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An Exploration of Foster Carers' Identity in the Caregiving Role: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Applied Social Studies in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2023

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Declaration

I, Maria Daniels, hereby declare that this thesis, which I am submitting in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is my own work and has not been submitted for another degree at either University College Cork or elsewhere.

Signed:  Date: 22/12/2023

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the life experiences that influenced foster carers to take on the role of fostering. The aim was to develop a more in-depth understanding of how their experiences shaped their identity in the caregiving role and their developing relationships with the children in their care. A qualitative approach was adopted guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Seven foster families were recruited and data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using IPA. Four superordinate themes emerged from the interpretative analysis. The first theme *Complex Family Dynamics* identified foster carers' reasons for taking on the role of fostering were deeply personal and related to their own subjective experiences. The second theme *Conflicting Identities* captured their feelings around the assessment process. The third theme *Developing Identities* related to their emerging identities as foster carers and developing relationships with the children in their care. The fourth theme *Enactment of the Role* outlined their approach to the task of fostering and relationships with professionals.

Narrative identity was the lens used to analyse the new findings related to the interchange between what foster carers bring to the role and the requirements of the system. Their experiences in the role emerged as contextual and deeply personal. Their identity as foster carers was shaped by their subjective experiences and this identity was different to the one imposed on them as 'ordinary' families who enter a system and are simultaneously required to adhere to statutory requirements and professionals expectations. The analysis of this research focused on foster carers' interpretation of their role and the implications for them, the children in their care and the system that recruits and supports them. The main conclusions are presented and lead to a number of recommendations for social work practice, support and training for foster carers, policy implications and future research. Underpinning these recommendations is an emphasis on the importance of considering foster carers' experiences through their lenses. The findings suggest further exploration of how foster carers are assessed in Ireland is needed to create a more authentic space for

reflection for both foster carers and social workers. An examination of what foster carers bring to the role from their unique perspectives would also give them a sense of self in the care they provide and build a foundation for future learning.

Chapter 1 – Background and Outline of the Thesis

Introduction to the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore, from the perspectives of foster carers, the life experiences that influenced them to take on the task of fostering and how their experiences have shaped their identity in the caregiving role. This research concentrates on the experiences of general foster carers who have a fundamental yet ambiguous role in society. They are not biologically related to the children they care for nor are they legally empowered as parents. However, they provide a family environment within their own homes for children who cannot live with their birth parents (Baker et al, 2016). Therefore, they play a pivotal role in the lives of children in care and represent a key determinant in child outcomes (Blythe et al, 2014). Providing quality care environments is in no small part reliant on foster carers who are highly suited to the role and who have the skill base and ability to provide nurturing environments, giving children the opportunity to reach their full potential (Randle et al, 2014). Thus, foster families comprise a unique population in society that experience many complexities (Richardson and Futris, 2019).

In Ireland, foster care is the placement of choice by the child welfare system and the service provision is provided by the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) or by non-statutory, voluntary or private fostering agencies (TUSLA Publications, 2014; Gilligan, 2019). The Child and Family Agency is committed to the principle that a family-based setting affords the best environment for raising children and defines foster care as '*a full-time or part-time substitute care of children outside their own home by people other than their biological or adoptive parents or legal guardians'* (TUSLA Publications, 2014: 85, TUSLA Publications, 2022). The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 defines a foster carer as a '*person other than a relative of a child who is taking care of the child on behalf of a*

health board[1] *in accordance with these Regulations and 'foster parents' and 'foster care' shall be construed accordingly'* (Department of Health, 1995: 3). Therefore, foster carers are 'ordinary' families who decide to share their homes and lives with children who need alternative care. Foster care is considered an alternative way of enacting family and a diverse activity which varies widely as families of different culture, composition and commitment deliver care to children (Suter et al, 2014; Sinclair et al, 2004). Similarly, the composition of family is unique in Ireland in that the socio-historical understanding of family is shaped by the influence of the Catholic Church and enshrined in the Constitution of Ireland 1937 (Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937).

The system of alternative care is built on the premise that admission to care for a child is a last resort and is only pursued when all efforts to keep children and their parents together are exhausted (O' Brien and Palmer, 2016). Within the care system foster carers provide safety and stability for children who often have complex background histories, trauma experiences and face difficult family circumstances such as poverty, neglect, and abuse (Nelson and Horstman, 2017). A foster family is often the first safe space a child experiences after they have been removed from their birth family. When foster carers provide consistent routine, demonstrate flexibility and manage complex behaviours, this capacity has been linked to placement stability and stronger outcomes for the children in their care (Miller et al, 2019; Rock et al, 2015). Stable foster care placements also give children continuity of care which is fundamental to securing better outcomes for them in their childhood and into adulthood (MacDonald and Gillespie, 2023). However, caring for children in foster care can often be intense as their needs are complex. They must live with the reasons their birth family were unable to provide a safe environment and understand that as fostered children they belong to two families (Suter et al, 2014). This is because they live apart from their birth

[1] In 2005 Health Boards were replaced by the Health Service Executive and in January 2014 TUSLA – the Child and Family Agency was established under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (TUSLA Publications, 2014). The role of the Child and Family Agency will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis.

parents which interrupts the development of attachment and sense of belonging to their biological family, while they must also form new relationships with their foster carers (Steenbakkers et al, 2019). Therefore, they are at elevated risk for disruptions in key areas of child development (Leve et al, 2012) and they are more likely to have developmental deficits in emotional processing and problem solving (Miller et al, 2019).

According to Schofield and Beek (2005) children in care, across a variety of age ranges, tend to be wary, distrustful, and controlling when they enter foster placements. They have complex needs and require from their foster carers many of the qualities that would be better described as providing a secure base in infancy (Schofield and Beek, 2005). Thus, foster care can be a valuable opportunity for nurturing placements which increases the likelihood of children developing secure attachments (Ciarrochi et al, 2012). In that sense, foster carers often experience high levels of satisfaction in the care they provide (Randle et al, 2018). Foster carers are also a vulnerable group who experience high levels of anxiety and frustration in the role (Harding et al, 2018). This frustration can be linked to their understanding of the task of fostering and their approach to caregiving can, therefore, serve as a protective or risk factor for the development of behavioural difficulties in children depending on their approach when children are placed with them (Chamberlain, 1996; Dubois-Comtois et al, 2015). Given that there are identified stressors and challenges in the role for foster carers, becoming a foster family is a significant life decision and many individuals think about fostering long before they actually become foster carers (Randle et al, 2017).

At the end of 2022 there were 5755 children in care in Ireland and 89% of them were in foster care. During the same period there were 3967 approved general foster carers with 599 of these families fostering with private providers. In their annual report TUSLA stated the recruitment of foster carers was a significant challenge (TUSLA Publications, 2022). Further statistics note at the end of 2022 there were 13% of general foster carers without an

allocated link social worker. However, a link social worker is required for all foster families under Section 15 of the National Standards for Foster Care (2003) which states '*approved foster carers are supervised by a professionally qualified social worker. This person, known as the link worker, ensures that foster carers have access to the information, advice and professional support necessary to enable them to provide high quality care'* (Department of Health and Children, 2003: 35). A link social worker is an essential component in foster carers' ongoing training and development. Therefore, if they do not have an allocated link social worker, they are not given the opportunity to attend supervision to reflect on the care they provide and, arguably, they will not have targeted training to meet their needs even if the annual training schedule is provided to them. This is mirrored in the opinion of Kaasboll et al (2019) who observe it is important to understand foster carers' needs so that training matches their needs for competence. Furthermore, Murray et al (2011) discuss how foster carers endure a high burden of care and consequently need support and training (this will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis).

Although research on foster care is vast, there is limited research on foster carers' subjective interpretation of the care they provide (Picken et al, 2011). This seems like an oversight considering the experiences of a child in placement is likely to depend on the foster carers' emotional wellbeing (Simons and Johnson, 1996). Every member of a household will affect, and be affected by, a child in foster care which highlights the complexities of the task for all concerned (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). Similarly, there is a dearth of literature capturing the experiences of foster carers in Ireland which seems remiss considering that foster care has now become the dominant form of State care for children who cannot live with their birth parents. Gilligan (2019) notes that there is a limited body of Irish research on foster care even though the actors who fulfil the role can bring us closer to the reality of the meaning of caregiving through their lived experiences. Thus, this research plans to address that knowledge and methodological gap by undertaking an in-depth analysis of foster carers'

reasons for taking on the role of fostering to understand how they contextualise the role within their experiences over the life course.

Rationale for the Research

My decision to undertake this research was prompted by my experience as a social work practitioner in a Fostering Department where I spent twenty years recruiting, assessing, training and supporting foster carers in their role. During that time, I often reflected on the challenges that were presented to me in day-to-day practice. This was especially when concerns were raised by other professionals about the approach a foster carer was taking with a child in their care. Usually in these circumstances, the children had developed strong relationships with members of their foster family, but there were underlying and unresolved concerns regarding a foster carer's attitude towards the child's behaviour, facilitating birth family contact, social work involvement or therapeutic intervention. I often pondered the concerns, but after discussing them with the foster carers realised the approach they were taking to the care they provided was more complex than it presented from the outside looking in. Mirroring the research by Hannah and Woolgar (2018) on the high levels of stress foster carers experience in the role, I observed that although their circumstances were often stressful, they nonetheless wanted the children to remain in their care and the children expressed a wish to remain with their foster family.

Jacobsen et al (2018) describe foster carers' emotional investment in the children in their care as a willingness to become committed to the child and being aware of their influence on the child's development. In my experience, this was not always the case as there were times the foster carers' values, attitudes or beliefs were in stark contrast to the child's background history and the child was, at times, unresponsive or uncomfortable in their care because of this. Whilst foster families do things in diverse ways regarding roles, responsibilities and approach to care, and change is to be expected when a child joins a foster family, concerns arise when the child does not thrive in that setting. One concern is the foster carers'

understanding of their role and their ability to integrate the child into their family. The literature suggests there is little known about the characteristics of foster carers associated with placement stability and foster carers' behaviour may serve to maintain, exacerbate or reduce the difficulties that the child presents with (Chamberlain, 1996; Dubois-Comtois et al, 2015). However, in a system that responds to child welfare concerns, there is often limited time to make sense of the unique and deeply personal perspectives of foster carers. With this in mind I decided to address their experiences in more detail through doctoral study.

Aims and Objectives

This thesis aims to explore the life experiences that have influenced foster carers' motivations to foster and how these experiences shaped their identity in the caregiving role. The objectives of this thesis are to identify how foster carers' understanding of the role informs the care they provide and the relationships they develop with the children in their care. By developing an understanding of the complexities foster carers experience in the role, it might also assist social workers to comprehend the challenges which is important for sustaining foster carers in the care they provide.

Research Questions

1. In what way do personal life experiences influence a foster carer's decision to take on the role of fostering?
2. How do foster carers integrate their identity into the caregiving role?
3. How does their understanding of the role inform the care they provide for children placed with them?

A Summary of the Research Strategy

A qualitative approach was adopted for this research guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring experiences in its own terms. It is also hermeneutic in its attention to the layers of

interpretation involved in IPA research (Smith et al, 2009). Finally, IPA is idiographic allowing for a deep exploration of each participant's experience which provides flexibility to examine similarities and differences between each participant (Sauve et al, 2020; Smith at al, 2009). Seven foster families (ten participants in total) were recruited for this research and data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using IPA. Thus, IPA is the tool that was used to gather rich data related to how foster carers make sense of their experiences in the caregiving role.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 2 – *Looking After the Child Who is 'At Risk'* gives an overview of the evolution of foster care in Ireland from the perspective of cultural and political influences noting the involvement of the Catholic Church from the nineteenth century onwards with a focus on the moral and social teachings of the Church in the care they provided for abandoned, neglected or illegitimate children. These children who were outside the parameters of the Church's moral and social teaching were deemed 'at risk' which is a concept that follows through in current legislation and practice. The chapter then discusses the fostering assessment of prospective foster carers as the first critical engagement of all family members involved in the subsequent life of a child in foster care. Finally, the construction of 'family' in Ireland is considered in relation to its social structure in society, the private and public domain of foster care provision, the fostering allowance, professionalisation of foster care and private foster care providers.

Chapter 3 – *Ordinary Families in Extraordinary Roles* looks at the 'ordinary' families who take on the extraordinary role of fostering. The complex task of fostering requires emotional commitment and resilience from foster carers in the care they provide. Furthermore, the family unit they have created will have a specific approach and understanding of the task of fostering based on their influences and experiences that extend to their wider social networks. These influences and experiences might also impact their engagement with

professionals and openness to agency support and training. Agency requirements of foster carers includes facilitating birth family contact and abiding by court direction. Professional decision making primarily considers the 'at risk' child which means professional awareness of foster family attributes, alongside foster carers' understanding of their role, is imperative to the success of any foster placement.

Chapter 4 – *Methodology and Methods* lays out the qualitative approach that was adopted for this study guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The chapter discusses the research design which will include the epistemological stance. The methodology will then be introduced alongside the relevant philosophical underpinnings, the rationale for selecting this approach, the study sample, methods of data collection, analytical techniques, ethical considerations, and procedures that were followed to ensure methodological rigour. Seven foster families from a homogeneous background were recruited and data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using IPA. A visual imagery technique was also used at the beginning of the interviews to facilitate discussion and to stimulate emotional responses from the participants.

Chapter 5 – *Complex Family Dynamics and Conflicting Identities* provides a narrative of the first two superordinate themes based on the application of IPA. The first superordinate theme identified complex family dynamics and feelings of loss in the participating foster carers' experiences. *Complex Family Dynamics* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Fractured Families, Loss a*nd *Going Back to the Beginning.* The second superordinate theme *Conflicting Identities* captured research participants' vulnerability in deciding to become foster carers and their attempts to make sense of the new role they were taking on. Their sense of self was also challenged by the process. *Conflicting Identities* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Feeling Vulnerable, Engagement with the Fostering Assessment* and *Past and Future Self.*

Chapter 6 – *Developing Identities and Enactment of the Role* provides a narrative of the last two superordinate themes which were *Developing Identities* and *Enactment of the Role. Developing Identities* captured research participants' emerging identities as foster carers as they started to develop an awareness of their role. *Developing Identities* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Building Resilience, Emotional Investment* and *Challenging Core Beliefs.* The last superordinate theme *Enactment of the Role* captured research participants' approach to the task of fostering with regards to their interactions with professionals, their acceptance of professional decision making, the changes that occurred with their own birth children, the shift in their family dynamics and their growing awareness of their development in their role as foster carers. *Enactment of the Role* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Foster Carer Attributes, On the Edge of Control* and *What about our Children?*

Chapter 7 – *The Different Dimensions of Identity for Foster Carers* introduces narrative theory as the lens to conceptualise the new findings related to the interchange between foster carers' identity in the role and statutory requirements for children in care. Foster carers' experiences in their role emerged as contextual and deeply personal and there were differences between what they bring to the role and the requirements of the system.

Chapter 8 – *Conclusions and Recommendations* highlights that being aware of the nuances that influence foster carers' approach in the caregiving role would assist professionals to support foster carers to manage complex situations. This professional awareness might also lead to increased opportunities for working together and for foster carers to gain knowledge and skills in the role appropriate to their level of need.

Chapter 2 – Looking After the Child Who is 'At Risk'

Introduction

This chapter discusses how alternative care for children evolved in Ireland from medieval fosterage to institutional care in industrial and reformatory schools during the time of the Poor Law system, and later the decision to board out children from workhouses. This is important to this research as it will help to explain how the attitude towards children in alternative care changed from what seems to have been positive regard during the time of medieval fosterage to a more prevalent attitude in the 1800s that focused on the 'at risk' child. The chapter goes on to discuss the fostering assessment as the first critical engagement of all family members who foster taking into account the construction of the 'ordinary' family who fosters in Ireland.

Historical Perception of the 'At Risk' Child

Foster care finds its place in Irish history as a form of child-rearing that was moulded in culture (Ni Chonaill, 1997). Celtic child-fostering can be traced back to a practice of medieval Ireland and early Irish fosterage appears to be well attested in the *Cain Iarraith* 'Law of the Fostering Fee' (Parkes, 2006: 361). The process of fosterage was governed by strict rules specified in the Brehon Law[2]. Fosterage came in two forms: fosterage for affection where no fee was involved, and fosterage for a fee which was more common (Preston-Matto, 2018). Fosterage might begin when the child was one year old and there were three periods at which it might end, namely, death, crime and selection. The age of selection i.e. marriage was fixed at 14 years for girls and 17 years for boys (Hamilton-Grierson, 1916). The terms fosterage and foster-mother carried connotations of medieval Gaelic fosterage practices where the foster child was understood to be integrated into their new family (Tait, 2020).

[2] Early Irish law was also called the Brehon Law.

O' Donnell (2020) builds on medieval fosterage to understand how it was supposed to work on an interpersonal level. He noted the foster family was complex and each member formed emotional bonds based on their ties with all other family members (O' Donnell, 2020; Tait, 2020).

Fosterage continued in Ireland until the eighteenth century. It is likely that the popularity of the custom was in part due to Gaelic tradition, but also as a means of relieving pressure upon space in households. Fosterage also served to strengthen ties between clans which reduced conflict and antagonism. In that sense it was used as a method to forge links between powerful families and so served as a political rather than a welfare purpose (Horgan, 2002; Gilligan, 1991). However, the establishment of the Poor Law system in the 1800s and the introduction of the *Irish Poor Relief Act 1838*[3] had a profound effect on the practice of foster care in Ireland. Under this Act, workhouses were built around the country under the central authority of the Irish Poor Law Commissioners (Robins, 1980). These decades before the Great Famine witnessed a growing interest, in Ireland and in Britain, on the problem of Ireland's endemic poverty. The extent of the nature of the poverty – a lack of capital investment and an over reliance on a single staple crop – were some of the most striking characteristics of pre-famine Irish society (McCabe, 2018).

Earner-Byrne (2017) notes the Catholic Church used criticism of the Poor Relief system to assert claim over the poor by arguing the system did not cater for the needs of poor Catholics. Fahey (1998) argues Catholic teaching leaned towards a negative perspective. The Church would reject rather than recommend and was clear on what it was against rather than what it was for. Thus, it did not strive to hold a clear appealing model of how society

[3] The poor law system in Ireland was modelled on the English poor law of 1834 and the Irish Poor Relief Act 1838 established a nationwide system of poor relief based on the workhouse and financed by a local property tax. The poor law system remained the primary form of poor relief in Ireland until the 1920s (Crossman, 2013).

should be organised preferring to warn against the threats and dangers of any given situation instead. However, the Church was influential in this regard as poverty was so widespread and distress in the population was obvious. Jonathan Binns (1785-1871) was an English Quaker who served as the assistant agricultural commissioner on the Whatley Poor Inquiry in the mid-1830s and travelled across Ireland in this capacity, conducting investigations into the social conditions of the poor. He wrote about a 'superabundant' population that was, for the most part, 'unemployed.' He also noted that between 'potato time and harvest' there was distress in general and it was 'very great' (Binns, 1837).

The Great Famine (1845-1852) that followed resulted in the death of approximately one million Irish people from starvation and related causes and at least another one million people emigrated (Seward et al, 2005). It is against this historical significance that the concept of entitlement and deservingness shaped the provision of support to families from the mid-1800s onwards. Although associated with middle-class values and perceptions, and often considered an English importation to Ireland, the concept of the deserving and undeserving poor became deeply rooted in Irish popular culture. The 'respectable' poor such as the elderly and disabled were regarded as deserving of sympathy and relief whereas those lacking respectability such as vagrants or prostitutes were felt to deserve punishment rather than assistance (Crossman, 2013). Powell (2007) noted that social policy in early modern Ireland, like England, orientated primarily towards the perennial problem of poverty. As far back as 1601, with the establishment of the Elizabethan Poor Law, England achieved a relatively sophisticated poor relief system based on a crude categorisation according to abilities and needs (Powell, 2007). Golding and Middleton (1982) observe the construction of the poor as deserving or undeserving had a sociological significance too as it allowed society to construct ideologies about the poor in the context of unequal relationships of power (Golding and Middleton, 1982).

Laying the Foundation of the Modern Foster Care System in Ireland

The subsequent introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1862 then provided a statutory policy for boarding out children which laid the foundations of the modern foster care system in Ireland. Under this system children younger than 5 years went to live with families who received a small fee for providing this service. This practice was designed to keep children out of workhouses in recognition of the harmful effects of the harsh conditions on their development (Robins, 1980). However, the early provision of foster care under this new regime also sought to rescue children from unsavoury and unsafe social conditions. The system exercised social control in three ways; it sanctioned 'failing' parents, it served as a warning to others and it functioned as a means of transmitting new social and cultural values to deprived children (Gilligan, 1991; Robins, 1980). It was also noted that when children were boarded out to extremely poor households the allowance was as much a means of assistance for the foster carers as for the children. In those circumstances the small weekly allowance paid for the maintenance of the child became the principal means of support for the family (Crossman, 2009). However, child welfare debates continued and centred on the merits of placing children in institutions or domestic settings. Even as a statutory policy, boarding out was not popular as officials were fearful of what might be found in many Irish homes and it continued to be widely articulated that pauper children were more likely to learn good habits and Christian values in the workhouse than in the homes of the poor (Lucey and Crossman, 2014).

The continued use of institutions in Ireland can be traced to the expansion of the Catholic Church on social policy in the nineteenth century which was due in part to the Church's success in developing a role as a provider of mass social services. Catholic institutions multiplied and flourished and the Church eventually entered into various forms of partnership with the State (Fahey, 1998). During this time, the attitude towards orphaned, abandoned or neglected children was also compounded by the introduction of the Reformatory School system. Reformatory schools were established in recognition that the actions of children,

which in law might be considered criminal, were different from the criminality of adults. The Reformatory Schools (Youthful Offenders) Act, 1854, in England was extended to Ireland with the Reformatory Schools Act, 1858 (Kennedy, 1970). The Industrial Schools Act of 1868 was then introduced to manage homeless and destitute children (Powell, 1992). Industrial schools were for children who had not yet committed a crime, but who were considered to be in an 'at risk' group (Pembroke, 2020). However, Powell (1992) outlined a regime that was punitive in orientation coming from the philosophy that there was a correlation between 'destitution and vagrancy' (Powell, 1992: 185).

From the mid nineteenth century three religious orders namely the Sisters of Mercy, the Irish Sisters of Charity and the Daughters of Charity established industrial schools around the country. These schools were set up to care for vulnerable children and employed a dominant institutional approach. Thus, the number of children in workhouses declined dramatically in the 1870s as children were moved to industrial schools and by 1907 there were seventy industrial schools in Ireland (Arnold, 2009). The aim of the industrial school was to adopt an authoritarian ethos to contain children who were critically labelled as 'social waste' and perceived as 'out of place,' 'deviant' or ambiguously 'troublesome' (Bauman, 2004: 146).

Wright (1987) discusses how the 'pre-modern' concept of risk was held prior to the 1900s. During this era childhood adversity was not constituted as preventable through social intervention. Child deaths were placed in the context of explanation in which they were associated with concepts like sin, natural 'wastage' and seasonal rhythm which assimilated into natural processes of decay. In the provision of care for these children the Catholic Church seemed to focus on parental 'failure' and instead of trying to replace a sense of nurturance for vulnerable children, the church instead took the view that a social order of purity should be maintained with Ferguson (2007) arguing:

> *While most commentators suggest that children were removed into care and treated cruelly because they were poor, there were also many children who entered the industrial schools who had been abused by their parents and welcomed being protected, and the community played a key role in supporting such actions. Children*

> *were treated harshly in the industrial schools not only due to their poverty but because they were victims of parental cruelty, which was perceived to have 'contaminated' their 'childhood innocence.'* (Ferguson, 2007: 123).

Ferguson (2007) described the purpose of the system with regards to the protection and welfare of children. However, the ethos of alternative care focused on preserving childhood innocence as opposed to acknowledging the experience of trauma or abuse. The first piece of legislation passed in Ireland which explicitly related to the welfare of children was the Children Act 1908 or the 'Children's Charter'. This legislation was passed through the British Parliamentary system and expressly put forward the doctrine of 'parens patrine' which put the State ahead of the parent as having ultimate responsibility for children. The Act focused on criminal proceedings and was explicit in what was considered parental responsibility. This Act named 'deprived' and 'depraved' children who were the responsibility of the State should the parents fail in their duty of care. Powell (1992) highlighted how the implementation of the Children Act 1908 in Ireland was slow because it was hindered by traditional values and noted that '*children's rights have always been regarded with scepticism in a society with an abidingly traditionalist conception of the family'* (Powell, 1992:136). This system did not alter or change even after the Republic of Ireland achieved independence from Britain in 1922 and the Irish State continued with the system of industrial schools (Raftery and O' Sullivan, 1999).

It is also worth noting that during the time of industrial and reformatory schools there was a particular fixation in clerical, political and social discourses about how to regulate 'unmarried mothers' (Glynn, 1921; MacInerney, 1922; Garrett, 2012). The first Mother and Baby Home was established in 1922 by the Order of the Sacred Heart to 'reform' 'first time' 'unmarried mothers'. However, this service was also interconnected with industrial schools and 'unmarried mothers' could easily find themselves in industrial schools (Arnold, 2009). Maguire (2013) adds to the argument that the fate of the 'illegitimate' child in post-independence Ireland was ambiguous with regards to lawmakers' responsibility to protect them as they were pre-occupied with more practical concerns such as the cost of caring for

them. Their desire to be seen as compassionate was in keeping with similar legislation elsewhere in Europe. The court ambivalence in this context stemmed from their duty to uphold the 'sanctity of life' while also confronting the lack of respect that existed in Irish society for the lives of illegitimate children (Maguire, 2013).

Developing Practices that Focused on the Welfare of Children

In 1950 there were still three reformatory schools and fifty-one industrial schools in Ireland, all run by religious organisations. The largest industrial school for boys was Artane in Dublin where 776 children were detained in 1950. The largest industrial school for girls was Goldenbridge, also in Dublin, with 148 girls. In 1950 there were 833 committals while 944 were discharged and 31 children absconded. Of the 833 children committed, two thirds were less than ten years old (Redmond, 2018). However, the *Boarding Out of Children Regulations 1954* became a significant development in establishing practices that focused on the welfare of children (O' Higgins, 1996). Furthermore, beyond these developments the Second Vatican of the Catholic Church (1962-1965) was of historic importance as it urged a more outward-looking attitude and practice among religious congregations encouraging them to engage with the wider community beyond the walls of institutions. Many female religious orders responded by becoming involved in the development of local social service councils with a focus on helping people in their own homes and communities (Gilligan, 2009).

These changes were followed by an altered public perception of the care that was provided to children in institutions in Ireland (Keating, 2015). Allegations of physical abuse of children detained in industrial schools were addressed publicly for the first time in the publication of the *Reformatory and Industrial Schools System Report (1970)* which became known as the *Kennedy Report*. This report is seen as having ushered in a new era in respect of the provision of alternative care for children in Ireland. Arising from this report the majority of industrial schools that operated in the 1970s changed from an institutionalised setting to a

form of residential care adopting a family group home approach (Sullivan and Breen, 2008). This changing attitude continued to shift the focus of the welfare of children to a family-based setting and Gilligan (1991) noted there were significant developments during this time which were positive for the future of foster care in Ireland. These included a system that was managed by professionally qualified social workers according to international standards of practice, foster placements that included sibling groups and children with disabilities and increased support and training for foster carers (Gilligan, 1991). According to Skehill (2003) the social work role became significant in the aftermath of the Health Act 1970[4] which is generally referred to as signifying the consolidation and development of the Irish Modern Welfare State. In 1973 the specific purpose of social work was identified as operating under the child care legislation (the Children Act 1908) and carrying the statutory function of child welfare and protection (Department of Health, 1973).

The Introduction of New Legislative Frameworks

New legislative frameworks which governed child welfare and protection were then introduced - the *Child Care Act 1991* and the *Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995.* The *Child Care Act 1991* was a culmination of various attempts to update child protection and welfare legislation and replaced the (British*) Children Act 1908* (Gilligan, 1991). The Act provides a more modern legislative framework to manage children who are 'at risk' in Ireland. Previous legislation, in the form of the *Children Act 1908,* was deemed inadequate to deal with the needs of 'at risk' children in Irish society. The 1991 Act incorporated, modified and repealed much of the existing legislation in relation to children under its broad remit becoming the first legislation to deal with children in a comprehensive

[4] The Health Act (1970) was introduced to amend and extend the Health Acts 1946 to 1966. The Act provided bodies for the administration of the health services (Department of Health, 1973).

manner (Buckley et al, 1997). The *Child Care Act 1991* was fully enacted in 1996. Currently the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) has specific duties under the Act to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection. This legislation confers both a statutory power and duty upon the Child and Family Agency to protect children and to promote their welfare (TUSLA Publications, 2014).

