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What makes foster carers think about quitting? Recommendations for improved retention of foster carers

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Publication Details

Randle, M., Ernst, D., Leisch, F. & Dolnicar, S. (2017). What makes foster carers think about quitting? Recommendations for improved retention of foster carers. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22 (3), 1175-1186.

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Abstract

Ideation, or the formulation of ideas pertaining to a particular topic, is the precursor to individuals making significant life decisions. Many individuals think about foster caring long before they actually become carers and it stands to reason that in many cases carer discontinuation also follows a period of ideation. This being the case, it is possible that by monitoring ideation, interventions could be introduced to prevent placement disruptions occurring, particularly if the sources of dissatisfaction are known. Using a sample of 205 foster carers, a posteriori segmentation analysis identifies groups of carers dissatisfied with the same aspects of their role. One group is particularly dissatisfied with factors that are within the control of foster care agencies and also reports high levels of discontinuation ideation. Recommendations include that the individual support needs of carers be identified such that customised support can be offered, including boosting initial and ongoing training to manage expectations and ensure carers feel prepared for the role. Results also highlight the important role of caseworkers in making carers feel appreciated and taken seriously.

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What makes foster carers think about quitting?

Recommendations for improved retention of foster carers

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Acknowledgements: this study was funded by the Australian Research Council through its Linkage Scheme (LP0776569) and Discovery Scheme (DE120102003, DP110101347). This study is part of an ongoing program of research being conducted in collaboration with a number of Australian foster care agencies (CareSouth, CatholicCare Wollongong and William Campbell Foundation) and our academic collaborators Dr. Leonie Miller and Prof. Joseph Ciarrochi.

Abstract

Ideation, or the formulation of ideas pertaining to a particular topic, is the precursor to individuals making significant life decisions. Many individuals think about foster caring long before they actually become carers and it stands to reason that in many cases carer discontinuation also follows a period of ideation. This being the case, it is possible that by monitoring ideation, interventions could be introduced to prevent placement disruptions occurring, particularly if the sources of dissatisfaction are known. Using a sample of 205 foster carers, *a posteriori* segmentation analysis identifies groups of carers dissatisfied with the same aspects of their role. One group is particularly dissatisfied with factors that are within the control of foster care agencies and also reports high levels of discontinuation ideation. Recommendations include that the individual support needs of carers be identified such that customised support can be offered, including boosting initial and ongoing training to manage expectations and ensure carers feel prepared for the role. Results also highlight the important role of caseworkers in making carers feel appreciated and taken seriously.

Key words: foster carers, discontinuation ideation, satisfaction, retention, segmentation

Introduction

Children are placed in out-of-home care for a variety of reasons including abuse, neglect or other factors threatening their safety and well-being. In Australia, the number of children in out-of-home care is has reached 43,000, a rate of 8.1 children per 1,000 and an increase of 20 percent between 2010 and 2014 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). This upward trend is mirrored in other countries around the world including, for example England, with foster placements up nine percent between 2010-2015 (Zayed & Harker, 2015), the US, up five percent between 2012-2014 (Children's Bureau, 2015) and Ireland, up 15 percent between 2010-2013 (Department of Health, 2015).

In addition, the characteristics of foster children are changing with more instances of complex needs and longer periods of care required (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Wood, 2008). However, a decrease has also been reported in the ability and willingness of foster carers to care for children with special needs (Lauver, 2008). These factors, combined with declining numbers of foster carers, has resulted in the challenge of finding enough appropriately skilled foster carers being stated as a priority issue by governments across Australia (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Because of the difficulties associated with attracting sufficient foster carers, not only has the issue of new carer recruitment intensified but the problem of carer retention has also come to the fore. Greater retention reduces the time and money spent on carer recruitment, increases the skill level and experience of current carers, and increases placement stability and permanence for foster children (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2006; Rhodes *et al.*, 2001).

