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'You've got to love her'—Perceptions of birth mothers among children in long-term foster care

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Abstract

Research shows differences in gendered caring expectations between mothers and fathers across countries and how they are affected by the development of different family forms and cultural practices. In this study, we explore the meaning that 14 children and youths in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain ascribe to their birth mothers. We found three main perspectives among the participants. Within these perspectives, age, gender and socio-cultural context seem to be intertwined in how children and youths in foster care perceive their birth mother's role in their lives. The analysis gives insight into the complexity of child–mother relationships and how young people navigate these. In light of these findings, we discuss some practical implications for social workers in child protection services.

KEYWORDS
foster care, life-giver, love, motherhood, non-kinship care, responsibilities

1 | INTRODUCTION

Several studies have explored foster children's relationships with their birth parents, and the findings suggest that birth parents remain important and that foster children may want contact despite giving negative accounts of their experiences with their birth parents (Andersson, 2018; Atwool, 2013; Iyer et al., 2020; Maaskant et al., 2016). Most foster children feel connected to their parents, even if there is limited or no contact, and feelings of loyalty, concern and an eagerness to forgive are not unusual among foster children (Maaskant et al., 2016; Van Holen et al., 2020). In Spain as well as internationally, foster care has become the first option of choice for children in need of out-of-home care up to the age of 18 and beyond when, for various reasons, they are unable to live with their birth family (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Foster care has traditionally been seen as an attempt to provide a family experience for children, which, through recruitment and selection, focused on traditional gender roles (Hicks, 2011). However, in an international perspective, LGBT families have become included in fostering practices in recent years (Riggs, 2020).

Previous research has highlighted differences in gendered caring expectations between mothers and fathers across countries and how they are affected by the development of different family forms and in different cultural practices (Featherstone, 2004; Nygren et al., 2019; Walsh & Mason, 2018). The role of birth mothers in the society can be reflected in the fact that, in many countries, women continue to be the main caregiver in most families despite policy efforts to increase gender equality in caring expectations—that is, the development of parental, paternity and maternity leave policies (Nygren et al., 2021). Nygren et al. (2019, 2021) found that mothers are often positioned as the main carers of the children by social workers in child welfare services, whereas the fathers are excluded. This is supported by other previous studies (Baum, 2017; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Nygren et al., 2019; Skramstad & Skivenes, 2017; Storhaug, 2013). Furthermore, several studies have shown that children in care have more frequent contact with their mothers than with their fathers (Cashmore & Taylor, 2017; Fossum et al., 2018; Skoglund et al., 2019).

Birth mothers often continue to play an important role in their children's lives after they have moved into foster care (Baker

et al., 2016). Much research has shown that social workers in child protection services tend to focus on the mother in their work (Baum, 2017; Nygren et al., 2019; Osborn, 2014; Scourfield et al., 2012), and even social work textbooks portray the mother as the default client (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016). The mother is considered to be the main carer and is held more responsible for the child's situation than the father, and, as such, child abuse becomes, to a larger extent, a women's issue (Nygren et al., 2021; Scourfield, 2014). The work of social workers and the provision of their services in child protection are, however, highly dependent on the welfare system and policy contexts in which they operate (Hämäläinen et al., 2012; Nygren, Naujanienè, & Nygren, 2018). In out-of-home care, parental contact between children and their birth parents ranges from being professionally supported and regulated by social services (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011) to the use of smartphones, tablet computers and social media (Aamodt & Mossige, 2018; Skoog et al., 2015; Wissö et al., 2019). Although contact between children and their birth mothers appears easy to define, the relationship between them can be complex and can be explained from different perspectives.

In the contemporary sociology of family life, family relationships have come to be understood as constituted through 'family practices' that are constructed, relational, active, negotiated and understood over time (Morgan, 1996, 2011), rather than reflecting traditional hegemonic biological or legal connections. The meaning that individuals attach to family relationships has been described as taking shape within social-cultural contexts (Smart, 2004), as seen in areas such as emotions and family stories and displays (Finch, 2007). This sociological perspective allows us to explore the ways in which family members perceive their relationships with others.