The Child Care Regulations were established in 1995 and were an attempt to provide regulation and consistency to the delivery of State care to children. The regulations are divided into three parts, namely, the *Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995,* the *Child Care (Placement of Children in Relative Care) Regulations 1995* and the *Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) 1995.* However, in line with the focus of this research, which is general foster care, the regulations relevant to the research are the *Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995.* These regulations broadly set out the criteria for pre-placement procedures with regards to health boards (now the Child and Family Agency) maintaining a panel of approved foster carers. The Regulations specify under Regulation 7 that:

> *A health board, in selecting persons from a panel maintained by it under article 5 of these Regulations to foster a child in its care, shall endeavour to ensure that those persons have the capacity to meet the needs of the child concerned* (Department of Health, 1995).

The Regulations also outline the supports that should be offered to foster carers to meet the needs of children which include supervision and home visits, the monitoring of placements, record keeping, the fostering allowance and specifies the duties of foster carers in accordance with the Regulations. The Regulations also address procedures to remove children from foster placements and the support that should be offered to foster carers in these circumstances (Department of Health, 1995). The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) were established following a report of the Working Group on Foster Care, *Foster Care: A Child Centred Partnership (2001),* who highlighted concerns about the quality of foster care services provided in Ireland. When the report was published, a committee was

formed to develop National Standards on Practices and Procedures on Foster Care. The Standards are based on the relevant legislation, regulation, guidance and best practice. It was the intention of the Department of Health and Children that the Standards would serve as a basis for consistently promoting quality care for children in the foster care services. The Standards are intended to provide constructive guidelines for agencies and foster carers as well as a basis for children and young people in foster care and their families to judge the quality of the care they are receiving. Section Two of the Standards addresses the assessment and approval of foster carers, and supervision, support, training and reviews of approved foster carers (Department of Health and Children, 2003).

Current Perception of the 'At Risk' Child

As public perception in Irish society towards the 'illegitimate' or 'poor' child started to shift in the latter part of the twentieth century, and there was a more coherent legislative framework in operation, it became a time of upheaval for the provision of child welfare services as various investigation reports were published exposing the abuse of children in the care of the State. The first publication was *The Madonna House Report* which was a report on the inquiry into allegations of sexual abuse and other misconduct at Madonna House in Dublin. The abridged version of the report was published in 1996. Other investigation reports on allegations into diocesan abuse include *The Ferns Report* published in 2005, *The Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin,* commonly known as *The Murphy Report* published in 2009 and *The Report by the Commission of Investigation into Catholic Diocese of Cloyne* published in 2010. Finally, *The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse,* commonly known as *The Ryan Commission* was introduced by the Irish Government to investigate the extent and effects of abuse on children from 1936 onwards. The final report commonly known as *The Ryan Report* was published in May 2009.

These sources of critical inquiry have irredeemably changed the policy landscape which is mirrored by Skehill (2004) who observed how inquiries have a profound effect on the nature

of child welfare practices. The *Ryan Report* was arguably one of the most prominent reports with regards to the role of social workers as it centred on accountability and transparency which were areas that had historically only operated in a piecemeal manner in Ireland (Buckley, 2012; Hughes and Houston, 2019). Since the publication of the report and the subsequent implementation plans were published, a major reform programme took place regarding child welfare and protection services. The first major development was the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in June 2011 which became the dedicated government department for children and young people. This was a manifestation of the priority attached by the government to improving the effectiveness of supports and services to this population.

It is also worth noting that a new group of 'at risk' children subsequently emerged in the early noughties with the arrival of unaccompanied migrant children to Ireland. These children represent a diverse group in terms of culture, ethnicity and religion. Their reasons for travelling unaccompanied differ too as it could be family related, exploitation related, survival related or independent child migration. The journey for these children might also be made entirely alone, with an adult who abandons them shortly after arrival or with an adult who cares for them or exploits them. These children were originally placed in hostels when they arrived in Ireland, but now the majority of them are in foster care (Horgan and Ni Raghallaigh, 2019).

While the Ryan Report was specifically concerned with the historical abuse of children in institutions managed by religious orders in Ireland, the Government took the opportunity with the report to address the contemporary risk of abuse to children who are unaccompanied minors. The Ryan Report Implementation Plan (2011) committed the State to ensuring greater equity of care in the treatment of separated children in Ireland. This commitment followed ongoing controversy from international and European human rights bodies. The criticism pointed to continuing gaps in protection and inequities in the standards of care

provided to unaccompanied migrant children (Mullally, 2011).

A further milestone in the reform programme was achieved with the establishment of the Child and Family Agency in January 2014 (Ryan Report Monitoring Group, December 2014). The Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) became the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children representing the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland. The services operate under *The Child and Family Agency Act 2013.* Previously this work formed part of the brief of the Health Service Executive, but the establishment of the Child and Family Agency gave a sharper focus to the State's work in this area (TUSLA Publications, 2014; Gilligan, 2019). Further policies were published too such as *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011, revised, 2017), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (DCYA, 2014) and the *Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022* (TUSLA Publications, 2017).

The alternative care system that developed in Ireland after the publication of the various investigation reports then needed to take cognisance of public opinion and the growing interest in what causes harm to children (Roets et al, 2015). The notion of the 'child at risk' is considered a concept that is ambiguous and ever-evolving (Dekker, 2009). Lohmann and Mayer (2009) observe that childhood has been linked to risks for both the individual and society since the 19th century which has caused an inevitable tension in social work practice with regards to social and individual interests (Lohmann and Mayer, 2009). However, the report of the *Kilkenny Incest Inquiry (1993)* brought the issue of child abuse into the public domain in Ireland (Hughes and Houston, 2019). Powell (1998) argues that high profile cases like this challenge traditional views of family as havens of safety, re-positioning the institution within a discourse of public risk. In this context, social work professionals must manage increasing public concern with regards to the welfare of children whilst also addressing the

notion of the ‘at risk’ child. They are required to make decisions about potential risks and threats and these decision-making processes result in a complex structure of care required for children (Parton 2011; Stanford 2010). Stanford (2010) observes the critical perspective of risk in social work practice elucidates how risk operates as a powerful construct for shaping knowledge, practice and ethics. How we view ourselves in our relationships with others has become dominated by the polarised identities that culminate around the notion of risk. There is dangerousness and vulnerability, responsibility and irresponsibility or trustworthiness and untrustworthiness. Thus, fear operates as a core constituent for defining risk (Stanford, 2010).

The Influence of Child Welfare History on Current Practice

Foster care has now became the dominant form of State care in Ireland and it could be argued that a lot of attention was on de-institutionalisation and preventing more scandal, rather than developing the role for foster carers beyond their approval as general foster carers. Davidson et al (2016) observe that much national policy making has had a pre-occupation with de-institutionalisation. Across Western Europe and North America, Australia and New Zealand, the de-institutionalisation of alternative care has been the policy and practice since the 1970s. The exception to this was in countries where there are more faith-based environments, as then church run institutions continued for much longer (Davidson et al, 2016). However, Ireland now has one of the highest rates of foster care placements globally and the Irish case has shown that a decisive shift to foster care can occur even when conditions seem unlikely, as the move towards de-institutionalisation started when Ireland was still a strongly Catholic country (Gilligan, 2019).

Notwithstanding that, the positioning of the ‘at risk’ child in the history of child protection in Ireland has seen a language of risk develop in social work practice and a culture of fear generated for foster carers with regards to managing complex behaviours or trauma experiences of children and young people in care. Powell and Scanlon (2015) argue that the

conceptual language of child abuse takes a number of distinct forms including the simple descriptive language of ‘moral condemnation’ contained in traditional words like ‘cruelty’, ‘neglect’, ‘incest’, ‘exploitation’ or ‘grooming’ which have framed popular media conceptualisations of child abuse. This language adopted by the media in reporting cases of child abuse reflects back to the public its own moral outrage and condemnation which can form moral panic (Fitzgibbon, 2012; Powell and Scanlon, 2015).

The subsequent development of practice in Ireland then placed a strong emphasis on safe care and safeguarding of children in foster care. This impacts on issues that arise for foster carers in their role, and one of these is when an allegation is made against a member of a foster family. To look at this issue more closely, a number of factors must be considered. The first is foster carers’ ambivalent position in the system as they are providing care in the private domain of their own homes. This means they are vulnerable if an allegation is made about their relationship with a child in their care. An allegation is when there is a child protection or welfare concern expressed that a child has been harmed through abuse (TUSLA Publications, 2022). When an allegation is made against a foster carer the fostering department must follow the Children First National Guidelines (2017) as well as their own policy (Irish Foster Care Association, 2019). Therefore, TUSLA must carry out a risk assessment of all children in the household (TUSLA Publications, 2022). This is important to note as foster carers are treated the same under this policy as any individual or family when concerns are raised about their care of children. Therefore, it depends on the experience of the social worker completing the risk assessment as to whether or not they consider the background history of the child’s birth family and the complexity of the child’s needs.

The Irish Foster Care Association (2019) note this process can be one of the most stressful experiences foster carers may encounter and one of the most isolating. Roberts et al (2024) note that investigations of allegations of abuse are paramount to protect children. However, many allegations are unsubstantiated and result is stress and anxiety for foster carers. Adams

et al (2018) observe allegations can cause unplanned endings to placements for children in care and also result in foster carers leaving their role. Nesmith (2020) suggests that looking after children with complex needs is one of the most challenging aspects of being a foster carer. When that is coupled with an allegation, foster carers should feel supported going through the process. Boffey et al (2019) and Randle et al (2017) note that trying to navigate a complex system whilst being the subject of an allegation with limited support, could be one of the greatest difficulties experienced by foster carers. Thus, the stressful nature of allegations for foster carers should be noted with regards to the language of risk that has developed in social work practice in Ireland and an emphasis placed on the support that is offered to them in those circumstances.

The Process of the Assessment of General Foster Carers in Ireland

All the participants in this research were assessed as general foster carers. Currently the *National Guidance for Foster Care Assessment* is the National Assessment Framework used to recruit foster carers in Ireland since 2015. The assessment framework was adapted to Irish practice and legislation from the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering '*Undertaking a Fostering Assessment: A Guide to Collecting and Analysing Information for Form F'* (Chapman, 2009). The assessment framework is standardised and before it was implemented nationally, fostering assessments were conducted in an 'ad hoc' manner from the different Health Service Executive areas (before the establishment of the Child and Family Agency). The aim of the current framework is to provide analysis and evaluation of information gathered during assessment interviews. There is an emphasis on statutory social work services and private foster care agencies selecting foster carers who have the skill base and capacity to meet the needs of children who cannot safely live with their own families. The framework is systemic in nature and outlines the sequence of essential conversations with foster care applicants to assess their ability to look after children and considers relevant information about their unique personal qualities and life experiences as

they relate to the task of fostering (TUSLA Publications, 2015)[1].

The assessment usually involves approximately eight interviews with prospective foster carers once a decision has been made that their application should proceed to the assessment stage. The assessment begins with the applicants completing several forms which include Garda vetting, medical forms which requires a visit to their GP and then the form is reviewed by the medical officer of the agency, names of two referees (both will be interviewed), employer reference but this is a discretionary one, Social Work Department checks to ascertain if the family were ever service users or there are any concerns about their involvement with children, and a check with the public health nurse if the applicants have children under five years of age. The applicants also complete an application form which requires details such as their age, gender, ethnicity, spoken language, religion, occupation or profession, who lives in the household and if they hold a valid full driving licence. They are then asked to provide information on their household finances, marital partnership status, educational and employment chronology, previous applications to foster (if any) and the fostering resources they can offer. This would include the type of fostering, for example long-term, short-term, emergency or respite foster care. The number of children they might foster and if they would foster a sibling group, if they have any restrictions on religious groups or children with specific medical needs or disabilities (TUSLA Publications, 2015).

After these forms have been completed and the information is gathered, the assessment interviews begin. The applicants are then interviewed an average of eight times and if they are a couple fostering they are interviewed together and usually only separated once for an individual interview. The applicants' individual profile, personal circumstances and what it will mean to become a foster carer are the overarching themes for consideration in the

[1] See appendices 2, 3 and 4 for further information on the criteria for assessment of prospective foster carers, the content of a fostering assessment report and the regulations and standards in foster care.

assessment. This includes what has made the applicants the people they are today and what creates stability and security in their adult lives. It is emphasised in the assessment framework that evaluation and/or analysis are included in addition to straight narrative summary. Information is gathered through conversations and observations of the family atmosphere at home, and how people relate to each other. Assessing social workers must consider the extent to which the information gathered indicates the potential strengths or vulnerabilities which might impact applicants' ability to foster (TUSLA Publications, 2015).

Fostering Assessment as a Critical Engagement

The assessment of prospective foster carers is the first critical engagement of all family members who will be involved in the subsequent life of a foster placement and the foster family as a whole serves as the context for this (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). Assessment is an integral part of fostering, but the nature, content and process of assessments has changed over the years in light of the diverse needs of children requiring placements and the different methods of finding families to care for them (Adcock, 2010). Luke and Sebba (2013) note the assessment of prospective foster carers requires skill from the professionals involved as it is not just a question of writing down applicants' responses or completing forms. Instead, all information about prospective foster carers' backgrounds, attitudes, skills and relationships must be evaluated and analysed. The need for evidence-based approaches has also become a central tenet of agency policy in order to ensure consistency and transparency (Bifulco et al, 2008). The National Assessment Framework guidance notes:

> '*The assessment report does not need to provide extensive detailed narrative of applicants' life experiences though this detail is gathered at interviews. The brief is to provide only information about the applicants which is relevant to their ability to foster. The golden rule is if it does not relate to their ability to foster, it does not need to be taken into consideration for an assessment report; the purpose of such a report is to evidence that relevant information gathered has been analysed with a recommendation made regarding suitability to foster'* (TUSLA Publications, 2015: 4-5).

The question this quote raises is who decides the information that should be provided as relevant regarding prospective foster carers' ability to provide quality care? Holland (2000) discusses how assessment tools are there to transform and reduce a complex and fluctuating world into a more linear and simplified structure. However, this structure is often described in a vocabulary that reflects the professionals' area of expertise and way of understanding and valuing the world (Holland, 2000). In the case of a fostering assessment, this might not be the foster carers' world and the values carried by the professional undertaking the assessment might not be compatible with the individuals undertaking the process. This opinion is mirrored by Milner and Byrne (2002) who observe it is seldom the world of the individual being assessed. Witkin and Harrison (2001) note the values carried by an assessment process might actually be counterproductive to the interests of the person being assessed.

In this research this argument is pertinent to understanding how an assessment process might impact professional decision-making depending on rapport and trust that can be established between the assessing social worker and prospective foster carer. Rehner Iversen (2005) argues there are times when assessment tools evaluate relationships in simplistic terms that sever further discussion or exploration during the course of the assessment and do not grasp the complex nature of experiences or their impact on individuals and families (Rehner Iversen, 2005). Furthermore, assessment tools can carry an overarching and inherent emphasis on potential problems which prioritises a deficit-based discourse as opposed to the language of potential (Rehner Iversen, 2005). This is the case with the National Assessment Framework which carries the viewpoint that the assessment of foster care applicants' ability to foster is a form of risk assessment – including their potential strengths or vulnerabilities. This viewpoint is highlighted in the introduction in Chapter 1 of the Framework noting an assessment report gives a snapshot in time of the applicants' lives and overall abilities giving an indication of their potential as foster carers (TUSLA Publications, 2015). However, the emphasis on risk in this context could focus the

assessment towards managing and securing against risk as opposed to attempts to get to know prospective foster carers and respond meaningfully to their understanding of the role (Stanford, 2010). It is also a stark reminder of the centrality of the power of social work professionals (Parton and O' Byrne, 2000). They write and construct reports based on their judgement and analysis of specific and often complex experiences (Hall et al, 2006).

In Ireland foster care is provided by 'ordinary' families who make a decision to share their homes and lives with children whose birth families are unable to look after them. Thus, foster care is complex and the care provided by foster carers takes many forms including responding to the cumulative effects on children in care of past experiences (Golding, 2003). There is also the on-going influence of the child's birth family regardless of whether or not they are present in the child's life (Chateauneuf et al, 2018). Therefore, getting to know the complex nature of foster family functioning is imperative to understand how foster carers build relationships and, in particular, their capacity to provide nurturing and safe environments for the children in their care. In recent years in the UK and Ireland the relevance of attachment theory has been considered to focus on three important qualities of prospective foster carers. These include the ability to manage a wide range of feelings, both in themselves and others, the resolution of past losses and traumas and the acquisition of reflective functioning (Walker, 2008). This is acknowledging that to understand how foster carers interpret and respond to the needs of children, their own earlier experiences with caregivers must be considered (Hughes, 2003).

It is well documented in literature that adult relationships and family dynamics are complex and how adults interpret and respond to the needs of children depends on their state of mind with regards to attachment (Berlin and Cassidy, 2001; Caltabiano and Thorpe, 2007). In seeking to understand their relationships from an adult perspective, research has relied on interview techniques or self-report to learn about childhood attachments (Caltabiano and Thorpe, 2007). Caron et al (2022) argue that when social workers do not have access to

important tools or methods in assessment, it can contribute to under investigation. Bifulco et al (2008) note there is a need for evidence based approaches to ensure consistency, transparency and effective interventions. Part of this is also to identify, categorise and analyse issues around risk, as well as to accurately identify the positive or protective factors that aid resilience. However, these tools are not included in the recruitment and assessment of foster carers in Ireland even though Blazey et al (2013) and Walker (2008) note they have the potential to improve the selection of foster carers by assessing their capacity to support the formation of secure attachments as well as inform education and support strategies of fostering agencies. The assessment process in Ireland considers the qualities of prospective foster carers more broadly, which is important to note as it highlights the subjective nature of foster care assessments when content and professional judgements are made by individual social workers.

Impact of the Fostering Assessment on Role Identity of Foster Carers

The fostering assessment lays the foundation for a foster family's understanding of what is expected of them in their role. The hope is that it will be a transformative experience that prompts foster carers to explore their understanding of the role and how they will approach care for children who join their family. This requires that they develop a heightened awareness of self-reflection which might bring them into a different space as a family if they did not practice self-reflection previously. Onions (2018) notes that there is repeated acknowledgement of the need to understand the specific parenting skills required to look after children who have experienced trauma or abuse. There is a strong focus on this aspect of parenting in the fostering assessment. It should help prospective foster carers to think about their own parenting styles. Caron et al (2022) remark that the fostering assessment should also address motivation to foster, commitment to a child and autonomy and parenting competence. These are emphasised to prospective foster carers as central dimensions of the role as they define the driving force behind their intention to foster, their capacity to integrate a child into their family and their competence in meeting the child's needs. However, Geiger et

al (2016) found that prospective foster carers often have unrealistic expectations of what is expected of them making the assessment experience subjective. Adcock (2010) added that inherent to the concept of preparation in assessment for prospective foster carers to gain an understanding of the role they want to take on, is the idea that participants can change and grow during the process and that agencies have a responsibility to help them do that.

The Construction of the Family who Fosters in Ireland

The notion of 'family' is complicated as it is infused with values, desires and fears and in the intricacies of personal lives and relationships, family meanings can be powerful and complex (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2012). Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2021) observe that we attach emotional meanings to family and family relationships. Emotions can undermine or strengthen a sense of belonging to a family (Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2021). Therefore, although family is not necessarily more important than other relationships, it remains significant to individuals as a distinct, designated aspect of their everyday activities, experiences and identity (Morgan, 2011). Individuals express and live out family meanings in their lives and in their interactions with others. They make sense of the circumstances and contexts in which they find themselves specifically through different meanings of family (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2012). Maintaining attention to family is important to create an understanding of people's sense of connection which stands above their sense of belonging as individuals (Edwards et al, 2012). Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2011) suggests issues of power, inequalities and values are integral to any understanding of the meaning of family.

According to Seward et al (2005) Irish families were characterised as being patriarchal, strong and stable for much of the twentieth century. However, patriarchy often signifies differential treatment of women and men, and boys and girls in households (Seward et al, 2005). Makama (2013) observes that patriarchy in families sets the parameters for structural inequality for women, noting that tradition, culture or religion have dictated relationships

between men and women for centuries. The socio-cultural composition of family in Ireland is significant in the way the Catholic Church influenced the development of social policy in the first few decades of the new Irish State. Construction and implementation of policies tend to permeate wider society and the Church's moral and social teachings reflected this on the position of the family in society culminating in the Constitution of 1937 (Kiersey, 2011). Inglehart and Baker (2000) emphasise that this Church and State partnership continues through to current social policy, as it is still enshrined in the principles of the Constitution. These influences are particularly apparent in how the Constitution views the family as the most important social structure in Irish society. As a result of the history of Catholic traditions in Ireland, quite distinctive value systems have developed (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Girvin (1996) notes the partnership between the Church and State influenced aspects of governance and the impact of the Constitution was that it institutionalised and formalised many of the values associated with a society that was Catholic and traditional. However, perspectives on traditional family have started to shift in the last twenty years as the children's rights referendum in 2012 addressed the superiority of parents' rights over children's rights (Doyle and Kenny, 2017). Furthermore, in 2015, Ireland became the first country to extend marriage to same-sex couples through a public vote (Tiernan, 2020).

Becker (1998) raises the importance of cultural considerations and notes the way in which people edit their own biographies is culturally determined. Roles are constructed and coherence is created and maintained over time. This is significant from an Irish perspective because although the construct of family is becoming increasingly diverse in Ireland, traditional roles continue too. Thus, most foster family households still include women and men in the caregiving role (Heslop, 2019). This means the social salience of these roles is the benchmark against which all new family identities are defined, measured, or negotiated (Blythe et al, 2013). Therefore, moral judgements of the concept of family can occur implicitly through the language of what is 'natural' and there may be moral disapproval of those who do not live up to this image of the 'natural' and 'normal' family (Ribbens McCarthy et al,

2012). Furthermore, social policy and practice still tends to favour either biological or legal family links in the context of foster care provision. This can present as problematic for families who foster as it disregards socially constructed familial ties and presumes emotional attachment coincides with biology or legality and is superior to any alternative (Blythe et al, 2013). However, there are a wealth of examples of authors who challenge this assumption. MacDonald (2017) emphasises that when families are not biogenetically connected the focus shifts to 'doing' family which explores the way all family relationships are constituted and sustained through activities of everyday life. Family display is associated with how individuals within families communicate with one another that they belong together as kin, thereby strengthening relationship bonds, and through which they display to external audiences who holds membership of the family. Miller-Ott (2017) observe how foster carers develop a family identity that welcomes children and gives them a sense of permanence even if they eventually return to live with their birth family.

Nelson and Colaner (2020) suggest that where other family forms have biological ties and shared history to make them family, foster families must rely on communication. This emphasis on communication in foster families has also been highlighted by other authors including Nelson (2014) who suggests that because foster families lack permanent legal ties, and foster carers do not have parental rights of the children in their care, they rely more heavily on communication and dialogue when constructing family identity. Furthermore, it has been noted that communication between the foster carer-foster child is vital for the emotional and social development of children in care especially as they come into care after experiencing abuse or neglect (Nelson, 2014, Miller-Ott, 2017). Nevertheless, Harrigan (2010) notes that the temporary nature of foster family placements is at odds with the idea of a forever family that permeates adoptive families. Foster carers are expected to manage the temporary nature of the care they provide whilst providing emotionally safe and nurturing environments and a substitute experience of family life for the children in their care. Picken et al (2011) observe that foster carers are encouraged to form attachments with

children, nurturing their ability to form future attachments. These emotional bonds formed through this provision of care creates the idea of ‘family’ suggesting that ‘family' is a social construction with a meaning dependent upon individual context and in contrast to the traditional assumption of women and men in the caregiving role. Thus, the importance of communication is emphasised not just between the foster carer-foster child, but also between the foster carer and professionals (Picken et al, 2011).

Like conventional parents, foster carers are responsible for the same parental tasks associated with caring for children (Blythe et al, 2013). Thus, providing long-term foster care enables foster carers to choose parenthood and the opportunity to identify as parents through the relationships they construct with the children in their care (Cleary et al, 2018; Blythe et al, 2013). However, foster carers still live in a world of inherent contradictions grappling with the formation of new relationships, but simultaneously acknowledging the temporal and professional nature of the care they are providing (Picken et al, 2011; Blythe et al, 2013). Also, contrary to conventional parenting, there are challenges associated with looking after children who have experienced trauma and abuse and standard behavioural interventions may not work (Onions, 2018). This may not be within the foster carers’ expectations of the care they want to provide. Additionally, in the parental role, foster carers may not feel autonomous as parents when they are caring for children who ‘belong’ in another family (Oke et al, 2013).

Dozier and Lindhiem (2006) observe that when foster carers struggle to commit to a child in their care, one of the influential factors impacting the relationship is the temporary nature of foster care. Furthermore, it is more frequently the female foster carer, whether married or single, who serves as the primary caregiver (Rodger et al, 2006). According to Swartz (2004) women are more often drawn to caregiving roles than men because it utilises skills they learned growing up and they have come to view altruistic and emotionally sensitive caregiving as confirming their feminine identity. Boyd (2010) maintains women are deeply

influenced by social contexts, power relations and ideologies connected to gender. Relationships are socially constructed, for instance by heterosexism and the ideology of motherhood, and women have a more continuous physical experience in relation to children as a result of pregnancy, breastfeeding and caregiving responsibilities. However, parenting a child in care can cause significant frustration for women when they lack parental authority. Although the experience of having one's mothering scrutinised is not unique to foster mothers, Blythe et al (2013) suggest women who provide foster care are subjected to increased levels of scrutiny which can have a negative effect on their health and well-being.

The role of fostering for men is just as complex. The literature mostly portrays foster families as traditionally structured and this traditional family structure differentiates male and female parenting roles to reproduce masculine and feminine stereotypes in relation to the man as economic provider and the woman as homemaker (Sainsbury, 2004; Pleck, 2004; Heslop, 2016). The role of fostering for men was sometimes regarded merely as a source of support for women as the main caregivers which is mentioned in literature dating back to the 1980s (Dando and Minty, 1987). Heslop (2019) observes that the focus on women as primary caregivers in foster care has created a limited understanding of what men do even though roles are re-negotiated within a family who fosters (Heslop, 2019).

A study by Fischer and Anderson (2012) compared the gender-typed characteristics and gender role attitudes of stay-at-home and employed fathers. The stay-at-home fathers rated their reasons for staying at home and reported similar levels of traditional masculine and feminine characteristics, but less traditional gender role attitudes. Wanting to be a stay-at-home father was the most important reason for doing it. The study also reported the more supportive the female partner was, the more enjoyment men reported in staying at home (Fischer and Anderson, 2012). Therefore, it is important to consider how roles are negotiated to understand the relational context of foster families (Orme and Combs-Orme, 2014). Jones and Hackett (2011) have reflected on how adoptive parents display family and

Sinno et al (2017) observe the way parenting roles are negotiated within families have been shown to influence children's understanding of family roles and gendered relations (Heslop, 2019).

Providing a Public Service in a Private Domain

The position of family in Irish society is noticeable in policy documents and legislative frameworks in operation in current practice in foster care. Article 41 of the Constitution recognises the family '*as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society'* and *'as a moral institution possessing certain inalienable and imprescriptible rights'* which are '*antecedent and superior to all positive law'* (Article 41.1.1 Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937). A right is '*inalienable'* in that it cannot be voluntarily surrendered and a right is *imprescriptible'* as it cannot be extinguished because of any failure to exercise it adequately except in exceptional cases (Gilligan, 1991: 14). Furthermore, it was held by the Supreme Court that the welfare of the child is best served within the confines of the family unit and the Supreme Court has endeavoured to protect this group from attack. Article 41.3.1 of the Constitution affords the family untrammelled protection in that '*the State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack'* (Article 41.3.1 Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937). The Constitution and subsequent legislation is, therefore, the benchmark by which all current policies and practices are measured and implemented in Ireland. There is an obligation under current legislation to safeguard the welfare of children in a manner that respects the rights of children, their parents and the family unit as a whole which can be a difficult balance to achieve (TUSLA Publications, 2014).