Commonly, placement disruptions are attributed to the emotional or behavioural problems of the foster child (James, 2004; Newton *et al.*, 2000). However, carer attrition also results in placement disruption or breakdown and other carer-related factors have been identified as contributors to placement disruption. These include stressful life events in the

months prior to the placement commencing, level of strain and stress experienced while looking after the foster child, and the carer's ability to contact caseworkers when required (Farmer *et al.*, 2005).

Placement disruptions have negative consequences for foster children (Andersson, 2009; Egelund & Vitus, 2009) who are likely to already have a background of instability and be vulnerable to further disruption. These negative consequences include lower levels of behavioural well-being (Rubin *et al.*, 2007), higher mental health service use (Rubin *et al.*, 2004) and reduced resilience and psychosocial development (Harden, 2004). Stability within a foster placement has been cited as critical for placement success (Newton *et al.*, 2000), both in terms of optimising the longer-term outcomes for the child and also for creating feelings of security and belonging for the child whilst in the placement (Randle, 2013).

Foster carer satisfaction

One factor found to be a key determinant of foster carer retention is their overall level of satisfaction with fostering (Denby *et al.*, 1999). Some studies focus on one specific aspect of the foster caring experience and assess the level of satisfaction with that aspect, for example Kirton *et al.* (2007) who focused on the payment received by foster carers. Others have taken a broader view of possible contributors to overall satisfaction. For example, Denby *et al.* (1999) examined factors associated with high foster caring satisfaction, which included feeling competent in the role, having a desire to care for children who need loving parents, not regretting their decision to become a foster carer and the caseworker sharing information and communicating their approval for a job done well. More recently, Whenan, Oxlad and Lushington (2009) investigated factors associated with foster carer well-being, satisfaction and intention to continue fostering. Univariate analysis found positive foster carer-child

relationships to be related to higher levels of satisfaction, and higher carer self-efficacy related to greater satisfaction and intention to continue fostering.

Foster care is a complex social arrangement with various stakeholders (e.g. foster children, foster carers, birth parents, foster care agencies) and other factors (e.g. training, financial assistance, caseworker support etc.) which can influence overall carer satisfaction. It may be that different combinations of factors leads to higher levels of satisfaction with fostering, and therefore greater intention to continue in the role. Denby *et al.* (1999) acknowledge this point and emphasise the importance of understanding the different contributors to foster carer satisfaction in order to minimise incidences of carer-initiated attrition.

A limitation of much of the prior research on foster carer satisfaction is that results are often reported at the aggregate level only, which can mask differences amongst foster carers in terms of their levels of satisfaction and the factors related to it. It has been acknowledged that satisfaction with foster caring is likely to be comprised of multiple components, and that strong dissatisfaction in particular areas may be more likely to result in otherwise capable foster carers choosing to discontinue in the role (Whenan *et al.*, 2009). However to this point there has been no attempt to examine this notion further to reveal which aspects of satisfaction are associated with higher and lower levels of carer retention and attrition.

Discontinuation ideation

Ideation, or the formulation of ideas or concepts pertaining to a particular topic (Oxford British and World English Dictionary, 2016), is typically a precursor to individuals making significant life decisions. Established models of behaviour change postulate that one of the earliest signs of the change process involves ideation, for example in their Transtheoretical Model of Change, Prochaska, Redding and Evers (2008) describe this as the

“Contemplation” stage. Consequently, ideation is commonly measured to identify the likelihood of individuals making such decisions before they happen. One of the most well-known ideation measures relates to suicide ideation, used to predict the likelihood of attempted suicide amongst individuals with mental illness (Joe & Niedermeier, 2008). Such studies have demonstrated strong links between suicide ideation and other emotional and mental characteristics such as high levels of depression and negative life stress (Ang & Huan, 2006; Hovey, 2000).

The relevance of ideation for foster caring has been shown in relation to becoming a foster carer, with 79% of people who request information about becoming a carer reporting they had been thinking about it for more than 12 months (Randle *et al.*, 2010). In relation to foster carer discontinuation, factors such as strain and stress have also been significantly associated with the frequency of foster carers’ thoughts about discontinuation (Wilson *et al.*, 2000) and higher rates of placement disruption (Farmer *et al.*, 2005). More recently, in a Canadian study Rodger *et al.* (2006) found that foster carers’ likelihood of “consideration of quitting” was related to having negative impacts of red tape, having to deal with a child’s difficult behaviour and experiencing conflict with child support workers. Also in Canada, Marcellus (2010) found that increased stressors and imbalanced expectations may increase the likelihood of discontinuation.