A longitudinal study in Norway suggested that foster children's accounts of their birth parents depend on a variety of factors, including their own and their parents' life situations, expressed emotions and their relationships with others, and that such accounts might change over time (Skoglund et al., 2019). The study indicated that children have different resources available for managing their relationship with their birth parents. Furthermore, some appeared to be unable to escape relationships with their birth mother, despite such relationships being challenging or difficult. In-depth studies focusing on children's perspectives of their birth mothers are rare, and this article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the meaning that children and youths ascribe to their birth mothers. In this article, we explore how children and youths in long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain perceive their birth mothers.

2 | STUDY CONTEXT—THE SPANISH SOCIAL POLICY AND CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Esping-Andersen (1990) influential welfare state regime typology is often used to describe how state policies support individuals' reliance on labour markets. His model, however, has been subjected to criticism because it underrates gender inequalities and neglects the role of the family in care (Geist, 2005). Hantrais (2004) provides an alternative typology that reflects how some welfare states place the burden of care on families (familialisation); whereas, other welfare states aim to relieve this burden (de-familialisation). Within this framework, Spain is described as 'familialised', whereby the state plays a limited role in redistributing resources, and family members, particularly the women, are expected to care for the wellbeing of the family themselves (Hantrais, 2004; Moreno-Mínguez et al., 2017). A crucial feature of the Spanish welfare state is its decentralised character, both at the level of formation and at the level of implementation (Moreno & Arriba, 1999).

Since the 1978 Spanish Constitution, social provision is the responsibility of the 17 autonomous regions (Comunidades Autónomas), each of which has its own government, parliament and an array of different powers (Kosher et al., 2018). As a regional policy, social workers are to provide support and services when families are unable to care for their members (Article 148 no. 1, xx), and each region has a public department that is responsible for issuing protection orders for children at risk (Kosher et al., 2018). The autonomous regions are directed to ensure the protection of the family and children, in accordance with the Spanish Constitution (Article 39 no. 1–4). The National Law 26/2015 of July 2015 regulates autonomous regions child protection laws to ensure that children and youths have an adequate legal framework that is consistent with the international laws, in particular the UNCEC (Massons-Ribas et al., 2021). The work of social workers in child protection services must adhere to the national law.

In Spain, foster care placements occur through an administrative order. In cases where the birth parents object, the placement occurs through a judicial order. Only the more severe cases of abuse or neglect lead to a parent–child separation (Law 26/2015). The birth parents of children in foster care have a diverse range of adverse experiences, including drug addiction, alcoholism, imprisonment and, in the case of birth mothers, mental health problems and prostitution (López-López et al., 2010). Foster care placement can be: (1) as an emergency, where the child can stay with the foster family for up to 6 months, (2) temporary—up to 2 years or (3) long-term—up to legal age of majority, with the goal of creating permanence, and this can be prolonged after the age of 18. The legislation, in accordance with the Spanish Civil Code, pays considerable attention to the biological bond between the child and his or her birth family. Children are expected or encouraged to have regular contact with their birth family during placements (Law 26/2015 Article 20 no. 2) unless safety reasons advise against it. Furthermore, the legislation prescribes temporary foster care placement with the aim of reuniting the child with his or her birth family.

Traditionally, children at risk have been placed in residential care despite an emphasis on family placements (del Valle et al., 2009). In 2019, the child population was 8 282 246, representing approximately 18% of the Spanish population (National Institute of Statistics, 2019). Of these, around 42 529 were subject to child protection orders, representing 0.5% of the total population of children in Spain. Of these children, 55% (23 209) were in residential care, 29%

(12 600) in kinship care and 16% (6720) in non-kinship care (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2020).

3 | METHODS

This study was funded by the European Social Fund and the grant administrated by Castilla y León regional Ministry of Education and aims to examine how long-term non-kinship foster children and youths experience and perceive their family relationship with their mothers. This study draws on a multi-method qualitative design, including visual and task-based techniques using photos, drawings, social network maps, recall and semi-structured interviews (Punch, 2002). Such qualitative research methods are preeminent in allowing children and youths to express their views in various ways, not only verbally (Ennew et al., 2009). Initially, this study set out to explore how family is perceived in long-term non-kinship foster care. However, many participants had very limited or no contact with their fathers, and their reflections concerning their mothers were more prominent in the data (see Ie, 2022). We thus chose to explore these perceptions in a more detailed manner by analysing patterns in the data addressing their relationship with their birth mothers. This paper builds on the analysis of the responses to the semi-structured interviews.

