselor to process feelings. Furthermore, male and female participants described the intensity of the loss of the foster child similar to dealing with a death. Other generalized impacts included separation anxiety, depression, weight loss, and anxiety attacks, identified by the majority of participants.

Following the transition and closure, several participants, both male and female, recognized lingering feelings of worry regarding the placement of the foster child. One participant shared an instance where she was emotionally distraught over the loss that it impacted her ability to take another child because her attention remained on the well-being of the first child. Participants further discussed the worries associated with the type of placements the foster child entered and the level of confidence that the child's needs were being sufficiently met. One female participant recognized, "You're afraid you'll get attached, and then they go back to a home that is destructive or abusive." Therefore, it placed participants more at ease when they were aware of more healthy and appropriate placements that the foster child transitioned into; however, when participants disagreed with the agency's decision for certain placements, it created more anxiety and stress for several participants. As one female participant described, "…it's hard for me to say it's going to be okay, don't lie, because it may not be okay…how do you word that? How do you help them? How do you help build some resiliency in them? It's tough. That's my least favorite part of it right there." A male participant described it as, "…if you lose your leg, eventually, the leg doesn't hurt so much but you learn, you know, learn to live the rest of your life without that leg….you know, that's…the way grief is. I think if somebody dies, it's hard, but there's closure. When a child leaves your home into a dangerous situation, you're not allowed to see him...I have yet to find a way to get closure." In addition, another

female participant struggled with the internal conflict as she sought to encourage the foster child in their new placement while she maintained her own personal desire to have the foster child back in her care.

In order to address the emotional and psychological impacts, participants identified various ways in which they were capable of coping. One female participant recognized the additional time spent with the family in the home bonding and processing the loss of the foster child. Finding individual ways to soothe and take care was another way in which participants coped. For one male participant, this included journaling, praying as well as engaging with his natural supports. Participants further described the need to process individual feelings, develop hobbies and engage in stress relievers. As shared by one of the single female foster parents, it was especially important to ensure that the children in the home were not impacted, in addition to her work and personal life, as a result of the grief she were experiencing personally. Therefore, for this participant, more time with her family was spent to reaffirm the cohesion.

Lastly, the conflict of whether or not participants wished to continue to foster additional placements was addressed. As one couple recognized, the emotional impact of losing a foster child led to their hesitation to continue to foster more children. However, regardless of the initial feelings of uncertainty and apprehension, participants recognized their families' ability and desire to continue to foster. This was attributed to the overall strength of the family to carry on as well as being continually present for one another. As both male and female participants noted, following the mourning period, they continued to recognize that the rewards outweighed the losses, thus perpetuating their overall motivation to foster. One female participant shared, "…I'm not going to deprive somebody of a home just cause I'm going to cry and it's my passion in life. I feel blessed that I even have a passion. How many people really know who they are on earth

and what they're put here for so I feel lucky, I feel blessed that I can, I know what my passion is and its kids and foster care."

Post-Placement Discussion

An unexpected discussion that emerged in the Post-Placement Discussion was the shift in perceptions and perceived awareness of participants as they progressed through their experience as a foster parent. In addition, following the closure, termination, transition or adoption of a foster child, the perspectives of participants were gauged to understand their motivations to continue to foster and if they aligned with their experiences. This was in addition to the significant emotional and psychological impacts influenced by behavioral challenges and attachments that would have served to deter their involvement in foster care in the future.

Change in Perception and Awareness. A topic that unexpectedly emerged was the participants' perceived awareness prior to beginning the process and how it drastically changed as their experiences progressed. Initially, two participants, both female, shared that they were aware of the challenges with the system prior to beginning the process as a result of direct connections with individuals who had fostered children or having worked in the foster care system. Therefore, these two participants shared that they felt they held a more realistic level of expectations and understanding for what they were likely to encounter. Because of educational backgrounds, another participant noted that she felt she had valuable knowledge on attachment issues that would likely emerge. In addition, through the training process, other participants shared that they continually maintained an understanding that the children they would be working with would pose more challenges and therefore recognized the necessary ability required to manage children who had succumbed to that level of abuse.

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Regardless, as one male participant described, "your expectations kind of go out the window when you're actually doing it", as well as "we knew that it was coming but I think knowing and experiencing is just a different kind of ball game". One female participant also shared in reference to their partner, "he worked with children in every different aspect so he just assumed by his experiences what he would look into fostering and it was a total different world, it really rocked him, it really sent him for a loop…." Another participant acknowledged that despite feeling confident in her knowledge prior, she did not consider the magnitude or multitude of factors. In comparison to her initial impression, the participant stated, "I was aware of challenges but more naïve that structure and love could conquer a lot. Structure and love are certainly important, they're not going to conquer what you need to conquer"; another female participant disclosed, "I don't think we were thinking that magically we'll be great people and he'll all of a sudden be better….we were not pretending that at all, but we were hoping that the time and the stable environment, that those things would at least lessen and then they got worse."

Motivation to Continue. Nevertheless, the overarching ability to demonstrate love to children in the foster care system served as a continuous motivation for participants to continue their placements. One female participant expressed the importance of not only affirming to the foster child that their circumstances were not their fault but also providing them a foundation of what love is and what love can look like. As she shared, "…the love that I've given this kid, no one can take off him." Another participant expressed a similar perspective and identified her goal to demonstrate love and the longitudinal benefits it may have for the foster child. She recalled on Mother's day, her foster daughter "wrote a mother's day letter to me explaining that I finally understand now, you know, what you really mean and what family really means and what love really is. That…makes it all worth it."

Lastly, participants identified the ability to assist children as a continuous motivation, despite hardships and other challenges. One female participant stated, "It's been challenging but the rewards are greater…there's this phrase where to the world you can be one person, but to one person, you may be the world. That is so much what this is all about because you are giving a child something that they did not have." As the emotional toll was thoroughly acknowledged by participants, one of the single female foster parents also described, "…my philosophy is that I'm not going to not give another kid a home just because I cry, it hurts deeply, but if I quit because I hurt, then there's some kid is going to be sitting in a home, waiting for a home….waiting for a home and I'm not going to give up on them because of that." Another female participant shared, "…you never give up on children, no matter how tough it gets…do not give up on your children…no matter what you go through, you stay with them and you keep loving them and hopefully over time, they will see that what you've put forth…" Similar to the others, one female participant stated, "….what if one more kid needed me. Just to know that they cared. Somebody cares…would that really make all the difference in the world…knowing that you can help one more kid…maybe I could have helped one more, at the same time, I don't think when you're eighty-five, you're going to regret helping a child."

