"It's the support of my mum and my family, without that I couldn't do the job." Foster-carers' perspectives on informal supports and developing resilience in the role

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Abstract

Fostering agencies face increasing challenges recruiting and retaining foster-carers whilst the numbers of children requiring foster placements continues to rise annually. This study used qualitative methods with eleven foster-carers to explore their experiences of how family and friends supported and promoted their resilience enabling them to continue as foster-carers. Most foster-carers in the study reported experiencing positive input from family, with a few exceptions. Adult children of foster-carers were considered particularly helpful with some becoming advocates for fostering. Whilst a number of foster-carers experienced good support from friends, a clear understanding of the fostering role, at different times, was key to the experience of support from both family or friends. Implications for practice include examining opportunities for developing and facilitating the support potential of adult children, extended family, and friends. These could include focused information and tailored training along with creative user led approaches for organisations to harness this underutilised yet fundamental support to foster-carers.

Keywords

Background

Foster-carers are of crucial importance to some children in Northern Ireland who cannot remain living with their birth family (Randle et al, 2017). However, as the numbers of children entering the care system in Northern Ireland has increased in recent years, foster-carer numbers have actually decreased over this period (DoH 2018, 2017). At March 2018, 3109 children were looked-after in Northern Ireland, the highest recorded number since the Children (NI) Order 1995 was implemented (DoH 2018). At the same time fostering agencies face challenges recruiting and retaining foster-carers. In 2018 an estimated 250 new foster-carers were urgently needed at a period when 89% of looked-after children were in foster-care, (Fostering Network, 2018). The Northern Ireland Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority reviewed fostering service across the region in (RQIA, 2013). Although good standards were reported across the sector, support for foster-carers was highlighted as an area requiring improvement. The RQIA (2013) highlighted that foster-carers who felt supported by services, *and* their own friends and family, were more likely to continue to foster.

Whilst many simply retire, a significant number of foster-carers leave the service annually because they no longer wish to continue. As example, in 2018, 64 foster-carers retired, whilst 81 quit altogether. Reasons for quitting may be complex, however the breakdown of foster placements is linked, and this may be in turn influenced by foster-carers' experiences of available support. 'Children in Care,' (DoH, 2017) reported that from 2016 to 2017, 41% of moves between foster homes arose from placements breaking down. It is against this background of what arguably might be described as a crisis in fostering services that this qualitative study explores foster-carers' experiences of the role their family and friends play in enabling and supporting them to continue fostering.

Literature overview

Foster-carers experiences of informal supports

The contribution informal support can make to foster-carers' lives is seldom a primary focus within the existing evidence (Cavazzi et al, 2010). However, some studies examining factors relating to family and informal supports provide insights on the issues for foster-carers in this respect. In a 2004 study exploring reasons foster-carers remained in the fostering role, Sinclair et al reported almost two-thirds of participants considered family a valuable support, with friends another significant support. The research concluded that the absence or presence of these supports could be indicative of applicants' suitability to sustain the fostering role and as such might be a useful factor in foster-care recruitment screening. Subsequent studies suggest that the more resourced a family are, including supportive family and friends, the lower likelihood of their withdrawing during the fostering recruitment process (Ciarrochi, et al., 2012; Geigar, et al., 2013).

Resilience in continuing and informal supports

In an effort to better understanding specific family factors that may promote resilience in the task, research has employed a range of conceptual approaches to explore foster-carers continuing within such a challenging role. A family resilience perspective (Ward, 2002), is one such approach in examining the influence of family dynamics and functioning in promoting carers resilience. Studies utilising this framework revealed social supports as critical (Henderson, et al., 2006; Fuentes-Peláez, et al., 2016; Piel, et al., 2017). Evidence further suggests that when combined with individual psychological strengths, supportive persons are associated with continued motivation to foster and sustain the role (Ciarrochi, 2012; Geigar, et al., 2013).