Inglis (1998) observed that the legacy regarding the institution of the family in Ireland perpetuated the view that the State should only intervene as a last resort in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. This principle was supported by the Church's social teaching, whose aim was to maintain a traditional society in Ireland, by resisting State intervention that

may intrude on elements of society the Church controlled (Inglis, 1998). This resistance to State intervention carried over to foster care in the 1980s and 1990s which was mirrored by Richardson (1994) who observed that privacy in relation to the family was a deep-seated principle within Irish culture. However, the implementation of the Child Care Act 1991 highlighted the changing relationship between the private domain of family, and the public domain within which the State operates and this became pivotal in foster care. More than twenty years later Inglis (2017) further observed that the cultural map of Ireland had changed dramatically as Ireland has become a multi-national, cosmopolitan, globalised society. There has been a shift in the balance of institutional, cultural power away from the Catholic Church towards the State (Inglis, 2017). Furthermore, the referendum held in 2012 to insert a new Article on children's rights into the Irish Constitution addressed problems that had emerged in Irish constitutional law where parents' rights were held to be superior to children's rights. The referendum was approved in November 2012 and upheld by the Supreme Court in April 2015 (Doyle and Kenny, 2017).

Foster Care Allowance

The literature on work-family balance and the consideration of roles and responsibilities are commonly discussed regarding mothers and fathers who work outside the home and for whom work and life are two different spheres of activity. In that sense they have distinct roles, identities and cultural meaning, but this is not the case for foster carers as their family is their work and vice versa. Because of this their roles are not so clearly separated, or boundaries so clearly defined (Schofield et al, 2013). Riggs and Delfabbro (2008) suggest that feminist research on care work has demonstrated the imbrication of the public and private domains. Although research continues, both public and economic policy and family law still promote an understanding of the caregiving role that at best constructs it as secondary to work in the corporate sector, and at worst not even work at all (Riggs et al, 2009).

Yet foster carers share their home with children in their care which Walker et al (2002) suggest is an ambiguous role when they receive an allowance and introduce the prospect of work into their private, domestic world. It is characteristic of foster care systems globally that foster carers receive an allowance to cover the cost of caring for a child (Oldfield, 1997; Williams, 2014). However, the foster care allowance has been the subject of controversial debate for years reflecting both philosophical debates as to whether foster care should be voluntaristic or a professional activity and the concern about placement provision and service delivery for children (Kirton et al, 2007). In the 1980s in the UK the policy was that payment did not contain an element of reward but was simply a maintenance payment to assist with expenses incurred for the day-to-day care of the child in placement (Rowe,1983; Bebbington, 1990). The traditional and widespread view at the time was that genuine motivation to foster was unaffected by payment (Smith, 1988). However, as far back as the 1950s in the UK a study by Gray and Parr (1957) concluded that 'boarding out' rates successfully increased the proportion of placements available for 'difficult to place' children.

Beyond the issue of the adequacy of the payment is foster care's hybrid position between the public and private domains. Therefore, foster care payments in particular are both part of the household budget and a delegated form of public expenditure with the added concerns about accountability (Kirton, 2001). In Ireland, the Child and Family Agency and the Irish Foster Care Association state the fostering allowance is to meet the needs of the child in placement and is not a wage or a salary for the foster carers. There is guidance by both organisations on the use of the foster care allowance (TUSLA Publications, 2014; Irish Foster Care Association, 2013). However, neither organisation discuss how this could be monitored.

In the 1990s the Irish Foster Care Association campaigned to ensure foster carers receive adequate allowances and were successful as the basic allowance was increased in 2000 following recommendations from the *Working Group on Foster Care.* A standard allowance

was then paid across all health board areas which eliminated discretionary payments. Today the foster care allowance is under the remit of the Child and Family Agency and is €325 per week for children under 12 years and €352 per week for children over 12 years (TUSLA Publications, 2014). A growing body of research on work and family with regards to foster care has examined the extent to which financial incentives influence individuals and families to take on the role. These studies highlight the varying ways in which remuneration has an impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers (Riggs and Delfabbro, 2009). For example, a study by Kirton (2001b) explored the place of payment within foster care with the focus on if foster carers perceived their task as 'parenting' or a 'job.' The study found that while most foster carers were not highly motivated by financial rewards associated with care provision, payment levels still must be sufficient to defray the cost of providing care. This study found that reduced pay did not lead to a loss of carers due to the carers feeling underpaid, but insufficient payments did not allow them to provide an adequate level of care.

According to Isomaki (2002) discussions with foster parents have shown money is an unpleasant and unimportant issue for newly approved foster carers. Their impulse to foster often comes of philanthropic or religious origins. The thought might be to fulfil the task selflessly and without any monetary compensation. The need for remuneration only comes when the reality of foster care raises surprising costs. Swartz (2004) argues that care can be provided for both love and money, and in both the private and public domains. Yet there is an inherent difficulty in managing payment, parenthood, and family life. The nature of the foster care allowance in Ireland adds to the debate of providing a public service in a private domain. The foster care allowance does not define the caring role as work, but as normative family relationships which do not get renumerated.

Professionalisation of Foster Care

Payment is only part of the story as the role of fostering has become progressively more complex (Schofield et al, 2013). Professional involvement and expectations of foster carers

raises the debate about the professionalisation of foster care in Ireland which is a complex topic as it raises issues of skill base and quality of care. It is a topic that was frequently debated but did not materialise as an alternative to the general, traditional provision of service in Ireland. There is a provision for *Special Foster Care* in the National Standards for Foster Care 2003 under Standard 22. Standard 22.1 notes the same criteria applies to special foster care that applies to general foster care with additional policies and procedures to support the needs of children with serious behavioural difficulties. Standard 22.3 notes that:

> *'Health boards ensure that only persons who are specifically trained and skilled foster carers and those with relevant experience provide special foster care. Health boards ensure that there is at least one full-time carer available in each placement'* (Department of Health and Children, 2003: 46).

Before the publication of the National Standards, the *Report on the Working Party on Foster Care 2001* also recommended that health boards develop special foster care initiatives to provide placements for children with behavioural difficulties (Department of Health and Children, 2003). Thus, professional foster care has been linked to the increasingly challenging nature of looking after children in care. The importance of training, support and qualifications and the likelihood that foster carers will receive a fee or salary in addition to an allowance suggests a certain level of skill and experience is required (Wilson and Evetts, 2006; Kirton, 2007; Schofield at al, 2013). This attitude towards payment for a particular skill set reflects the evolving role with broader social changes (Kirton, 2007). These factors then make it necessary to consider foster care as a professional role and the associated skills and training commands respect in the role that is on a par with other professionals. Hence, foster carers then become a part of the professional network around the child (Schofield et al, 2013).

Although attitudes towards foster care in Ireland has evolved in the last few decades, attempts to set up professional foster care in the early noughties was still met with concern that foster care would lose its caring ethos and a two-tier foster care system would develop.

These opinions are mirrored by Kjeldsen and Kjeldsen (2010) and Schofield et al (2013) who discuss how the concept of a professional foster carer identity is developed. The question about continuing to provide care to children in an alternative family setting that enables children to experience secure attachments might be compromised. If foster carers are paid a salary and doing a job then the parenting role becomes the professional role and employment status (Kjeldsen and Kjeldsen, 2010; Schofield et al, 2013). If the role of foster care became more professionalised there is also the consideration that family life is the workplace which can then be the subject of even greater scrutiny especially in relation to risk averse 'safe care' policies that often determine the routine in the foster carer's home (Schofield et al, 2009).

Private Foster Care Provision

While foster care remains a public not for profit service, there has been a growth of private foster care providers in Ireland in recent years (Gilligan, 2019). The Child and Family Agency notes the placement of children in foster care has long been the responsibility and practice of statutory providers. However, in more recent years through legislation, regulations, standards and directives, this responsibility has extended to include placing children in foster care through private foster care agencies. A key practice when placing a child in a private placement includes a Service Level Agreement between the private agency and the Child and Family Agency. This is prior to accepting any child into its foster care service. Once a child is placed, the monitoring of the placements are the responsibility of the allocated social worker for the child even if the child is placed in another area. Only a Foster Care Committee of the Child and Family Agency area has the authority to approve foster carers which include statutory and private agencies (TUSLA Publications, 2014). In 2018 there were 387 children placed with private foster care providers representing 9% of all children placed with general foster carers (TUSLA Publications, 2018; Gilligan, 2019). The Child and Family Agency pay fees to private agencies for the services they provide allowing these agencies to offer a more comprehensive level of support compared to what the Child and

Family Agency offer directly to its own carers (Gilligan, 2019). The question as to whether or not the provision of care in the private sector is superior with regards to providing a better resourced and more professional service is important to consider. Both the private and public sectors of foster care provision are tasked with meeting the complex needs of children and providing a sense of safety and permanence (Steen and Smith, 2012). Therefore, their capacity to meet children's needs should always be paramount to the service they provide.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the historical and socio-cultural issues and debates that influenced the development of alternative care for children in Ireland. In recent years foster care has become more regulated and foster carers are subjected to more scrutiny in the assessment process. However, the use of assessment style interviewing is still not common. The families who foster in Ireland are 'ordinary' families who offer their homes and lives to children as an alternative family arrangement. The composition of family is complex and foster families bring their own understanding of the caregiving task to the role when they become approved foster carers. This becomes more complicated when their reasons for taking on the role of fostering must align with statutory requirements or professional expectations. Furthermore, the private family space is then open to public scrutiny which includes being monitored in the care they provide. The literature review will now progress to exploring the 'ordinary' families who are in the extraordinary role of fostering. This will include their motivation to foster, the engagement of all family members in the provision of care, agency support and training and the impact of professional decision making on foster carers.

Chapter 3 – Ordinary Families in Extraordinary Roles

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the historical and socio-cultural debates that informed the evolution of foster care provision in Ireland. The aim of this chapter is to take a closer look at foster family functioning and the attributes or patterns of care that enable foster carers to meet the complex demands of looking after children who have experienced trauma or abuse. Foster carers are expected to develop nurturing and safe environments for children who join their families giving them the opportunity to develop future attachments. However, their approach to care depends on their own feelings of belonging and understanding of the child's needs. This begins with their motivation, but their own attachment patterns, capacity for sensitive caregiving and ability to reflect on the care they provide all play a part in sustaining foster carers in the role. Being a family who fosters must also engage all family members if the child is to become integrated into the family, which includes the consideration of birth family and professional support and training.

Motivation to Foster

The start of the journey for foster carers is when they decide to take on the role of fostering and the process of establishing their suitability to provide care for children begins. To understand their motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic factors must be considered as foster carers can be influenced by a combination of both internal and external processes (MacGregor et al, 2006). A study by Conway (2012) suggests the factors that motivate foster carers to start their fostering journey may also motivate them to continue fostering. Interest in foster carers' motivation is a phenomenon that has been considered for decades. An early study by Josselyn (1952) purports that motivation to foster can be understood in two layers. There are the conscious and 'public' reasons for wanting to care for a child. However, there are also underlying, private and less understood motivations which operate as partial masks so that true motivation is not always readily known through either words or actions (Josselyn, 1952; Dando and Minty, 1987).

This complicated interplay between conscious and unconscious motivations illustrates the complex nature of the process for all involved. Josselyn pointed to the importance of recognising unconscious determinants and the role they play because it is often the motive that initially presents as less significant that reveals the strongest interest and potential for effective caregiving (Josselyn, 1952; Mintz, 1962). Other research by Kay (1966) suggested 'successful' fostering is associated with two specific kinds of motivation. The first is a desire to parent a child and the second is when foster carers identify with children who have experienced abuse or neglect as a result of their own experiences in childhood. Kay believed that unless one or both of these motivations are present, foster carers rarely survive the stress involved in long-term fostering. Kay's reasoning for this is that these motivations represent strong personal needs which can offset potential anxiety or disappointment (Kay 1966; Dando and Minty, 1987).

More recent research by Isomaki (2002) suggests it is possible to identify the complex nature of conscious and unconscious reasons, both intrinsic and extrinsic, behind the decision to become a family who fosters and these reasons are not attributable to a single variable (Isomaki, 2002; Leschied et al, 2004; Migliorini et al, 2018). Intrinsic motivation is described as motivation that stems from an individual's innate and genuine interest to act on something (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Cooley et al, 2020). It comes from within one's self and is internalised in an individual's value system. This can also refer to the enjoyment someone finds in the activities they engage in. One reason foster carers' motivation is important is because the quality of the care they provide can depend on it (Neagoe et al, 2019). Studies on altruism as a type of intrinsic motivation revealed that foster carers want to help, love, and provide a stable environment for children. Specific altruistic motivators include wanting to support children (MacGregor et al, 2006).

The opposite to intrinsic motivation is extrinsic motivation which is motivation that is driven by an anticipated reward or the fulfilment of expectations from others (Migliorini et al, 2018).

However, research suggests that income generation is not a principal motivation to foster, though studies of motivation only rarely distinguish between carers from different income groups (Randle et al, 2011; Sebba, 2012). A study by Daniel (2011) noted a common misconception of foster care identified by foster carers in the study is that people outside the foster care system believed fostering was a lucrative form of employment. The author also noted a perceived shortage of foster carers in the community, and an increased need for foster placements, was the initial motivation for people interested in fostering. MacGregor et al (2006) and Rodger et at (2006) identified making a difference in a child's life as a key motivating factor. Whatever their reasons for taking on the role, understanding motivation to foster is imperative as foster carers enter the system with the expectation they will be parenting a child, but the complexity of the role often exposes them to a range of stressors that stretch beyond those of typical parenthood. Foster carers must then adjust their lives to manage the emotional and behavioural needs of the children in their care (Whenan et al, 2009; Sammut, 2017; Vanschoonlandt et al, 2012; Harding et al, 2018).

Attachment Patterns of Foster Carers

More than 50 years of literature on attachment theory has shown that early childhood experiences, especially parent-child relationships, influence how parents respond to their children (Steele et al, 2016; Bowlby, 1982; Ainsworth, 1991). Attachment theory purports that close relationships in adulthood are viewed as originating from childhood relationships with primary caregivers. The responsiveness of the attachment figure to the child's emotional needs leads to a secure attachment while caregiving that lacks appropriate responsiveness leads to insecure attachment (Caltabiano and Thorpe, 2007; Hazen and Shaver, 1987; Bowlby, 1973). Kelly (2019) observes that seventy-five percent of children experience some form of stress in their lives before the age of nine years. In some cases the nature of these adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can lead to negative long-term outcomes (Bellis et al, 2016). Based on the emotional availability of the primary caregiver coupled with the caregiver's behaviour, a young child is thought to develop 'internal working models' of how

their relationships should be and these models influence their subsequent representations of the self and others (Bowlby, 1969; Jacobsen et al, 2014). This attachment working model then shapes how the individual comes to view the self and others' responsiveness to emotional needs which evolves into an attachment style that the individual carries into adulthood (Caltabiano and Thorpe, 2007; Hazen and Shaver, 1987; Bowlby, 1969; 1973).

Taking this into consideration, looking after children who received insensitive caregiving in the past can create a complex construct for foster carers as their own mental representations pertaining to relationships are likely to influence their caregiving behaviours (Dubois-Comtois et al, 2015; Madigan et al, 2006; Withington et al, 2016). Therefore, it is likely their interpretation and response to the needs of children placed with them will depend on their earlier experiences that influenced how they process thoughts and feelings associated with their own attachment patterns (Berlin and Cassidy, 2001; Main, 1990; Caltabiano and Thorpe, 2007). Foster carers with secure attachment styles have a positive expectation of support, care and warmth from those who are close to them. Those with insecure attachment styles have expectations of harm, rejection, abandonment, betrayal or unreliable support or care. These styles have implications for the care of children as experiences of inadequate parenting in early life can be repeated. They also have implications for adult relating styles in that avoidant or dismissive ways of relating can negatively influence the choice of partner or support figures and inhibit the ability to access emotional support (Rhodes et al, 2003; Bifulco et al, 2008).

Attachment patterns also emphasise that emotion serves as an indicator of how the interpretation of issues impact individuals on a physical, social and psychological level. Emotions are adaptable and can either protect self-interests or lead foster carers to achieve personal goals and tasks (Goleman, 1995; Johnson, 2020). The psychological constructs that provide positive outcomes for children in foster care include a foster carer's ability to understand why a child responds the way they do and to not reject them on the basis of their

behaviour. A foster carer's warmth and affection towards the child in care also affects placement stability as does their level of satisfaction in their role (Muller et al, 2019). Finally, foster carers whose parenting styles are organised and positive during placement, and where there is emotional sensitivity and availability, show fewer disruptions in the care they provide (Oke et al, 2013; Chamberlain et al, 2006).

Sensitive Caregiving and Emotional Investment of Foster Carers

General foster carers do not have a shared history with the children they care for and often the full details of the child's history is unknown to them. Thus, the relationship between the child and foster carers can be precarious because of the child's conflicting emotions and insecurity in relating to their foster carers when they are first placed with them (Dozier at al, 2006; Leathers, 2004; Van Andel et al, 2015). In this context, the relationships that children develop with their foster carers has the potential to either perpetuate or change the patterns of attachment the child built with their previous caregivers (Garcia Quiroga and Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2016). A child can react to a foster placement with avoidant behaviour and this can be interpreted as if the child is adapting to their new family. The foster carers only realise they are not settled when they do not communicate their needs (Van Andel et al, 2015). Similarly, when a child has experienced insensitive caregiving previously, their learning from those adverse experiences can lead to signals that are difficult to interpret as they struggle to articulate their needs (Jacobsen et al, 2018).

In some circumstances these can present as triggers for foster carers depending on their understanding of the presenting behaviours. Sometimes this behaviour can become challenging for foster carers to the extent that it leads to stress in the household (Chamberlain et al, 2006; Van Andel et al, 2015). Therefore, to be given the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging and to develop healthy social-emotional functioning, children in care are often in need of highly sensitive and emotionally invested foster carers (Jacobsen et al, 2018). Nurturing care tends to be driven by the qualities of the caregiver

and a foster carer's emotional availability is a relevant concept with regards to the skills a caregiver needs to support a child in placement (Stovall-McClough and Dozier, 2004; Dozier et al, 2013). The key to this approach is the acceptance of a wide range of emotions rather than responsiveness to solely distress situations (Biringen, 2008; Emde, 1980; Van Andel et al, 2015).

Responding to behaviours that are disruptive or detached can evoke a range of negative emotions that may contribute to foster carers feeling their role is a burden which causes a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing. They may struggle to balance their own social and emotional needs against those of the children in their care (Shyu, 2000; Mullan, 1992; Picken et al, 2011). There is also evidence that disrupted attachments and adverse experiences in their own childhoods may provide foster carers with an outlook that gives them a more empathic understanding of the needs of children who have come from similar backgrounds (Caltabiano and Thorpe, 2007). An early study by Jenkins (1965) noted the crucial difference between successful and less successful foster carers was whether they had resolved their unhappy childhood experiences and healing had occurred (Jenkins, 1965).

Sensitive caregiving and emotional investment can be influenced by other factors too which are both internal and external to foster carers. The concept of permanence has a range of meanings in foster care, but in this context refers to the emotional dimensions of stability, and one main aspect of this is the continuity of relationships for both foster carers and the children in their care (Biehal, 2014). However, this notion of permanence for foster carers creates ambiguity with regards to the emotional commitment that is expected of them when they do not know if the child in their care will be staying with them. Thus, different conceptions of the role for foster carers may lead to contradictory expectations of the care they should provide (Blythe et al, 2013). Similarly, foster carers' experiences in collaborating with professionals and parenting children with complex emotional needs have highlighted the

importance of using interpersonal capabilities and skills to effectively manage issues as they arise (Buehler et al, 2003). Interpersonal skills include problem-solving skills, social skills and coping skills (Taylor et al, 2009). However, this is assuming foster carers have these skills or can access them in stressful situations. A study by Maclay et al (2006) on surviving the system as a foster carer found that foster carers often feel undervalued and whilst some manage the system, there are others who become dragged into draining conflict. This highlights foster carers' role ambiguity as they have a parental role, but they have limited decision making capacity (Thomson and McArthur, 2009).

Parental Reflective Functioning

The capacity for parental reflective functioning (PRF) is important in enabling foster carers to best respond to complex behaviours as it assists them to support the emotional wellbeing of the child in their care (Cooper and Redfern, 2016; Midgley et al, 2019). PRF refers to the caregiver's capacity to think about their own and the child's mental states and how these may underlie behaviour. Their ability to reflect upon the child's internal experience is crucial to passing on a secure attachment. PRF involves both a self-reflective and an interpersonal component in which the caregiver must grasp the complex interplay between their own feelings (mental states) and the child's inner experience. If a foster carer can hold in mind a representation of the child as having feelings, this allows the child to notice and explore their own internal experience via the foster carer's representation of it (Fonagy et al, 2002a; Bunday et al, 2015). Elevated levels of PRF have been related to lower levels of stress in parenting, possibly because better PRF assists the foster carer to understand the child's behaviour rather than seeing it as simply disruptive. PRF is also shown to be associated with important facets of parenting such as sensitive caregiving, tolerance, stronger parent-child relationships and secure attachments (Slade, 2005; McMahon and Meins, 2012; Huth-Bocks et al, 2014; Stacks et al, 2014; Midgley et al, 2019).

Foster carers' capacity for PRF can be observed in their coping strategies which gives a strong indication of how they will manage the extra tasks of fostering (Reimer and Schafer, 2015). More precisely, birth family contact or complex behaviours can cause triggers for foster carers that might lead to stressful interactions between them and the children in their care (Gabler et al, 2014; 2018). This is significant as caregiver stress is likely to play a role in the child's development and behavioural functioning (Brown and Bednar, 2006; Goemans et al, 2018). It might be the case that foster carers' parenting capacity is markedly reduced if they are experiencing stress and in these situations they are less likely to meet the needs of the children in their care or to integrate them into their family (Bywater et al, 2011). There is also a complex network surrounding foster care which increases foster carers' susceptibility to stress. Depending on their capacity to manage the extra tasks of fostering, a mismatch between resources and demands of being a foster carer could evolve (Gabler et al, 2018).

Foster Carer Resilience

Resilience is described as the ability to function competently amid adversity and stress and refers to the resources which protect an individual from the potential negative effect of encountered stressors by modifying the responses (Cooley et al, 2017; Schofield and Beek, 2005; Chmitorz et al, 2018). When foster carers are managing complex behaviours in their home their resilience includes a range of protective characteristics such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, a sense of security, hopefulness, and reflective functions which all contribute to successful adaptation and coping strategies (Schofield and Beek, 2005). Filipp and Aymanns (2010) propose two perspectives on ways of coping with difficulties as they emerge. The first involves reorganising an individual's adaptation to their environment. This demonstrates how a critical life event can change the relationship for those affected by it by either altering the environment or adapting to the change in circumstances. The second view emphasises ways of reducing discrepancies between actual and desired circumstances by showing how an individual's dissatisfaction with their circumstances leads them to take remedial action (Filipp and Aymanns, 2010; Reimer and Schafer, 2015). In that sense,

resilience is considered a continuous process in which an individual's life, experiences and knowledge intertwine rather than the occurrence of a single event (Rutter, 2012).

Emotional support has been found to be an important attribute for resilience as having at least one positive relationship with a significant person has been identified as important in resilient outcomes (Garcia-Dia et al, 2013). Emotional support is also one way to enhance the process of resilience in families who foster. This support can be received through informal or formal sources. Examples of informal support would typically be from family or other foster carers. While informal support is linked to reduced stress in the caregiving role, formal support from allocated social workers has been linked to foster carer retention and satisfaction (Geiger et al, 2017, Mallette et al, 2020). To understand resilience in the caregiving role, it needs to be contextualised within the family network. For example, despite stress factors there are many families who are able to sustain fostering while maintaining or enhancing the functioning of their family unit. This happens when family members develop shared meaning and offer mutual support to one another (Lietz et al, 2016).

Resilience can involve the process of creating changes to the structure and daily functioning of the family unit (Leitz et al, 2016). Foster carers encounter a variety of stressful events in their day to day lives. Some cope with these adverse effects and resilience to stress can be thought of as a decrease in negative emotional responding coupled with an increase in positive emotion. Understanding the factors that contribute to variability in resilience may aid successful coping (Carlson et al, 2012). The essential feature of all significant life experience is that it has meaning. Meaning making addresses the ultimate concerns about the purpose of life and strengthens endurance during hardship. It can also provide opportunities for significant learning and development in adulthood and is at the centre of human experience and the most fundamental human activity (Lee, 2006).

Engagement of all Family Members in the Fostering Task

Foster care is characterised by certain contradictory features. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is a form of public care, but the care is provided in a private domain. This generates the question about what happens when a private family is transformed into a space for public caregiving? How does this transformation affect the privacy and social interactions of the family? (Hojer, 2007). In their role, foster carers enter a complex system which has specific challenges on top of traditional parenting stressors. These are system related challenges such as being expected to build relationships with birth families and maintaining working relationships with professionals (McKeough et al, 2017). This is apart from the complex and often intense behaviours they manage with children in placement (Riggs et al, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) observed that individuals do not develop in isolation, but through a multitude of experiences in relation to their family, home, work, community and society. The individual is continually evolving and the interactions between these environments are fundamental to on-going development. In foster care, individuals are part of a family which is a functional system, the operation of which will be altered by its internal composition and external forces (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fearnley, 2020). Giddens (1991) argues that in contemporary society individuals rarely have clear or traditional roles mapped out for them. Instead, they often have to adopt multiple and ambiguous roles which in turn have shifting expectations for them from family, friends or professionals (Giddens, 1991; Schofield et al, 2013). This suggests foster carers are not unusual in having to negotiate multiple roles, but for them this negotiation might be emotionally intense or represent a source of stress which impacts them in their role. Therefore, managing complexity can put pressure on foster carers which goes beyond the normal daily happenings in a home. This can build up over time to the point where foster carers begin to feel the negatives of fostering outweigh the positive benefits and rewards (Eaton and Caltabiano, 2009).

Due to these challenges foster carers may experience a strain in the quality of their interparental relationships which includes both their marital and co-parenting relationships. The quality of the relationship encompasses interpersonal processes and patterns of interactions between partners. For example, communication and conflict management and intrapersonal processes reflective of each partner's evaluation of the relationship (Richardson and Futris, 2019). As well as that there are strong social expectations in the general population that stable parenting is supported by a lifelong commitment to children. While this is not necessarily the case in foster care, it can nonetheless have an impact on foster carers' feelings towards long-term commitment. Given the potential consequences for children and foster carers when complex dynamics develop that are associated with placement disharmony, it is important to understand the variations in foster carers' perceptions of their experiences of parenting children with complex needs (Leathers at al, 2019).

Birth Children of Foster Carers

Foster care is considered a collective undertaking of all family members, which is modified in its structure, given that the needs and desires of all members are linked to the needs and desires of others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Raineri et al, 2018). It should not be forgotten that a child coming into care is a stranger whose history and difficult experiences leaves no-one indifferent and can affect the system of the foster family in structure and dynamics (Mainpin et al, 2016). Thus, foster care has a significant impact on the lives of birth children of foster carers (Nuske, 2010). Taking the aforementioned into consideration, there are two reasons birth children should be involved in the foster care process. The first is that they have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The second is that they influence the foster care process as their views affect their parents' availability both directly and indirectly (Thompson et al, 2016; Raineri et al, 2018). A study by Thompson et al (2016) suggests that birth children attribute importance to their position in the family, for example the oldest or youngest child, and that is a key element to the way they relate to their parents. Therefore,

emotional security and parent-child relationships can be strained by a foster placement if this is not taken into consideration (Thompson et al, 2016). In that sense, birth children also experience loss associated with their place and role in the family, especially regarding their relationship with their parents (Twigg and Swan, 2007).

Birth children have identified factors that are different for them when they become a family who fosters. They noted fostering can increase conflict and stress within their family (Nuske, 2010). They are required to share their home, personal space and possessions with children in placement and sometimes they take on the caregiving role (Hojer et al, 2013; Roche and Noble-Carr, 2016; Raineri et al, 2018). Thompson and McPherson (2011) conducted a systematic review of a number of studies that examined the experience of fostering as described by foster carers and birth children. The review highlighted a number of relationship changes between birth children and their parents. Birth children reported tensions in the family, a loss of close family relationships, time, attention and distance between family members. All this was as a result of fostering (Thompson and McPherson, 2011). However, some birth children felt family relationships were closer during fostering (Thompson et al, 2016). An Irish study by Williams (2014) found that birth children of foster carers provide practical support to their parents in caring for children in foster care. Furthermore, older birth children in some foster families accompanied the children in foster care to access visits with their birth parents (Williams, 2014).