Challenges that Serve as Deterrents. There were limited challenges that participants recognized that deterred them from fostering in the future. Male and female participants identified an abundance of priorities and commitments that would not allot the time to foster additional children, as well as changes in their family structure which would also impact their time commitments. Another participant acknowledged that the foster care process may be cost prohibitive as a result of the limited support to access resources and child care from the agency, especially as a single foster parent. Participants further expressed their frustrations with the

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functionality and accessibility of their fostering agencies. Some reported minimal to no contact with their case workers, as well as a level of incompetence and a lack of trust and rapport. Few participants acknowledged feeling strongly supported by their agency when seeking support as well as navigating the system, which potentially served as a deterrent to continue their role. These perspectives were identified by both male and female participants.

Overall, the totality of the findings represents a degree of consistency among the majority of the participants and their experiences as foster parents. It should be noted that this is not to imply a clear consensus among all of the participants that is generalizable to all foster parents in non-kinship placements. There were, however, no identifiable discrepancies or outliers that were significantly impactful. The responses largely indicated similarities and commonalities among the majority of the participants with minimal variation in perspectives. Furthermore, frequently cited emotional and psychological impacts were more clearly identified in the findings to retain the focus of the research study, which is on the collective experiences of multiple foster parents and less emphasis on the outliers; this is addressed more thoroughly in the following section.

Discussion

As previously identified, the intent of the present research study was to examine the experiences of foster care parents with particular emphasis on the specific challenges frequently encountered with behaviors and attachment; and a secondary component was to address the resulting emotional and psychological impacts. Findings of the study indicated that the majority of participants acknowledged their experiences with a range of emotional and psychological impacts that were correlated with the presence of behavioral challenges as well as attachments; these included stress, anxiety, frustration, depression, isolation, exhaustion and anger. However, none of the participants included in the present study indicated that these impacts served as a justifiable reason to discontinue their role as foster parents, as this is discussed more thoroughly in the subsequent sections.

Pre-Placement Discussion

In regards to the Pre-Placement Discussion, there were no large discrepancies or inconsistencies in the identified motivations of participants. As addressed, many participants worked with a similar population or in another helping profession which propelled their interest in becoming a foster parent. Furthermore, several participants acknowledged their innate desire to help oppressed individuals in their own communities. Prior to beginning the process, only one female participant and one couple identified an intention to adopt; however, as the placements progressed, several other participants adopted foster children as a result of the attachments that had been established. In addition, none of the participants identified any financial gain from the fostering process; this is inconsistent with prior research which identified the additional form of income as a form of motivation for foster parents (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Overall, however, the motivations shared by male and female participants in the present research study

were largely consistent with previous findings (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Broady et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2006; MacGregor et al., 2006).

As discussed, there were only two female participants who had prior connections with other foster parents and the foster care system upon beginning the process. Therefore, this awareness may have significantly impacted their expectations as well as their abilities to manage behaviors more effectively; and it may be suggested that these participants were more attuned to what could as well as what would happen and less shocked by the experience as a result. As stated by one participant, she was exposed to what her own family had experienced as foster parents and therefore, she were more guarded in some respects. As a result, this level of awareness grounded in more realistic expectations was inconsistent with the majority of the other participants in the present study.

An additional theme among participants, both male and female, was that the majority stated that their immediate and extended families' perspectives and opinions did not influence their decision to foster. This was consistent among participants who had fostered as a couple as well as single foster parents. Also, despite mixed levels of support upon beginning the process, none of the participants identified a lack of support from their families throughout the duration of various placements; and as many shared, their immediate and extended families grieved the loss of the foster child at the end of the placements.

A consistent theme in regards to the considerations and apprehensions of participants was the type of placements that individuals sought to foster. For all of the participants, they did not wish to place their own family at risk of being victimized; therefore, sexualized behaviors and children older than their own were largely dismissed. However, there was limited concern expressed by male and female participants for making attachments with the foster children as

well as the ability to manage behaviors that may have arisen prior to beginning the process. This may be linked back to individual perceptions and participants' assumed abilities to manage behaviors and attachment based on prior experiences and educational backgrounds. Overall, a consistent concern was for the well-being of the other children in the home by both male and female participants; however, there was no mention of the psychological or emotional impacts, which was identified extensively following the closure of placements. Instead, initial concerns were largely linked to what the foster child may be bringing into the home in terms of behaviors and negative influences as a result of their previous abuse and trauma.

In comparison, perceived risks and concerns identified by participants of previously conducted studies largely encompassed the potential for heightened stress, and an overall lack of support and communication with the fostering agency (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Whiting & Huber, 2007). Consistent with the present research study, a previous research study found that foster parents identified similar concerns regarding the particular challenges of children in the foster care system that may be encountered as well (Murray et al., 2010).

Overall, in regards to the Pre-Placement Discussion, the majority of participants voiced similar experiences and perspectives that were also congruent with previously cited literature. Many of the participants in the present and previously conducted research studies identified the same apprehensions, considerations and concerns prior to beginning the process. The only discrepancy that was noted in the present study was with the two participants who had a more realistic expectation and understanding of what was entailed with the foster care experience as a result of previous connections which may have decreased the severity of the psychological and emotional impacts.

Integration into the Family

Participants consistently recognized the need to set some type of foundation for the rules and functionality of the home when the foster child initially arrived and there was no significant contrast in perspectives. In addition, all of the participants in the present study thoroughly emphasized their intention to incorporate the foster child into the family as much as possible, regardless of how they perceived their role as a foster parent. Instead, there was some variation in how individual participants identified themselves as mother, father, brother and sister. Therefore, the participants that were adamant about their role as a parent and less as a temporary caregiver were more likely to identify themselves as "mom" and "dad" in comparison to other participants who allowed the foster child to address them in the way they desired. These participants further recognized that their placement was not permanent. Additionally, whether or not the family intended to adopt initially did not significantly influence the integration and identification of roles; for example, several participants who sought be identified as "mom" and "dad" did not intend to adopt.