Using an adaptational resilience, Leitz et al (2016) examined why some foster families cope and adapt to the demands of fostering over time, yet others don't. Findings indicate families adjust to stressors and become resilient through a five-stage process of; 'survival', 'adjustment,' 'acceptance,' 'growing stronger' and 'helping others'. Ten family strengths were identified as essential to certain stages with social support considered vital in the early 'survival' stage. Other research indicates that initially foster families can struggle immensely with adjusting to the new role. Pickin, et al., (2011) found foster-carers experienced role ambiguity, blurred boundaries between a quasi-professional

role and their home life, alongside constraints imposed by confidentiality and a sense of the fostering identity being 'all-consuming.' Whilst some foster-carers felt isolated by a lack of perceived support, others reported the company of friends as valuable, providing a means of 'stepping out' of the fostering role. This suggests a sometimes complex experience; whilst family and friends of foster-carers are important to developing resilience, some foster-carers may experience isolation from essential social supports because of boundaries within the very role itself (Pickin, et al., 2011; Geigar, et al., 2013; Fuentes-Peláez, et al., 2016).

Informal supports and the stress and strain of fostering

Fostering presents challenges that can significantly impact life satisfaction and are often 'part and parcel' of the role, for example, managing ongoing challenging child behaviours, (Landry-Meyer, et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2015; Cooley, et al., 2015). Studies show that foster-carers perception of these issues and their capacity to continue, is associated with the quality of support available to them, including informal supports (Cooley, et al., 2015; Denby, et al., 2015). Of particular relevance to this study is Piel et al's (2017) findings that foster-carers developed stronger networks with friends and family to offset reduced agency support. Whilst recognising that this support has some influence on motivation and continuing to foster, it does not identify in what circumstances it is effective.

Influence of others who value the fostering role

Positive influences, in particular the input of a more experienced foster-carer or friends who see value in fostering, appear to support and sustain foster carers in their role (Leitz, et al., 2016; Piel, et al., 2017). Pickin et al (2011) and Cavazzi et al (2010) identified that foster-carers experienced isolation when not able to share this central aspect of their lives or if criticism is received from family or friends in relation to fostering. Therefore, whilst the literature suggests family and friends can influence motivation and capacity to continue their role, the value significant others place on the fostering role is an important factor in determining whether their influence on foster-carers is positive or negative. Few

studies have focused exclusively on foster-carers' reflections the support role of friends and family.

Method

Participants and ethical considerations

This study was conducted in the largest of Northern Ireland's 5 Health and Social Care Trusts. The Northern Trust serves a population of approximately 471,000, with the second largest number of looked-after children in the region; 663 children were looked-after in the Trust area in March 2019 (DoH 2019). Participants were purposively recruited through their allocated social worker in the local fostering team. An inclusion criterion of non-kinship foster-carers with five or more years' experience with both short and long-term placements was applied in order to capture the lived experiences of foster-carers who spent significant time caring for children. This 'purposive sampling' strategy was appropriate as a uniquely experienced group is required to provide data which is 'information rich' (Taylor, et al., 2015). All those recruited were female with fostering experiencing ranging between nine and thirty years. Most lived in rural settings, some remote, with the remainder based in small towns. Participants provided written consent, study approval was granted by the Ulster University Ethics Committee and the Research Governance Department of the Northern Health & Social Care Trust.

Data collection and analysis

Eleven foster-carers participated semi-structured interviews. An 'Aide Memoire' provided an opening generic question about individuals' perceptions regarding the challenges of fostering. Subsequent questions explored thoughts on the concept of resilience in the role, and their views on the contribution made by their family and friends, thereby allowing participants the opportunity to 'tell their story' about support in the role. Interview transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006)

understand it as a process of meaning making through identifying patterns, or emerging themes in the data. This requires the researcher to immerse in an iterative process of, deconstructing, labelling or coding and review until themes are clearly identified. NVivo software was used to facilitate this process of coding and identification of themes.

Results

In exploring how foster-carers perceive the role of informal supports in sustaining them with this task, two overarching and inter-related themes emerged, with a number of sub-themes occurring within each key theme. *Foster-carers own conceptualisation of the fostering role* was a key theme in understanding both their expectations of informal supports, and their lived experience of this in sustaining them. Sub-themes here included foster-carers own perceptions of; 1. their role as foster-carers, 2. the impact of fostering on family relationships, 3. the fostering role and family life stages and, 4. informal supports understanding of the role. Analysis revealed the second overarching theme as the *lived experience of the role of informal supports*, with their experience of the 1. the support role of family, and 2. the support role of friends, as sub themes within this.