Whilst some research has investigated thoughts relating to continuation, usually intention to continue (Hendrix & Ford, 2003; Whenan *et al.*, 2009), few have explicitly considered the relationship between carer satisfaction and discontinuation ideation. If we accept that a foster carer’s decision to quit follows a period of ideation, then it is possible that by effectively measuring and monitoring ideation, interventions could be introduced to prevent placement disruption.

Research questions

The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there groups of foster carers who are similar in terms of their level of satisfaction with different aspects of foster caring?
2. Are these groups distinctive in terms of (a) the training they receive; (b) the support they receive; (c) their perceptions of the foster care system; and (d) their perceptions of the child's behaviour?
3. Are levels of satisfaction with different aspects of foster caring associated with increased thoughts about discontinuation?

Method

Data collection

A purposive, self-selection sampling strategy was employed for this study. Between May 2011 and February 2012 three collaborating foster care organisations invited all of their foster carers to participate. One hundred and fourteen foster carers completed the questionnaire, which was sufficient to perform basic analysis but insufficient to conduct the *a posteriori* segmentation analysis presented here. Therefore, in order to increase the sample size to enable more sophisticated analysis, between November 2012 and January 2013 the purposive sampling strategy was expanded to include the email distribution list of the Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA). Invitations to participate were distributed with the AFCA newsletter and interested foster carers contacted the researchers directly to have the survey sent to them as either an email link or a paper questionnaire. The result of this second phase of data collection was an additional 91 participants, taking the total sample size to 205. Names and email addresses of participants were recorded to ensure carers did not complete the questionnaire more than once. While this sampling strategy was considered most

appropriate in this instance it is acknowledged that a disadvantage of this technique is the potential for self-selection bias. Various factors that bias foster carer samples have previously been identified, including type of local authority, carer ethnicity, whether they have other paid employment and whether they are an active or dormant carer (Wilson *et al.*, 2000).

The survey included questions about carers' personal background and characteristics and experience of foster caring. It took around 50 minutes to complete and participants received a gift voucher in appreciation of their time. The data collection procedure was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Sample

Of the 205 foster carers, 133 were female (65%) and 72 were male (35%). Eleven percent were aged 18-35, 22% were 36-45, 44% were 46-55 and 22% were 56 or older. Over one third (36%) worked full-time while around one quarter (26%) worked part-time or casually. Thirty-nine percent had a university qualification and the sample included carers from a mix of metropolitan, regional and rural areas (38%, 43% and 19% respectively).

Just over one quarter (26%) had been fostering for between one month and two years, another quarter (25%) for 2-5 years, another quarter (25%) for 5-10 years, and just under one quarter for more than 10 years (24%). Participants represented over 28 different government and non-government foster care agencies and included carers who had provided all types of foster care. Forty-eight percent had provided emergency care, 61% had provided respite care, 54% had provided short-term care and 81% had provided long-term care (percentages do not add to 100 because carers may have provided more than one type of care). Thirty-six percent of the sample had considered becoming a foster carer for more than 12 months prior to having a child placed with them. This sample of foster carers shows similarities with other studies of foster carer discontinuation in the UK and Canada (e.g. Rodger *et al.*, 2006; Wilson *et al.*,

2000), such as a concentration in the middle age groupings (between around 35-55) and a dominance of the major ethnic group (in this case individuals identifying primarily as Australian rather than other cultural backgrounds).

Measures

Satisfaction with foster caring. Participants were presented with 16 statements relating to foster caring and indicated how satisfied they were with each on a five-point scale from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”. Some items were adapted from the Satisfaction with Foster Parenting Inventory developed by Leckies *et al.* (in Stockdale *et al.*, 1997).

Overall satisfaction with foster caring. Participants indicated their overall satisfaction on a five-point scale from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”.