3.1 | Research context and participants

This study was conducted in the autonomous region of Castilla y León in northern Spain. In December 2019, there were 984 children subject to Castilla y León child protection services, of which 475 were in kinship care and 509 were in non-kinship care (Servicios Sociales Castilla y León, 2020). Castilla y León child welfare services were asked permission to gain access to the participants. The regional Red Cross social workers who oversee child protection cases in collaboration with social workers in each province assisted with the recruitment of children and youths who had been in non-kinship foster care for over 2 years. Fourteen children and youths from four provinces in the autonomous region of Castilla y León decided to participate, comprising seven boys and girls aged 10–22 years. The mean age of the children was 15.42 years (SD = 3.76).

In Spain, most children in foster care placements are ethnically Spanish (del Valle et al., 2009), and of the 14 participants, 12 had an ethnic majority background. Only six participants were still in contact with their birth mothers at the time of the interviews. Among the eight who had no contact with their birth mothers, the lack of contact was the 'choice' of four children, as they felt the contact to be too much of a burden. For two of the eight children, the absence of contact was felt to be their mother's choice. For one participant, contact had been stopped without the participant knowing why, and one participant had never seen their mother since entering foster care. Eight participants had been in foster care for over 5 years and six for over 3 years. Five participants had experienced neglect, and three had

experienced physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. Of those eight, four participants' birth mothers had experienced drug addiction, alcoholism and/or mental health adversities. All participants had experienced neglect and/or abuse by their mothers prior to entering foster care. In the results section, all participants' names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality, and the participants' ages are presented in parenthesis. The study was reviewed by the University of Valladolid Ethics Committee.

3.2 | Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted between March and August 2021. The main question in the interview guide, 'What does your biological mother mean to you?', sought to elicit nuances in the significance that birth mothers have in the foster children's lives and the reasons for this. Other questions asked about the participants' past and present relationship experiences in relation to their mothers. The interviews took place at a location of the participant's choice, including the Red Cross Head office (n = 6), a university campus (n = 4), their foster care home (n = 2) or online via Zoom (n = 2), and each interview lasted 45–90 min, with an average of 60 min. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated from Spanish into English by the first author.

The presentation of the findings incorporates two analytical approaches. The first was a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aided by the ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software. This method was chosen because its structure follows procedural phases that are flexible and have the potential to meet the trustworthiness criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). We used an inductive approach, constantly moving back and forward between phases. We sought to understand the derived themes across the research data through regular discussions about the dataset as a whole until a consensus was reached. After familiarisation with the data, a number of subthemes describing the participants' experiences and views of their biological mothers were coded and subsequently developed into themes. Narrative analysis was then conducted to examine how the narrative constructions of these themes might differ depending on the participant's individual experiences and background. According to Cortazzi (2014), the application of narrative analysis is useful when considering how themes are used in a specific context. In the final analytical phase, the following three main themes relevant to the focus of this paper became apparent: (1) *The life-giver*, (2) *A lifelong commitment* and (3) '*A love I cannot understand*'.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | The life-giver

A common feature among the majority of the participants' narratives was to see the birth mother as the life-giver, whether they had contact or not. There were also differences in participants' use of

expressions to assimilate the term 'life-giver'. Most participants used expressions such as 'she gave me life' and 'she gave birth to me'. Most of the participants, particularly the boys, emphasised the life-giver role, although they did not have a close family tie with their mother nor included her in their nuclear family.

> I don't really want to see her, but for me she is very important because she gave life to me.
>
> (Filipe, 13).

> After all, she is the one who gave birth to me and who cared for me, even if it was only for a short time, but she cared for me [...] I don't want to be with them (my biological family) or know anything about them ...
>
> (Lucas, 14).

> She is a person that I am not very close to, I don't know much about her, but she is important because she is the one who gave me life.
>
> (Rodrigo, 15).

Although Filipe and Rodrigo said that not having contact was their mother's 'choice', they too perceived their mother as a life-giver. Pilar (10) also acknowledged her mother as her life-giver. However, unlike the participants above, she made a clear connection between her mother as life-giver and her mother's caring love for her by saying:

> She is the one who always supports me, the one who has given me life, the one who takes care of me, the one who loves me a lot, and no matter what happens, she won't let anyone hurt me and she will never leave me on my own.