Foster-carers conceptualising the role

Perceptions of fostering; All participants had definite views about their responsibilities as foster-carers, three considered the role as limited to just the immediate family unit. They understood protecting the privacy of the children they cared for as integral to this and seeking emotional support when stressed, even from family and friends could be stigmatising for the child. They prioritised the relationship with the child and establishing trust, possibly with consequences for themselves, as typified by one foster-carer:

> …*We always protected the kids because people…can get the wrong impression of foster kids and we have great kids that do stupid things and I always thought,*

> *'no. I'm not telling other people [family] what you've done because I don't want them getting the wrong image of you...,* PD1.

A foster-carer of thirty years' experience, described the beneficial use of therapeutic parenting approaches gained through formal training, as well as her determination not to give up on very challenging children. Such was her commitment, that she viewed part of her role as making amends for placement breakdowns or other moves children in her care had previously undergone:

> *You know... my determination was she wasn't leaving here till she was ready to leave herself...She turned eighteen and...she went independent. She...got a wee flat...but that was her choice at that point.* PA5.

Getting to know children thoroughly proved beneficial in understanding and meeting children's needs. Most described becoming so immersed in fostering that Initially it took over their lives and whilst exhausting, they referred to this total absorption in positive terms, as evidenced by XX when stating:

> *...but at the same time, you just think to yourself...these are damaged children, there's been a reason they're here...my job is to help them.* PB4

This commitment to the children whilst increasing the demands of the role, sometimes limited involvement with extended family and friends. Some foster-carers expressed determination not to ask for respite care because they perceived the children they fostered as part of the family who might feel they were being rejected. This conceptualising of the role is typified when stating that:

> *...So we always said if they were coming here we weren't going to send them...if we were going to have a party they were going to be at the party, or if we're going to go on holiday, they're going to go on holiday.* PA3

Some families, with the consent of the birth parents and social services instigating background checks, were able to avail of more informal babysitting arrangements through adult children or close friends, viewing these as sharing the fostering role to a limited extent. Other foster-carers however viewed their role as solely their

responsibility and although they knew their family were willing to help, preferred not to ask them:

My family would be supportive…but it's me that chose to foster, not them. PB4

However, not every foster-carer could count on their family members being willing to be involved in the fostering task, and this was cause of some hurt:

I have a sister who told me…straight to my face, 'you foster, I don't,' so we could never turn to her for support…because the answer would be 'no.' We never had that, it was like we went into this on our own. PD1

Impact on own and other children

All foster-carers had children of their own, most of whom were now adults. Many had fostered a number of children at a time who were not always related. Most reported that ensuring everyone's safety in the home was a source of additional stress, especially when children had challenging behaviour. Foster-carers described how children could be at risk of physical harm from other children. Unfortunately, when this could not be safely managed a placement could breakdown:

…so there was a lot of issues there and when he went to hit his sister I just knew I couldn't protect my own [child] anymore but they tried their best to salvage it…it had just went beyond where I felt safe and the other two children in the house were not safe. PC3

Foster-carers believed that their own children had made sacrifices to accommodate the needs of foster children, such as forfeiting familiar routines, however in many cases they embraced fostering and foster-carers believed the experiencing in the family was personally enriching for them too:

…It's part and parcel of their life and always has been and…no matter who I bring in they accept them. It doesn't matter what it is…even if they don't like the behaviour, they will accept the child. PA4

…My daughter, who has grown up now within the foster-care… She's trying to get passed for the fostering at the minute…..she doesn't see it as any different you see, because she was born into it. PA5

Another foster-carer sought her then teenage daughter's approval in making her decision to foster. Although she never expected her to contribute to the role, it was meaningful that she was willing to share her home and her mother with other children. Many reported that their children were advocates for fostering, having been inspired by their parents' example, and in two cases applied to be assessed to foster themselves. Their motivation lay in clearly understanding of the role, and their acceptance of the foster children despite challenging behaviours. Overall, foster carers perceived the experience for immediate family as an overwhelmingly positive one.