Discontinuation ideation. The foster carer discontinuation ideation scale was based on the Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (Reynolds, 1987). Participants indicated how often they had experienced each of six types of discontinuation thoughts in the past four months.

Training. Carers were asked (i) which types of training they completed before becoming a carer; (ii) how much training was available since becoming a carer; (iii) the training they would have liked to have before becoming a carer; and (iv) which training opportunities were provided by the agency in the past four months.

Support. Participants were asked to rate (i) the perceived quality of their caseworker from “excellent” to “very poor”; (ii) the frequency of contact with their agency from “less than

once a month” to “almost every day”; and (iii) the amount of agency support received from “a lot less than needed” to “a lot more than needed”.

System factors. Participants rated (i) their understanding of their rights and responsibilities as a foster carer on a five point scale from “very poor” to “very good”; and (ii) satisfaction with these rights and responsibilities from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied”. Participants could also suggest improvements to the foster care system in an open-ended text field.

Perceived child behavioural and emotional issues. Goodman’s Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (1997) was used which includes 25 statements about children’s behaviour. Items are rated on a three-point scale labelled “not true”, “somewhat true” and “certainly true”.

Analysis

Data was analysed using a finite mixture model for binomial data with concomitant variables (Wedel, 2002). This model was used because it allows the inclusion of both primary and secondary grouping variables (e.g. Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). The sample included 75 individual foster carers and 65 couples (total 205). Accepting that coupled partners do not represent independent observations, the extent to which they are conditionally independent based on segment membership was examined (the finite mixture model assumes conditional independence rather than independence over all observations). This assumption was tested in permutation tests, where the grouping imposed by couples was randomly shuffled within each segment in 100 replications. For each replication the degree of agreement between couples was computed using the mean absolute difference in answer categories. Comparing the average agreement between couples in the observed dataset against the simulated distribution

of agreement scores it is revealed that couples within the same segment still tend to answer in a similar way (i.e. the observed agreement between couples was greater than the agreement between randomly coupled respondents in more than 95% of simulated cases). Thus, the assumption of conditional independence does not hold in respect to answers made by couples.

While this is acknowledged as a limitation, retaining this model was preferred over possibly increasing the model complexity by taking extra precautions to accommodate this dependence structure. Also, this model is only used to determine homogenous groups of respondents and as cluster analysis is always exploratory in nature this trade-off seemed reasonable.

A binary ideation score was used as the concomitant variable in the model. Scores of exactly zero indicated that respondents had selected “not at all” for all six ideation items (the “no ideation” group) versus any score larger than zero which indicated that respondents had thought about at least one of the ideation items at least once in the past four months (the “ideation” group). The decision to dichotomise this variable was based on both conceptual and practical reasons. First, if a foster carer shows even the slightest signs of ideation this would indicate a problem that could quickly develop into a major issue and lead to placement breakdown. Second, the distribution of ideation scores was skewed with most respondents having a score of zero or one and scores greater than one being rare (roughly a 50/50 distribution between zero and one or greater). This means that, conceptually, foster carers split quite clearly into those who do not think about discontinuing at all and those who do so in different degrees. This is numerically better reflected by assigning a value of zero to all foster carers who have not thought about discontinuing and assigning a value of one to all foster carers who have. A numerical representation accounting for responses to all six ideation items (with possible values being zero to six) would reduce the distance between those carers who do not think at all about discontinuing and those who agree with one or two ideation

items. Dichotomising the concomitant variable also has the positive statistical side-effect of reducing the number of parameters which need to be estimated. Fewer parameters simplify the model without losing a significant amount of information when compared to treating the score as ordinal.