Birth Family Contact

Most children who remain in foster care continue to see members of their birth family (Taplin et al, 2015). Therefore, foster carers' feelings towards birth family contact is an important consideration especially if they struggle with the level and quality of contact and the relationships children have with their birth parents (Boyle, 2017). Birth family contact can play a significant role in a child's wellbeing and the proposed function of it is to preserve the relationships to benefit the child, bring a greater sense of continuity to the child's life story

and identity development, and to enhance the child's psychological well-being (Schofield and Simmonds, 2011, Taplin, 2005, Garcia-Martin et al, 2019). However, this contact is complex as it involves different people and interactions which can elicit difficult emotions for all involved (Collings et al, 2020). Determining what contact is in the best interests of the child is a challenge for social workers and there are several factors that need to be considered including the child's age, stage of development and their wishes and opinions on contact (Garcia-Martin et al, 2019). A study by MacDonald (2017) discussed post-adoption contact, but the context for birth family contact in foster care is similar. She suggests social workers have a leading role in establishing and supporting contact arrangements. If social work support for contact is to be empowering and a sensitive collaboration, it has to be informed by an understanding of how various parties experience relationships (MacDonald, 2017).

It has also been suggested that birth family contact contributes to more stable placement outcomes as it helps children to understand their situation and to have a realistic view of their biological parents (Argent, 2006, Taplin, 2005, Garcia-Martin et al, 2019). A child's feelings of ambivalence about belonging in a foster family can depend on how they position themselves in relation to their birth families too. Children who feel the loss of their parents as unresolved or who had unreliable or rejecting parents can be more pre-occupied about where they belong compared to children who can make sense of separation (Biehal, 2014). However, the relationship between the foster family and the birth family also has a direct effect on the child who, in many cases, is attached to both families (Chateauneuf et al, 2018).

The importance of building strong relationships with children in foster care is highlighted in a study by Maaskant et al (2016) who explored foster children's relationships with their birth parents, their foster carers, and their wellbeing. The outcome of the study suggested they had positive feelings of loyalty and attachment towards both their birth parents and their foster carers, but their wellbeing was related to stronger attachments with their foster carers.

The study found no indications of competing positions between the birth parents and the foster carers from the child's perspective. In contrast, a study by Jarvinen and Luckow (2020), which took a sociological perspective of ambivalence, analysed 'co-parenting' between birth parents and foster carers as prototypes of ambivalent relationships. The incompatibility was rooted in the conflicts between the foster carers' professional role and emotional involvement with the child and the status of the birth parents as 'failed' parents from the perspective of the authorities, and their aspirations to get their children home. The study showed how structural ambivalence is associated with difficulties for birth parents and foster carers in translating the principle of the 'best interests of the child' into concrete practice in foster care (Jarvinen and Luckow, 2020).

Trauma Experienced by Foster Carers in the Role

The role of caring for traumatised children has been widely recognised as having inherent risks for secondary exposure to trauma and stress (Bride et al, 2007). As discussed earlier in the chapter, providing sensitive care for children requires foster carers to understand and support their presenting behaviours. McLaren et al (2024) note this means there is risk associated with trauma responses when children are distressed, which can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout. Teculeasa et al (2023) describe compassion fatigue as an emotional disconnection resulting from repeated exposure to someone else's trauma. Central to the definition of compassion fatigue is avoidance of trauma related thoughts or memories (Figley 1995; Hannah and Woolgar, 2018). A study by Lyttle et al (2021) focused on placement breakdown in adoption, but it is also relevant to foster care. The authors note the harmful impact of accumulated adversity transcends far beyond the point of placing a child in care as most breakdowns tend to happen not around the time the child was placed with the family, but as conflict and complications evolve over time as the family are together. Therefore, understanding and supporting foster carers' experiences is vital to their sense of wellbeing. Whitt-Woosley et al (2020) observe it is important to discuss exposure to trauma with foster carers as they might also experience compassion satisfaction in their role,

meaning they are not always stressed when they are exposed to secondary trauma. However, sometimes even when they are experienced foster carers, they might need support and interventions to address the issues arising for the children in their care (Whitt-Woosley et al, 2020).

Support and Training for Foster Carers

Understanding the components most likely to produce a successful foster placement assists professionals to support foster carers (Haysom et al, 2020). In Ireland foster carers work alongside at least two allocated social workers if they have a child in placement. The child has an allocated social worker required under Section 5.1 of the National Standards for Foster Care (2003) which states that a social worker is allocated to a child '*as soon as the need for an admission to care is identified and for as long as they remain in care'* (Department of Health and Children, 2003: 16). The child's allocated social worker is responsible for ensuring compliance with statutory requirements and standards and the overall management of the placement for the child including an assessment of their needs. The child's allocated social worker listens to the views of the child, works in partnership with the child's family and ensures the welfare of the child is promoted (Department of Health and Children, 2003). At the end of 2022 eighty seven percent of children in care had an allocated social worker with 731 (11%) of children awaiting allocation of a social worker at the end of the year (TUSLA Publications, 2022).

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, general foster carers should have an allocated link social worker which is required under the National Standards for Foster Care (2003). Link social workers provide support and supervision to foster carers and organise training. A schedule of training is provided by TUSLA and private fostering agencies and foster carers are encouraged to attend to continue to develop their knowledge and skills in the role. Similarly, foster carers often source training themselves externally with the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) or specific training if required to meet a child's needs – trauma informed

care for example. The link social worker ensures that foster carers receive all relevant background information about the child in their care and consult with the child's allocated social worker (Department of Health and Children, 2003). Therefore, it could be argued that foster carers and social workers collaborate in service delivery to children and their birth parents (Vanderfaeillie et al, 2016). However, even with strong levels of support, foster carers often endure the burden of care for the children placed with them (Murray et al, 2011; Kaasboll et al, 2019). This is because the vulnerability of children in care places a high demand on foster carers and the sustainment of productive relationships with professionals (Cooley and Petren, 2011).

The quality of the relationships between social workers and foster carers has been discussed for many years and according to Sellick (1996) can make or break a placement. The working relationship between social workers and foster carers forms the basis of how people negotiate, what they achieve and if they are satisfied with the outcome. Open communication and rapport and recognising foster carers as members of a team whose views are respected has been cited as an important support by both foster carers and professionals (Daniel, 2011). Satisfaction for foster carers in collaborating with professionals depends on the information that is provided about a child's background history, returning foster carers' calls promptly and addressing their queries in a timely manner (Rodger et al, 2006; Vanderfaeillie et al, 2016).

Training

Training is considered necessary to provide foster carers with the knowledge, skills and support they need to develop positive foster carer-child relationships and to manage potential emotional and behavioural difficulties encountered in placement (Cox et al, 2003; Kaasboll et al, 2019). In recent years in Ireland support and training provided to foster carers has become more focused and there is an emphasis on training that implements trauma informed care. One example of this intervention is *Fostering Connections* which is a Trauma-

informed Care (TIC) psychoeducation intervention developed in Ireland (Lotty et al, 2020). Another is a Podcast that was set up by the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) called *Stories from Foster Care* which was launched in November 2021 and hosts people from all 'walks of life' who have different experiences of foster care.

Foster carers can also access training both online and in person from a wide variety of sources including the Child and Family Agency and the Irish Foster Care Association. However, although there is a need for foster carers to possess the skills to manage complex behaviours, research suggests current training is not fully preparing them for the demands of caring for children placed with them (Benesh and Cui, 2017; Solomon et al, 2017). This is possibly because it is important to understand foster carers' needs so that training can enhance their knowledge and skills in the role (Kaasboll et al, 2019). Similarly, if foster carers receive appropriate training to meet their needs this helps to mediate the stress associated with the caregiving task and creates a balanced parenting style that provides boundaries and positive reinforcement (Greeno et al, 2016).

Summary

This chapter looked at previous literature that examined foster carers' reasons for taking on the role of fostering and the complexities they experience in the care they provide. As 'ordinary' families, foster carers bring their own experiences to the role when they decide to foster. All family members engage in the role, but each one has a different understanding and interpretation of the care that should be provided. The private family setting is also transformed into a space for public caregiving. This highlights the challenges of the complex task of fostering for all concerned. The next chapter will discuss the research design and methodological framework that was used to gather data on the life experiences that motivated foster carers to take on the role of fostering to bridge the gap in knowledge and understanding of the experiences of foster carers in Ireland.

Chapter 4 – Methodology and Methods

Introduction

This research addresses a gap in knowledge on the provision of foster care in Ireland by exploring with foster carers their motivations to foster to develop a more in-depth understanding of how they were influenced by their personal histories and experiences. To gain insight into how foster carers make sense of their experiences, the process of exploring their feelings, perceptions and reflections was employed. The methodological approach adopted for this research is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the aim of this chapter is to discuss the methodological principles and methods that underpin the approach. I begin by discussing the research design which will include the epistemological stance. I then introduce the methodology, the rationale for considering IPA, ethical considerations, the study sample, methods of data collection, analytical techniques, and procedures that were followed to ensure methodological rigour.

Research Design

This research is qualitative in nature as it is commonly used to generate detailed personal accounts (Smith et al, 2009). The analysis process is therefore described as inductive as it is driven by the data, rather than deductive which would be driven by existing research and literature (Smith et al, 2009; Goodall, 2014). Carter and Little (2007) clarify a framework which provides the foundations for conducting qualitative research. The first fundamental component is epistemology which guides methodological choices. The methodological approach, in turn, shapes research questions, objectives and study design and provides justification for the methods used to gather data (Carter and Little, 2007). Epistemology is described as a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). It is the study of the nature of knowledge and justification (Dawson, 2009). When thinking epistemologically, researchers attempt to answer questions such as ‘what is the nature of knowledge?’ and ‘how is knowledge produced?’ (Willig, 2013).

A social constructionist epistemological stance was adopted for this research. Crotty (1998) describes social constructionism as the view that '*all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context* (Crotty, 1998: 42). Going back to my rationale for undertaking this research, I feel social constructionism speaks to the essence of foster carers' experiences. This was highlighted for me repeatedly as a social work practitioner supporting foster carers in their role. When concerns were raised about a foster carer's approach to care it was often the case that their meaningful reality was different to the professionals involved with them or the children in their care. It was how they constructed their reality in the caregiving role that sometimes raised concerns for professionals and caused confusion for the foster carers. This opinion is mirrored in Crotty's (1998) suggestion that meaning is not discovered but constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Furthermore, according to Butcher and Gersh (2014) and Eysenck (2003) the search for an objective truth is misleading as it is the significance that humans make of the experience which is meaningful as opposed to the meaning itself.

In previous chapters I addressed how the provision of alternative care in Ireland was heavily influenced by the historical and socio-cultural composition of family which culminated in the 'ordinary' family becoming a family who fosters. Furthermore, foster care in Ireland evolved from practices that were altruistic in nature during the time of medieval fosterage to a more defined role where foster carers are paid an allowance for the care of the child, but they are still not considered 'professionals.' In this regard social constructionism assists me as a researcher to develop an understanding of how foster care is historically, culturally and politically situated. Young and Collin (2004) assert that knowledge is historically and culturally specific. Importantly, social constructionism does not just say that something is socially constructed, but instead points to the historical and cultural location of that construction (Young and Collin, 2004). Berger and Luckman (1984) and Houston (2001)

observe that society is not viewed as a pre-existent domain and instead is the product of people engaging with one another where these interactions become externalised, objectified and then internalised (Berger and Luckman, 1984; Houston, 2001). Therefore, in my opinion a social constructionist epistemology recognises that even though the provision of foster care is historically and culturally situated in Irish society, the reality of everyday living for foster carers is subjective and differs from one carer to another, so this perspective gives scope to understand the meaning they ascribe to their experiences.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the methodological approach to explore the in-depth experiences of foster carers. IPA has been developed as a distinctive approach to conducting qualitative research that offers a theoretical foundation and a detailed procedural guide (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). IPA is an approach committed to exploring how research participants make sense of life experiences and has a lens that focuses on individual experience; the central concern is to attempt to portray a rich and detailed personal experience. IPA recognises that participants are interpreters of their world and it is through their own lenses that they interpret their experiences (Smith et al, 2009).

This methodological approach appealed to me as a practitioner-researcher as it felt like an appropriate fit for the contribution I want this research to make. As a social work practitioner, I recruited and assessed foster carers in Ireland for twenty years. During that time it often occurred to me that the systemic approach to assessment and support did not afford foster carers the opportunity to critically engage in discussions that would support them to make sense of their experiences. As IPA focuses on portraying rich and detailed personal experiences, I felt that by adopting this approach it would provide a space for foster carers to explore their experiences through their lenses. In that sense, the phenomenological approach taken in an IPA study is ideally suited to this research as it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms. Experience is a complex concept, but IPA researchers

are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on a particular significance. When people are engaged in a momentous experience in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research engages with those reflections (Smith, 2019). In this research the participants reflected on the circumstances that influenced their motivations to become foster carers and in doing so they started to articulate how they made sense of their identity in the role and how this was generated.

IPA is hermeneutic in its attention to the layers of interpretation involved in IPA research (Smith et al, 2009). IPA researchers need to get experience-near to meet their phenomenological commitments while also seeking accounts from participants that are rich in content to support interpretation suitable for IPA's hermeneutic commitment (Boden et al, 2019). The IPA researcher becomes a part of the process by constructing the research questions and engaging in data analysis. There are two levels to the approach of IPA; the participants engage in an interpretation of their experiences and secondly the researcher engages in an interpretation of the participants' interpretation (Ferguson et al, 2010). This was a fundamental part of the process for me as I wanted to engage with the participants on their terms to capture their contextual and deeply personal experiences. In IPA studies, the researcher at first stays close to the data, but then moves out in scope and engages with the participants using the researcher's own lens. This double layer of interpretation is referred to in IPA as a double hermeneutic. The researcher is seen as central to the process, all of which is co-constructed by the participants and the researcher. IPA also recognises the reader of the research as the third interpreter, hence there is a triple hermeneutic involved at the point of research dissemination (Smith et al, 2009). Applying a triple hermeneutic is important to this study as I felt that ultimately I want to reach foster carers and social workers as readers of this research. The hope is that they can relate to the analysis and interpretation of the participants' experiences.

To conduct a thorough examination of individual experience, IPA requires a commitment to the idiographic or to the particular (Kirn et al, 2019). IPA's commitment to the particular operates at two levels. Firstly, there is a commitment to the sense of detail and subsequent depth of analysis. Therefore, analysis must be thorough and systematic. Secondly, IPA is committed to understanding particular experiential phenomena from the perspective of particular people in a particular context (Smith et al, 2009). IPA studies are therefore in contrast with a nomothetic stance where the researcher is concerned with making claims at a group or population level. Instead, the knowledge claims of an IPA study are intended to provide a contextual insight of a particular phenomenon (Kirn et al, 2019). IPA's deeply idiographic exploration of each participant's experience also provides flexibility to examine similarities and differences between each participant (Sauve et al, 2020; Smith at al, 2009). Phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography are discussed in more detail in the next few sections of the chapter as exploring these philosophical foundations of IPA will ensure the focus and aim of the approach is understood (Willig, 2013). This in turn will give the reader a more in-depth understanding of foster carers' experiences which might assist social workers to reflect on how they make sense of the caregiving role.

Table 4.1: Layers of Interpretation Involved in an IPA Study

Get experience near to meet phenomenological commitments. Seek accounts from participants that are rich in content (Boden et al, 2019). The researcher becomes a part of the process by constructing the research questions and engaging in data analysis (Ferguson et al, 2010).
The researcher at first stays close to the date but then moves out in scope and engages with the participants using the researcher's own lens. This double layer of interpretation is referred to in IPA as a double hermeneutic (Smith et al, 2009).
IPA also recognises the reader as the third interpreter. Hence, there is a triple hermeneutic at the point of research dissemination (Smith et al, 2009).
The idiographic commitment of an IPA study operates on two levels. Firstly, there is a commitment to detail and depth of analysis. Secondly, there is a commitment to understanding phenomena from the perspectives of particular people in a particular context (Smith et al, 2009).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is one of the theoretical underpinnings that influences IPA and is one of the key approaches in this research with regards to exploring and understanding the complex experiences of foster carers. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and an approach to research and allows for an in-depth exploration of how phenomena appear to us in our consciousness, and the nature and meaning of such phenomena (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006). There are different emphases and interests amongst phenomenologists, but they have all shared an interest in thinking what being a human is like, especially in terms of the things that matter to us, and which constitute our lived world. Many phenomenologists have also been committed to thinking about how we might come to understand what our experiences of the world are like (Smith et al, 2009). Phenomenology as a philosophy was developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) in the early twentieth century. Husserl's founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined the way it occurs and in its own terms. Knowledge begins with experience and remains within experience (Smith et al, 2009). This was mirrored in the approach that was taken to gathering data for this study. The focus was on the participants' experiences as I felt their perspectives as foster carers could only be truly understood by examining their deeply personal experiences.

Finlay (2009) notes the immediate challenge for researchers embarking on phenomenological inquiry is to move beyond what we already know and to break away from our own attitude to find a way to remain open to new understandings. I was strongly influenced by this as a practitioner-researcher because I spent so many years supporting foster carers in their role. I reflected on the significance of Husserl's argument that in order to understand any given phenomenon '*we must go back to the things themselves'* (Husserl, 1970: 252). In this statement he suggests we experience the world using the 'natural attitude' which means we take our experiences for granted (Smith et al, 2009). I think I took my experience for granted at the beginning of this research in that I thought it gave me the

knowledge required to understand foster carers' experiences. When I then explored Husserl's belief that phenomenology was pre-suppositional - that nothing should be assumed or taken-for-granted when trying to understand a phenomenon, I started to re-think my position. As a researcher I then decided I would try to reach the true essence of the participants' experiences. However, this turned into a complex process as I was unsure how I was going to do it or if the essence of their experiences could be truly reached. The challenge for me in the early days of the research was how to position myself as a practitioner-researcher to ensure the participants in the research were heard and understood.

Husserl (1970) wanted to get to the pure essence of a phenomenon to understand how one looks at something. To Husserl, intentionality is the fundamental property of consciousness. It is how we look at something and our awareness of it that is the principle theme within his philosophy (Peoples, 2021). Husserl (1927) writes about a deliberate suspension, a bracketing, of the natural attitude towards the world. Individual impressions that enter consciousness are ever in flux and yet they represent an essential flow which allows for the construction of reality (Gaston, 2013). Husserl developed a method intended to identify core structures and features of human experience. He suggested researchers need to consider the consequences of taken-for-granted ways of living. In doing this there is scope to 'bracket' the taken-for-granted world to concentrate instead on our perception of that world (Husserl, 1927; Smith et al, 2009). Therefore, the focus of this research was twofold; the first was to capture the essence of the participants' experiences and the second was to make sense of their perceptions of their worlds. To do that I had to carefully consider my position as a practitioner-researcher and my own subjective consciousness.

According to Eberle (2015) researchers investigate phenomena according to their own subjective consciousness. Thus, the 'bracketing' of assumptions reduces the beliefs and theoretical or pre-theoretical presuppositions and elements of knowledge that are involved in

the constitution of a phenomena. Presuppositions are also known as ‘epoche’ and ‘phenomenological reduction’ (Giorgi, 1997). As a researcher this was the greatest challenge for me. I struggled to understand how my prior knowledge could be truly ‘bracketed.’ However, when Husserl (1970) discusses the experience of truth, he considers how experience may come to be trusted as evidence. For example, two individuals can have the same sensations, but they are affected differently in how they feel. This implies that inner evidence is the experience of truth. Therefore, individuals’ experiences of truth may not coincide with each other (Husserl, 1970; McSherry et al, 2019). This resonated with me and gave me confidence in my skills as a researcher to reflect on the process and to understand the aim of the research was to capture particular experiences in a particular context.

The teachings of Husserl (1970) assists IPA researchers to focus centrally on the process of reflection. He sets the agenda for the attentive and systematic examination of the content of consciousness which is our lived experience. Husserl (1970) believed that all human thinking was linked to something and that everything we know has an objective existence, but when we discover it the act of knowing makes it subjective as well because we name it. Husserl (1970) also believed it was impossible to use any kind of thinking or knowing that was not linked to language to really understand the essence of something. This highlights the importance of reflective thinking when studying experience (Smith et al, 2009). However, studying experience is a complex task so the aim is to produce an account which is ‘experience close’ rather than ‘experience far’ (Smith, 2011). While Husserl was concerned with the essence of experience, IPA attempts to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people (Smith et al, 2009).

Heidegger (1889-1976) emphasised his divergence from Husserl as it was his belief that Husserl’s phenomenology was too abstract. His approach to phenomenology is often taken to set out the beginnings of the hermeneutic and existential emphases in phenomenological philosophy. He believed that our engagement with the world was intentional and he argued

that people cannot be meaningfully detached from their context, from other people, objects, language and culture (Smith et al, 2009). Heidegger's belief that our engagement in the world is intentional grounded my approach to the consciousness of the participants' decision-making processes in this research. They made a decision to foster, but their decisions cannot be understood in isolation of their being-in-the-world and what that means for them. That is before they enter the system of child protection and welfare which takes on a whole other meaning in relation to the task of fostering. Therefore, Heidegger's argument that people cannot be meaningfully detached from their context is significant with regards to their reasons for taking on the role of fostering.

According to Heidegger (1962), meaning is fundamentally important to understand phenomena and he questioned the possibility that any knowledge can exist outside of interpretation. In the early stages of this research, the prospect of interpreting foster carers' experiences became a daunting task for me. I was influenced by Heidegger's perspective which was that '*the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation'* (Heidegger, 1962: 37). It was his belief that there is no way of bracketing experience because we are always in the world with others in the circumstances of existence (Peoples, 2021). I felt intertwined with foster carers and their experiences from everyday practice in social work. Therefore, my understanding of interpretation was that it was inherent to our existence. Heidegger considered interpretation as a basic structure of being-in-the-world (Finlay, 2002). He introduced the concept of Dasein which is essentially 'human being' (literally meaning 'there-being'). He was concerned with the conceptual basis of existence which includes a worldly perspective. This concept of 'worldliness' affords the human, embodied actor a range of physically grounded (what is possible) and intersubjectively-grounded (what is meaningful) options. The term intersubjectivity refers to the shared, overlapping and relational nature of human engagement in the world (Smith et al, 2009:17).

Heidegger observes that a human being can be considered as a person-in-context as they are 'thrown into' the world of objects, relationships and language. The intersubjective field helps one to make sense of this world through perspective. Thus, according to Heidegger, perspective is always personal, historically located and in the context of being related to something. In other words, phenomena are defined in the context of relationships and phenomena themselves are defined in relation to other phenomena (Smith et al, 2009; Aparicio, 2014). After becoming familiar with Husserl and Heidegger's teachings, I leaned towards certain viewpoints of Heidegger in that I believe it is not possible to fully 'bracket' prior knowledge, experiences or pre-conceptions and only attempts can be made to do this. Therefore, I decided as a researcher that I could not aim to capture the true 'essence' of the experiences of the participants which is what Husserl aspired to do. Instead, my aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of the deeply personal experiences and perceptions of the participants and to become comfortable in a space I created for myself as a researcher where I was satisfied I had 'bracketed' my prior knowledge, experiences and pre-conceptions to the best of my ability.

Hermeneutics

The second major theoretical underpinning of IPA is hermeneutics which is the theory of interpretation (Langdridge, 2007). Hermeneutics is a foundational principle of phenomenology and provides a methodological framework for the researcher and the participant to arrive at a mutual understanding where both move from descriptions of phenomena to understandings of experiences encountered (Robinson and Kerr, 2015). Hermeneutics makes an important contribution to this study as it gives scope to include my interpretation as a researcher of the participants' experiences in a particular context.
As noted earlier, Heidegger believed that understanding phenomena is driven by interpretation, thereby directly linking phenomenology to hermeneutics (Aparicio, 2014).

One of his aims was to articulate the case for a hermeneutic phenomenology. Lived time and engagement with the world are features of Heidegger's account of Dasein. However, he points out that access to these is always through interpretation (Smith et al, 2009).

In Heidegger's (1927/1962) view, consciousness is not separate from the world, but is a formation of historically lived experience. This is fundamental to the approach taken in this research as it was the participants' interpretation of their experiences that directed their life path. Heidegger believed that understanding is basic to human existence in that understanding is not a way we know the world, but the way we are (Polkinghorne, 1983; Laverty, 2003). In this way we inevitably bring our prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions to the process of interpretation (Goodall, 2014). Heidegger (1962/1927) argued that '*whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon the … fore-conception. An interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us'* (Heidegger, 1962/1927: 191-192). Thus, Heidegger implies the reader brings their prior experience, assumptions and preconceptions, that is, their fore-conceptions to an encounter and cannot help but look at the new stimulus in the light of their own experience (Smith et al, 2009).

Heidegger goes on to explain that the task is to ensure our fore-conceptions are not presented to us as popular conceptions and instead there is a need to make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith et al, 2009). Thus, the fore-structure is always there and could be an obstacle to interpretation. However, priority should be given to the new object rather than one's preconceptions (Smith et al, 2009). In this research I strove to ensure my fore-conceptions did not present as popular conceptions, then I could focus on the new information that was gathered from the participants without preconceptions. This was more difficult to achieve than I anticipated but reflecting on the transition from practitioner to researcher was a worthwhile process. It required that I take a closer look at my

preconceptions to ensure prior knowledge was not also unintentional bias. IPA values Heidegger's notion of appearing – there is a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but there is detective work required by the researcher to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened. However, making sense of what is said or written involves close interpretative engagement on the part of the listener (Smith et al, 2009).

Gadamer (1990/1960) picked up on Heidegger's hermeneutics regarding the relationship between the fore-structure and the new object. He pointed to the complex relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted (Smith et al, 2009). Gadamer 1960/1975 stated '*the important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings*' (Gadamer 1975: 238). Smith et al (2009) note that rather than acknowledging one's preconceptions before doing interpretation, the researcher may only get to know their preconceptions once the interpretation is underway. This process is multi-faceted and dynamic as every revision of the fore-projection can produce new projections of meaning. These can emerge side by side until the unity of meaning becomes clear (Gadamer, 1990/1960; Smith et al, 2009). Furthermore, interpretation involves a continual mediation between the past and the present so there can be no one correct interpretation. Gadamer holds that the interpretation of a text cannot be limited to what the author intended. The text is not an expression of the subjectivity of the author. The text only comes into real existence when the interpreter engages in a dialogue with the text. Hence, the position of the interpreter is an important condition of the understanding of the text (Introna, 2011). Gadamer's teachings added another rich dimension to the importance of my position as the interpreter of the data gathered in this research. His opinion emphasised the importance of understanding the meaning the participants attached to their experiences.

Double Hermeneutic

IPA researchers engage in a double hermeneutic whereby they try to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith et al, 2009). This is a complex process and requires a high level of involvement and interpretation on the part of the researcher (Smith, 2011). Thus, IPA is concerned with trying to make meaning of the research participants' point of view, but at the same time, a detailed IPA analysis can also ask critical questions of participants' accounts. In this way interpretation can be descriptive and empathic. The aim is to produce rich experiential descriptions and a critical questioning '*in ways which participants might be unwilling or unable to do themselves'* (Eatough and Smith, 2006: 189; Shinebourne 2011). Applying a double hermeneutic to the data gathered for this study was inspiring and daunting in equal measure. My experience as a social work practitioner was relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. While this approach is not entirely unproblematic the rapport I developed with the participants facilitated deep insights into their lived experiences and a reflexive hermeneutic cycle was applied. Participants' comments became catalysts for the consideration of themes discussed in light of personal and professional experiences and a process which continued into analysis.

To make sense of their experiences I engaged in a long and complex process of interpretation. I asked critical questions of their accounts of their experiences and what their accounts meant to them whilst ensuring I stayed present with the transcript. I made a commitment early on in the research to transcribe the interviews myself and this was one of the most valuable decisions I made as a researcher during the process of interpretation and analysis. I could hear the participants' voices in my mind as I analysed their interpretation of their experiences. This gave me a clear understanding of the depth of their feelings and how they made sense of their decisions and actions which, in turn, were directly linked to their understanding of their role as foster carers.

The Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle is a concept that has a level of significance to IPA because it emphasises the interactive relationship between examination and understanding of the parts and the whole (Smith, 2007). Hence, the meaning of any given part can only be understood in relation to the whole and the meaning of the whole can only be understood in relation to the parts (Smith et al, 2009). This occurs on many levels when a researcher is engaged in interpretation (Aparicio, 2014). When I started the process of interpreting the participants' experiences, it was often one word that had meaning and started a sequence of interpretation. Sometimes the essence of the theme that emerged was a combination of not just their use of language, but the strength of the participant's feelings and their coherence as they expressed their views. Smith et al (2009) note examples including the single word only becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence. However, the meaning of the sentence depends upon the cumulative meanings of the individual words. Thus, the process of interpretation in IPA is circular in that it requires a repeated process of engagement with the text (Goodall, 2014). Furthermore, the interpretative role of the researcher requires an explicit recognition that utilising this method of data analysis involves a tacit acceptance of this process of engagement (Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

Idiography

IPA is idiographic in nature which means that the focus is on personal perspectives and the experiences of particular individuals rather than losing those accounts to make group level claims (Smith, 2004). A distinctive feature of IPA is its commitment to the detailed analysis of research participants' personal experiences on a case-by-case basis so that the final report ensures the experience of each individual participant still has a presence. In this study the participants' experiences emerged as deeply personal and even though the role of fostering is linked to a complex system, the idiographic approach of an IPA study gives scope to maintain a strong sense of individuality amongst the participants. In this way there is an articulation of both convergence and divergence within the study sample (Smith, 2017).

Thus, knowledge claims of IPA studies provide contextual insight of a particular phenomenon rather than speaking explicitly to the breadth of applicability of certain constructs. This idiographic commitment does not negate concerns for generalisability. However, it does reframe how findings from a given study might be considered as transferrable to other domains beyond the context of the investigation (Kirn et al, 2019). For example, in keeping with IPA this research focused on a small group of general foster carers, but the findings could transfer to the general population of foster carers. Because of IPA's idiographic commitment studies tend to use small purposive samples. Furthermore, analysis is thorough and systematic (Smith et al, 2009).

The idiographic focus assumes a worldview in which the research participant is not a passive recipient, but an active interpreter of his or her subjective world. In the participant's world there is not objective reality or truth so the researcher plays an integral role in the generation and interpretation of data (Smith and Eatough, 2007). How researchers interact with data is fluid and continuous and understanding evolves in a contextual milieu. Culture and traditions inherently influence how we conceptualise experience. Thus, the researcher also invites the data into the home of their lifeworld (Engward and Goldspink, 2020). Interacting with the data was not a linear process for me as a researcher. It is not the case with an IPA study that the themes simply emerge and are obvious and straightforward. In order to gather rich and detailed perspectives and experiences of approved foster carers actively fostering, there is a lot of preparation required beforehand to ensure their voices are heard. The participants in this research had unique and deeply personal experiences that provided rich data to examine individually and collectively. The idiographic element of IPA focuses on a detailed examination of individual cases before moving on to search for comparisons across cases. This idiographic commitment is also represented in the write up of the findings by including transcript extracts from individual interviews to highlight their individual experiences (Smith et al, 2009, Goodall, 2014). IPA affords researchers the

opportunity to examine experiences in close detail which was invaluable to me as a researcher and I became fully immersed in the data gathered for the study.

Table 4.2: Key Influences on the Research Orientation and Design

Phenomenology	Husserl (1970) argued we experience the world using the 'natural attitude' which means we take our experience for granted. However, according to Husserl nothing should be assumed or taken for granted (Husserl, 1970). Experience should be examined the way it occurs and in its own terms. Knowledge begins with experience and remains with experience (Smith et al, 2009). The challenge for me as a researcher was to break away from my own attitude to find a way to remain open to new understandings.
Hermeneutics	Heidegger (1962) asked if any knowledge can exist outside of interpretation? He believed that consciousness is not separate from the world but is a formation of historically lived experience (Laverty, 2003). Therefore, understanding is basic to human existence. It is not a way we know the world but the way we are (Laverty, 2003). In this way we bring our own assumptions and preconceptions to the process of interpretation (Goodall, 2014). As a researcher, I leaned towards Heidegger – it is not possible to fully 'bracket' prior knowledge and only attempts can be made to do this.
Double Hermeneutic and Hermeneutic Circle	The researcher tries to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their experiences (Smith et al, 2009). I transcribed the interviews myself which gave meaning to the essence of the themes that emerged. It was a combination of the participants' use of language, strength of feelings and their awareness as they expressed their views that influenced my interpretation of their experiences.
Idiography	Idiography ensures there is a strong sense of individuality amongst the participants. There is a commitment to detailed analysis on a case by case basis and the final analysis ensures each individual participant still has a presence. The themes do not simply emerge. There is a lot of preparation involved to ensure the participants' voices are heard.

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics differentiates between what a person should and should not do in the conduct and dissemination of research (Velasquez et al, 2009). A researcher's values, position and personal experiences can have an impact on the chosen topic to study, how it is studied and analysed and what is reported. Thus, being self-aware is important regarding ethical considerations that arise in collecting data (Suzuki et al, 2007; Rohleder and Lyons, 2015). Social work researchers are compliant with laws and regulations, but as a profession in the field of research, social work has displayed minor attention to the complex understanding of research ethics in practice or research (Ferguson and Clarke, 2018). I became acutely aware of this as an experienced social work practitioner but a novice researcher and it was to the forefront of my mind as I applied for access to research participants for this study and through to gathering data and research dissemination.

This research was granted ethical approval by the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork on 24/08/2017 – Reference Log 2017-093. The approval was amended on 09/04/2018 to change the areas I could access participants for the research. Ethical approval was granted by one private foster care provider on 28/09/2017. Finally, the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) approved a research agreement and protocol on 12/02/2019. Ensuring the research process was underpinned by a respectful and trustworthy approach was paramount during the research design and implementation. Particular attention was given to research participants' ability to give informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and reducing the potential for distress as they engaged in the research process. All the research participants in this study had the competence to give their consent to participate. According to Schinke and Gilchrist (1983) competency involves the legal and mental capacity of the participants to give their permission. The research participants were informed of all aspects of the research before taking part in a phone call and by reading the Participant Information Sheet. They were given time to reflect on the information they

received before agreeing to participate. Their written consent was sought before their interviews began and they indicated they understood their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. Seeking informed consent ensured participants were fully aware of the information required and the purpose it would serve, how they were expected to participate in the research and how it might affect them (Dawson, 2009).

All research participants were given pseudonyms and any information that might identify them was omitted. These strategies were put in place to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. The research participants were informed the interviews would be audio recorded to assist with analysis and these would be securely stored. When I was transcribing the interviews all personal information was removed and replaced with the word 'name' or 'area' for example. Throughout the process of gathering data I was the only person who has access to the original unedited names, addresses or any identifying details. Data and records are maintained securely in paper or electronic form and data and records stored on the computer are backed up. All files relating to this research will be maintained securely for a minimum period of ten years in compliance with research data storage procedures in University College Cork.

As mentioned previously, IPA has a clear idiographic focus ensuring there is a strong sense of individuality amongst the participants, and a commitment to detailed analysis of personal experiences. This required careful consideration in the write up of the analysis with regards to maintaining an idiographic focus whilst also adhering to confidentiality and anonymity for the participants. As the researcher who had explored the participants' experiences with them, I decided to give some background information at the beginning of the analysis to ensure the reader got a sense of the foster carers who were telling their stories. However, any identifiable details or features in their biographies were taken out if there was a possibility they might have made them recognisable. For example, their location, occupation and particular aspects of their lives that were distinctive. Similarly, I ensured their

pseudonyms were completely different to their real names. When I was writing up the analysis I checked and double checked that identifying details were removed. My supervisors were also involved in this process by commenting on the information provided as they read the analysis.

The potential for harm was considered throughout the data collection stage of the research as I was aware research participants might become stressed or distressed when they were discussing their deeply personal experiences. It is necessary for the researcher to reflect on the questions asked to understand the responses the questions might provoke. Tyldum (2012) notes that the personal rapport sought by many researchers can become problematic if it develops into a quasi-therapeutic interview. I took steps to minimise this potential by explaining in advance how long the interview should take and giving them the option of when and where we should meet. I also assured the research participants the aim of the research was to develop a better understanding of their motivation to foster and there were no right or wrong answers to the questions asked. They were encouraged to lead the direction of the interview. An oral debriefing process was also adopted after every interview to ensure the research participants could reflect on the experience or discuss support they might need afterwards.

Access and Recruitment of Research Participants

As stated previously, permission to access participants came from the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) and one private fostering provider. In both sectors the principal social worker acted as gatekeeper to identify potential participants. In line with the conditions of the ethics board of the Child and Family Agency I requested access to two participants at a time. This condition was not specified by the private fostering agency. When the participants were identified they were given a Participant Information Sheet (See Appendix 5) and a Consent Form (See Appendix 6) and if they were interested in participating, they were asked to contact me by telephone. When they made contact they were given the opportunity to ask

any further questions and informed they could agree or decline to take part. Arrangements were made for interviews in a place of the participant's choosing and a consent form was signed before the first interview commenced. It took a year to recruit the sample which was much longer than anticipated. The participants came from four regions and there were participants from rural and urban areas. To take part in the study the participants had to be approved general foster carers. As I had no access to the participants beforehand, I had no knowledge of the diversity of the sample group until they made contact with me. The interviews proceeded with three couples interviewed, two single female carers interviewed and two female carers who were fostering with their husbands, but who could not attend the interviews because of work commitments.

Study Sample

On a methodological level an IPA study typically involves an intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by the research participants. These verbatim accounts are captured and the analysis proceeds such that patterns of meanings are developed (Smith et al, 2009). Participants are selected on the basis that they can give access to a perspective on the phenomena under study (Smith et al, 2009). The sample for this study was purposive as it was necessary to recruit approved, general foster carers. The research concentrated on general foster carers as the criteria for recruiting relative carers in Ireland is completely different. Therefore, the research questions for this study would be misleading for relative foster carers as relatives are often approached by the Child and Family Agency to look after the children in need of alternative care, and relatives engage in the assessment process after the children have been placed with them.

In line with IPA's concern for depth of experience and an acknowledgement of the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies tend to be conducted on small sample sizes. The aim is to find a homogeneous sample so that convergence and divergence can be examined in detail. The number of interviews (rather than participants) are between four

and ten. This is typical of an IPA study to permit detailed analysis. The number of interviews is emphasised as a study could have, for example, four participants interviewed twice (Smith et al, 2009). I recruited seven families (ten participants in total) and five of the families recruited were interviewed twice. Two families decided not to engage in a second interview which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The second interviews were for the purpose of gleaning a more in-depth understanding of participants' views to ensure their interpretation of their experiences was captured during the analysis stage. I also used a visual imagery technique which will also be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Methods of Data Collection

Smith et al (2009) note that most IPA studies adopt straightforward designs, for example researchers recruit small homogeneous groups of participants and collect data from them once. However, it is possible to be more adventurous, but this is more demanding of the analyst (Smith et al, 2009). I decided to interview the participants twice which started out as a safety net for me as a novice practitioner-researcher. However, when I met with them for the second time, and with more experience as a researcher, the rapport we had developed the first time around ensured we had another meaningful discussion. The learning from this was the volume of date gathered which I will discuss in more detail later on in this section. I also decided to use a visual imagery technique which I felt positioned me as a researcher and gave me a clear focus with the participants. I hoped this would ensure they understood my role as a researcher and not as a social work practitioner in the context of the research.

Visual Imagery

The starting point in understanding the modalities that constitute experience include language, vision, sound and touch (Del Busso and Reavey, 2013). Qualitative methods utilise verbal data, but it could be argued that words alone are insufficient to describe the abstract and complex nature of lived experiences. Individuals encounter the world as a sensory experience, and visual imagery can sometimes access an inner world that language

cannot articulate. It has also been suggested that using visual imagery can facilitate discussions on subjects that are sensitive or abstract, and this may stimulate emotional responses (Picken et al, 2011). Furthermore, visual research in the social sciences has grown significantly in the last few decades in part due to an increasing emphasis on the importance of culture and cultural practices in making sense of lived experiences (Reavey, 2011). This is because visuals are a part of our everyday lives featuring in the form of images and symbols that communicate and depict aspects of our lives and cultures (Rose, 2012; Silver, 2013; Bartoli, 2020). In this research the participants were asked to provide an image that represented the meaning of fostering for them and the images were then used as a catalyst for discussion. Using this method, the participants were given an opportunity to visually as well as verbally represent their role in fostering. This participant-led method gave the participants the opportunity to decide to share sensitive information if they choose. Furthermore, it provided a means of uncovering insights into the subjective perspectives of the research participants. This method also shifts the importance of the research inquiry from the researcher to the participants which can give access to data previously thought of as unimportant (Ferguson, 2013).

The use of visual imagery in this study was adapted from reading about photovoice which has philosophical roots in hermeneutics and phenomenology. The hermeneutics approach is interpretative and concentrates on the meaning of experiences. The phenomenological approach focuses on specified human phenomena. The aim of photovoice as an approach is to describe and understand the meaningful experiences for those concerned. IPA shares these same hermeneutic and phenomenological roots making it a coherent analytic technique for gathering data (Picken et al, 2011). Six of the seven participating families engaged in the use of visual imagery by providing images that were meaningful to them. One couple (Sarah and David) did not engage in the process, but they gave no reason for this decision. The images were discussed at the beginning of the first interview. The images and symbols provided were important to the participants and they gave detailed explanations

of their meaning. The images were not taken from the participants for dissemination.

Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews started by gathering general background information. The use of visual imagery was explained and the participants were asked if they had decided to engage with this creative part of the interview and if so, they discussed the images or symbols they brought to the interview. Following the initial discussion on the visual imagery provided by the research participants, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. In qualitative research two key formats of interview are unstructured and semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study as these interviews contain a combination of both pre-planned and unplanned questions, with the latter allowing the interviewer some discretion to create new questions in response to the participants' answers (Carey, 2013). The participants' motivation to foster was then explored in more detail alongside their understanding of the experiences that influenced their decision to take on the role of fostering.

The discussion seemed to naturally progress to their life experiences and the structure of the interviews gave the participants scope to consider the meaning of the role of fostering for them. Later in the interview the participants were asked if they felt they were afforded the opportunity to discuss their motivation during the process of their fostering assessment. IPA's aim is to gather data that invites participants to articulate their thoughts and feelings about their experiences and semi-structured interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting such data (Smith, 2004). An interview schedule was developed (See Appendix 7) which was flexible and gave the participants an opportunity to move between sequences which were narrative or descriptive to begin with, to more analytic and evaluative later. The research participants were encouraged to raise issues of importance to them, and by doing so, they led the interviews and discussed their unique experiences (Ljungvall et al, 2020).

The study was piloted with one participant interviewed twice a few weeks apart. Piloting study methods is an important part of the research process (Maltby et al, 2009). This enabled me to test the recording equipment and interview schedule to glean an understanding of my interview skills as a novice researcher. As an experienced social work practitioner, I had a long-established interview technique when I was interviewing foster carers, so I did not realise the challenges of fieldwork interviewing until I met the first participant for this research. It was difficult not to exercise therapeutic capacity or practice judgement, all of which I exercised daily as a social work practitioner. There is a lot of highly engaged listening in social work practice as there is in research, but the silences were different. In a usual conversation silences are taken as a cue to speak, whereas in the interview setting for research these must be waited out a little longer as participants often gave a more detailed understanding when they are given time to relax and warm to the interview process. Also, by remaining alert to the interview dynamics, I could revisit early topics at a later point and facilitate a shift from talking about their experiences at the generic to the specific level (Smith et al, 2009).

When foster carers were single carers I interviewed them individually, and when they were couples, I interviewed them together if possible. This led to a mix of profiles in the sample dynamics in the interview process as there were three couples interviewed together, two single foster carers interviewed, and two foster carers interviewed without their husbands present. The rationale for interviewing couples together was influenced by the approach to recruiting foster carers within current social work practice in Ireland which assesses them as a couple. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the fostering assessment requires a minimum of eight interviews and couples are separated and interviewed individually usually only once during that time. I felt interviewing them together would capture the power dynamic and different narratives in their relationship. Couple interviews assist researchers to gain an understanding of sensitive issues that are pertinent to the couples and may have an impact on their relationship (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018).

I was also aware that interviewing couples together had the potential to divert the couple dynamic especially if they had different opinions or perspectives on issues raised during the interview. To manage this I ensured to engage with the divergences expressed by the couple. Furthermore, I sometimes reiterated points they made to explore them further especially if I felt one person's opinion was stronger than the other. There was learning in this with regards to how much information can be gathered with a couple together in such a short space of time. On reflection, I still feel the decision to interview them together was the right one for my research because it was not clear cut and therefore highlighted the nuances of lived experiences, and the different and often diverse opinions that need to be captured to understand the complexity of the fostering role. In relation to the role of fostering, primary caregivers in Ireland tend to be female which is mirrored in a study by Narey and Owers (2018) of foster carers in the UK who observe that the positioning of foster carers as a predominantly female, non-professionalised group of carers has not been explored. While it is not within the scope of this research to explore this positioning of foster carers in Ireland either, I was cognisant of it with regards to ensuring the voices of both the female and male carers were heard. Therefore, as the primary caregivers were predominantly female another advantage of interviewing them as a couple was to obtain the male carer's participation into sensitive areas of family life where men have previously been ignored (Cerchiaro, 2022).

In this context it was interesting to observe the couple's non-verbal communication and to note if one partner was more passive than the other. Sometimes the shared experience differed from the individual experience and there were times the individual experience fed into the joint experience of the couple. The different narratives that developed were interesting for the scope of this research because they highlighted their understanding of their experiences both individually and as a couple fostering. The participants had unique perspectives on their individual roles alongside describing their dynamic when they were approaching an element of care together. Furthermore, Polak and Greene (2016) suggest joint interviewing can add analytic value compared with individual interviewing as the

analysis of interaction within joint interviews can help to explicate tacit knowledge and can illuminate often hard-to-access resources that influence decision making.

All interviews were audio recorded which yielded high quality audio data. Contemporaneous notes were made after every interview which is in keeping with IPA. Taylor (2012) notes the importance of logging initial thoughts, observations and reflections. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and (as mentioned previously) I made the decision to transcribe the interviews myself. This gave me the opportunity to reflect on the interviews and to get to know my interview style. The interviews varied in length from 55 to 127 minutes. All the interviews had depth and the participants were reflective in their own way. Smith (2004) notes that quality accounts are more associated with the significance of the experience for the participants and their engagement with the process. As an experienced social work practitioner and a novice researcher I made the decision (with my supervisors) to conduct two interviews with the research participants. This was to ensure I could gather rich data by returning to the participants to further explore issues they raised in the first interview if this was deemed appropriate. Five of the seven foster families interviewed engaged in this process with only one family not responding when contacted to engage in a second interview. They gave no reason for not participating. The second family who did not engage in a second interview came to the decision themselves in discussion with me as the researcher. Their first interview was long (127 minutes) and the depth of meaning expressed in that interview was sufficient to understand their experiences. They did not feel they had more to add.

On reflection, I think I could have been more specific in how I approached the second interview with the participants. Possibly the use of visual imagery in this study was the reason there was meaning and depth to the participants' experiences early on in the interviews. However, as this was the case, the second interviews generated a large volume of data that was not in keeping with an IPA study regarding the idiographic focus. Therefore,

although I transcribed the second interviews, I made the decision to only analyse the first interviews with the exception of the foster carer who participated in the pilot interview. My reason for this was that her first interview was short (as the pilot interview) and more unstructured than the others. Her second interview was in line with the first interviews of the other participants with regards to interview structure and the depth of meaning that emerged. As a novice researcher the second interviews gave me confidence that the participants were engaged with the research and wanted to share their experiences. Also, they did not share information during the second interviews that was different or contradicted the information shared previously.

Analytical Techniques

The existing literature on analysis in IPA has not prescribed a single method for working with data. IPA is characterised by a healthy flexibility in matters of analytic development. The essence of IPA lies in its analytic focus (Smith et al, 2009). IPA holds that human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality. Instead, they interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them. The aim of IPA is to explore the processes that give participants the opportunity to make sense of their experiences by looking at their account of the process to utilise an inclination towards self-reflection (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Therefore, an IPA analysis is exploratory and seeks to understand participants' experiences from their point of view. In that sense the researcher approaches the data with no specific hypothesis (MacDonald and McSherry, 2011). IPA can be characterised by a set of common processes – moving from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative. The principles of IPA show a commitment to the participant's point of view and there is a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts, which are applied flexibly according to the analytic task (Smith et al, 2009).

As mentioned previously, the interviews were audio recorded which facilitated electronic storage. According to Dresing and Schmieder (2012) the transcription detail depends on the method of analysis. An interview transcribed using IPA requires a verbatim record of the data collected. Analysis in IPA aims to interpret the meaning of the content of the participant's account. Therefore, it is important to recognise the range of features that might also be selected for transcription, for example pauses or laughter as the transcription is a form of interpretative activity (Smith et al, 2009). I noted all relevant activity in my interaction with the research participants during the interviews - pauses, struggles, laughter, tears. The process of transcribing was extremely time consuming, but a worthwhile endeavour as it afforded me the opportunity to get close to the research participants' experiences. As mentioned previously, when I started to analyse the data I could still hear their voices and expressions having played the recording of the interview many times while transcribing. Sahlstein-Parcell and Rafferty (2018) note that when the interviewer is not transcribing the interviews, there must be someone trained and briefed on the interview and the level of detail required in the transcription, for example a research assistant. This research is self-funded so that facility was not available to me. However, regardless of the circumstances, I did not want this to be the case as I felt I could immerse myself in the participants' experiences by listening to their accounts as I transcribed. In an IPA study the analysis starts once the transcriptions are complete. A typical analysis draws upon the following strategies:

- A close line by line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns and understanding of each participant.
- The identification of the emergent patterns (themes) within the experiential material emphasising convergence, divergence, commonality and nuance.
- The development of a dialogue between the researcher, their coded data and their psychological knowledge about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns, in this context, leading to the development of a more interpretative account.
- The development of a structure which illustrates the relationships between themes.

- The organisation of all this material in a format which allows for analysed data to be traced through the process.
- The use of supervision and collaboration to help assess and develop the coherence and plausibility of the interpretation.
- The development of a full narrative evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through the interpretation, usually theme-by-theme and is often supported by some form of visual guide.
- Reflection on one's own perceptions, conceptions and processes (Smith et al, 2009).

The initial recollections of the interviews are recorded in context and then the transcripts are analysed descriptively, linguistically and conceptually (this will be described in more detail later). This noting is conducted in the margins of the transcripts starting with the first interview (Smith et al, 2009). The use of computer software in data analysis in IPA is considered an individual preference (Pringle et al, 2011). I considered using NVivo10 to code and organise the emergent themes as NVivo is primarily a database and good for organisation. However, in IPA each individual transcript must be analysed on its own terms regardless of software and there is no way for this software package to distinguish between the three levels of comments on the transcripts. As I moved towards developing themes it then felt like the analysis needed to fit around what NVivo can do which is to create and organise a list of brief summarising phrases or words rather than integrate the lengthy comments that characterise IPA in a meaningful way with the transcripts that comprise the data.

Meaning making for the participants also includes their interactions during the interviews – a sense of something, laughter, tears, pauses and hesitancies alongside their tone of voice. None of these can be captured by software which was particularly important to me as I had previously become completely immersed in the interviews by transcribing them. Thus, I found NVivo useful to group quotes for themes after I worked them out, but not before.

Instead, I set up separate files for my participants which included the steps taken for data analysis and the development of emergent themes. The current study followed the steps outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009) which is reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connection across emergent themes, moving on to the next case and examination of patterns across cases (Smith et al, 2009).

Step 1 - Reading and Re-reading

As IPA is committed to idiography the process starts with a detailed examination of one case until a degree of closure has been achieved (Smith, 2004). Beginning with the most detailed and engaging interview the researcher should listen to the audio recording at least once while reading the transcript. Listening to the participant's voice during subsequent readings assists with a more complex analysis and ensures the participants become the focus of analysis (Smith et al, 2009). When I started with the first transcript I ensured I stayed with their experiences. My recollections and observations of the interview were noted and bracketed to allow the focus to remain with the data. Smith et al (2009) notes that reading and re-reading the transcript facilitates an appreciation of how rapport and trust can build across an interview, and the researcher starts to notice patterns where participants shift from generic explanations to specificities of events (Smith et al, 2009).

Step 2 - Initial Noting

This level of analysis was the most detailed and time consuming. The step requires an examination of semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level. It was important to maintain an open mind as the researcher and to note anything of interest within the transcript. This process ensured a growing familiarity with the transcript, but, moreover, it gave me the opportunity to identify specific ways by which the participants spoke about, understood and thought about issues. During this stage I noted anything of interest to developing and understanding the participants' lived experiences. This is a free textual analysis and there are no rules about what is commented upon. I noted their individual and collective experiences as a couple interviewed together. The aim is to produce a

comprehensive and detailed set of notes (Smith et al, 2009). Three categories of comments are then made which are descriptive comments pertaining to the specific content of what was spoken, linguistic comments which refer to the participant's use of language during the interview and conceptual comments which are notes for the researcher about potential connections within the transcript (Aparicio et al, 2018). I used three different fonts to distinguish between the categories. The categories are important to identify more abstract concepts which helps to make sense of the patterns of meaning in the participant's account.

Step 3 – Developing Emergent Themes

The interview transcript retains its central place in terms of data, but through exploratory commenting the data grew substantially and there was an additional level of important, but still provisional, notes. This data set then became the focus of the next stage of analysis which is developing emergent themes. Interrelationships, connections, and patterns are mapped. This step highlights the importance of comprehensive, exploratory commenting. At that stage, as the researcher, I then started to take on a more leading role in organising and interpreting the data. The resulting analysis was a product of the collaborative efforts of the participants and me as the researcher (Smith et al, 2009).

Step 4 – Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

A set of themes are then established within a transcript that are in chronological order, that is, the order they came up. The next step was to chart or map how the themes came together. The analyst is encouraged to explore and innovate when organising the analysis and not all emergent themes must be incorporated. The ones that were discarded depended upon the overall scope of the research. As the researcher, I then started to look for a way to draw the emergent themes together to produce a structure which pointed to the most interesting and important aspects of the participant's accounts (Smith et al, 2009).

Step 5 – Moving to the Next Case

The next step involved moving to the next participant's transcript and repeating the process. It was important to treat the next case on its own terms. This meant bracketing the ideas that emerged from the analysis of the first case while working on the second. This was in keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment (Smith et al, 2009).

Step 6 – Looking for Patterns Across Cases

The final stage involved looking for patterns across cases. This meant I was looking for connections across cases and deciding if a theme from one case helped to illuminate a different case. Deciding which themes were the most potent led to a reconfiguration and relabelling of themes as described by Smith et al (2009). This stage of analysis was a particularly creative task. Here the analysis can move to a more theoretical level when there is recognition that the development of superordinate themes, which are particular to an individual case, also represents instances of higher order concepts which the cases therefore share. The final result was presented in a table of themes for the group of participants showing how themes are nested within superordinate and subordinate themes (Smith et al, 2009).

A naive understanding of the interview is formulated from the first reading of the transcript. The text is then divided into meaning to form superordinate and subordinate themes. These are compared with the naive understanding for validation. When the full transcript is read and analysed the naive understanding and the themes are reflected on in relation to the literature and a comprehensive understanding is formulated. The comprehensive understanding may disclose new possibilities for being in the world. This world can be described as the prefigured life world of the participants as configured in the interview and prefigures in the researcher's interpretation of the readers of the study (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004).

Reflexivity

Finlay (2002) highlights the centrality of reflexivity in qualitative research. Meanings are negotiated between the researcher and research participants within a particular social context. Reflexivity is therefore commonly viewed as a process of continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality. There is also active acknowledgement and recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015; Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Stronach et al, 2007). Thus, self-awareness is particularly important as the researcher is often the main instrument throughout the data collection, analysis and interpretation processes (Onwuegbizie et al, 2010; Rohleder and Lyons, 2015). I frequently reflected during supervision and in a reflective journal on how my previous experience as a social work practitioner in fostering might influence my approach to data collection and analysis in this study. Therefore, I employed a method whereby previous knowledge and predisposition was made transparent.