Most participants who expressed gratitude for the life-giver found it difficult to elaborate on the matter. Despite attempts to elicit more detailed comments, it seems that the brevity of the responses signifies that these participants understood the term life-giver as so palpably obvious that a comprehensive explanation seemed unnecessary to them. Even so, some, whether they had contact or not, also expressed a justification for their mother's drug addiction or mental health problem situation when talking about her as the life-giver, such as Emma (14), who had no contact and said that both good and bad things come to mind when thinking of her mother:

> Good things because she has given me life, and bad things because she hasn't treated me very well, but it's not her fault.

Some participants did not explicitly express the life-giver gratitude perspective, and this mostly applied to the older participants. They believed that their view of their birth mother was triggered by negative experiences with her in the past. Emilia (21), who stopped contact with her mother, said that her mother meant nothing to her apart from her name, 'I love my name [which denotes freedom], [it] was the best thing she left me'. Referring to the name 'Freedom', she explained:

> I like to have the freedom to choose who I want to see, and when I want to see [them] ... because before I didn't have the freedom to choose. Now, I have the freedom to decide [on my own].

Carmen (22), who has contact with her mother, clearly maintained: 'To me, it's just another word; I mean, I have never had a real mother—or father'. Mateo (16) has not seen his mother since entering foster care. He said that nothing but sharing 'the same genes' connected him to his mother. Although acknowledging the study's small sample, boys and younger participants seemed, to a greater extent, to underscore their appreciation of their mother as a life-giver; whereas, older and mostly female participants expressed a more nuanced portrayal of their relationship with their mother (positive, negative or both) without limiting her to solely being a life-giver. Nevertheless, the idea of being given life provided participants with a sense of continued emotional connectedness with their birth mothers.

4.2 | A lifelong commitment

Several participants described how their relationship with their birth mother often required them to take responsibility for her. Female participants were more likely to express the role they played in meeting their mothers' wellbeing needs, and they also addressed the expectations made of them when their mothers did not act according to the societal norms of being good mothers. Notions of care, help and support were central to their narratives. Carmen (22) talked about these responsibilities, which began at an early age when her grandmother died and then continued through her adolescence.

> She had a really hard time, and I was always like her mother, supporting her and comforting her, but she didn't transmit that to me ... Whenever she had problems with men who mistreated and abused her, the one who stood up for her at the age of 12 ... [was] me.

Most of the female participants who had made their own decision to stop contact with the mother believed that they always acted 'like mothers' to their own mothers from an early age. María (13) explained that she was unwilling to have a relationship with her mother because she did things she should not have done:

> I realised a long time ago that it isn't worth it because, at the end of the day, I want to be with people who really love me and want to be with me, but not with my mother [...] I was like a mother to her, because I was always taking care of her.

The participants' sensemaking of their caring roles and responsibilities can be understood in terms of expectations that they placed on themselves from an early age, which continued as they got older, such as Isabel (21), who said:

> I know if I stop seeing my mother, if I stop talking to her, my mother will relapse. So, in a sense, I feel responsible for her.

The implication of past negative experiences did not undermine how participants felt about undertaking these obligations and responsibilities. As Olivia (15), who has contact with her mother, said: 'She is still my biological mother, and even if she hurts me, for me, she will continue to be my mother'. Several participants described how these responsibilities were not usually reciprocal. Emilia (21) said:

> I was six years old and took more care of her than she took care of me. I wanted her, my mother, to take care of me.

Emilia and others who had no contact with the mothers also felt that this responsibility was constituted in terms of expectations coming from other people, such as social workers, foster parents and others:

> I didn't want to see her, and I cried and clung to the walls, the doors—I mean, when a child does that, it's for a reason. They [social workers] would say: 'Relax, it's your mum.' I know she's my mum, but I don't want to see her. So, they would force me and drag me out the door with her, and my mum would take me away … they would say: 'She's your mother and you have to love her.'

Within the narrative of commitment, certain normative expectations were imposed upon the participants, emphasising that a child should not lose contact with their birth mother. Adults (both social workers and foster carers) held certain beliefs that structured the responses to what should be expected from the participants. Isabel (21) recalled being told by her foster parents, social workers and other professionals to always keep in contact with her birth mother:

> They've told me that you can't lose contact with her […] I want to have contact [with her] without feeling obliged. I want to have that contact without feeling like I have an obligation to her.