Note that there is no optimal solution for the problem of selecting the best number of segments for any given data set. A wide range of criteria exist that can be used to guide the choice of the number of segments (Dimitriadou *et al.*, 2002). But these criteria are only useful if the data which is being analysed is actually structured. If true density clusters exist in the data, most of the proposed criteria will offer a reasonable estimate of how many market segments should be constructed. When working with empirical data sets, however, such clear density structure is rarely present. Dolnicar and Leisch (2010) therefore conceptually differentiate between three kinds of market segmentation: (i) natural segmentation, when true segments exist; (ii) reproducible segmentation, when true segments do not exist but the data has some other structure that helps the analyst repeatedly arrive at the same segmentation solution, and (iii) constructive clustering, where data is unstructured. It is only in the case of natural segmentation that the correct number of segments can easily be determined. In the case of reproducible segmentation the number of segments which have the highest reproducibility can be chosen. When conducting constructive clustering it is up to the user to inspect a range of solutions and decide which of them is most useful. The latter approach had to be taken in this study, with the four segment solution chosen because it could be interpreted best. It is this solution that is discussed throughout the remainder of this study.

To identify differences in variables that were not used for segmentation, Chi-square tests for independence of columns and rows of a contingency table (nominal and ordinal background variables) and Kruskal Wallis rank sum tests for comparison of group medians (metric background variables) were used. Fisher's exact test (Fisher, 1970; Mehta & Patel,

1986) was used for tables with low frequency counts. Missing data in the background variables was handled by case-wise deletion. The resulting *p*-values were corrected for multiple testing by controlling the false discovery rate (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995).

As a sizeable portion of the respondents in the sample were couples, this would likely violate the assumption of independent observations, upon which above mentioned statistical tests are based. To correct for this problem a simulation study was conducted where one respondent from each couple was randomly chosen. On this subsample all statistical tests were repeated including the correction for multiple testing. After repeating this procedure 1000 times to eliminate random sampling bias, the percentage of simulation replications where each background variable was significant was computed. As a conservative estimate, only variables which were significant both in the original sample and in at least 93% of simulations containing only one partner from each couple in each replication are reported.

Results

Segmentation: foster carer satisfaction

A posteriori (Mazanec & Strasser, 2000) or data-driven (Dolnicar, 2004) segmentation was conducted to identify whether there are groups of foster carers who share common patterns of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with foster caring. Figure 1 shows the four segment solution. The horizontal bars represent item means for level of satisfaction with each aspect of foster caring as reported by each segment. The dots indicate the average level of satisfaction for that aspect of foster caring as reported by the entire sample.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In addition, the levels of ideation and overall satisfaction reported by each segment were calculated and are provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

As can be seen in Figure 1, carers in segment 1 are around average in terms of satisfaction with agency and caseworker support, however they are relatively dissatisfied with the payment they receive for foster caring. They are also less satisfied than average with the information received about the child, their rights as foster carers and their involvement in planning for the child's future. Just over half of this segment (53%) thought about discontinuing foster caring in the past four months and 86% reported being satisfied or very satisfied in their role as carer. Carers in segment 2 were the most satisfied, reporting higher than average satisfaction with all aspects of foster caring. This high satisfaction is reflected in the fact that virtually no-one in this segment thought about discontinuing in the past four months (only 4%) and 96% were very satisfied with their role.

Carers in segment 3 were around average in terms of satisfaction with their relationship with their foster child and confidence as a foster carer. However they were far less satisfied than other segments for factors related to the foster care agency – namely their relationship with the agency, support from caseworkers and their ability to reach caseworkers when required. Significantly, almost two thirds of this segment (64%) thought about discontinuing foster caring in the past four months, representing the highest rate of discontinuation ideation of any of the segments. In addition, more than one third were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied in their role as foster carers, which was significantly higher than the other three segments. Carers in segment 4 were around average in terms of satisfaction with most aspects of foster caring, but higher than average in satisfaction with their agency and caseworker, and inclusion in planning for the needs of their foster child. Just under half of this segment thought about discontinuing in the past four months (47%), and just over 90% were satisfied or very satisfied in their role.