Life stage factors

Stages of the life cycle had an impact on availability of informal support. Three foster-carers were in their sixties or early seventies, while the remainder were in their forties or fifties. By continuing to foster after they had raised their own children, they often found themselves 'out of sync' with their peers' and siblings' life stages. They reflected on having experienced greater involvement from friends and family when their children and foster children were similar ages. Involvement often petered out, and friendships sometimes drifted away when the children grew older, although foster-carers continued to take on the care of other young children. This loss of common experience and hence relationship is summed up by one foster-carer:

I think over the years we've lost a lot of family…They're all got their own kids and the kids have grown up so they're not about the same. PA5

Another remarked how she and her husband lost friends over the years because they were unable to socialise as other couples with adult children had the freedom to do.

Friends could not understand why just 'getting a babysitter' posed difficulties or their reluctance to leave a fostered child in someone else's care, one foster-carer highlighted the experience when saying that:

> *...And now we find that people our age, kids are all married and away…and we still have young children so when they ask us out, we sort of go, 'oh no we still have [foster child] here,' or 'we can't do that'.* PD1

Another foster-carer described her own siblings became distant once their children grew up and her parents passed away, as her own household continued to foster, they had less in common and drifted apart:

> *We'd see them at a wedding or…a funeral but…we don't have the same close relationship…But…when I wasn't fostering I would have spent more time…searching them out and…going visiting…and now when you're fostering and you're busy you don't want to be trailing the kids out here, there and everywhere, so you don't and I just keep it simple…* PB3

The 'out of sync' nature of the experience was observed by a foster-carer when caring for young children after her daughter was grown up brought her back to attending mother and toddler groups. She described feeling like a grandmother figure although she did not have grandchildren. For this foster-carer the adjustment to being home-based again was too difficult after having more freedom and she subsequently opted to foster teenagers instead.

As foster-carers aged family members' perceptions of the demands of the role sometimes altered, with concerns articulated regarding their age and stage of life, especially where a child's behaviour was challenging. In two cases foster-carers' elderly parents queried why they were not wanting to enjoy retirement. Life stage processes meant foster-carers were confronted with personal family dilemmas and choices, for example one carer discussed having to decline caring for her elderly father because the intensity of a foster placement made this impossible.

An older foster-carer was dismayed at her adult children expecting her to cease fostering after their father died, whilst another foster carer acknowledged eventually

accepting her adult children's concerns about the impact of a child's extreme behaviour at her life stage

> *…they're frightened for me as I get older…because I did have a wee boy with me…I knew when I agreed to take him they had nobody else left and…that he had a lot of problems…quite violent…And I kept him about six months but at the end…they were saying to me, 'mummy, no, no more'…and for my own health I had to say, 'no, look I can't, I'm not strong enough, to do this'…and I was sad to see him go… , PA4.*

With ageing, some foster-carers viewed their decreasing physical fitness as a limitation, however they remarked their wide experience and knowledge led to greater confidence and skill. Experience meant foster-carers were able to weigh up losses involving informal supports with the benefits the role brought to them personally.

Family and friends understanding of the role

Overall, foster-carers in the study felt that their own children understood the demands of the fostering role. However, there were exceptions, one foster carer stated that her adult son never understood the motivation to foster. Most adult children's anxieties tended to relate to worries regarding life stage events and ageing. One foster-carer recalled her grown children's concerns:

> *…Sometimes they'll say, 'but mummy…you're getting that wee bit older now, are you sure you're able to work with it?' I say, 'Yip, it's fine…when I feel I'm not able to work with it, I'll stop, but at this stage, no, I'm fine.' So…they keep an eye on me as well, [laughing], just to make sure. PA4*

Adult children were sometimes credited with significant insight into the role. In two of the families' adult children applied to become foster-carers themselves and in another an adult children identified an issue with child which the foster-carer had missed:

> *…a couple of my own children said a long time before that wee boy was diagnosed, 'mum there's something doesn't tie up… …but because…I saw him every day, was with him every day, was looking after him every day, that was the normal to me…PB4*