In a way, she shared a similar belief as the social workers and foster carers; however, she believed her mother's health would deteriorate if contact ceased. Not enjoying contact moments with her mother, Isabel said:

> I don't know if it's more like a daughter's obligation … I have to be careful because, at the end of the day, I know she's my mother.

4.3 | 'A love I cannot understand'

Participants also conveyed having a kind of love for their mothers, independently of having contact with her. However, bad past and present experiences made this love difficult to understand and articulate. Carmen (22) said that only people who have been in the same situation could understand what kind of love this is:

> I've talked to many people who are in foster care, and it's a love that we have for our mothers that we don't know why we have. If they ask us for help, we'll go even if we get two kicks in the ass, because that's the way it is. But we're going to be there … It's a feeling that is there. I've been asked many times and I don't know how to explain it. Only a person who has lived it with their mothers or with their family understands it. We don't know how to explain it to others, but we have it.

Isabel (21) also found it difficult to explain and revealed her ambivalent feelings by saying:

> I feel I would like to have a relationship with her beyond the responsibility that I have towards her. I would like to have more contact, even though I don't feel that. I don't know how to explain it, I mean, I do like to have contact, but I don't feel that I want it.

Filipe (13) also described feelings of ambivalence towards his mother that were linked to being repeatedly disappointed:

> I really don't want to see her, but still, she also means love, but less [compared to what I feel towards my foster parents]. I don't want to see her, because she looks like she's going to disappear again.

Filipe thus showed the ambivalence that is present in his life and his fear that contact will only result in him getting hurt. Several participants expressed a belief that they do love their mothers unconditionally, yet they do not understand this love because they, at the same time, feel neglected and uncared for. Emma (14), Eduardo (11) and others acknowledged that moving into foster care was a good thing, saying:

> I feel frustrated because I have my mother and I love her, but at the same time I'm happy because if this [moving into foster care] didn't happen, I wouldn't be in this family [the foster family]. At the end, it's been like a gift.
>
> (Emma).

Before, I had nothing, and now, I have almost every-thing. I now believe that I am surrounded by people … that I matter a lot to them.

(Eduardo).

Although missing her mother, Pilar (10) also said: 'I feel better this way than being with her'. On the contrary of not understanding the love applies to participants who felt forced to love their mothers without understanding why or how. Emilia (21) felt forced by her social workers, 'They told me many times: "You have to love her, she's your mum"'. She elaborated on how difficult it was to connect with her mother and how she tried to love her but never felt able to. During the interview, she questioned rhetorically: 'If my mum is not behaving well, why should I love her?' For many of the participants, the feeling of being forced to love was also pushed onto them by relatives, such as for Beltrán (18), who felt forced by his own biological family.

My biological family opposed the fact that I don't want anything to with my mother or know anything about her because my mother wasn't good [to me].

Overall, the findings presented above reveal mixed feelings embedded in how the foster children perceived their birth mother's role in their lives. Below, we discuss the implications of these findings in terms of gender, age, socio-cultural and political context, as well as practical implications for social work in child protection services.

5 | DISCUSSION

This article explores how birth mothers are perceived by children and youths in a long-term non-kinship foster care in Spain. Previous studies have shown that birth mothers often continue to play an important role in the children's lives after they have entered foster care (Baker et al., 2016; Skoglund et al., 2019). This was, to some extent, also the case in our study; however, the participants revealed complex and ambivalent thoughts when reflecting upon their relationships with their birth mothers. Despite addressing feelings with positive connotations, many participants had a difficult relationship with their mothers because of childhood experiences of abuse and neglect, disappointment and the need to provide care for their birth mother even after moving into foster care. In the following, we will discuss these findings and the implications they may have for child protection work.

Several participants talked about their birth mother as a life-giver. Notably, this view predominantly applied to younger children with very limited or no contact with their birth mother or when the absence of contact was the mother's choice. As such, this view appears to represent a form of symbolic significance for the children and is a way of expressing gratitude to their birth mother. Skoglund et al. (2019) found a tendency among young people in foster care to romanticise their birth mothers. This could be a possible rationale for the life-giver perspective; however, most of them did not feel a sense of connectedness or experience family relationships beyond the life-giver perspective.