A key insight from this analysis is the fact that the segment with the highest levels of discontinuation ideation (segment 3) is also characterised by the lowest levels of satisfaction

with factors related to the foster care agency. This finding is significant because, unlike other factors associated with foster placements (e.g. characteristics of the child and/or birth family), these are factors over which policy makers and agencies have some control. It may be the case that systematic changes to the support and conditions offered by foster care agencies, which influence levels of satisfaction within this segment, may also reduce ideation about discontinuing and result in higher rates of foster carer retention. Therefore, the next section of this paper focusses on the characteristics of segment 3, with the aim of understanding the changes which might be implemented in order to achieve higher levels of satisfaction and reduce discontinuation ideation. Note that many other differences between segments could be discussed in detail, but given that the key focus of this study is to discover patterns which lead to foster care breakdowns, segment 3 is of particular interest.

Factors associated with discontinuation ideation

To better understand foster carers experiencing higher levels of discontinuation ideation (segment 3) background variables were explored. Table 2 summarises the significant differences identified when comparing segment 3 and the other three segments combined. Differences at the 95% level are reported, while correcting for multiple tests by controlling the false discovery rate (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995).

Insert Table 2 about here

When compared with the other groups, segment 3 was significantly different in three key areas: (i) levels of training; (ii) support received; and (iii) perceptions of the foster care system.

Training. Carers in segment 3 were more likely to have had no training prior to becoming foster carers which related to the supports available to foster carers and the importance of self-

care (41% compared to 7%). They were also more likely to feel that they did not receive enough training before becoming foster carers (41% versus 16%) and report that their agency had not provided any training in the past four months (36% versus 78%).

Support. Members of segment 3 reported receiving a lot less support than needed in a range of areas, including training opportunities provided (62% compared with 7%), support from caseworkers (67% compared with 2%), number caseworker visits (46% compared with 4%) and overall agency support (79% compared with 4%). Regarding caseworkers, carers in segment 3 were more likely to describe the quality of caseworkers as average (44% versus 19%), poor (28% versus 2%) or very poor (23% versus 1%). They also reported very infrequent contact with caseworkers, in terms of being called less than once a month (77% compared to 22%).

The foster care system. Members of segment 3 were more likely to describe their understanding of their rights as foster carers as “very poor” (23% compared to 2%). In addition, they were less satisfied with their rights and responsibilities as carers, with the proportion indicating they were “very dissatisfied” being 28% (compared to 5%) and 10% (compared to 1%) respectively.

Suggested improvements: perspectives from segment 3

Participants were given the opportunity to provide qualitative feedback regarding training and other improvements to the foster care system. Twenty-four members of segment 3 (62%) provided comments relating to training, whilst 39 members of the segment (100%) offered other suggestions for improvement. Qualitative comments were analysed using the content analysis procedure prescribed by the Analytic Qualitative Research method (Rossiter,

2011), which involves interpreting the first order data (individual comments) into higher order concepts or themes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the voluntary comments provided by segment 3 aligned with the three general areas in which they were more dissatisfied than other segments: training, support and the foster care system. Therefore, the comments are presented within these three themes to provide insight into how agencies might increase satisfaction with each of these areas.

Improved training and preparation

Emotions. Segment 3 suggested that training relating to the emotional aspects of being a foster carer would have been very beneficial. Most training relates to dealing with the foster child, however carers report that a particularly challenging aspect of their role was dealing with the emotions of becoming attached to a child in the knowledge that they could be removed at any time.

How to handle the emotional issues of being a carer, caring for children who are not yours, wanting to love them dearly but being frightened of getting hurt!

A similar theme is the lack of clarity regarding carer roles. Carers suggested benefits of training about likely public reactions to them as carers and their perceived relationship with the foster child.

How to cope with others' perceptions of you as a foster carer (meaning not the birth mother)...

Managing expectations. Numerous comments related to the unrealistic expectations of carers, with suggestions regarding how these might be managed more effectively. This could involve

more interaction with existing carers who can give personal recounts of the types of situations carers might encounter.

I would have enjoyed hearing some testimonies of other carer's experiences and things they would recommend.

Understanding the system. The complexity of the foster care system was reflected in the comments provided. Many foster carers would like to have been better informed about their rights and responsibilities and more knowledgeable about the support services available.

What supports are available to assist with care, what entitlements are available for children.