Another foster-carer remarked that because her adult child understood the role, this caused worry for that daughter:

> *…one of my children now fosters themselves. They do understand it; I think what happens to them sometimes is that they're frightened for me as I get older.* PA4

Regarding extended family, if foster-carers reported close relationships with parents and siblings, they tended to describe these as supportive, although the extent to which family members understood the role varied:

> *…they will listen, and they get it to a point, and they are there for us, but I don't know if they totally…get it…'you walked into this situation'…but they will listen.* PA3

Initially, family members did not always recognise and appreciate the additional responsibilities as recalled by the same foster-carer:

> *…Even just that support of being there…I have my family who live near but it does take a while for them to realise that you have this extra responsibility that's…always there…They don't immediately see that…but it does work out…but sometimes you have to trigger people to think.* PA3

Four foster-carers spoke of negative attitudes and behaviours displayed from extended family. These tended to be critical or dismissive comments, emphasising how the foster-carers had put themselves into the situation by choosing to foster or suggesting they give up. This was experienced as hurtful and undermining:

> *…sometimes I think people should understand by now…why we do it, they always ask. I had it recently said by a family member…'why are you still bringing all those waifs and strays to live with you when you should be enjoying your retirement and living it up and going on holiday and stuff?' That's actually not very supportive!* PA5

For some this disapproval was evidenced in their distancing themselves from the fostered children, appearing not to consider them part of the wider family. Furthermore, this was demonstrated through minimal interaction with them, in one case forgetting

their name, in another walking out of the home when the fostered child threw a tantrum. In general, these attitudes resulted in the foster family reducing contact with the family members concerned, although two foster-carers also spoke of challenging them:

…well you don't have to do it' that's their attitude [when challenged]. They don't see this child who needs a loving home…So that annoys me…, PA1.

Foster-carers generally felt that most of their friends had limited understanding of the fostering role. To protect the children's confidentiality, they tended not to confide in them:

…I always thought, 'no. I'm not telling other people what you've done because I don't want them getting the wrong image of you'…and we've never really discussed them outside the house. PD1

Similarly, another remarked that:

…a lot of our friends would be church people...they asked me to go to the women's conference a couple of years ago and I said 'no I can't because I couldn't get respite.' And they looked and they said, 'why can't [your husband] do it?' I said, 'because she is a young girl and I can't leave her in the house with three men,' PD1

Half of those interviewed spoke of the value of friendships with others who fostered. Some had one or two close friends who fostered or were part of a larger friendship group with other foster-carers. Whether they met up face to face or corresponded by telephone or private messaging on social media, all the foster-carers who had these friendships valued them greatly, believing that other foster-carers thoroughly understand the role. A foster-carer summed this up when stating that:

. Because with all the best will in the world, social workers…don't live with them, they don't put up with what goes on, so they really don't know what we're doing, what we actually have to try to go through. PA4

One foster-carer spoke with admiration about more experienced foster caring friends, whom she considered role models. Others described how talking to foster-carers was

reassuring, helping them see different perspectives, and encouraging them to try other approaches to dealing with issues children presented:

> …[My friend]…because she has been a foster-carer, she understands the role…I find that even within your family…with my sons…because their first loyalty is to me…if you're in a bad situation and you're under a lot of stress their first reaction is…'get rid of him,'…'it's too much trouble' but…if I go to [my friend] with it, it's different, she'll talk me through it and…it's different. PA5

Another foster-carer recalled her hurt when following the death of her husband, her children pleaded with her to stop fostering. She reflected on how aside from grieving, her difficulty in accepting her family's lack of understanding of how fundamental fostering was to her identity. However, she persisted in the role with determination and in this case support from a foster carer friend was critical to her remaining in the role.

The Influence of Personal Support Networks

The role of family

Whilst many foster-carers did not have an expectation of much family support, ultimately many identified family members as their closest and most reliable supports. For some this included their own parents and siblings, whilst for others it was their adult children who were most supportive. The type of support varied with practical assistance such as collecting children from school, babysitting, or errands being identified but for others emotional support was most valued:

> … …my sister and my brother, they're always at the end of a phone…we just phone them up and talk to them about anything…they're always there. PA3

Another shared how:

> …I think it's just…someone to listen…to what you have to say and to be able to express it…and…then…sometimes when you do say it…it doesn't seem as bad or the other person will come back and say, 'well what about this, that or

the other?' …and they also would maybe say, 'don't worry about it,' and…'it will get sorted…,' PC1.