As I transcribed the interviews I listened to my interview technique and challenged myself on my approach if I felt it could be construed as leading the participants. Whilst this was never intentional there is a difference between practicing social work and researching which I was mindful of at all times. I found silence uncomfortable at first as a researcher and it was necessary to adapt my technique to ensure participants were given ample time to discuss their experiences. Reflexivity means turning the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one's situatedness within the research that might affect the setting, research participants, data being collected and interpretation (Berger, 2015). I found taking the time to reflect a beneficial process and eventually I learned that becoming reflective gave me the opportunity to develop an awareness of how my perspectives and assumptions might influence data collection and analysis. This is mirrored in the opinion of Glover and Philbin (2017) who observe that reflexivity is central to a study that is underpinned by phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry as the researcher must strive to recognise his or her presuppositions about the phenomenon and the potential influence

these may have on the identification and interpretation of the human experience.

I also concur with the opinion of Schweber (2016) who notes that the everyday knowledge of the researcher is a combination of common sense, reasoned views and unexamined assumptions. Therefore, the knowledge which the researcher produces should be the product of systematic, epistemologically controlled analysis where key assumptions are examined and justified and their impact on the findings scrutinised and explained. In that sense, there is a moral tension in qualitative research that is acknowledged by many researchers and a lot has been written on how researchers can reflect on these experiences (Van Wijngaarden et al, 2018). This approach assisted me to stay focused on the participants' experiences and as time progressed I embraced my previous experience as a learning curve that brought me to the practitioner-researcher space where I could develop an understanding of foster carers' experiences that only research can uncover. However, I experienced many struggles along the way and the following excerpt from my reflective journal dated 20/09/2019 notes some of my feelings during data analysis:

> *'Transcripts are building up and it is an overwhelming amount of information to analyse whilst at the same time staying true to the words of the participants. This is an in-depth analysis, but there were times in the last few weeks when I felt my thinking was at odds with the participants. I have reflected on this and now realise my concern lies in my capacity as a researcher to understand and interpret the participants' experiences. It is a big responsibility and it is weighing heavily on me. I took a break for a few days and then I went back to the transcript I'm currently analysing. I now see that some of the most basic responses and short answers might be the key to understanding the participants. Making sense of their experiences often lies in their use of language or when they are struggling to give coherent responses. Then I realised there is an opportunity with this research to give foster carers a voice that is coherent even if it is messy, and that is what I am here for.'*

Methodological Rigour

Smith et al (2009) note guidelines should be employed by the researcher that assess the quality of the research. In this study methodological rigour was considered by adopting four broad principles by Yardley (2000) which include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Yardley 2000; Smith et al,

2009). Yardley (2000) argues that a good qualitative research study will demonstrate sensitivity to context. Smith et al (2009) suggest that IPA researchers start demonstrating sensitivity to context in the very early stages of the research process. As a methodology IPA has a focus on rigorous and systematic exploration of idiographic experiences (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008). This systematic exploration starts with the research questions as asking the 'right' question implies there are 'wrong' questions to ask. This runs contrary to the ideal of scientific inquiry because any question considered 'wrong' could be truly meaningful if looked at with an open mind (Dodgson, 2020). The focus then returns to the researcher's preconceptions and assumptions which he or she takes into the research field. These ideas can be identified and then the researcher can try to exclude them from his or her existing knowledge during the research process, but in reality that would merely be self-deception and the knowledge is there even if the researcher pretends it is not (Brown, 2019).

To facilitate this level of credibility I showed sensitivity towards the socio-cultural milieu in which the study is situated which Smith et al (2009) suggest is from the beginning of the research. I became familiar with the existing literature on the research topic and the philosophical underpinnings of IPA. It could be considered that a rigorous human science must be prepared to be 'soft' and reflective in its efforts to bring a range of meanings of life's phenomena to reflective awareness (Sloan and Bowe, 2014). This continues through to the analysis process as IPA has a theoretical commitment to the research participant as a cognitive, linguistic being and assumes a chain of connection between how participants talk, their thinking and their emotional state. It was my responsibility as the researcher to acknowledge this chain of connection is complicated. There were times during the interviews when the participants struggled to express the complexities of their experiences and it was my responsibility to interpret what they were saying. This was mirrored by Smith and Osborn (2007) who observe that often people struggle to express their thoughts and feelings and the researcher has to interpret their emotional or mental state from what they say. Thus, a strong IPA study will demonstrate a sensitivity to the raw material and there will be a

considerable number of verbatim extracts from the participants' material to support the arguments being made and to give the participants a voice in the research (Smith et al, 2009).

Yardley (2000) argues that another characteristic of value to is to apply the principle of commitment and rigour. In an IPA study there is an expectation a commitment will be made to the degree of attentiveness shown to the research participants during data collection (Smith et al, 2009). The interview process begins and is maintained within an environment of safety and trust that is established between the researcher and the research participant at the outset and continues throughout data collection. The interaction in the interview takes place within the context of a relationship that is central to what is created (Polkinghorne, 1983; Laverty, 2003). Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the study with Tracy (2010) arguing that rigour is demonstrated by selecting a study sample that is appropriate to achieving the aims of the research. This research included a small sample of ten participants which was in line with that expected in an IPA study. The aim of the research was to develop an in-depth understanding of how foster carers make sense of their experiences. This was achieved by keeping the balance between closeness and separateness to notice important cues, to dig deeper and conduct a thorough and systematic analysis (Smith et al, 2009).

Yardley (2000) discussed the third broad principle as transparency and coherence. Transparency refers to how clearly the stages of the research process are documented in the write up of the study (Smith et al, 2009). I hope that the discussion in this methodology chapter has shown that there is an appropriate fit between the research aims and objectives and the methodology selected. I tried to be transparent by including information on procedures throughout the research process and my reflections on these procedures. Each theme that emerged and was analysed in this research can be connected back to the participants' transcripts. Elliott et al (1999) note the trustworthiness of a research study can be increased through credibility checks. This was a process that was adopted in this study

as my supervisors engaged in reviewing material, for example, the interview schedule and data collection and analysis as the study progressed.

The coherence of a piece of qualitative research is often judged by the reader of the final write-up (Smith et al, 2009). Tuval-Mashiach (2017) notes that a shared notion has emerged in qualitative methodologies that refer to the researcher's responsibility to convince the reader that the research product is meaningful. Yardley (2000) suggests coherence can refer to the fit between the research and the underlying theoretical assumptions of the approach being implemented. I feel I have provided a clear rationale of the fit between my research and the theoretical assumptions in this study. I think that when reading this research it is consistent with the underlying principles of IPA. The reader should be aware that they are positioned as attempting to make sense of the researcher trying to make sense of the experiences of the participants (Smith et al, 2009). Yardley (2000) writes about the fourth principle which is impact and importance. She makes the point that however well a research study is conducted, the test of its real validity lies in whether or not it can tell the reader something interesting, important or useful. Smith et al (2009) note IPA researchers should be aspiring to do this (Yardley, 2000; Smith et al, 2009).

Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology and methods applied to this study which included a detailed description of the research design, study sample, analytical techniques and methods of data collection. Ethical considerations, reflexivity and methodological rigour were also addressed. Consistent with IPA, data were gathered from a purposive sample of seven foster families (ten participants in total) using a visual imagery technique and semi-structured interviews. The next two chapters will present the findings of this research which include four superordinate themes and each of these have three subordinate themes that are presented as they emerged from the research participants' experiences.

Chapter 5: Complex Family Dynamics and Conflicting Identities

Introduction

The aim of this chapter and the next one is to provide a narrative of the research findings based on the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four superordinate themes emerged from the research findings and these include all participants' understanding of their lived experiences. These were: *Complex Family Dynamics, Conflicting Identities*, *Developing Identities* and *Enactment of the Role*. Each superordinate theme has a number of related subordinate themes which are presented and discussed in turn. Although they have been separated during the process of analysis, there are overlaps as some of them are linked to different times, events, challenges, perspectives and feelings. It is, however, important to consider the themes in relation to the holistic experience of the hermeneutic cycle. The narrative highlights both shared and distinct experiences capturing convergence and divergence across experiences (Dawson, 2013). The superordinate and subordinate themes are presented in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Complex Family Dynamics	Fractured Families Loss Going Back to the Beginning
Conflicting Identities	Feeling Vulnerable Engagement with Fostering Assessment Past and Future Self
Developing Identities	Building Resilience Emotional Investment Challenging Core Beliefs
Enactment of the Role	Foster Carer Attributes On the Edge of Control What about our Children?

The interviews for this research captured a snapshot in time of the participants' attempts to make sense of their lived experiences. The understandings accessed in interviews are not held up to be 'the truth,' but they are seen as 'meaning-full' and IPA recognises them as originating from the situated concerns of the participants (Smith et al, 2009). The table below guided the analysis process ensuring a thorough, rigorous and consistent approach to this phase of the research.

Table 5.2: Points to Consider When Undertaking the Analysis

- The participant is the focus of analysis.
- Slow down the habitual propensity for quick reduction and synopsis.
- Record my own recollections of the interviews and most striking observations.
- Examine on an exploratory level with an open mind.
- Aim to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments.
- Record themes of significance – relationships, places, events, values and principles, and their meaning.
- Next is more interpretative noting about why the participants felt that way.
- Look at language and context for concerns.
- Identify more abstract comments or concepts and make sense of the pattern of meaning.

Descriptive comments – Content of what the participant said (What is the participant saying?).

Linguistic comments – Exploring the specific use of language (How is the participant saying it?).

Conceptual comments – Engage at a more interrogative and conceptual level (What sense do I make of what the participant is saying?) (Smith et al, 2009).

Before discussing the findings, the characteristics of the participating foster carers are presented along with a table of their biographical data. I then give a brief description of the individual circumstances of each participant and their contribution to the visual imagery technique. All the foster carers who participated in this research are white and Irish.

Table 5.3: Biographical and Relevant Details of Foster Families

Pseudonym	Status of Foster Carers	Birth Children	Children in Placement	Type of Fostering
Rebecca	Single carer	Two grown up children living independently	Two children in placement	Long-term foster care
Veronica and Conor	Couple fostering	No children	Three children in placement	Long-term foster care
Laura and John	Couple fostering	Four grown up children – three living at home	Two children in placement	Long-term foster care
Mia	Fostering with her husband, but who was unavailable due to work	One grown up child and one under 18 years – both living at home	Two children in placement	Long-term foster care
Colette	Fostering with her husband, but who was unavailable due to work	One child under 18 years living at home	One child in placement	Short-term foster care
Annie	Single carer	Three grown up children living at home	One child in placement	Short-term foster care
Sarah and David	Couple fostering	Five grown up children – two living at home	Two children in placement and one in respite care	Long-term and respite foster care

Rebecca

Rebecca is a single carer who lives in a rural area. She is divorced with two grown up daughters who live independently. Rebecca has two grandchildren. She fosters full-time and at the time of interview had two children in her care long-term. The two children are not

related to each other. Rebecca was the first foster carer I interviewed, and she was aware she was part of the pilot for the research. Rebecca was interviewed twice. To participate in the visual imagery technique Rebecca provided two photographs at the beginning of the first interview. One was of her mother who is deceased and someone she described as ‘cruel'. She was the fifth child and her four older siblings lived with their maternal grandmother in Ireland. Rebecca lived in the UK with their mother as a young child. She was the only child who lived with their mother as she was born in the UK. During this part of the interview she described her feelings of loneliness and desperation at the train station as a child when she was leaving her grandmother and siblings to return to the UK with her mother. Eventually she returned to Ireland to live with her grandmother and siblings. Rebecca’s second image was of her grandmother who subsequently reared her, and she remembers her as a strong woman who had courage and resilience. She was a widow at the time. She is deceased many years now.

Veronica and Conor

Veronica and Conor are a couple fostering and they live in a rural area. Conor works full-time and Veronica is at home full-time. At the time of the interview they were fostering three children in care long-term. The three children are siblings. Veronica was interviewed twice, and Conor was interviewed once. Conor was working when the first interview took place. To participate in the visual imagery technique Veronica and Conor provided a memory card of Conor's deceased mother. They said they had considered their options for years with regards to parenting or looking after children. They have no children of their own, but were not forthcoming about this during the interview, so the context is missing. Conor's mother suggested they become foster carers, so they credit her with ‘putting a name to it.’ They were fostering the three boys in their care for five years when they were interviewed and fostering had become a significant part of their lives. Several times during the interview either Veronica or Conor referred to ‘my son' or ‘our son’ when discussing the children in their care.

Laura and John

Laura and John are a couple fostering and they live in an urban area. They have four adult children together – one lives independently and the other three live at home. John works full-time and Laura is at home full-time. At the time of the interview they were fostering two children in care long-term. The two children are siblings. Laura and John were interviewed together, but they did not engage in a second interview. They gave no reason for making this decision. To participate in the visual imagery technique Laura and John provided two photographs for the research. The first was of Laura's mother looking lovingly at a new-born baby. She provided this image to emphasise how looks can be deceiving. The baby is Laura's son who was born when she was 17 years old, but her mother refused to support her so the baby was put up for adoption. Laura traced her son years later when he was an adult, and she is still in contact with him. The second image they provided was a photograph of their four children. When Laura met John they had four children together and are fostering as a family. Laura felt this symbolised her future after overcoming adversity.

Mia

Mia is fostering with her husband, but he was unavailable for interview due to work commitments. Mia lives in a rural area. Mia and her husband have two children – one is a young adult and the other is under 18 years. Both of her children live at home. Mia’s husband works full-time, and she is at home full-time. At the time of interview, they were fostering two children in care long-term. The two children are not related to each other. Mia was interviewed twice. To participate in the visual imagery technique Mia provided two drawings – the first one was of a heart, and the beat of the heart, which symbolised her family's heartbeat. Also, if someone in the family is upset then it impacts on all family members. The second drawing was of chicks in a nest and the drawing showed two of them falling from the nest. The tree was tall with Mia emphasising that in her role as a foster carer it is her responsibility to catch the children in her care before they fall, no matter how many

times this is required. The goal being that eventually they can leave the ‘nest’ independently with skills to cope in life.

Colette

Colette is fostering with her husband, but he was unavailable for interview due to work commitments. Colette lives in a rural area. Colette and her husband have one daughter who is under 18 years and lives at home. Colette’s husband works full-time, and she is at home full-time. At the time of the first interview there was a teenager in placement. When I met Colette for the second interview the young person had moved to independent living and there was a young child in short-term foster care. Colette was interviewed twice. To participate in the visual imagery technique Colette provided a photograph of her daughter and the child in care (teenage girl) who took the photograph on her phone, got it developed, framed it, and gave it to Colette's daughter. She saw it as a snapshot of a moment in time that shows two happy children. The significance for Colette was the effort the child in care made to take it, develop it, and frame it before giving it to their daughter.

Annie

Annie is a single carer who lives in an urban area. She is divorced with three grown up children – two daughters and a son and they all live at home. Annie is at home full-time and at the time of the first interview she was fostering a teenager in short-term care, but she had given 28 days’ notice to end the placement as this is a policy requirement, to give the agency time to plan the move to another placement for the young person. When I met Annie for the second interview, she informed me she had not fostered since the young person left her care, but she was available to foster, and she was awaiting a suitable placement match with another child or young person. Annie was interviewed twice. To participate in the visual imagery technique Annie provided a sculpture of hands holding a baby. This was a sculpture she bought when she was approved as a foster carer to symbolise her role in holding the baby. Annie said she believes in signs so when she saw the sculpture in a shop straight after

she was told she was approved as a foster carer she saw that as a sign of success in fostering.

Sarah and David

Sarah and David are a couple fostering and they live in a rural area. Sarah and David work on the family farm. They have five grown up children – two live at home. At the time of interview, they were fostering two children in long-term foster care and providing respite care to another child for two weekends a month. None of the children were related to each other. Sarah and David were interviewed once which was a decision they took together as participants of the study. Sarah and David did not provide an image or symbol to participate in the visual imagery technique for this research.

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Complex Family Dynamics

This first superordinate theme identifies complex family dynamics and feelings of loss in participating foster carers' stories. When the participants explained their reasons for deciding to become foster carers they described experiences that were subjective and deeply personal. These influences shaped their thought processes before they even made the initial phone call of enquiry about fostering. *Complex Family Dynamics* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Fractured Families, Loss* and *Going back to the Beginning*. All three subordinate themes represented important decisions for these participating foster carers when they took on the role of fostering. It was their desire to care for someone or to parent a child, to overcome adverse experiences, to feel empowered, or to start afresh and as a way of moving forward. Regardless of their reasons, the participating foster carers' experiences profoundly affected them and were at the forefront of their reasons for deciding to take on the role of fostering.

Fractured Families

Laura, Rebecca, John, Veronica and Mia described experiences of childhood trauma or abuse, or witnessing the impact of trauma on relatives, friends, or neighbours as significant factors in their decision to become foster carers. Rebecca and Laura experienced emotional isolation and fear as children and felt they were not nurtured by their parents in their early formative years. Laura conveyed a mother who was abusive and when she became pregnant as a teenager, her mother refused to support her, so the baby was put up for adoption. In the same sentence as she described this, she stated she looked after her mother when she was older. Laura implied a fractured relationship with her mother, sorrow at losing her son to adoption and a sense of responsibility to her mother intertwined. She was also grateful her new-born son escaped what could have been a difficult relationship for him too. Using the visual imagery technique, she showed me a photograph of her mother cradling a baby:

> *Anyone looking at that would think that that's an adoring mother looking at [pause] …. nonetheless she had pretty much forced me into having him adopted. When I look at that I think … well you're one child that escaped because I would have been living at home. He escaped what could have been quite an abusive relationship* [Laura, lines 118-123].

When Laura was a baby her parents employed a 'live in' nanny that stayed with the family until Laura reached adulthood. This nanny provided a bond for Laura which was a significant relationship she carried into adulthood. Laura feels she is better adjusted as an adult because of her relationship with her nanny as a child. There is the sense that Laura knows the difference one loving adult can make in a child's life. She also understands the trauma a child can experience if they do not have a nurturing relationship with a primary caregiver. Laura appears to want to give this nurturance back to a child:

> *Having experienced it as well …. I guess at times I wished someone had come into my house and taken us all out …. but I think back then … you know …. people weren't as aware and there weren't the services there* [Laura, lines 548-551].

Rebecca was the youngest of five siblings and the only child who lived with her mother in the UK. Her maternal grandmother was a widow who looked after her four siblings in Ireland and Rebecca remembers a time she returned to Ireland with her mother at the request of her grandmother because her four siblings were taken into care and placed in a group home. Rebecca's grandmother searched for her mother for months before she located her. Rebecca's siblings returned home after her mother arrived back to Ireland, and then her mother decided to return to the UK, again taking Rebecca with her:

> *Granny couldn't locate my mother to get them out [of care]. My granny wouldn't have had any money …. my grandad was [pause] I was six months old when my grandad died …. em …. but anyway …. it took her six months …. she would always tell us it took her six months to find our mam …. then she came home with me and she got the kids out of care* [Rebecca, lines 124-129].

Rebecca said she did not live with a parent who took the easy road when she was a child. She acknowledged her mother's status living in the UK in the 1950s as an independent working woman, but her memories are blurred by traumatic times that outweigh the positive ones. Rebecca's mother was unable to form or maintain lasting relationships with her children because her behaviour was so unpredictable. Rebecca connects these experiences with her desire to become a foster carer. She links the loss she feels as an adult to her vulnerability as a child, and this sense of loss was apparent as Rebecca reflected on the person she is now:

> *Sometimes I get a bit whingey, but I went into therapy. I would still be very emotional …. like we all slag that [Rebecca] is this hard person, but I have to be. It is a wall or else I will be all teary, teary. Emm…yes that is probably why my daughter says I always take the hard road even if [pause] but I don't see the easy road. You know there is no easy road. There is only one road I take, and it is always the hard one* [Rebecca, lines 11-15].

Even though Rebecca was not taken into care she felt loss from her childhood that she did not want other children to feel if she could prevent it and she seemed to identify with the children coming into her care:

> *I could have been any one of those kids that came into my care …. I could have been* [Rebecca, lines 237-238].

Because of her childhood experiences Rebecca also presents as identifying with the more difficult life path. In her role as a foster carer this manifests in Rebecca identifying with children with more complex needs. When Rebecca said she could have been a child in care she may also have felt like the child that no-one wanted. Rebecca was the only child who lived with her mother in the UK, but she did not feel nurtured by her mother in her early formative years:

> *You know give me the worst child [to foster] and sure look…. you know what I mean….it is all this. The child that nobody wants is the child I want* [Rebecca, lines 19-20].

John, Veronica and Mia had experiences of living in group homes (or orphanages) either directly or indirectly as children, or they had memories of family or friends being visited by social workers as service users because there were concerns for the welfare of the children. During the interviews they recollected these times during their childhood. The first in this discussion is John who lived in a group home for periods of time as a child and has vivid memories of his time there. Whilst there he did not attend school and instead worked long hours even though he was a young child:

> *It was a home in [name of area] and…. em…. there was a lot of abuse going on in there. It wasn't a very nice place….so…. we started going into it [fostering] because we don't think kids should be brought up there [in group homes]. It's not personable, it is sort of…. you got a number and that was it…. you know…. bed, lunch, dinner, breakfast and in those days we were made…. from morning to evening…. we were made sit and make [names product] all day* [John, lines 248-255].

John was admitted to the group home when he was 6 years old for one year, and again when he was 8 years old for one year. Because of his time there, John has strong empathy for children in care, which stems from his own vulnerability and sense of loss from his childhood experiences. His understanding of the impact of these experiences motivates him to support the children placed with him now as a foster carer:

> *Yeah…. kids shouldn't really be brought up in a [group] home. The likes of [name of organisation] or other homes…. you know what I mean…it's just not…. it's too many in one place. They don't get enough…. sort of….one to one* [John, lines 287-290].

Veronica was influenced by her mother's emphasis on family life growing up because her mother grew up in a group home. Veronica met me on her own for the first interview and described her mother's experiences during that interview. Her husband Conor joined us for the second interview (he was working when the first interview took place) and when they were interviewed together they gave a number of different reasons for deciding to become foster carers and it was only later in the second interview that Veronica discussed her mother's experiences again. Some of the other reasons they gave for deciding to foster will be discussed later, but her mother's experiences were important to Veronica when she was interviewed alone:

> *My mum.... em.... her mother walked out on them when my mum was five [years old] and my uncle was three [years old]. I'm not too sure.... my mum and my uncle were the two younger ones and they were put in homes....and you know ....my mum talking to us growing up.... you know she would always say.....oh you know family is very important.... you know…like and as all the girls ..... you know she would be saying like.... you know if you have children and that.... like you know..... make sure like you know not to let anything happen. Don't let anybody.... you know.....don't walk out on them...don't you know.... kind of.... this thing....and it used to be..... just listening to her.... over the years …. like you know.....used always think no* [Veronica, lines 301-308].

Veronica struggled to articulate this emotive issue of her mother's experiences of abandonment as a child. She was influenced by her mother's protection of the family unit with her desire to create a family of her own. Veronica linked her mother's fractured relationships from living in a group home, to becoming a foster carer, and her desire to parent. Now that she is fostering five years Veronica considers the children in her care as her children. She referred to the three children placed with them as 'my son' or 'our son' several times during the interviews. Veronica has no biological children, but she clearly identifies with being a mother and seems comfortable in this role. When Veronica spoke about the children in care during the interview it was with pride and their sense of achievement was her sense of achievement too. This emphasises the importance Veronica places on her role as a mother and her understanding of family from her mother's experiences as a child.

Mia was profoundly affected as a child by the impact of substance misuse and neglect on her next-door neighbours who were also her friends. Mia remembers their involvement with the Social Work Department when she was a child because of the parents' substance misuse issues. Mia described these memories that are intertwined with her mother's desire to help others (which will be discussed later in the chapter) as her reasons for deciding to become a foster carer. By becoming a foster carer Mia could protect children. When she made the application to foster and was accepted to complete the initial training course, her friend (and former next-door neighbour) who influenced her the most, died by suicide the same weekend. Mia was devastated by his death and put the application on hold for a while, but then felt even more strongly that she should be the adult that children need in times of crisis. Mia still feels this is her role and is passionate about protecting vulnerable children:

> *It was the social workers .....you see back then we didn't know social workers, it was guards and priests. Social workers weren't [pause] I suppose nowadays everybody knows what a social worker is, but when I was a teenager, like, what was a social worker? You know.... was it somebody who worked for the priest or whatever? Em... but all we do remember is that they were coming to take them away. Then it didn't happen....it didn't happen that they took them away, but the mother had to run away with the children. But these were my best friends..... these were, like, my brothers and sisters and whatever ... and our houses were right beside each other. We used to knock on the walls to each other, and all of that. So that had an awful impact on me …. as a child* [Mia, lines 596-603].

Loss

A feeling of sadness emerged strongly from Rebecca, Annie and Colette during the interviews for this research. There was a sense they were reacting to anguish or loss when they decided to take on the role of fostering. Although all three participating foster carers had support from close family members, there is also the sense that this was a deeply personal journey for them. There was an uncertainty attached to making the decision to take on the role of fostering when they were feeling challenged and vulnerable about other, more recent experiences. As already discussed, Rebecca wanted to foster because of her complex childhood experiences and expressed her desire to look after children to her husband when they were together. When they separated, she started to attend therapy and during this time

her daughters suggested she consider fostering again. Her daughters knew of her difficult childhood and her efforts to overcome the turmoil she felt as an adult:

> *I would have [pause] when my kids were small, I would have always wanted to [pause] …. there was an orphanage in town, and I'd think, oh God that's not fair, but I wasn't thinking straight. I would think we should take the children out for Christmas. At least [ex-husband] was logical about it … he would say [Rebecca] spoil them for two weeks and then send them back. Does that make sense? Oh, it doesn't make sense, but I always wanted to be doing something, but [ex-husband] didn't you know [struggles] …. yeah …. it wouldn't have been his thing, and I suppose when we split up …. like both my girls would have said …. here …. you know you're in therapy now, you're getting all this sorted, now is your time …. you know you have a big house …. well it's not that big* [Rebecca, lines 494-505].

Annie was struggling with her new identity as a single parent and deciding to become a foster carer became intertwined with her husband's affair when he left the family home to live with the woman he was having the affair with. Their children were still young when Annie separated from her husband, and it was apparent this was a traumatic experience for her. Annie became emotional during the interview when she described this experience and her use of the word 'trauma' suggests it was deeply distressing:

> *Yeah … so …. em …. meanwhile back at the ranch I found out that [names ex-husband] was having an affair and it was his friend's wife and all this crap …. so that was a huge, big thing needless to say … trauma …. I was left with three children. It was all my fault of course … everything …. I was so dysfunctional he had to have an affair and leave …. right* [Annie, lines 556-559].

Annie's ex-husband portrayed her to their children as dysfunctional and his reason for leaving the family home. Annie dismissed this portrayal of her by her ex-husband, but she repeated 'dysfunctional' during subsequent responses suggesting this description of her by her ex-husband to their children deeply hurt her. About a year after her ex-husband left the family home, Annie considered applying to become a foster carer and eventually decided to make an inquiry:

> *Yeah …. so, I was googling different things and …. em …. [daughter] came in from school, secondary school [pause] yeah, she was 16 maybe, so it was a year or so after [names ex-husband] was gone and …. eh …. when she saw what I was googling she was going …. oh, mam are we having a baby [laughs] are we getting a baby, can we have a baby …. and I was saying hang on a minute [laughs] will you calm down. I said I'm just looking …. I don't even know if I'm going to be able. I said I don't know being a single parent would they give me a baby …. you know ….*

> *because I don't have a husband …. and eh …. she then comes in and she says [to other daughter] we're getting a baby [laughs]. So, they were all really excited, but …. em …. anyway, it took ages later. I was wondering …. I kept thinking will I, won't I?* [Annie, lines 656-664].

Colette and her husband have one daughter and she stated in interview that there will only ever be her which alluded to fertility issues and a sense of loss. Colette is a stay-at-home mother who was childminding as well as looking after her daughter before she decided to become a foster carer. Colette thought that by becoming foster carers, they could share their home with a child in need of alternative care and their daughter could experience having a sibling. However, Colette struggled to make the decision to foster in case it had a negative impact on her daughter. She presented as hoping fostering would benefit her husband and daughter too, but she was aware she was the one driving the possibility of them becoming foster carers:

> *It was probably [pause] it was something that was kind of …. we had often spoke about like …. going way back before we even looked …. we looked into it when [daughter] was 4 or 5 and then we decided no it wasn't for us and it was the [agency] who had come out to us and us kind of went there's no backup …. [daughter] is too young and everything else …. and we didn't …. em [pause] I was …. I stayed at home after we had [daughter] and it was just [pause] ah you know …. you think it's a great thing when you stay at home, whereas you also need to occupy something …. and it was the need …. I am …. as I've been told before, I am one of these people who is just able to love and take care of somebody and that's in my nature …. that's what I tend to do, and it was just something that filled that little gap …. and I kind of went …. I could do that …. I could do that … and then …. em …. when the time was right then …. we just kind of …. and it was [husband] he said we'll look into this again …. we'll look at this again* [Colette, lines 214-224].