Dealing with allegations. The need for knowledge and training was particularly relevant in instances where allegations are made towards carers. More information could be provided to raise awareness that this may happen and inform carers of what to do if allegations are made.

There was no information given [...] [about] the possibility of being falsely accused of abuse.

Better support

Improve quality of social workers. Carers were critical of social workers which is consistent with low levels of satisfaction identified in the segmentation analysis. In particular, they cite high rates of turnover, lack of skills and experience and lack of appropriate personal characteristics as contributing to the perceived low quality.

[Foster care agency] workers need more professional training, they don't know how to support carers or understand the complexities of children in care

More listening to foster carers. Some of the most passionate and detailed comments related to carers' perceived treatment by others. They felt ignored when it comes to the interests of the child and planning for their future. Typically, they feel as if agency and government staff make decisions without consulting them when they feel they know the children best.

More respect given to carers' opinions, acknowledgement that foster carers know the children better than department workers.

Carers also felt ignored in relation to their own needs, and often treated as peripheral to the foster placement rather than a key player. These issues contribute to carers feeling unappreciated.

Foster carers should feel that they are part of a team working for the best interests of the child, not a paid babysitter whose opinion is of no consequence.

Improvements to foster care system

Professionalisation of foster care. Carers explained the struggles encountered in providing care to high needs children, which often precludes them from obtaining other paid employment. They called for the professionalisation of foster caring in order to acknowledge the specialised and highly skilled nature of their role and also to alleviate more practical concerns such as the ability to contribute to superannuation and secure their financial future.

Formalising (accrediting) foster carer training to increase the professionalism amongst carers and to ensure carers and the general population realise the importance and responsibility of the role of carer.

Increased financial assistance. Some carers highlighted the financial strain of foster caring, especially in instances where children have high medical and social needs and the carers want to provide high levels of care for the children.

We are out of pocket financially every week while caring for a foster child. I strongly believe this to be an inadequacy of the system.

Discussion and implications

This study investigated the association between foster carer dissatisfaction and thoughts of discontinuation with a view to informing improvements to the foster care system. Based on responses from 205 foster carers a concomitant variable finite mixture model was computed which revealed four groups of carers who share satisfaction patterns. In so doing, this study addresses the need highlighted by Denby *et al.* (1999) to better understand the factors contributing to foster carer satisfaction with a view to minimising carer-instigated attrition. One segment, containing one fifth of the sample, was particularly interesting because its dissatisfaction did not relate primarily to factors which are difficult to change, such as their relationship with the child or their confidence as a foster carer. Rather, dissatisfaction primarily related to the agency managing the placement and other factors such as their rights and feeling as though they are part of the planning process for the child. These results support earlier studies which identified agency-related factors, such as caseworker support and recognition by the agency, as important contributors to foster carer satisfaction (Denby *et al.*, 1999). These factors are to some degree within the control of the foster care agency and could therefore potentially be improved to reduce discontinuation ideation and increase carer retention. Two thirds of carers in this segment also reported thinking about discontinuing fostering, which was the highest level of discontinuation ideation for any of the segments identified.

Practically, this study offers insights into the profile of carers most likely to be thinking about discontinuing in their role, and the program-related changes likely to increase satisfaction and reduce such thoughts. A prominent theme emerging from this study is dissatisfied carers' perceptions of a lack of caseworker and agency support, a finding which again echoes previous studies identifying a lack of caseworker support as a key source of dissatisfaction and strain (Fisher *et al.*, 2000; Sinclair *et al.*, 2004; Triseliotis *et al.*, 2000; Triseliotis *et al.*, 1998). Lack of caseworker support has also been identified as a key predictor of intention to discontinue fostering (Sinclair *et al.*, 2004). Depending on the particular skills and experience of the foster carer, and the needs of the child placed with them, some carers may require higher levels of support than others. Agencies need to closely monitor the needs of individual carers so greater support can be provided if required. Importantly, carer needs can vary at different times during a placement which further emphasises the need for constant monitoring. While the primary focus of many foster care organisations is on the needs of the foster child, it is also important to recognise the needs of carers to identify individuals who may be increasingly dissatisfied and experiencing higher levels of discontinuation ideation. The importance of support for this group is perhaps amplified by their perception that their foster children are exhibiting behavioural problems, which suggests they may not be coping well with the individual needs of that child and have an increased need for support.