In many cases support provided was mixed. Two households relied greatly on both emotional and practical support from parents and close siblings, stating that they would not be able to foster without their families' input:

> *…I would be lost without [my mum and dad]...They just treat the kids like their grandchildren I don't know how anybody does it without extended family around.* PC3

> *…She didn't sleep and…me and my husband went to Donegal to get some sleep, so my sister came down and minded her, so if we didn't have that there we couldn't foster and especially with children with behavioural issues. You do need your family support around you.* PA1

Adult children were often referred to as having embraced fostering as a natural part of their lives and their willingness to include foster children, assisting their integration was greatly valued:

> *…my children…are very, very good at including everybody still to this day. A lot of the children…that we had they're still friends with. So that…helps because it makes them feel part of a family, makes them feel as though they're wanted and that's what a child needs to feel.* PA4

There were barriers to a number of the foster-carers accessing familial support, some were reluctant to share stressful issues with family members because relatives might worry about their wellbeing or advise them to end a placement or cease fostering. In one case relatives had voiced an objection to ever being approached and in other cases family members' lack of understanding of what the role entailed precluded them ever being asked to help:

> *… You know the first thing would be, 'you see I told you, you brought it on yourself,' that's all I ever get from her. Now we're…still quite close and the children can go to her house for barbeques…now because they're grown up and they're sensible…but…if I was to say to her, 'I am tired,' 'Well you brought that on yourself,' …,* PD1.

Some relatives were willing to help but had their own responsibilities impacting availability. However, in these situations, knowing that individuals wanted to help was valuable:

> *…My own family are very, very good…There's one of the boys that wasn't married and he was an excellent support and when he got married…he said…'I'll still help you out mum,' ……and now has a wee boy and expecting another child of their own, you know you don't want to impose.* PB4

One foster-carer reflected the reality of practical support:

> *…my sisters are very good too…they're all willing…but when it actually comes to it there's lots of things they do be doing and it never really works out so I do have to go outside…if I needed respite…They said they would and then they take on other things in their lives and their jobs…so it just doesn't work…but they're always there in the evening…I have good friends and I have a good family I suppose. I'm quite lucky.* PD3

The role of friends:

For some foster-carers, close friends were a primary source of support, both practically and acting as a 'listening ear.' In most cases these friends had insight into the fostering role or were foster-carers themselves:

> *…Well it would probably be [my school friend], would be my first shout or [my other friend]…is also a foster-carer…Like for difficult situations it would be [my other friend]. To have a rant and a scowl it would be [my school friend], for practical help it would be my own daughters but…these boys don't give me a lot of bother.* PB3.

Those who did not seek support from friends in relation to fostering, chose not to as similar to family who were not called on for support, they felt friends did not fully understand why they wanted to foster, or else to protect the children's privacy. The restrictions of the role on lifestyle could also impact on friendships:

> *…They'd invite you out for dinner and think we could just at the drop of a hat go and somebody's going to mind the kids. I said, 'you don't get that, you have to get it organised to go to specific people to do this.' So people just got tired asking us out.* PD1

In the case of another foster-carer, she felt her friend simply didn't understand the role:

> *…and maybe [my friend] would ring me…and I try to show her things from [the] child's point of view and I try to explain to her…this child is not like…your own child…this child has had different experiences. She can't understand why he's not more…like her daughter. …* PB3.

One foster family becoming alienated from another fostering household due to issues between their foster children:

> *…having close ties to the other foster carer…who had the sibling, I would have thought we would have got more support…I know they were going through a difficult time too but it was like if things went wrong with their child it was our child's fault…,* PA5.

A foster-carer who spoke highly of a friend's support was disappointed at having to forgo the placement of severely disabled children as this friend did not feel able to perform personal care tasks to for the proposed placement of a teenage boy. This level of expectation was exceptional.