A theme among participants in regards to family dynamics was the disproportionate amount of time that was allotted to the foster child in comparison to the other children in the home. All participants recognized the additional attention that foster children required; however, participants justified the extra time for an infant more frequently than for an older child with behavioral challenges. Consistently in both instances, exhaustion and stress were cited as impacts. Furthermore, although many participants stated that they did not seek to demonstrate partiality toward their own children, many identified that they spent time solely with their own children to compensate for the time spent addressing the needs of the foster child.

Lastly, the additional impacts on the family as a whole, on partner relationships, as well as on the other children in the home were consistently positive such as increased cohesion, compassion and communication. Many participants recognized that in spite of challenges, the positives by far outweighed the negatives and none of the participants identified severe impacts on their family that would have deterred their future involvement in foster care.

Broadly speaking, the majority of participants, both female and male, fit together in their desire to integrate the foster child into the family structure upon their arrival into the home. Most participants shared similar experiences with unequal time allocation between the foster child and the other children within the home; however, participants also identified the same or similar benefits to their family with the added dynamic of the foster child. In addition, differences did not emerge between female and male participants. The area in which there was a divide among participants was their perspectives in how they wished to be perceived by the foster child in terms of "mom" and "dad"; however, this inconsistency did not serve to have a significant impact on overall experiences as previously discussed.

Managing Behavioral Challenges

The behaviors that participants encountered ranged and were largely dependent on the placement; therefore, a consistent theme and pattern did not emerge as a result. However, participants frequently linked the severity of the behaviors to the foster child's history and as a result, generalized feelings of sadness and sympathy was expressed. Many participants further developed an understanding and awareness for the abuse and trauma that the foster child may had been exposed to throughout the duration of the placement; and in spite of severe behaviors, an overarching theme was the desire to demonstrate love to the foster child by both male and female participants. As addressed in previous literature, the participants of the present research

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study appeared to have an understanding for the potential challenges with disorganized attachment through their increased awareness (Walker, 2008).

The ways in which participants sought to address behavioral challenges were consistent as well. Most participants, both male and female, recognized the need to step away from the situation and allow an opportunity to become calmer, instead of becoming reactive in the moment. For the participants who fostered as a couple, many identified a heavy reliance on their partner to intervene as needed and interact as a team. For single foster parents, it was acknowledged their tendency to allow space for the child to process their feelings before readdressing the situation. For the foster parents of the present research study, the majority of participants demonstrated skills congruent with the literature discussed by Stoker et al. (2007) and the importance of being emotionally sensitive. As Stoker et al. (2007) suggested however, there was not a significant discrepancy in how male and female participants responded to the foster child to address their emotional needs.

The emotional and psychological impacts of managing behaviors were consistent among participants that included feelings of frustration, anger, inadequacy as well as stress. There was an emerging theme among participants of self-doubt as many felt they should have been capable of addressing certain situations and behaviors or maintain the knowledge to be effective. Other participants recognized more severe states of emotional distress in which they had to remove themselves from the situation in addition to reminding themselves not to personalize the behaviors and attacks. Lastly, participants recalled feelings of isolation and hopelessness with the inability to access the proper supports within the immediate moment. This was prevalent among both male and female participants. In regards to previous literature, Walker (2008) identified the importance for foster parents to master the ability to manage their emotions before being capable

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of effectively addressing and managing the emotions of the foster child. Therefore, as the majority of participants acknowledged, they had to remove themselves from the stressful environment in order to reenter the situation with a clear mind. Furthermore, one female participant in particular discussed her need to reflect on incidents and crises to better understand what had occurred to better prepare for next time; this is consistent with the skill of "reflective function" which is especially valuable for foster parents (Walker, 2008, p. 51).

Lastly, an emotional toll was experienced by participants who terminated placements prematurely. In both cases, the placements were terminated as a result of safety concerns for the immediate family; therefore, the participants recognized their needs as they took precedent over maintaining the placement. However, with one foster couple, there were levels of severe guilt linked to their feelings of inadequacy and despite the physical attacks, the emotional attachment and motivation to assist in the progress of the foster child continued to override their immediate concerns. This same couple also identified their role as temporary and continually emphasized their intention to provide a home at the needed time before the child moved on. As a result, it may be suggested that regardless of how foster parents choose to identify their role, the attachment and emotional impact is significant nevertheless.

Overall, the experiences with behavioral challenges were largely consistent among the majority of participants as individuals shared utilizing similar coping skills as well as experiencing similar emotional and psychological impacts. Additionally, the skills demonstrated by participants to manage behaviors in the immediate moment and the skills following any incident were consistent with skills previously discussed in the literature. The identified impacts did not vary among gender or age. A clear pattern was not determined, however, in regards to the specific types of behaviors which largely ranged among placements.

Making Attachments

A theme among participants was the ease of attaching with an infant in comparison to an older child which was largely attributed to the limited behavioral challenges exhibited by an infant. Participants also identified the time commitment spent with the infant, which may further suggest more investment in establishing an attachment and bond that the infant has yet to make with another caregiver. Additionally, the length of time for each placement emerged as a consistent theme as many participants noted that the transition of long term placements were significantly more difficult to endure than short term placements. This may simply suggest a greater amount of time and investment in the child throughout the duration of the placement that led to a greater attachment. This theme is further validated by previously conducted research in which participants identified that the strength of the attachment increased as time progressed in the placement. The literature also stated that because of the level of attachment, some participants sought for a more permanent placement with their foster child, regardless of whether that was their original intention (Broady et al., 2010). This is similar to the circumstances of several of the participants in the present research study who adopted former foster children, regardless if that was their initial purpose.