Results also suggest agencies should think more broadly about the types of support offered, and make use of new technological platforms. Traditionally, support has taken the form of face-to-face or phone-based contact with agency staff. However, there is now scope to offer modernised forms of support such as online communities, feedback forums and discussion groups. These online mediums could provide effective platforms for foster carers to support each other, which is known to be a highly valuable source of support (Sinclair *et al.*, 2004) particularly in relation to concerns regarding children's behaviour (Octoman &

McLean, 2014). The appropriate combination of support channels can only be identified by asking foster carers: (i) how satisfied they are with the support they currently receive; (ii) reasons for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction; and (iii) what supports they would most value and use. This approach has two advantages: first, it enables the agency to tailor the support services offered to its specific foster carer community; and second, it sends a clear message to carers that the agency values their opinions, will listen and take them seriously.

This leads to a related theme of this study, which is that foster carers who think about discontinuation are also likely to feel they are not listened to or taken seriously. This was evidenced by the fact that, when given the opportunity, all members of segment three offered suggestions for improvement in the open-ended questions. While most agencies have some mechanisms for foster carer feedback, these need to be carefully considered in light of the fact that dissatisfied carers are also more likely to have concerns about the quality of their caseworker. Alternative feedback channels which avoid (i) reliance on one staff member to convey carers' concerns; or (ii) public disclosure of these concerns, are required to ensure carers feel they can communicate issues effectively. Such feedback mechanisms would also allow agencies to understand whether some problems are systematic and therefore require changes to processes more broadly.

Results highlight the importance of carer training, an issue which has previously been identified as important for foster carer satisfaction and retention (Murray *et al.*, 2011; Triseliotis *et al.*, 2000) and a key predictor of intention to discontinue fostering (Sinclair *et al.*, 2004). The importance of training and preparation of carers also supports prior findings that higher foster carer self-efficacy is associated with greater foster carer satisfaction (Whenan *et al.*, 2009). In reality, training programs are often determined by available agency resources; however results suggest that adequately preparing foster carers for the challenges they may encounter is associated with the likelihood of them having thoughts of

discontinuation. Findings support the argument that agency funding applications should include provision for comprehensive training programs customised for each agency's community of carers. Results also emphasise the importance of the personal characteristics of caseworkers in facilitating successful placements from the carer's perspective. The importance of this person, as carers' primary point of contact, should be considered by agencies in terms of caseworker recruitment strategies and screening criteria. The importance of agency staff more generally in supporting carers has also been emphasised as another factor important for foster carer retention (Chamberlain *et al.*, 1992) .

An additional finding relevant for policy makers and agencies is the suggestion from foster carers that their role be considered as a profession rather than volunteering. While this represents a major paradigm shift in the way foster carers are viewed in many countries around the world, it could potentially significantly impact carer retention as it would overcome a number of the issues raised by carers here. These include a lack of recognition of the skills required to be a good foster carer; the out-of-pocket expenses associated with foster caring and the impact of this on other members of the fostering household; and the practical implications of choosing foster caring rather than paid employment, including the lack of superannuation.

From a policy perspective, this study provides evidence of the value of improved foster carer training and support to increase satisfaction and decrease discontinuation ideation. In Australia, foster care agencies are funded per-placement by government. This funding structure needs to include capacity to improve training and support for carers, as a way of increasing the quality of care provided by minimising carer turnover. Funding allocated to increased training and support would be somewhat offset by the reduced cost of new carer recruitment and training, which would be lower due to reduced turnover of existing carers.

A limitation of this study is that the sample used may be biased toward more satisfied foster carers who tend to be more willing to voluntarily participate in studies about foster care. Furthermore, the present study is cross-sectional in nature and future research should conduct similar investigations longitudinally in order to increase understanding of how levels of satisfaction and discontinuation ideation change over time, and the triggers that lead to placement disruptions.

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