Giving of support to others and other demands:

All of the foster-carers spoke of ways that they supported others. A range of practical and emotional support and advice was provided to family and in some cases, this included friends. In many instances, support was provided to other foster-carers, although one foster-carer felt strongly that advice on fostering should only be sought from professionals:

> *…and we'll talk round it and we'll see what other options there is that we could actually do and…try and that's…the best support we can have. The other ones… that are doing the same job know how hard it is and know how they've tried different things.* PA4

Practical support included daytime and overnight child-care, sometimes for other foster carers:

> *…I have provided support to a foster-carer…in that she was going to a wedding…she's a single carer…at that stage she didn't have respite, so…I said, 'if it helps in any way I'm happy to take the little one for that weekend or an overnight… go through your social worker and check it out,' and that's what happened.* PB4

Foster-carers continued to value their own role with extended family members, this remained important.

> *…my brothers or maybe my sister at times would need my support and I'm happy enough to be asked and happy enough to help if I can.* PC1

> *I look after all the kids, all the nieces and nephews. Where would they be without auntie.* PC3

Foster-carers cited other responsibilities including care of elderly parents or other family with on-going needs. Sometimes they were conflicted between the responsibilities of fostering and other demands on their time:

> *…This time last year and for two years before that I was [my father-in-law's] carer … he'd had a stroke…My sister-in-law…is due a double heart by-pass and they are looking at me for her as well, then I have my own father of eighty-six and he's…coming to ill-health and I'm going to be in the same position as I was with my father-in-law and…I seen him yesterday and when I come home I was a wee bit cross with myself because I only had the morning with him and you kind of think, 'I should really have more time…*, PA5.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore foster-carers' perceptions of and experiences of how friends and family may contribute to their developing and maintaining resilience in the role.

Limitations

Although purposive sampling has the advantage of facilitating the recruitment of participants with relevant characteristics (Pickin, 2011), this study with experienced

foster-carers within a particular trust, whilst offering a range of perspectives, recruited only through fostering teams. Thus, the findings should be understood within this context. However, as the sample group were motivated to engage their views offer valuable insight into the experiences of foster-carers regarding their personal support networks and factors influencing these.

Conceptualising the Role of fostering

For parents in this study, their conceptualising of the role in terms of its intensity in meeting the child's needs, and discretion required in upholding their privacy, meant the experience, certainly initially when a child was placed, could be isolating. This supports existing literature (Pickin, et al., 2011; Geigar, et al., 2013; Fuentes-Peláez, et al., 2016) where for some they seen the role as immersive. Overall however, foster-carers in the current study were more accepting of the challenges, understanding them as an integral part of their fostering identity. This corresponds with some other literature, which considers accepting a re-defined family identity as a foster family, and the renewal of a commitment to fostering, as necessary to develop fostering resilience, (Leitz, et al., 2016; Fuentes-Peláez, et al., 2016).

This was somewhat paradoxical in cases where the perception of having to be all-available meant some foster-carers not availing of formal respite. However, findings in this study show that in some instances the family's fostering identity extended to adult children taking an active role in supporting their parents to foster. This suggests that the adult children had embraced fostering as part of their family identity too, becoming advocates for fostering, with some becoming foster-carers themselves. Unfortunately, some foster carers found that fostering had a negative impact upon other children in the home, especially when the fostered children's behaviours were extreme. Challenging child behaviours were noted as a significant stress factor in the literature, (Gerard, et al., 2006; Cooley, et al., 2015).

Many of the foster-carers referred to life stage factors having a bearing on their access to support. Some experienced contact from friends or family diminishing as their children grew. Whilst they continued to foster, they lost the common ground they had shared with peers whose children had reached the stage of greater independence. As

some of the foster-carers had grown older and issues around health and fitness emerged (and in one case they reported the loss of a spouse), their families became more protective and less certain that the foster-carers were able to continue to foster. Some foster-carers found that friends and family expected them to retire from fostering. Having responsibilities at odds with peers and stage of the life cycle is evidenced as adding strain for foster-carers in previous studies, (Landry-Meyer, et al., 2005; and Gerard, et al., 2006; Denby, et al., 2015). However, within the current study, the foster-carers also identified positive aspects of ageing, including increased knowledge and greater tolerance for challenging behaviour. As opposed to expectations of support from family and friends during this time, they were more challenged by their lack of understanding of the meaning fostering had for them, and their identity, regardless of life-stage.