In addition, participants consistently recognized that forming attachments was easier when the foster child was less oppositional and defiant. A few participants indicated a level of difficulty to attach with foster children who were more aggressive as these participants distanced themselves from foster children who exhibited these tendencies. Therefore, it may be suggested that behavioral challenges are more prevalent and severe in older foster children as a result of more exposure and trauma to further generalize the challenges with attachment, in comparison to infants. Regardless, the majority of participants acknowledged that they formed strong

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attachments with their foster children, in spite of their behaviors; the initial attachment may have just been easier when the foster child was receptive to forming an attachment as well.

Furthermore, the presence of the biological family played a considerable role in the level of attachment. This was not prevalent among infants, but more so with older foster children. A consistent theme was the loyalty that foster children held for their biological parents. Therefore, as several participants noted, the foster children may have sought to sabotage their placement through the display of various behaviors or had guarded themselves from making a strong attachment with the family. All of the participants recognized this relationship and the overarching value; in addition, the participants that did not refer to themselves as "mom" and "dad" immediately were more likely to establish those boundaries as well as affirm to the foster child that they were not their mother and father in these circumstances.

There were several inconsistencies in how participants perceived and defined their roles. As previously stated, participants that were less adamant about establishing themselves in the role of mother and father and also established boundaries with the biological families consistently identified their role as a temporary caregiver. In one case, a participant acknowledged that her tendency to differentiate and limit her role may have, in fact, impacted her type of attachment with the foster child. Another couple recognized their attachment to their biological child was significantly different than the one with the foster child and as a result, the attachment existed on a more day-to-day basis. This was consistent with previous literature which identified the differences in the nature of interactions between foster parents who intended to adopt and those who served as temporary caregivers (Ponciano, 2010). As Ponciano (2010) described, the type of attachment may differ dependent on the intentions of the foster parents. However, among those who were more likely to set boundaries and establish roles, the emotional

impacts that were experienced when the child transitioned out did not differ from other participants. An additional theme that emerged was among those participants who identified their roles as more than just a temporary caregiver; they also adopted one or more of their foster children, regardless if that was their original intention.

Following the closure and transition of placements, there were several themes that emerged. As previously stated, the length of the placement largely impacted the magnitude of the emotional and psychological impacts that were experienced by participants. In addition, all of the participants identified experiencing a grieving period following the loss or end of a placement, including feelings of depression and anxiety. Another theme was the continuation of anxiety and stress following the transition of the foster child out of the home as the severity level was largely dependent on where the foster child was placed. As the majority of participants stated, they endured more stress when they disagreed with the placement of the foster child. This is further supported by prior research in which other foster parents identified the emotional challenges with experiencing a level of uncertainty with placements as well. In addition, during the transition from the home, participants experienced a grieving period as a result of broken attachments (Whiting & Huber, 2007; Pickin et al., 2011). A previously shared research study further concluded that the severity of the grieving process was correlated with the conditions of the transition; therefore, the process was more severe when there was a greater sense of ambiguity (Thomson & McArthur, 2009).

Other consistencies among participants were the ways in which they coped following transitions and closures, largely relying on natural supports to debrief. Several participants also cited seeking counseling and increasing the level of family unity. As the length of time participants spent between placements varied in order to allow an opportunity to process and

grieve, none of the participants identified the emotional and psychological impacts as a deterrent from fostering placements in the future. As previously stated, participants strongly felt the benefits of being a foster parent exceeded the downfalls. This suggests the overall strength of the foster family to effectively manage the emotional and psychological impacts collectively.

Overall, there were no large inconsistencies among participants, in terms of single foster parents and foster couples, or gender specifically. As previously addressed, the majority of participants experienced the process of forming attachments and breaking attachments in a similar manner. Many participants identified the same types of challenges with attachment which also implied a degree of consistency. Furthermore, there were no large discrepancies between male and female participants as both genders equally identified similar emotional and psychological impacts and their utilized coping mechanisms.

Post-Placement Discussion

As participants reflected on their experiences, a theme that emerged was the lack of awareness and knowledge for the challenges that several participants initially perceived themselves to have. More specifically, several male and female participants acknowledged that prior to beginning the process, they were confident that their foundation in life and occupational experiences sufficiently prepared them to tackle the challenges of being a foster parent. However, throughout the experience, all of the participants who identified prior knowledge or awareness, found this to be largely untrue. Therefore, it may be suggested that if participants entered the foster care process with the intention to utilize their skills, it would not serve as a validating motivation. Furthermore, previously cited research identified that foster parents did not feel equipped to manage behaviors despite completing agency-based trainings (Cooley & Petren, 2011); participants in the present research study shared similar perspectives as well. As

participants discussed various expectations and preparedness, it may be valuable to consider how to be more proactive and better support caregivers at the beginning of the foster care process.

Regardless of feelings of unpreparedness, there was a consistent theme among participants that their motivation to continue was contingent on the opportunity to provide safe and stable homes for children in dire need. As acknowledged prior, the challenges and emotional toll of being a foster parent did not deter any participant from continuing to foster additional children in the future; instead, deterrents ranged dependent on individual circumstances. For several male and female participants, the frustrations with the system in regards to functionality and accessibility were identified as a potential deterrent more so than the challenges presented by the foster children. This is congruent with the previously discussed literature, which also acknowledged changes in family structure and dynamics, as well as poor agency relations that resulted in the discontinuation of foster care placements (Rhodes et al., 2001). Reasons that were not discussed by participants of the present research study that were identified in other literature included a lack of preparation, the associated stress with caring for a child, and conflicts with the biological parents as deterrents (Rhodes et al., 2001).

Generally, the majority of participants identified the nature of the relationship with the fostering agency as a primary deterrent to continue their role as foster parents; in addition, there were few participants who did not express a heightened degree of dissatisfaction with their agency. Also, it was widely identified by participants the limited preparation provided by the agency prior to beginning the process to address the challenges that were encountered. Similar to previous sections, there were no significant discrepancies or fluctuations from the majority that would have influenced the data.