Colette's focus is on family life with an emphasis on traditional family i.e. husband, wife and children. She has strong traditional views on what makes up a family unit, and the role each person plays. This gives an indication of Colette's sense of self and how she presents to others. There is a possibility that fostering needs to fit around her sense of family and integrate into their lives. If it does not then Colette will not feel she is fostering the child in her care. Colette feels safe in her role as a mother and wife. She emphasises her caring nature as if providing affirmation for Colette that she should be in this role in life. When Colette

discusses her house being run like a madhouse, she is stating this is who we are, and her sense of identity is clear. However, she still presents as unsure of herself as a foster carer:

> *Yeah, we just went for it then …. and I just …. I just think we are [struggles] sometimes this house is [pause] run like a madhouse and we're not politically correct [laughs]. There are certain things we do and that works in some situations and it doesn't work in some situations, but it definitely works for this one [child in placement], but eh …. yeah …. the two of us just.... I just.... I think we just have...we do [emphasises the word] have an awful lot to give…you know and that caring nature is in me I know that....and it was just.... em ... it was just something to do and we just thought well we could do this....and we could...in doing... something that kind of.... would .... not benefit us as in....but it would fill a void..something there to [pause] also help somebody else* [Colette, lines 229-236].

Going Back to the Beginning

Mia, Conor, Veronica, Annie and Rebecca found a familiarity with fostering from their previous experiences. By going back to the beginning these participating foster carers were moving forward with a life plan that gave a strong sense of meaning to their decision-making processes. During her childhood Mia was influenced by her mother's kindness towards children in the community and she recalled many times when her mother intervened in their community to help children and families who were struggling. Mia did not question her mother's motives at the time even though she acknowledged the role her mother played in the lives of many families. There is a sense from Mia that she felt her mother's actions were important and they did shine a light on the path she took in life as an adult:

> *I suppose growing up, well growing up my mother was …. she always had children in the house and she always helped other children. Now at the time I didn't kind of realise what she was doing because a lot of them would live in the village and would be in and out of the house anyway …. and then you'd get a lot of [people] coming to the village and you remember years ago they used to knock on doors looking for milk and that. Well mammy used to give them my clothes and my new runners and everything like that. So, they'd be gone off dressed to the nines, but she was always good like that …. and there was one particular family in our area …. em …. where the father was an alcoholic and the mother was just off the whole time …. and mammy got whiff that they were [stumbles] it was actually a big white bus …. this is what we remember as kids …. the big white bus was coming for them* [Mia, lines 582-592].

Mia felt a familiarity, and therefore a confidence in fostering, from her childhood memories and she was also strongly influenced by her next-door neighbours' experiences. As a teenager and young adult, she observed adults drinking when they were celebrating an

occasion and sometimes removed children from this environment by volunteering to look after them. At that stage in her life it seems Mia was connecting the influences from childhood. Mia presented as someone who has a connection with children, and she became their protector as she got older:

> *I suppose years ago looking at mam doing it, but not realising the impact on a lot of these children and what was going on in their lives. I mean I was caught up in it, but I could go home to my house do you know …. and then I suppose …. and then as a teenager … an older teenager …. I always [pause] I could be in a room and there would be kids all around me and even when I was courting [husband] … well not courting [husband] but going out with [husband] he would say …. oh my God we can't even go anywhere …. like we had [stumbles] … like …. like when we had …. there was a party down the town, a christening or something …. I'd end up coming home here with ten kids and telling the parents to stay down there drinking. I don't know what it was … it was just [pause] obviously it was just something I'd seen or something* [Mia, lines 670-678].

Conor shared his memories of his mother's kindness towards others during his childhood and he respected his mother's desire to do good when he was a child. Conor felt as he got older, he was considered a protective adult too, and this was because his mother was known to help vulnerable families. Conor felt coming from a family known to help, his brothers and he were also considered the same as their mother. Connor willingly took on this role and was eager to express this sentiment:

> *There was always kids in and out of our house. There was nine of us, but there was …. you could wake up in the morning and God knows who else would be in the house … you know …. a kid or a child you know …. whereas it might kick off in some other house overnight or something like that and our door was always the first one* [Conor, lines 28-32].

Veronica has also embraced the role that Conor has adopted on the housing estate where they live as he is known as someone to go to if in difficulty. The three boys in their care are aware of this and they will just call Conor if someone knocks on the door. Conor reacted with humour to this comment by Veronica and joked their neighbours want him to put petrol in their cars. However, as the interview progressed, it became clear that the role he has adopted is important to him, especially with regards to his feelings of self-worth:

> *Like they laugh here in this house since the boys came to us …. like … anything that goes wrong in this estate …. the first door they'll knock on is ours …. and the boys would be here and they're going such a fella up the road is looking for [Conor], if a*

> *car breaks down, they'll look for [Conor], if they need a hammer they'll look for [Conor]* [Veronica, lines 457-460].

Veronica and Conor made numerous references to Conor's mother's opinion of their suitability to foster so she featured strongly in their decision making processes. As already mentioned, when Veronica was interviewed alone, she said her mother's experiences of abandonment as a child strongly influenced her decision to foster. However, when Veronica and Conor were interviewed together, they mentioned Conor's mother as their primary reason for deciding to take on the role. Their reference to the children in their care indicated they had established a family unit with the three children placed with them. Their focus is on parenting and they stated fostering is their full identity now after five years as approved foster carers. This is a strong statement to make and suggests fostering is a particularly important part of their lives now:

> *Your mother [to Conor] kind of planted the seed [for fostering]. It was something I had always thought about. I know I was saying it to you before about my mum and that …. but I always used to say to my mum oh I'll look after kids when I grow older, but I never put a name to it. [Conor's] mother put a name to it. [Conor's] mother asked us outright; would we ever consider fostering. She always thought we were made for it [laughs]. She used to always say to us …. like …. you know would you ever consider doing it* [Veronica, lines 14-18].

For Annie, the link was her connection with children because looking after children, being trusted to take care of other people's children and enjoying the company of children preceded her separation from her husband and this is what Annie returned to when she decided to become a foster carer. This highlights the complexities of foster carers' experiences and captures the nuances attached to their reasons for deciding to take on the role:

> *Well I suppose going back to the beginning I'm one of eleven children and I'm fourth from the bottom …. and em …. my older brothers and sisters had kids and I was always babysitting for them from the time I was really young you know and very [pause] I had a lot of responsibility because I was trusted I suppose* [Annie, lines 452-453, 461-463].

As an adult, Rebecca repeated patterns of behaviour she acknowledged were learned from childhood. Early in the interview she discussed her stepfather's alcohol misuse and her memory of him going out for a drink, but not returning home for a few days. She remembered her mother's attempts to find him which were usually unsuccessful. These experiences influenced many aspects of her life including her marriage because she married a man who misused alcohol, which was the reason they eventually separated. Rebecca's only sister was 10 years older than her and they were close, but she died when she was 59 years old. She said her sister often joked about their childhood, but it brought back painful memories to Rebecca of the opportunities that were not available to them as children. Rebecca's sister would say she learned to play the piano when she wanted to learn to play the violin. This was her sister's attempt at humour because in their childhood learning to play an instrument was far removed from the reality of their everyday lives.

Rebecca acknowledged her sister also repeated patterns of behaviour and because of this she married an abusive partner. Rebecca and her sister shared a feeling of obligation to help those in need. Rebecca did not directly associate her relationship with her sister with her desire to become a foster carer. However, she spoke about her sister at length during the interviews and compared her sister's actions when she was alive to her own actions now as a foster carer. It may be that she surmised her sister would have approved of her fostering role because of their mutual desire to help people. Because of her background history Rebecca also feels a familiarity with managing complexity, but there was a sense from Rebecca that this obligation weighed heavily on her:

> *I would bring in every waif and stray and so did my sister. Now I wouldn't have brought them in as fondly as she would have had* [Rebecca, lines 510-511].

Summary

This chapter discussed the first superordinate theme to emerge from the research findings. *Complex Family Dynamics* was concerned with participants' motivation to foster which evolved as complex and deeply personal in this study. Some of the participants' experiences

gave a clear indication of their reasons for deciding to become foster carers while other experiences presented as more nuanced. Their perspectives seemed to derive from their subjective experiences which gave them a unique understanding of the caregiving role.

Conflicting Identities

The second superordinate theme *Conflicting Identities* captures research participants' vulnerability in deciding to become foster carers and their attempts to make sense of the new role they were taking on. Their sense of self was also challenged by the process. The participating foster carers decided to take on the role for the reasons previously discussed, but they were not prepared for the level of engagement required during the assessment process. They often felt emotionally challenged and tried to maintain a sense of autonomy. This theme highlights the contrast between participants' expectations as prospective foster carers compared to the reality when they started the fostering assessment. *Conflicting Identities* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Feeling Vulnerable, Engagement with the Fostering Assessment* and *Past and Future Self*. These subordinate themes encapsulate the internal world of the participating foster carers and considers that touching on external reasons alone for wanting to take on this role does not capture the intensity and power of the emotions experienced during the process. In this discussion the participants' emotions range from uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability to reactions that are defensive and stubborn. However, there is acknowledgement too that there is a feeling of reassurance and freedom when complex information is disclosed and accepted during the process of becoming foster carers.

Feeling Vulnerable

Annie, Rebecca, Colette, Laura and John presented as unsure and sometimes vulnerable as they took the initial steps to become foster carers. They expressed a vulnerability that was complex because they had already experienced loss which was the reason they decided to become foster carers in the first place. When they started to explore fostering they were trying to make sense of complex experiences, and their reasons for fostering were inextricably linked to those experiences. Annie felt vulnerable because she did not know if she could foster as a single parent. She often visited a church and prayed one day for help in deciding if she should become a foster carer and at this time during the interview she

started to cry. This was very emotional for Annie and she jumps from one issue to the other, and her repetition of 'em' suggests she was struggling to articulate her feelings:

> *Yeah …. anyway, I used to go in and light candles and …. em …. I was saying one day …. you know …. let me [pause] kind of show me a sign [still crying] and em …. and low and behold …. em …. when I opened up [the newspaper] it was the [names newspaper] or something …. yeah …. but I didn't know …. I hadn't a clue, I hadn't a clue about anything …. em …. just that there were kids that needed fostering. So …. eh …. I …. em …. it was a Thursday evening right and I said I'll just [pause] I'll ring the number and see what they say. So, I went up to my bedroom and …. em …. somebody answered the phone in [agency] and I said …. eh …. I said …. hi …. yeah …. I just saw the ad …. I said I was just wondering are single parents allowed and they went …. oh of course* [Annie, lines 683-685, 702-706].

When Annie started the fostering assessment, she was informed by the assessing social worker that her ex-husband would be invited to an interview as part of the process. Annie was to inform him of this and ask if he would be willing to engage to give his opinion as a co-parent. Annie paused and laughed in her use of language here, but she felt vulnerable because she did not know if he would speak about her as he had spoken to their children in the past. It was also apparent from her reaction as she struggled to describe her contact with him, and the implications for her assessment as a prospective foster carer, that his opinion still mattered to her:

> *Yeah [social worker] had to go to speak to him so I had to ask him first was it ok for [social worker] to call in and he was like … oh, I'm working until such and such and how long will it take and all this …. and I was saying …. oh, she'll be as quick as possible and what have you. So anyway [social worker] …. [pause] …. I gave [social worker] his number and she rang him, and they made an appointment and off she went …. and I was saying …. look I've told you everything about everything …. like what he said about me in the past. I said … so I don't know what he is going to come out with and …. em …. [pause] and all my friends were like …. oh [Annie] this should be interesting you know …. but …. em …. [social worker] came back to me and said that he thought I was a great mother; an absolute wonderful person and he would highly recommend me [laughs] for fostering and all this crap* [Annie, lines 908-916].

Rebecca's ex-husband was also interviewed as part of the assessment process, but unlike Annie, Rebecca felt confident her ex-husband would be complimentary towards her and she did not feel emotionally exposed by the involvement of her ex-partner. She presented as someone who knew her ex-husband would be positive, but she still resented the intrusion.

During the interviews Rebecca was keen to portray her personality as softer than she thought she presented to others as she often made reference to having a 'hard shell.' However, it was obvious from her presentation that the turmoil she experienced as a child had a lasting impact on her. There was a sense from Rebecca that her past is always with her and she easily became sad or emotionally heightened during the interview:

> *My sister was only a year or two dead at the time as well, so I probably was in a heap, you know the way …. em …. yeah …. she went to talk to my husband…. [names ex-husband] would never [swears] …. as a mother he thought I was the best thing since sliced bread, as a foster carer the same thing as …. he'd never …. do you know …. and he said everything that happened …. it was him …. it was his drinking, it was him …. you know the way …. yeah … like I suppose I know my friend probably did say yeah, she's a bit soft, she's an idiot. I give out this [pause] I know I'm this hard shell, but I'm just mushy inside and I suppose I have to be. I feel I have to be or otherwise I'm [pretends to cry] …. I'm a whinger at the movies, I'm a whinger, you know if anyone hurt themselves, I would cry with them* [Rebecca, lines 661-673].

Uppermost in Colette's mind at all times was their family unit and she struggled to balance her desire to foster with the possible upset fostering might cause to their family dynamic. Colette made a statement during the interview that they have the 'perfect little family,' and she was not trying to extend their family as such. It was important to Colette that she did not invite complexities into their home that might become unmanageable in the future, or cause upset or confusion for their daughter. However, Colette is nurturing, and this seemed to cause confusion for her in deciding if becoming foster carers was the right choice for them as a family unit. She eventually reconciled her wish to foster with the timeframe regarding her daughter's age and understanding. However, the dilemma continued for Colette as she struggled to understand the information that was imparted to her regarding her suitability to foster as her expectations were completely different:

> *I kind of went …. more family life …. I also felt it gave [pause] …. [daughter] is an only child …. there is only her …. there only ever will be her and that's [struggles] …. em …. so …. we kind of gave her the idea of being a sibling …. what it was like …. whether it was going to be …. [struggles] …. at the time we thought it would just naturally be younger kids …. we just thought the way …. we didn't think …. because when you're out of the …. out of the actual thing [system] you just [pause] you just assume it's going to be young and that was [struggles] we kind of [struggles] kind of …. not fit around our family but [pause] …. no …. but talking to a lot of the social workers at the time and everything else …. it was like …. the house …. yourselves …. everything is suited to teenagers, but because I've never been [stops] someone thinks you're going to be able to do it …. you don't think …. I've never dealt with a*

> *teenager where [struggles] my knowledge goes from nought to nine years old …. that's all I know* [Colette, lines 253-263].

Laura was apprehensive because she felt her complex background history might influence the outcome for her and John. It was important to Laura to feel accepted as a suitable candidate to take on the role of fostering. She could only feel this way if she fully disclosed her background history. Nevertheless, she was nervous and felt vulnerable and struggled to articulate her feelings. Laura's repetition of 'em' suggests she still feels uncertain and vulnerable when she speaks about her childhood experiences. There was a sense from Laura that she is proud of who she has become, and she is protective of the feelings of self-worth she has established for herself as an adult. Laura referred several times during the interview to her ability to connect with people in difficulty because of her own complex childhood which suggests this is who Laura has become and she is proud of herself in this role:

> *I'd never …. other than with [John] …. I'd never spoken about how abusive my mother was …. to anybody …. em …. and I [pause] told them absolutely everything …. em …. and I think it was really important because I didn't know whether or not that was an asset or something that …. maybe I shouldn't foster. I can remember saying to [John] …. look …. I've told them absolutely everything about my background …. good, bad and indifferent. They can make the decision and if they decide yes …. well it is because they have all the information. Whereas, if I hadn't said about my mam …. or whatever …. I think [pause] I would always be second guessing myself. I would be saying …. well if they knew that would they still want us as foster carers …. so, I was glad I said it to them …. thinking they might say … look your background is not the best and we don't think you're balanced enough …. or whatever …. so, to me …. just saying …. like …. this is it …. this is who I am …. this is where it comes from* [Laura, lines 1375-1392].

A recurring theme for Laura throughout the interview was that looks can be deceiving and circumstances can be contradictory as they may appear to be something they are not. Laura initially mentioned this at the beginning of the interview when she discussed feeling forced to place her new-born son for adoption. Because of this there was a perception from Laura that she wanted to feel acceptance and a sense of belonging was important to her:

> *We were brought up to put out this thing of being from [names area] from one of the richest families in [names area] and we were really classy and really respectable …. and behind closed doors it was completely the opposite …. em …. and it was always if people knew what went on in our house, nobody would be allowed near us …. and*

> *whatever …. and it was actually saying to someone …. this is who I am, and this is actually what was going on in our house …. and still we were …. or I was .... accepted* [Laura, lines 1421-1429].

Laura's husband John was also apprehensive initially when they decided to make the application. In the previous theme he discussed his admission to a group home as a child. This was a difficult experience for John in his childhood and prompted him to become a foster carer as he felt he could identify with children with complex needs and support them to develop skills to cope in adulthood. John demonstrated determination and resilience as a foster carer during the interview. However, when John was a young adult, he was known to the Gardaí and he felt vulnerable disclosing his background history in case it influenced the decision or he was rejected on the basis of his behaviour in the past. He was very unsure of his suitability at the beginning of the process:

> *Yeah …. up to the age of what …. 19, 20 …. I was getting into trouble with the Gardaí as well …. you know …. and we always thought …. oh, if you've ever been in trouble with the Gardaí it's like trying to go to the States …. you're not going to be able to foster …. you know …. if you've been in trouble with the Gardaí …. so, I just told them* [John, lines 1456-1461].

Engagement with the Fostering Assessment

This theme identifies the concept of engagement with specific detail on the participants' understanding of the level of engagement required with the process of becoming foster carers. Colette, Conor, Rebecca and John showed a level of disengagement in the process that emerged as an experience that was negative or unnecessary. They presented as dismissive or resentful of the intrusion into their personal lives alluding to a process that was, for them, time consuming and repetitive. All of these participating foster carers had different reasons for deciding to take on the role of fostering. Their familiarity in this subordinate theme is their struggle to acknowledge that engaging with the process might benefit them without making them feel emotionally exposed or vulnerable.

Colette emphasised her difficulty with the process and reflected on the dilemma it raised for her, acknowledging she had a different focus to what was required of her. Colette's focus was to nurture a child and when she had come to terms with the implications of fostering for her family, she did not understand why her conceptualisation of the role of fostering was scrutinised. Colette presented as someone who thought the nature of the process of becoming a foster carer was irrelevant to her and she struggled to engage at the level of depth required. The process caused concern for Colette and she presented as feeling unsafe in the space. It may have been because she felt unable to shift her focus from parent to prospective foster carer and the realisation that the role most important to her in life, and the one that shaped her identity, that is, as a mother, was being scrutinised. Even during the interviews for this research as an approved foster carer Colette expressed strong emotions and often struggled to convey her feelings:

> *I remember times when we were walking around the house saying …. she's [assessing social worker] never coming into my house ever again. I'm not doing this ever, ever, ever again. Then you'd go on and your next meeting would be two or three weeks away …. and you kinda …. by the time that came …. you'd be kinda …. okay …. no …. I'm okay …. because [sighs] they seem to pick the [pause] the bad reasons which is what they obviously want to do. They want to see how crackable are you, you know what I mean? How …. you know …. they seem to just pick the bad reasons all the time …. and just …. kind of …. well what do you mean by that? What …. da, da, da …. you know …. and you're like …. that's not got anything to do with fostering …. we don't want to talk about that …. that's over there [gestures away from her] please continue on here …. but they just kept going on certain things* [Colette, lines 640-649].

Colette invoked an image of a happy family living in the present with a focus on their daughter's needs. She did not necessarily want to experience change and this possibility may also have felt daunting for her. However, Colette was emotionally invested in becoming a foster carer and there was a sense she could not detach emotionally to objectively understand the process, and this may have made her feel vulnerable:

> *Yeah, and there were things like [pause] I've dealt with that …. that's done …. why …. why [emphasises the word] are you dragging this up? You don't [pause] …. obviously in our heads …. we don't want to talk about that, we don't want to know …. like both of us [names husband] and myself were like …. what's that got to do with it …. but of course …. it's got the whole thing …. has got to do with over here* [Colette, lines 653-657].

It was only when Colette was approved as a foster carer that she realised the level of complexity she was inviting into her home. This seems to have been a revelation for Colette even though her struggle to become a foster carer in the first place was her concern that she may add a layer of complexity to their family that would negatively impact on their daughter. There was a sense from Colette that the process was an emotional rollercoaster and she did not feel she was a willing participant, but she needed to influence the outcome to ensure she was approved as a foster carer. Because of this she did not decide to end the process, but her intense feelings of frustration indicate she was engaging in it without a high level of autonomy:

> *You know [pause] you know [stumbles] would I turn around at some stage and say …. no, I've had enough …. I'm done, do you know what I mean …. sort of …. but if I couldn't deal with an assessment and stuff …. how was I going to deal with it in a child's [struggles] …. dragging things up [struggles again] so I did …. kind of …. but I did kind of feel it was a bit [pause]…. you know [pause] …. not a bit much I couldn't say …. they know their job and they know what to do* [Colette, lines 667-672].

Conor experienced a number of challenges engaging with the process of becoming a foster carer. He possibly presents to people who do not know him as not being emotionally invested in the role. This is not the case as he is emotionally invested in the three children placed with them in long-term care. However, his approach to the personal nature of the fostering assessment suggests he felt unable to become emotionally immersed in the process because he shifted his focus to the assessing social worker and started to analyse her instead. There was a sense from Conor that he wanted to maintain a sense of his own power and portraying himself as someone who is emotionally strong and capable was important to him. However, he struggled to articulate his feelings here and his repetition of 'I think' suggests he felt uncertain:

> *I think it just gets …. I think with the assessment [pause] you know …. because every question is on …. until something is asked …. and you just get to a stage …. and it just gets to a stage and you just think …. you know I'm getting tired of this …. you know …. plus …. plus …. we have a habit of reading people ourselves …. then as well like you know …. and you're being asked these questions and you know you're reading into the other person …. and I'm …. well …. I …. me especially …. reading into the other person that's asking the question and thinking …. you know …. that's a bit cheeky coming from you. You know that sort of thing …. and you know that …. you know I could have …. I could have …. I feel with the [assessing social worker]*

> *…. like you know …. she was a nice woman …. but …. like …. I could have told her …. her life story to her from day one* [Conor, lines 671-680].

When Rebecca started the process of becoming a foster carer, she had separated from her husband, she was attending therapy and she was grieving for her sister who died two years previously. All these factors combined may have made Rebecca feel vulnerable and resistant to the intrusive nature of the fostering assessment. However, Rebecca links her complex background to her motivation to foster, so resenting the intrusion into her previous experiences presents as a contradiction. Rebecca could not comprehend the level of participation required or expectation that she would engage in several interviews that were all personal in nature. There was an emphasis placed on her grief at losing her sister which she strongly resented:

> *This was ten years ago …. and I remember …. I'll never forget her name even. I thought …. oh my God …. she had me in tears and this was going on every week for three months. Going back ten years ago, my sister was only dead two years, and even now I cry about my sister. She would say to me …. your sister …. and I would be in floods of tears and she knew it* [Rebecca, lines 194-197].

Rebecca felt there was a strong emphasis on her sister's death and this informed her opinion of the fostering assessment. Because of this she resisted the process and then started to feel concerned about her feelings of negativity towards the assessing social worker. She questioned why she felt the process was so intrusive, but she could not see beyond the negative, personal feelings that consumed her. Rebecca's use of language is strong and clear, and during the interviews for this research she still struggled with her feelings towards the assessment process even though it was ten years ago:

> *I thought there might be some of me in her. I looked at this person and I wondered …. why don't I like you? I'd sit down with the girls [daughters] and they would be like tigers. Both of my girls would protect me to death as I would do for them. You know they'd say …. there's nothing of you in her …. I thought that three months would never end. It was horrible and I think …. if I got through that, I would get through anything* [Rebecca, lines 276-280].

When the process involved other family members, and they were interviewed as Rebecca's support network, she felt judged and misunderstood. This exacerbated her feelings of negativity and seems to have curbed any learning for Rebecca during this time of preparation. Rebecca presented as so negative about the assessment that any advice, guidance or sharing of knowledge was lost in her feelings of consternation and vulnerability. There is also a possibility that the challenge it posed to Rebecca's feelings of self-worth made her feel fragile and so much so that she did not recover from the experience to embrace the role. Her son-in-law was interviewed, but he was not married to Rebecca's daughter at the time. This quote captures the challenge the assessment posed for Rebecca when her interaction with her family was scrutinised:

> *Yeah …. you know …. he says to her …. you know everything happens around our table and [Rebecca] puts food up and we put the world to rights and there is nothing she won't talk about …. and we eat and we laugh …. so, would you class her as a feeder then …. you know …. stupid …. and then saying to [daughter] …. do you think your mother's a bit vulnerable for fostering? She was probably doing her job …. right …. but it didn't work with me …. we did not gel* [Rebecca, lines 606-611].

John felt the process of becoming a foster carer was too personal at the beginning, but his attitude to it was different to the other participants as he acknowledged his background history was complex and it might influence the outcome for him. John has strong empathy for children in care and he understands as a former child who experienced the care system that imparting information was the best way to decide if he was a suitable candidate to foster:

> *At first, I thought it was getting a bit too personal …. like why do you want to know all that? It was going back, and it was really in-depth …. but …. yeah …. I suppose I understood after a while they need to know …. basically …. what your mindset is ….and would they accept us?* [John, lines 1442-1446].

Past and Future Self

Mia, Veronica, Laura, Rebecca and Colette had varying expectations of fostering that either evolved as their understanding developed or did not meet their initial expectations. It highlights how taking on the role of fostering for specific reasons might not compare to the requirements of the system. These participants engaged in comparisons between their past

and future selves with regards to this new role they were taking on. They had thought processes that motivated them and gave them an understanding of what the role would be, compared to what it turned out to be. Mia linked her mother's compassion for others when she was a child to her understanding of the role of fostering. However, she was misguided by her mother's actions compared to the complex nature of foster care. Notwithstanding that there is a sense from Mia that her childhood experiences gave her confidence in the role and because of this she identified with it. Mia is open to learning, but her learning from her childhood superseded any foundational information she was given as part of the process of becoming a foster carer. Mia struggled to articulate this viewpoint:

> *So …. I …. what I thought …. right …. well …. look at …. we went through it all and then you find out …. you're told the worst-case scenarios and it's like when the social worker came here to talk to you about the children. You always talk about the worst things they've done. You don't talk about the good things they've done. So that was a bit daunting I suppose, but then it's only words. You've got to see it with your own two eyes. So …. yeah …. the first placement …. I …. em …. yeah …. we were very excited about this first placement and we didn't know what age the child was going to be, but they're going to come into this house and they're going to be …. like …. little snotty nosed kids …. like you know. You know you can clean them up, like little house on the prairie, or like mam. Mam used to bring them in and bath them in the sink …. the little kids …. and they used to be spick and span going out the door [laughs]. Yes …. that was my impression of it …. we'd all sit around together watching movies and we'd all be one happy family and there'd be no problems at all. Well, was I in for a shock!* [Mia, lines 944-955].

Veronica was not expecting to build a long-term family unit with the children placed with them in foster care. During the interviews she made no reference to having no children of her own, but she struggled to articulate what she was trying to achieve by becoming a foster carer. It seemed that her initial thoughts on fostering were far removed from the family unit they now have with the three boys in their care. Veronica's thoughts on fostering indicate she was thinking of an alternative way to care for children and was not expecting foster care to become permanent, but she embraces the life she now has caring for the boys and identifies with this role:

> *Well we always thought …. like …. we were going to foster a child coming in [to care] and kind of …. maybe work with the child and social workers …. whatever …. work with mum and dad …. whatever …. and that we'd just help the child on a stepping-stone to kind of nearly go back to their parents …. kind of like …. you know …. that we were going to be the stop gap that helped …. kind of …. everything …. the child*

> *felt safe and that …. until they could go home …. like …. to their mum or dad …. but …. now it's …. with the lads we have …. they're kind of …. we tell them …. kind of …. we be always saying to them …. oh like …. you know sure …. we'll do this until you get back to your dad and the whole lot but looking at them now like …. they don't want that. They don't even want to hear that. We're saying …. like …. you know …. sure listen …. this is until you get back to your dad now …. this is not a thing they even want to know now. So, the oldest fella said to me here a few weeks ago …. ah sure …. I'm gonna be living with you when I'm 43 …. I'm like …. you're not [laughs]* [Veronica, lines 863-873].