In this study foster-carers mainly felt that they gained particular benefit from the support of those who understood the fostering role. This support had a calming, positive effect, providing not only a means to share a problem but helping them view an issue from a different perspective. This finding is supported in the wider literature (Leitz, et al., 2016; Piel, et al., 2017), but goes further in evidencing that friendships, as well as family support can perform this role.

Some foster-carers who took part acknowledged having had thoughts of relinquishing their fostering role, or reported that others expected this following stressful child placements or personal bereavement. This reflects other studies which also established links between carers' perception of challenges, the quality of support they experienced, and their capacity to continue (Cooley, et al., 2015; Denby, et al., 2015). Whilst there was evidence of constraints within the role restricting access to social support for some foster-carers, ?????the experience of isolation identified in previous studies, (Pickin, et al., 2011; Geigar, et al., 2013; Fuentes-Peláez, et al., 2016) was not confirmed in this study. All of the foster-carers in this study had decided to continue their role despite facing challenges, and whilst they reported having no preconceived idea of being supported in a sustained way by family and friends, in fact their role was critical in enabling them to continue over time.

The Influence of Personal Support Networks

Most foster-carers in this study identified their family as their closest and most reliable support, although there were limitations to this for some. Friends were recognised as important supports for many of the foster-carers, especially where they had insight and understanding into the fostering role. This study goes further than previous research in this area by explicitly highlighting the importance of emotional and psychological support from family and friends in the form of a listening ear, or helpful advice, aside from practical support. Furthermore, where foster-carers experience family and friends' acceptance and understanding of the role at critical life stages, as well as when placements are particularly challenging, this in itself is hugely sustaining. Establishing these specific characteristics and dimensions of informal support enhances previous research in this area and further confirms the crucial role of social supports in developing resilience and sustaining fostering role (Henderson, et al., 2006; Leitz, et al., 2016; Piel, et al., 2017).

As a more mature cross participant sample, it was apparent that those interviewed had developed resilience within the fostering role and acquired skill, confidence and experience over the years. Most of the foster-carers credited their support systems as essential to their capacity to continue, whilst a few appeared independent of the support of family or friends. However, by focusing this study on resilience in the role over time as opposed to supports themselves, it became apparent these foster-carers had often benefitted from the support of family and friends at an earlier stage in their fostering experience. Only one carer reported no support for the fostering role from family and loss of friendships as a result of the constraints and responsibilities of the role.

Whilst previous studies noted that some families struggle to negotiate fostering challenges and can experience enduring isolation due to factors affecting their access to informal support, (Geigar, et al., 2013; Fuentes-Peláez, et al., 2016), this was not the case in this study. As a direct consequence of their experiences of being supported and their perception of this as necessary to the task, all of the sample provided support to others. Whilst some faced conflicts and challenges in relation to caring for others, as 'family and friends' themselves they gave of their time to nurturing and supporting

significant others in their lives, including regularly caring for grandchildren, nursing terminally ill relatives or providing emotional support to family and friends.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Fostering services nationally are experiencing unprecedented pressure in recruiting and maintaining placements. A complex range of factors are involved in foster-carers developing resilience over the life-cycle, family and friends are just one aspect of this, formal supports are also critical to sustainability. However, this study indicates that family and friends do support, and knowledge and awareness are fundamental to the experience of support.

Friends and family's' acceptance and understanding of the role is linked to foster-carers role validation and developing resilience. Structured awareness raising and information giving opportunities should be made available to informal support networks to provide essential knowledge of the task their friends and loved ones are engaging in. This could include general information about children's trauma needs and the practical, legal, administrative, and emotional requirements of the role. Findings from this study suggest this should extend to awareness raising of how support may be provided during key life stages and processes, for example, bereavement or ill-health, in helping to sustain and support foster-carers resilience in caring for children.

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