Implications

The key implications of this research study are identified at the policy, practice as well as research levels. First and foremost, the findings were consistent with previously conducted studies, which identified inadequate trainings for foster parents as well as a lack of continuous support throughout the placement. Therefore, it would be significant to address more stringent policy changes to ensure sufficient as well as accessible resources for foster parents. This may involve revising the requirements for foster care licensure, in which foster parents are required to continually attend trainings throughout the duration that their license is open to address specific behavioral concerns, emotional impacts as well as self-care issues. Policy changes should also address the feasibility to access affordable child care and other resources in order to appropriately provide for the child. In addition, following the closure and transitions of placements, it would be valuable to implement mandatory closure sessions to minimize the anxiety and stress that foster parents experience when there is a greater sense of ambiguity in cases. Policies should also be implemented in order to keep case workers and others associated with the agency more accountable to their families, as several participants identified negative feelings toward these individuals. It is important to note that policies may already be in existent at various federal and state levels to address these concerns; therefore, a goal may be to ensure their enforcement at the local level more frequently.

The research study further provided implications for practice. Several participants identified a lack of knowledge to address specific behavioral challenges and as a result, they reported teaching themselves or sought additional advice from their natural supports. Therefore, as the findings suggest, there is a significant need to increase the level of communication between the fostering agency as well as the foster parents to develop more healthy relationships

and positive rapport. Participants stated that they did not defer to their fostering agency when they required support; and when they did seek assistance, the support was minimal to non-existent. However, through greater collaboration and sharing of evidence-based practices to manage behaviors between the agency and the foster parents, the emotional and psychological impacts may be diminished as foster parents may feel more competent and prepared. As placements transition from the home, it may be significant as well for the fostering agency to follow up with the foster family to ensure their emotional and psychological well-being. Therefore, the fostering agency may be more equipped to identify if the foster family is prepared to foster another child, dependent on their stage of grief. In addition, to limit the level of stress and anxiety associated with the uncertainty of placements, the case worker may be able to facilitate a more appropriate transition between the foster family and the adopted family or the biological family, as previously stated. As a result, the emotional and psychological impacts for the foster family and the foster child may be minimized. Lastly, the case worker may be able to continue some level of communication and allow any attachments to slowly taper off to ensure a smooth and healthy transition.

Implications for research may be to address the inconsistencies in the literature review with the findings of the present research study. For instance, it may be valuable to address the impact of the societal perceptions of the foster care system and the consequences of social isolation (Blythe et al., 2012). Several participants did identify feelings of isolation and judgment from their natural supports; however, this was not evident on a larger scale with society as a whole. Another inconsistency in present and previous research was the level of competency identified by participants in correlation with their overall satisfaction with the fostering experience. Previous research described the level of competence experienced by foster parents

was positively correlated with overall satisfaction (Cooley & Petren, 2011). Participants in this study identified a shift in their level of competence as they encountered various challenges and in these instances, their level of perceived competence decreased; however, none of the participants identified this as a factor impacting their satisfaction as well as their motivations to continue to foster future placements.

Lastly, based on the findings of the present research study, there were several factors linked to the behavioral challenges of older foster children, thus impacting attachment and potentially the availability of willing foster homes. These factors include age, extent of exposures and trauma and loyalty to the biological family. Therefore, it may be valuable for future research to identify the initial perceptions that foster families maintain toward older foster children and how this may limit the accessibility of foster homes. As a result, the stigma associated with these children may be reduced as individuals increase their own understanding and awareness of the backgrounds and factors impacting older foster children specifically.

Limitations

An identified limitation of the research study included the sampling methods. As a result of the sampling methods utilized, the participants largely resided in the same geographic area. Therefore, several participants may have had associations with the same fostering agency, which may have resulted in similar perspectives and experiences. In addition, dependent on their geographic location, this may have impacted their accessibility to resources and other forms of support, in comparison to other areas that may be more or less dense, in regards to population. Furthermore, through the use of personal contacts in the recruitment process, some of the participants may have shared similar backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, which may have also impacted the extent of the diversity of the study. As previously addressed, all of the participants of the study were racially identified as Caucasian, which may have served to impact the perspectives as well.

An additional limitation of the study was the result of the limited scope of the study as the specific demographic information and cultural backgrounds of the foster children were not identified by the foster parents. As previously stated, all of the participants involved in the study were identified as Caucasian. Therefore, if any of the foster children were not Caucasian, this may have served to significantly impact the integration into the family, the family dynamics and other various aspects of the fostering experience. Furthermore, the cultural competency of the foster parents may have impacted their ability to manage behaviors and form attachments and the foster children may have struggled to identify with the foster family on various levels.

Overall, given the subjective nature of the research study, it may be more difficult to generalize the findings of the research study to the experiences of other foster parents on a broader scale. There were some consistencies identified with prior research as well as some

inconsistencies; however, the perspectives may have been largely influenced by a multitude of additional factors that were individualistic to each participant involved in the study, leading to challenges with generalizability and transferability. The present research study also sought to examine the breadth of experiences in comparison to the depth. Therefore, the perspectives shared by participants were based on their collective experiences as foster parents thus far, varying depending on their years serving as a foster parent. A different perspective may have emerged if participants focused on one particular placement with a foster child to provide more specific and consistent data instead of generalizing their experiences.

Recommendations

To provide appropriate recommendations applicable for practice, it is important to first identify the target population that may benefit most from the present research study. As previously discussed, it can be inferred that the majority of participants were of middle socio-economic status, early to middle adulthood, educated, gainfully employed as well as financially stable. In addition, the majority of participants fostered as a couple and all participants had a pre-established family structure with other children within the home and were identified as Caucasian. Therefore, the findings of the study may be more beneficial when working with foster parents with similar characteristics and family structures.

As a basis for the recommendations, it is also significant to revisit and summarize key findings. First, during the Pre-Placement and Post-Placement discussions, the trainings provided by the agency were described by participants as being insufficient and unbeneficial to address the challenges presented by the foster child. However, based on perceptions of individual knowledge and skills, participants felt confident in their roles as foster parents prior to beginning regardless. Furthermore, the trainings or lack thereof did not serve as a deterrent to foster future placements. An additional finding indicated that the experiences with attachments were prevalent among the majority of participants, regardless of participants' perceived roles and intentions for permanency. As identified by participants, experiences with behavioral challenges spanned across various placement types and were subjective to the individual histories, traumas and exposures of the foster child as well. Another significant finding was the consistency of emotional and psychological impacts that were experienced throughout the duration of placements by all of the participants. Participants identified their capabilities to utilize coping skills and natural supports to manage; similar to the level of preparedness, these impacts did not

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serve to influence the retention rate of participants. Lastly, any deterrent as expressed by participants to continue their role as a foster parent in the future was not directly linked to the presence of the foster child in the home. For the participants in the present research study, their decision to discontinue their role was linked more frequently to external factors, such as changes in family structure, and the relationship with the fostering agency.