Moreover, older participants expressed a more critical and complex understanding of their birth mother's role in their lives. Research also suggests that, when children are mature enough to have their own life, they seem to be more critical towards their birth parents, deliberating over whether to maintain or avoid contact with them (Andersson, 2018). These reflections, which were particularly noticeable among female participants with birth mother contact, were grounded in feelings of responsibility and the expectations imposed upon them by themselves and by others. Our findings therefore suggest gendered experiences of young people with regard to how they perceive their relationship with and their view of their mothers. These young girls generally experienced more expectations and responsibilities with regard to their birth mothers and tended to internalise the role of having responsibility for caregiving. More specifically, they highlighted moral obligations and care responsibilities in emotionally supporting their mother. These gender-specific experiences suggest that we must consider the role these young people have within the wider Spanish family and cultural constructions of what it means to be a woman. Moreno-Mínguez et al. (2017) argue that traditional gender stereotypes of womanhood are still present in Spain, in which being 'a good mother' is associated with caring for children and the family. The young girls seemed to embrace these teachings and expectations by considering themselves to be responsible for and having moral obligations towards their mother, more so than the male participants. Such expectations can also be seen in relation to Spain being a familialistic country. In familialised welfare regimes, the fulfilment of caring responsibilities for family members is first and foremost considered to be a family (and female) matter (Hantrais, 2004; Leithner, 2003; Nygren, White, & Ellingsen, 2018). If the mother has a limited family network and therefore limited support alternatives, caring expectations may be left to the older and particularly female child. As such, caring expectations may be related to socio-cultural factors, gender and age, and these may be intertwined.

Policies, legislation and regulations emphasise the importance of contact between children in out-of-home placement and their birth families, which is also a priority goal of the UNCRC (UNCRC, 1989 Article 9). This emphasis may have an impact on how social workers approach children in out-of-home care. However, policies (and practices) focusing on birth parent contact do not necessarily reflect what children feel (Morrison et al., 2011). Nevertheless, social workers have a crucial role in assisting and supporting young people in foster care to make sense of their experiences (Ellingsen et al., 2014), particularly when children find their relationship and contact with parents problematic. The findings from this study show that complex and ambivalent feelings may arise after out-of-home placements. For example, some felt love for their mother despite having bad experiences of her, whereas others felt forced to love their mother. Previous research has shown that children in foster care may have very good reasons to distance themselves from their parents (Skoglund et al., 2019), and forcing contact and expecting specific feelings from the children can add weight to these complexities. A paramount principle should be that

feelings of love cannot be forced—they must be experienced. It is therefore important for social workers to acknowledge that children may have different feelings towards their birth families. Furthermore, birth mothers (and other family members) also need support and follow-up to manage their situation and their expectations towards the child, and social workers should acknowledge the fluid nature of families and family relationships that change over time (Ellingsen, 2011; Morgan, 2011). Most children can reflect metacognitively upon their family relationships (Allen, 2008), and exploring children's perceptions of family and what family members mean to them can offer valuable insights that are important for child protection work. With a growing number of varied families and living arrangements, social workers might also benefit from reflecting critically upon their own and culturally taken-for-granted understandings of family. In doing so, listening to young people's experiences of family life and paying close attention to how they go about making sense of their family relationships in the context of foster care is crucial.

6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the present study contributes to social work research and foster care literature by shedding light on how children in long-term non-kinship foster care perceive their birth mothers, it nonetheless has several limitations that leave room for potential avenues for future research. First, our study describes the perspectives of a small group of children from the care system and the policies that govern protection services in Spain. Foster children in other contexts might describe their views on birth mothers differently, or new perspectives altogether may emerge in narratives put forth by younger children, LGBT children and children who are placed in foster care with same-sex families. Future research should explore these possibilities.

In addition, although some children had experienced at least one form of neglect and abuse from their mother, it is unclear to what extent this affects how birth mothers are perceived. Future research might explore whether the various types and severity of maltreatment affect how children perceive birth mothers. In addition, the number of participants in this study whose birth parents had experienced diverse adversities makes it difficult to say anything about the impact of these on children's relationships with and feelings towards their parents. Despite these limitations, this is an important issue that has hitherto been the subject of little research with regard to social work and foster care.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared for ethical reasons.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
This study was approved by the Valladolid University Ethics Committee and Castilla y León child protection authorities. All participants provided written and verbal informed consent before participation.

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