The findings serve to provide a sufficient foundation for recommendations; however, it should be further acknowledged the areas that were not included in the present research study that may have served to influence the experiences of participants and in turn, overall findings. There was limited diversity among the recruited participants and the diversity of the foster children was not identified, which was not within the scope of the present study. Therefore, specific characteristics of the participants and the foster children including race, religion, socioeconomic status, values and cultural practices, may have served to influence a multitude of factors involved with the foster care process. Detailed information of individual placements was also not addressed, as the focus of the study was on the collective experiences. With large discrepancies in the number of years fostering and the number of placements participants had fostered, their collective experiences may have been greatly impacted and thus altered the findings. Without a thorough examination of individual placements, the impact of specific factors is less easily identifiable; this is an important consideration for future research.

Based on the findings and additional considerations of the present research study, there are valuable recommendations that may be provided in response. First, although the type and availability of trainings did not deter participants to foster in the future, it served as a frustration nevertheless and may have also contributed to the negative perception of the fostering agency, which did serve as a deterrent. A recommendation for fostering agencies and practitioners then is

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to initially assess the individual needs of foster parents, their motivations to attend trainings, and any perceived barriers to attend or access trainings. Through this assessment process, an open dialogue may be facilitated to discuss perceived levels of competency and preparedness as well. The impact of the geographical location of various foster homes may also be identified through the needs assessment of rural placements versus urban placements. Overall, a more thorough process of engagement, preparation and rapport building prior to fostering a child may lead to a positive relationship between the fostering agency and the foster parents.

An additional recommendation is to be more conscious of the various factors entailed with the foster care process that may influence experiences, which were not included in the present research study. These factors, as previously identified, include race, religion, and cultural background, in addition to prior traumas and placement histories. These factors may significantly impact the overall challenges with the foster child as well as the ability to develop attachments and manage behaviors. As participants also shared, based on their experiences, the behaviors that were encountered were largely dependent on the individual history and background of the foster child. First, the assessment of needs to manage behaviors and develop attachments may be more effective when external barriers such as these are more thoroughly recognized. Secondly, with this insight into backgrounds, fostering agencies and foster parents may be more equipped with the appropriate knowledge and more attuned to the specific needs of the foster child. Lastly, through further discussion of cultural differences and varying backgrounds, the disconnection between kinship placements and non-kinship placements may be identified as there is likely to be fewer differences for the foster child when placed with relatives.

Finally, as presented in the findings, the emotional and psychological impacts of being a foster parent are prevalent and although these impacts do not limit individuals from fostering in

the future, it is valuable to address these concerns. Therefore, a recommendation is for the practitioners in fostering agencies to be continually present for the foster families and aware of the severe impacts of losing a foster child. This may entail a weekly check-in with the family either face-to-face or over the phone to inquire the well-being of the family. Other possibilities would be to consistently connect foster families to resources for grief counseling and support groups to process the emotional and psychological impacts. It may be especially valuable to connect these individuals to other foster families who can identify and relate to similar experiences. The emotional and psychological state of foster families is important to assess at the beginning of the foster care placement, throughout the duration of the placement, as well as at the closure of the placement as unexpected challenges are likely to arise as well. Through opening these lines of communication between the fostering agency and the foster families, they may feel better supported and better equipped in their roles to serve the foster child.

Overall, the intention of the present research study was to provide a platform for foster parents in non-kinship placements to share their experiences as a foster parent and to identify the rewards and the challenges. Non-kinship placements are the most frequently utilized placement type for foster children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012), yet there have been limited opportunities for these caregivers to speak on the emotional and psychological toll that they experience. Therefore, as a basis for the present research study, through an enhanced understanding for these experiences, it may be recognized how foster parents may be better supported through increased education and communication. Furthermore, the advocacy of these individuals is imperative as they are a valuable asset to the foster care system and foster children in need of safety and stability.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Bibliography

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Appendix B: Consent Information

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CONSENT DOCUMENT

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Title of Project: Family Dynamics within Non-Kinship Placements: The Perspectives of Foster Parents

Responsible Principal Investigator: Lindsay Tryc, Grand Valley State University

Other Investigator(s): Patricia Bowen, Grand Valley State University

Purpose of the Study: This research project seeks to examine the experiences of non-kinship foster care placements and its influence on family dynamics. The intent is to gain a better understanding of foster care placements from the perspectives of foster parents. In turn, this will help to ensure the development and success of children within the child welfare system through appropriate placements. We are most interested in the individual and/or group perspective of the parent(s) who serve(d) as the caregiver of a foster child in a non-kinship placement; and how the environment has changed the pre-existing family dynamic and structure.

If you choose to take part in this project, Lindsay Tryc and Patricia Bowen will interview each individual as well as group (if applicable for spouses), at the location of your choosing, for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at one time and additional interviews will not be necessary. There is no stipend or compensation for participation in the project.

Possible Risks and Benefits of Participation: The risks for participating in this project are similar to those you may experience when discussing your experiences as a foster care parent. Potential risks may include some levels of discomfort depending on the current discussion.

The goal of the research is not to induce any discomfort or distress. It should be acknowledged that there are no correct answers; therefore, all perspectives are encouraged. We would like to hear the perspectives of parents who have taken on fostering a child, unrelated to them; and how the environment of foster care may have changed the roles, duties, and dynamics as a family and individual. Your perspectives are highly valued as foster care is a needed service for children who experience unstable family and living arrangements. You have the right to refuse any question or to terminate the interview at any point without consequences.

Benefits of participation include your ability to share the positive and negative experiences of becoming a foster care parent to inform practice. Through sharing your experiences, you may identify the value you have had as a foster care parent as well as contributing to the research to ensure the appropriate placements of youth.

Data Collection and Storage: The interviews will be recorded audibly and the words will be transcribed exactly as they are said in the interview. After the transcription is complete, the

records will be destroyed and/or deleted. The only individuals who will have access to the recorded interviews will be Lindsay Tryc and Patricia Bowen. Until transcriptions are complete, the recorded interviews will be securely and safely stored away.

Confidentiality of Interviews: Any use of your interviews will not contain information that will identify you; and the transcripts will also not contain any identifying information. The only individuals who will have access to the information will be Lindsay Tryc and Patricia Bowen. Any use of your interview in the future will also not contain any identifying information.

Whom to Concern: If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator, you may contact Dr. Cray Mulder, Professor of SW 693, Grand Valley State University School of Social Work, telephone (616) 331-6550 or muldecra@gvsu.edu as well as the Human Research Review Committee, Grand Valley State University, telephone (616) 331-3197 or hrrc@gvsu.edu

Voluntariness: Participation in the study is on a voluntary basis. Therefore, you may terminate your participation at any point without consequences.

Dissemination: The findings of the study will be submitted as part of a research project for a class project. In addition, the findings will be submitted for the requirements of a Master's thesis for the School of Social Work at Grand Valley State University. Findings will be shared, potentially, in published studies and/or conference presentations. Therefore, the interviews and findings from this project will be combined with additional interviews conducted in the future with other participants. If you would like, you can also receive a copy of the final paper. Please note: no identifying information about you will be shared. In rare circumstances, access to the research data must be made available to the research advisor and the HRRC for purposes of protecting the rights and welfare of study participants.

Statement of Consent:

- I am 18 years or older.
- I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____   _____

Participant Signature   Date

CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Project: The Experience of Being a Foster Parent in Non-Kinship Placements: Emotional and Psychological Impacts

Responsible Principal Investigator: Lindsay Tryc, Grand Valley State University

Supervising Faculty Member: Dr. Cray Mulder

Purpose of the Study: This research study seeks to examine the experiences of foster parents in non-kinship placements and the identified impacts on emotional and psychological well-being. The intent is to gain a better understanding of foster care placements and experiences with behavioral challenges as well as attachment from the perspectives of foster parents. I am most interested in the individual and/or group perspective of the parent(s) who serve(d) as the caregiver of a foster child in a non-kinship placement; and how the experience has impacted these individuals and their families.

If you choose to take part in this project, Lindsay Tryc will interview each individual as well as group (if applicable for spouses; children will not be included at any point in the interview process), at the location of your choosing, for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at one time and additional interviews will not be necessary. There is no stipend or compensation for participation in the project.

Possible Risks and Benefits of Participation: The risks for participating in this project are similar to those you may experience when discussing your experiences as a foster care parent. Potential risks may include some levels of discomfort depending on the current discussion.

The goal of the research is not to induce any discomfort or distress. It should be acknowledged that there are no correct answers; therefore, all perspectives are encouraged. I would like to hear the perspectives of parents who have taken on fostering a child, unrelated to them; and how the experience of foster care, focusing specifically on behavioral challenges and attachment, may have impacted the emotional and psychological well-being of the foster parents and their families. Your perspectives are highly valued as foster care is a needed service for children who experience unstable family and living arrangements. You have the right to refuse any question or to terminate the interview at any point without consequences.

Benefits of participation include your ability to share the positive and negative experiences of being a foster care parent to inform practice. Through sharing your experiences, you may identify the value you have had as a foster care parent as well as additional concerns requiring attention to ensure the well-being of the foster parents themselves.

Data Collection and Storage: The interviews will be recorded audibly, with the use of digital recording, and the words will be transcribed exactly as they are said in the interview. After the transcription is complete, the recorded interviews will be destroyed and/or deleted. The only individuals who will have access to the recorded interviews will be Lindsay Tryc; in addition, the supervising faculty member, Dr. Cray Mulder, and other university officials may have access to the information provided or its analysis. Until transcriptions are complete, the recorded interviews will be securely and safely stored away. After transcription, any personal identifying statements will be modified to de-identify participants. Analysis of the transcripted interviews, not the interviews themselves, may be shared as part of the reporting out plan.

Confidentiality of Interviews: Any use of your interviews will not contain information that will identify you; and the transcripts will also not contain any identifying information. The only individuals who will have access to the information will be Lindsay Tryc; in addition, the supervising faculty member, Dr. Cray Mulder, and other university officials may have access to the information provided or its analysis. Any use of your interview in the future will also not contain any identifying information.

However, any disclosed statements of possible abuse or neglect of the foster child as perpetrated by the foster parents will warrant a break in confidentiality and reporting to the appropriate (faculty and/or child protective agency) officials.

Whom to Concern: If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator, you may contact Dr. Cray Mulder, Professor of SW 693, Grand Valley State University School of Social Work, telephone (616) 331-6550 or muldecra@gvsu.edu as well as the Human Research Review Committee, Grand Valley State University, telephone (616) 331-3197 or hrrc@gvsu.edu

Voluntariness: Participation in the study is on a voluntary basis. Therefore, you may terminate your participation at any point without consequences.

Dissemination: The findings of the study will be submitted for the requirements of a Master's thesis for the School of Social Work at Grand Valley State University. Findings will be shared, potentially, in published studies and/or conference presentations. Therefore, the interviews and findings from this project will be combined with additional interviews previously conducted with other participants. If you would like, you can also receive a copy of the final paper. Please note: no identifying information about you will be shared. In rare circumstances, access to the research data must be made available to the research advisor and the HRRC for purposes of protecting the rights and welfare of study participants.

Statement of Consent:

- I am 18 years or older.
- I am agreeing to be audio recorded
- I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____   _____

Participant Signature   Date

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter(s)

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY
www.gvsu.edu

DATE: July 19, 2012

TO: Lindsay Tryc
FROM: Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee
STUDY TITLE: [345861-2] Family Dynamics within Non-Kinship Placements: The Perspectives of Foster Parents
REFERENCE #:   12-227-H
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: July 19, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: July 19, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for this research study. The Human Research Review Committee has approved your research plan application as compliant with all applicable sections of the federal regulations, Michigan law, GVSU policies and HRRC procedures. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This approval is based on no greater than minimal risk to research participants. This study has received expedited review, category 7, based on the Office of Human Research Protections 1998 Guidance on Expedited Review Categories.

Please insert the following sentence into your information/consent documents as appropriate. All project materials produced for participants or the public must contain this information.

> *This research protocol has been approved by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University. File No. 12-227-H Expiration: July 19, 2013.*

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note the following in order to comply with federal regulations and HRRC policy:

1. Any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the *Change in Protocol* forms for this procedure. This includes, but is not limited to, changes in key personnel, study location, participant selection process, etc.
2. All UNEXPECTED PROBLEMS and SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENTS to participants or other parties affected by the research must be reported to this office within two days of the event occurrence. Please use the UP/SAE Report form.
   All instances of non-compliance or complaints regarding this study must be reported to this office in a timely manner. There are no specific forms for this report type.

3. All required research records must be securely retained in either paper or electronic format for a minimum of three years following the closure of the approved study. This includes signed consent documents from all participants.
4. This project requires continuing review by our office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate *Continuing Review* forms when applying for approval extension.
   - Protocols that are <u>active and open</u> for enrollment require both the Primary Investigator and Authorizing Official to electronically sign the Continuing Review submission in IRBNet.
   - Protocols that are open for data analysis ONLY, require the Primary Investigator's signature.

If you have any questions, please contact the HRRC Office, Monday through Thursday, at (616) 331-3197 or hrrc@gvsu.edu. The office observes all university holidays, and does not process applications during exam week or between academic terms. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

cc:

Generated on IRBNet

DATE: November 2, 2012

TO: Lindsay Tryc
FROM: Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee
STUDY TITLE: [379839-2] The Experience of Being a Foster Parent in Non-Kinship
                             Placements
REFERENCE #:   13-056-H
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: November 2, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: November 2, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for this research study. The Human Research Review
Committee has approved your research plan application as compliant with all applicable sections of the
federal regulations, Michigan law, GVSU policies and HRRC procedures. All research must be conducted
in accordance with this approved submission.

This approval is based on no greater than minimal risk to research participants. This study has received
expedited review, category 2-7, based on the Office of Human Research Protections 1998 Guidance on
Expedited Review Categories.

**Please insert the following sentence into your information/consent documents as appropriate. All
project materials produced for participants or the public must contain this information.**

> *This research protocol has been approved by the Human Research Review Committee at
> Grand Valley State University. File No. 13-056-H Expiration: November 2, 2013.*

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and
insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must
continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal
regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note the following in order to comply with federal regulations and HRRC policy:

1. Any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation.
   Please use the *Change in Protocol* forms for this procedure. This includes, but is not limited to,
   changes in key personnel, study location, participant selection process, etc.

2. All UNEXPECTED PROBLEMS and SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENTS to participants or other parties
   affected by the research must be reported to this office within two days of the event occurrence.
   Please use the UP/SAE Report form.
   All instances of non-compliance or complaints regarding this study must be reported to this office in
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cc:

Generated on IRBNet

Appendix D: Recruitment E-mail

Project Explanation / Invitation to Participate:

Dear Social Work Student/ Recent Alumni,

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the experiences of foster parents in non-kinship placements, to develop an understanding for the challenges that foster parents face. The criteria for the proposed research study are individuals who have served as foster parents to children who are not biologically related, and have at least (1) year of experience. Other areas of considerations such as location, types of placements, age of foster parents and the presence of biological children in the home will not serve to exclude any individual. You do not need to presently have a foster child in your care to participate. Please note that foster and biological children will not be involved at any point in the interview process. Your participation is voluntary.

While there is substantial research regarding the experiences of biological parents, there is limited research to understand the emotional and psychological impacts that foster parents in non-kinship placements endure. Therefore, the intent is to gain a better understanding of foster care placements and experiences with behavioral challenges as well as attachment from the perspectives of foster parents.

I am hoping to conduct interviews with foster parents as a couple as well as individually, with interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Therefore, if you're interested in sharing your story, please contact Lindsay Tryc at **TRYCL3689@gmail.com**. In addition, if you may know someone who meets the criteria and would be interested, this e-mail can be shared with other individuals.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Tryc
GVSU MSW Student

Dr. Cray Mulder
Supervising Faculty Member

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

<u>The Experience of Being a Foster Parent in Non-Kinship Placements:</u>
<u>Emotional and Psychological Impacts Interview Protocol</u>

PRE-PLACEMENT DISCUSSION

1. Please tell me about your motivation and/or your reasons to foster a child and/or children.
2. Please tell me about any apprehensions or concerns you had prior to beginning the process of being a foster parent; including concerns about access to supports and resources or potential impacts on family structure and relationships.

MANAGING BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

3. From your perspective, please discuss any (foreseen and unforeseen) behavioral challenges that you have encountered as a foster parent.
4. Please describe any feelings that you have experienced in regards to identifying and addressing these behavioral challenges; did any of these feelings impact your ability to address the behaviors? If so, how?
5. Please tell me about any additional impacts that managing behavioral challenges has had on you as an individual; on your family.

MAKING ATTACHMENTS

6. Please discuss, from your perspective, the role of the foster child's presence in relationship to the family structure.
7. From your perspective, how would you characterize/describe the bond/relationship that you have with the foster children within your home?
8. From your perspective, please identify any factors that may have impacted your attachment to the foster child.
9. Please tell me about your experiences with completing a foster care placement.
10. Please identify any issues revolving around separation and attachment present upon completion of a foster care placement, such as after effects.
11. Please describe your family's process upon the completion of the placement; how did you and your family address the transition of the foster child out of the home?

POST-PLACEMENT DISCUSSION

12. From your perspective, how do your motivations to foster align with the actual experiences of fostering?
13. Please identify any reasons that would deter you from fostering in the future; in addition, please identify any other motivations/reasons (possibly unforeseen) to continue to foster in the future.