Laura embraces her role as a foster carer and identifies with children in care from her complex background history. Notwithstanding that she still thought when children were placed with them as approved foster carers, they would be happy to be there because they were removed from a family setting that was abusive. This was Laura's presumption based on her own longing to be removed from her family home as a child. This captures the importance of Laura's conceptualisation of her role especially with regards to her understanding of the need to be emotionally available and flexible:

> *I thought that a child was going to come to the house who was going to be so glad to be here because they were coming from mayhem …. em …. and realising that …. actually …. the draw [pause] no matter how bad home was, the draw to go home is in a lot of children coming here and they think you're the enemy …. and I was also doubtful that we would get the support that [agency] were saying we were going to get. I was very, very nervous about that* [Laura, lines 1041-1048].

As the interview progressed there was an understanding from Laura that her perception of her lived experiences clearly brought her to a mindset that wanted to move beyond lies and contradictions to provide a safe and nurturing environment that is honest and reflective for the children in their care. Laura presented as aware of difficulties other families experience, with a particular focus on mental health and substance misuse and the impact this has on children in a family. This may be a need in Laura to feel she is 'saving' these children because no-one came to save her:

> *I think when I came into it, I thought we were going to save all these kids, but I think now all we can do is give them a period in their lives where they were safe, and they were fed and they weren't judged …. and hope that …. that …. you know …. at some stage in their lives they can look back and say …. well [pause] and actually I know that has happened because we've had a few children …. we've had a few of them that have …. yeah …. who have said it's the best time they've ever had* [Laura and John, lines 873-882].

Rebecca felt the professional support on offer to her as an approved foster carer might affect the quality time she would spend with a child placed with her. She did not want the level of support offered as she felt confident getting to know the child placed with her and she was not perturbed by complex behaviours. This point highlights the nuances of prospective foster carers' feelings towards professional involvement:

> *Sure …. I suppose it didn't happen the way …. like I see them in [agency] saying you're going to have to [pause] they're trying to make it out that it's a good thing, but it can scare people. If I'm here trying to …. they're telling me don't worry because you will have a social worker for the child who will call regularly. You'll have your own social worker, or your link social worker who will call regularly. If the child absconds you will have an out of hours [social worker] …. and in your head, you're adding up all these people* [Rebecca, lines 818-825].

Colette became a foster carer to nurture a child and to give her daughter the opportunity to have a sibling, but when she started fostering there is the sense it was not as she thought it would be. Their first placement was with a teenage girl who lived with the family until she completed school and moved to third level education and independent living. Although Colette was fond of her, there was not a sense that the young person was an integrated member of their family. When Colette was interviewed for this research the young person was about four months from moving out of their home and Colette discussed their future plans as foster carers. However, she still makes reference to fostering younger children and this might be an indication of where Colette's motivation has always been:

> *Like the whole lot of us … [names husband], myself and …. we're already like talking about [pause] it's not like we're rushing [names young person in care] out the door, but we are …. kind of …. like …. what's next that is coming in …. you know what I mean …. like what do we do …. do we [pause] like [daughter] is 12 [years old] now and when we started doing it she was 9 [years old] so we were limited to older kids, but now we're a bit more open to younger kids and we are kind of …. like …. do you stay with teenagers? Do you go younger now or …. you know …. I mean both of them have different …. have pros and cons to both of them …. like you know …. so sometimes like [pause] if [names young person in care] wants to do something or go somewhere …. she's a teenager …. she kind of [stops to think] is not splitting the family up but …. right [laughs] you take that child and I'll take this child. You know [laughs] so it's that kind of sense …. whereas younger kids …. sometimes …. you know you're just kind of thinking you can just drop everything else and we'll all go as a package* [Colette, lines 366-376].

Summary

Conflicting Identities was concerned with the complex feelings that emerged when participants decided to start the process of inquiry into becoming foster carers. They expressed their feelings of vulnerability before they started their assessment and then feelings of negativity and intrusion once the assessment began. Furthermore, the role of fostering turned out to be more complex than the participants anticipated or the role did not meet their initial expectations. These superordinate themes highlight the interplay between foster carers' reasons for taking on the role and the requirements of the system.

Chapter 6 – Developing Identities and Enactment of the Role

Developing Identities

The third superordinate theme captures research participants' emerging identities as foster carers as they started to develop an awareness of the role. There is a confidence emerging when foster carers become knowledgeable, responsive to the children placed with them, and emotionally available. There is also the reaction they can give to children placed with them when behaviours trigger unresolved experiences suggesting they grappled with the fostering task in the relationship between wanting to foster, but not wanting these experiences when they were fostering. Their core beliefs were challenged too by the actions of the birth families of the children in their care. There is the sense from participating foster carers that in some circumstances they felt isolated even though there was extensive support available. This suggests fostering is a deeply personal journey for foster carers which elicits emotions that range from great joy to feeling like a failure. It is a complicated emotional jigsaw for some foster carers, and it takes time for them to develop their identities. *Developing Identities* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Building Resilience, Emotional Investment* and *Challenging Core Beliefs.*

Building Resilience

For Laura, Mia, Veronica, Conor, Colette, Rebecca and Annie, the past is always there and can be both a positive and a negative influence for them when they are managing complex behaviours. Laura made strong statements about her childhood experiences and implied fostering has helped her put these experiences into perspective. This is, in part, from supporting and managing the complex experiences and behaviours of children in care.
She also presented as someone who feels she is in a role that gives her a sense of purpose. Laura does not seem to emotionally struggle to reach the children placed with her because she can look at the reasons behind the behaviours. Because Laura knows how deceiving looks can be, she actively engages as non-judgemental in the role. However, there is also a

vulnerability attached to the emphasis Laura places on the care she provides from the point of view of managing a placement breakdown or rejection:

> *I used to always think I was a bad person …. I was a bad kid because I was told I was a bad kid and a bad [pause] …. but …. now I realise that actually it wasn't me …. it was the person that was telling me I was bad that had the problems and not me. I was able to realise in later life …. well …. actually, there was something wrong with my mother …. whereas I did believe what she was telling me …. that I was never going to be anybody. Even when I met [John] …. like …. you know …. you're marrying out of your class …. he has tattoos and he is this and that and the other …. em …. but.....yeah …. she had to admit in later life that he was [pause] the best son-in-law that she'd ever had. He was the only one that would go up and do her garden and take her to a hospital appointment. I can see kids that come in here and they've been told they're no bloody good …. like [names child] …. you're no bloody good …. and I would say to them …. well …. school might not be your thing, but you're a bloody amazing artist and you're going to go places with your art …. and funnily enough he was the first child [pause] you know this street art …. things that are being done on boxes …. he was the first child to win a competition to do that. Yeah, he sold loads of his paintings to magazines and he has got himself his own studio* [Laura, lines 1565-1585].

Mia's sense of the care she would provide as an approved foster carer was heavily influenced by her mother's actions during her childhood and her pre-conceived ideas about what that would mean. The first child placed with her was from a Travelling background and because Mia's mother looked after a lot of Travelling children through the years, she assumed the child lived in a trailer before being placed with her in foster care. Mia's intention is always to protect children so she thought she would provide a safe and nurturing environment and the children placed with her would be grateful for the opportunity to live with them. However, her first experience was starkly different to her expectations:

> *So, the first placement came anyway and [pause] a teenager [pause] like that …. yeah …. it was so …. you know …. she was lovely and she was the type that everybody loved her …. like you know …. but oh God [laughs] I used to sit at this table [kitchen table] for about six hours during the night because she slept all day …. you see …. and then she was awake all night, and she would be crying all night and I'd be sitting here thinking oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. I'd say …. okay so …. I think we'll go to bed now and we'll start afresh in the morning …. but I can't …. and she would be bawling crying and I was thinking [pause] I was mentally drained, mentally drained …. yeah …. but she [pause] I'll never forget …. when she came here. Anyway, she was a Travelling girl, a little Travelling girl, and I said she'll be so happy to come here like …. we have five bedrooms …. like …. and three bathrooms …. you know …. she came from a caravan. Here I was thinking this …. we brought her home one Christmas and …. oh my God …. well there were these big gates opened up with two big tigers on the pillar and …. oh my God [laughs] …. my house was like a wigwam compared to it..... you'd want to see the house* [Mia, lines 955-967].

Mia persevered and her commitment to fostering is strong in this statement. She is open to learning, has built resilience, and presents as a strong advocate for taking on the role as she has balanced the needs of her family with the children coming into foster care:

> *Look at …. I suppose …. six months into fostering …. I would have said …. oh my God, oh my God …. like it's so tough, it's so hard …. you know …. but now I think …. and it comes from experience as well …. and it comes from everything else …. now …. if somebody approached me now and they said I want to foster …. I'd say go for it …. but think of the placement …. think of your own children …. think …. you know …. are they going to fit in with your children because it's very important …. you know …. I mean I bring a little child in that door …. you cannot just turn around and say …. I'm sorry but this placement does not suit you* [Mia, lines 728-734].

Veronica and Conor were challenged in the first few days of their first and only placement of three siblings, who were initially placed in an emergency for a few weeks, but they were still with Veronica and Conor five years later when they were interviewed for this research. This was an ordinary everyday event that was an awakening moment for Veronica and Conor when they took the children to buy board games. Conor's repetition of 'you know' suggests he wanted to be heard and his use of language also emphasises the importance of the memory for him:

> *The first week we had them we were over in Smyth's Toy Store thinking that we'd only have them for another week [pause] …. you know …. thinking that we'd have two or three weeks and that's it, and these lads will be going back [to their father]. We were over in Smyth's Toy Store and I said …. look we'll get a few board games …. and that like …. you know …. just something to pass the dark evenings away …. and eh …. I was looking at [struggles] some snakes and ladders and stuff like that* [Conor, lines 507-512].

Veronica interrupted Conor and said she was considering a game of monopoly. Veronica did not express the same passion to tell this story as Conor did as he placed emphasis on the details from his memory and his own experiences. Conor said the youngest child, who was 8 years old at the time, asked if he could get a chess game. Conor started to express his doubt during this part of the conversation and repeated words and phrases several times:

> *He was 8 [years old] at the time …. he says …. can we …. can we get a chess game he says …. he says I have one in the car …. he says …. but …. whatever …. I don't know where the car …. dad's car is …. he says …. I said …. sure …. yeah …. we'll get a chess game …. and with that I could hear …. eh …. I think it was Mozart or Beethoven playing, and the oldest lad was over with [Veronica], over on the far side on the keyboard playing away …. em …. I kind of went [pause] it was one of the first*

> *times I said to myself …. and I said …. am I going to be able to handle these lads at all? Now most people look at what the badness is that somebody is after doing and think will I be able to handle this? Whereas, I was saying …. will I be able to handle these lads at all? These lads are way too far on for me …. maybe or something …. you know* [Conor, lines 520-524, 529-533].

This trip to the toy store raised concerns for Conor with regards to his own educational opportunities. Conor's uncertainty emerges here as he considered caring for children who are clever. He presented as feeling momentarily overwhelmed by their capabilities before deciding to nurture their talents and to provide the best opportunities for them to learn whilst in his care. It was the only time during the interview that Conor expressed vulnerability. Veronica hoped she would not hold the children back, but she was not as perturbed by the experience as Conor seemed to be:

> *I left school so early and that …. and I had very little chance at school …. but the …. eh …. I could see straight away …. from day one …. I remember from day one when they were here …. you know I could see how intelligent the three of them were …. you know …. and how eager they were to learn …. so, I think in that way …. I thought to myself …. now …. you know we'll have to try to keep these lads going …. with the …. with the intelligence …. you know with their work and with their intelligence …. like you know …. to keep it, to keep them motivated* [Conor, lines 558-564].

Although Colette struggled with the personal nature of the process of becoming a foster carer, she was encouraged when she received acknowledgement for her use of initiative and when she was told she had insight, this gave her confidence. Throughout the interviews Colette's description of the steps she took to become a foster carer seemed like a leap of faith. She was anxious and resistant to the process and she had strong views on traditional family values. She acknowledged she has a fragile sense of self-worth so reassuring her of her capabilities cannot be underestimated for her:

> *Yeah …. no, you don't …. you just …. because I've always …. I would never …. I wouldn't be an outgoing person and I wouldn't be a very confident person so I was doubting the fact that [pause] would I be good at this? Would I …. and she was [social worker] she was saying …. yeah …. and she was the one who was saying to me …. she said you've good …. good insight …. you've good initiative on some things. I go with a gut feeling …. and I feel something and so far with [child in care] I've been correct. I've often rang up my link social worker and went …. watch this space. Last year there was actually a thing …. I was like …. something's up, something's up …. and I have …. I have a good thing about that and that was one of the things she …. in the assessment …. said …. you're very in tune …. because I'd*

> *have these little lists of questions and they were for …. like …. what if this happened? What if this happened? She was …. like …. you're very on tune with kids. You just seem to be able to think on …. right …. ok …. yeah …. yeah* [Colette, lines 753-763].

Rebecca indirectly expressed her resilience by describing the care she provided for the first child placed with her. He was asked to leave his previous foster placement because he had Hepatitis B, and this upset Rebecca. She then compared the reality of this experience to the assessing social worker's emphasis on issues during the assessment that she considered irrelevant to fostering, for example being asked to put up net curtains when there was already a blind on the window:

> *My first placement was a boy …. a boy with Hep B that was dumped out of his placement as soon as they realised, he had Hep B …. in [names area] and I fought tooth and nail …. it was a disgrace like …. I mean I know all about Hep B …. my daughters have travelled all their lives …. constantly getting Hep B [laughs] you know the way you get your Hep B injections …. we just all done them again …. and didn't make a big thing about it, but it was silly things …. it was net curtains. She thought she would see me put up a mesh when the child could just pull down a blind. It was silly things that she was telling me and none of it came to pass* [Rebecca, lines 721-730].

Annie was presented with a dilemma with regards to a young person in placement that seemed to trigger feelings of rejection and Annie struggled to make sense of those feelings. Annie was also trying to justify her reasons for not wanting the young person to stay in her home and this weighed heavily on her. Annie's struggle suggests ending the placement was very problematic for her and her reaction was manifesting in her physical health. However, trying to change the young person suggests she was looking outwards rather than inwards:

> *They were all coming to sign off [on the young person staying with Annie] …. but I just couldn't do it. Yeah …. [pause] ….and …. em …. [name] who is my social worker …. she came to talk to me before the others arrived so we could try and iron out a few things that maybe we could change about [names young person] …. and the [pause] goings on …. and em [pause] …. and eh …. when she came I just said [name] I can't do it. She said you don't look right at all …. my blood pressure …. it was after going sky high …. and em …. [pause] …. well …. he …. I don't think he wanted to be here for starters, and he made that kind of quite clear from [pause] …. the transition he was alright …. you know …. and he was kind of going along with stuff, but when he moved in then …. it was just [pause] he didn't want to be here, and he made it quite clear. He didn't say that because he had kept on saying to his social worker that he really wanted to be with a family …. you know …. and he had been in eight different placements before he came here* [Annie, lines 59-68].

Annie's feelings towards this young person in care were powerful and although she moved on from her discussion about him, she returned to him later in the interview when she was reminded of her [ex] husband's behaviour towards her when they were married. This caused significant distress for Annie and there was the sense that she needed freedom and this young person in care triggered feelings of being controlled or not feeling in control and, therefore, losing her autonomy:

> *No …. well I knew …. like he [ex-husband] was a bit of a control freak and I think this is where [names young person] started to remind me of him* [Annie, lines 594-595].

Annie used the word 'failure' a couple of times suggesting she felt she should be able to cope with the behaviour of the young person in placement. There is a sense she was also concerned that professionals would have a negative perception of her for making this decision and this was a struggle for her. 'Shell shock' suggests a tremendous sense of difficulty relating to horror or shock as one would experience at war and is out of proportion for the decision she made except for Annie's heightened feelings in this situation. This placement breakdown was difficult for Annie to express and her use of language suggests she felt emotionally raw from the experience:

> *I was saying [names link social worker] …. you need this like a hole in the head and his social worker was going on maternity leave so she didn't need it either, but I just [pause] I couldn't do it …. and [names social worker] said …. I've never seen you like this before. I was just like [pause] shell shocked by the way …. by the carry-on of him and the way he would speak to me and treat me and …. my children are young adults, but I call them my kids* [Annie, lines 114-118].

Emotional Investment

Laura, Mia, Annie, Veronica, Conor, Colette and Rebecca spoke about varying levels of emotional investment and their attempts to adapt their parenting to develop relationships with the children in their care. This theme captures how they expressed their commitment to the children and their sense of ownership in the role. The emphasis they placed on their role defined how they approached the task of fostering.

As a foster carer Laura identified with the children placed with her and felt she was empathic because of her difficult experiences in childhood. Laura actively engaged in comparisons between her experiences and those of the children in her care. She gave several examples of her approach to the task of fostering and presented as confident in the role. In this quote she discussed one of the first children placed with them when they were initially approved as foster carers suggesting she always demonstrated a certain level of confidence regarding her level of skill and understanding:

> *I would go into school and something would kick him off in school and he'd thrash the school …. he'd be going mad in the school and I remember one time …. em …. going in and they were getting the police for him and I said please don't get the police. I'll get him to leave the school. He wouldn't let anyone [pause] he was in this little storeroom …. and …. em …. I went into him …. and I …. because he didn't like you to look at him when he was like that …. so …. I kind of went in and sat with my back to him and said …. look …. you know …. none of these know what is going on in your head, but I have a fair idea. I said how about you and I just escape, and we leg it when nobody is looking …. em …. and he was really grateful for that and it got him out of a situation. So, like that I wasn't going to fix everything that was going on in his head, but it got him out of a moment in time when he couldn't find a way to get out of it* [Laura, lines 911-925].

Laura is proud of the children in her care and is driven by her understanding of their experiences. There is a sense their experiences have become her experiences and because of this, their progress in placement is more gratifying. She is intensely involved in their care and feels they are fully integrated into her family:

> *They are gorgeous, gorgeous kids …. we don't [pause] …. well I won't speak for you [to John] …. feel like we're fostering anymore with them …. they are part of the furniture. [They are] fully integrated …. if my own children had been as well behaved at that age …. now …. as they are. To be quite honest with you everybody goes on about their manners and how pleasant they are. [Names child] …. his teacher …. he's had her for two years and she's in love with him …. she says when I come in …. in the morning …. and I see his smile, it gets me through the day* [Laura, lines 1229-1231, lines 1235-1240].

Mia presents as a thoughtful foster carer who acknowledges that her role is emotionally demanding which can evoke different feelings. Mia is not negative about her experiences, but she is honest about the emotional impact of fostering. She discussed the personal commitment involved and the high level of motivation required to continue to support the children in her care. Mia's commitment is strong here as she relayed a conversation with one

of the children about the reason he is in foster care. Mia's repetition of 'you know' at the beginning suggests she felt uncertain, but she became more confident as she continued to speak:

> *Like if we're out or anything like that and someone says is that your little lad …. yes …. yeah …. that's [pause] I don't like to say that they're foster children …. especially him because he's been with us for so long … like he is …. this is …. we're his family and that's it …. and whatever …. and that word foster …. even like if I sit down and I explain to him …. you know …. just because you have that …. you know …. people say … oh you're a foster child …. passing remarks …. you know like they always call [my son] the sick child …. and he didn't like it …. yeah …. but I don't like it either mam …. yeah …. I said I know you don't like it. Now we had an incident there one day where somebody said something to him [names child] why do you live here …. or why [pause] I don't know what they said, but he got upset anyway …. and he said why …. he said why am I in care? Why am I living with you? I said …. well I said …. look at [names child] I said …. I said …. I rang up I said [clears throat] we needed a little boy in this house …. I said [son] was getting older and we needed a hurler [laughs] I said and I was talking to a lady one day and she said that there was a little boy up in [area] and he might be mad into hurling. I said we wanted you and he just looked at me …. and I said …. so, if anybody ever says to you …. why do you live with this family or why are you in foster care …. tell them it's because we wanted you … you tell them we wanted you … because you know …. it's hard on them as they get older* [Mia, lines 772-789].

Annie presented as emotional during the interviews for this research which suggests she has strong feelings in her role as a foster carer. Annie sees herself as a carer and someone who takes care of others. When she spoke about her own children or the children she looked after as a childminder, she did not become upset. However, when she discussed fostering she often cried. She seemed invested in the role and connected to the two previous young people she fostered in long-term care. Even her strong feelings towards the last young person in her care suggests she is emotionally invested:

> *Obviously, I have experience, I've done so many courses and training …. em …. but …. basically, all the training you do and all the [pause] seminars you go to …. it all boils down to one thing really and it's kind of [starts to cry] you know …. sorry [wipes her eyes] it is just kind of taking care and just minding people for a short period* [Annie, lines 1236-1239].

Veronica gave many examples of the family unit they have established with the boys in their care. In some of the discussions she included the boys' father and adult siblings. She was open to promoting contact and the boys' birth family were welcome in their home. Veronica demonstrated a strong emotional investment in the three boys in her care which extended to

anyone in their lives that might being them joy. This suggests Veronica was able to put the boys' needs before her own and she did not present as feeling vulnerable as a foster carer even when she discussed the ambivalent timeframe regarding the boys' status in care. There is the sense Veronica appreciates the opportunity to parent the boys that was afforded to her as a foster carer:

> *The boys are treated in both houses, in our house here, with my family, with [Conor's] family as if they were [Conor's] and mine …. and we treat them like that. We don't pussy foot around them or anything else. If like …. our son will say to me …. he turned around one day, and he was on about the dad and the lies and the whole lot and he said you are very, very honest with me …. you know …. and if I think he's doing something wrong I'll say it …. if I think they're doing something right I'll say it …. do you know what I mean? I don't …. we don't treat them like they're not ours* [Veronica, lines 1124-1129].

Conor is emotionally invested in the three boys in placement and speaks with pride about the progress they are making. There is the sense he hopes he has added to their carefree attitude and confidence as young people. Conor is reminded of his own feelings of self-worth, and he compares the boys' temperament to his own suggesting he is now the role model and parental figure for them, and this is an important role to him. Conor appears to contradict himself in this quote when he says he would love to be as natural as they are, but then suggests they behave as he does:

> *Just the laughs and the chat about them …. you know I often think to myself …. I'd love to be able to be like that …. you know …. you know it's just natural …. even a lot of things they do even …. I'd look at them …. or see them …. doing things or saying things and I think to myself …. that's me …. you know that sort of thing* [Conor, lines 980-981, 995-996].

Colette expressed an understanding of the needs of the children placed with her, but she presents as wary of becoming emotionally invested because she is always concerned about the impact fostering might have on her daughter and the welfare of her family is a priority. This was particularly during their initial approval because their daughter was 8 years old and they had no experience as foster carers. The first example she gave of managing behaviour she did not want her daughter exposed to was when the child in care wrote an expletive on the car window when she left the children alone in the car for a few minutes. In this quote

Colette begins by explaining the assessing social worker warned her about fostering and the difficulties she might introduce to the family:

> *She was like …. you've …. you've the perfect little family …. you've everything else …. why would you …. like you know …. you are introducing trouble as such into the home …. into a certain degree like you know, but we just said …. we just kind of thought it would be good experience for [names daughter] if it worked out …. like …. we had to be particular who we were going to pick …. we had to …. [daughter] was young …. you know what I mean …. a bit more relaxed with things …. and there was a bit of difficulty in the beginning …. like …. you know what I mean …. em …. we were somewhere with the car and it was cold, and I got into one of the shops …. or something …. and the two of them were staying in the car. It was all fogged up …. em …. somebody had written some words on the window …. four letter words …. but when I got back into the car …. I hate that in general …. because you know what it did …. it stained the window …. half of me didn't care about what word was on the window …. you know that's going to stain there …. it was the inside of the window. It was like …. ahh …. you know so …. but …. em …. [child in care] had a cap in her hand and kept saying it wasn't me who rolled up my sleeves, it was [daughter], it was [daughter] …. and like you know [daughter] was at that stage, I'm not sure how old she was … about 8 …. she was at that stage [laughs] she's not going to write on a window, they were silly sounding words …. [daughter] did get upset you know* [Colette, lines 1213-1227].

Rebecca has a perspective on her role as a foster carer that is unique to her and her experiences. Because her childhood was difficult and there is a feeling of loss when she speaks about it, there is not always a feeling of satisfaction from Rebecca regarding her role as a foster carer. She notes more incompetence and discrepancy than positive affirmation or progress, and this is with both social workers and the children in her care. However, she expresses commitment and emotional investment when she discusses the two children in her care and her use of language is definite when she states 'this is their home':

> *So those kids are not leaving here …. yes, I give out like hell about them …. to them …. and whatever …. but this is their home …. like …. and alright …. you are trying …. at one stage …. I am trying all the time to let [child in care] know she has a family, because she doesn't want her family …. only because [other child in care] didn't have a family and she wants to be a part of our family [pause] and then they do a piece of life work with her family and because [names child] doesn't want to talk about her own family, they talk about mine* [Rebecca, lines 974-982].

Challenging Core Beliefs

Mia, Sarah, Laura, John, Veronica, Conor and Rebecca all expressed different perspectives and attitudes towards birth families and the impact of contact on the children in their care. Their attempts to manage the challenges posed by the conflicting actions of birth families is

captured here alongside their response to adverse behaviour or their feelings towards disclosures of abuse from the children placed with them. An important connection emerges here between their own needs and the experiences of the children in their care and this directly impacts on their responses. This theme also highlights the nuances attached to birth family contact when foster carers are dealing with the impact and influences of birth family every day in their home.

Mia presented as very protective of the children in her care and had a strong opinion of birth family involvement which was often negative. However, her feelings towards these relationships are more complex than they might initially present to professionals. During the interviews for this research Mia elaborated on the conflict felt by the children in her care between their feelings towards her as their primary carer and their birth family. She wanted professional involvement to ensure the children's loyalty to her did not negatively impact on their ability to communicate their needs. Mia wanted the children to be given an opportunity to understand their feelings and to meet their parents if that was their wish. Mia struggled to articulate her thoughts during this discussion and showed empathy towards the dilemma for the child in her care. However, she was also uncertain of her approach as she struggled to understand the child's feelings:

> *They're [professionals] trained to do it …. like you know what I mean …. and it's [pause] I find it very hard because [names child in care] doesn't speak …. doesn't talk much about things that you know [pause] he'd rather [pause] like if we mention [pause] like he met his father [pause] well he thinks he met his father there a couple of months ago …. and …. em …. when we spoke about it he didn't want to know. He just put his head in the pillow and he just cried and cried and cried. I said it's okay …. it's okay …. it's okay if it was your daddy …. it's okay …. and I said would you like to see your daddy and he said yes …. but I think he thought he was hurting me …. I don't know what he thought* [Mia, lines 230-236].

Mia's approach to birth family contact emerged here as an attempt to identify with the birth family and she wanted to present as non-judgemental. There is a sense she was identifying with the role she observed her mother adopt when she was a child. Mia has empathy for families who are struggling, but she seems unaware of the power imbalance for families

when their children are in care. However, her concern for the child in her care supersedes all other issues and her focus is on his welfare. From this perspective she struggled to understand why the birth family would try to disrupt the placement and this upset her. This quote shows Mia's attempts at inclusivity, but also the complexities of different beliefs and behaviours:

> *We had a few meetings to explain this ….. we're no different from ye …. we had a caravan out the back at the time …. you know what I mean? We go to church, we're no different from them …. em …. and we had a bond then with them, but they didn't want the bond with us. So, when he [child in care] would go on access …. one particular time he [child's uncle] brought him to meet his real granny and his real mother which [pause] and his aunties. So, when he came back here to the placement, he broke down …. actually afterwards …. when he came back to us I could see there was something wrong, but I couldn't figure out what it was. I'd ask him …. I'd say …. are you alright? You know …. what did you do in [names area] and …. whatever …. and he wouldn't [pause] he was very [pause] even at that age he was very loyal and very secretive and still is. Anyway, we found out …. we …. we ….. we found out what happened. What happened was the uncle brought him to [names area] and the [pause] the grandparents and the aunties told him that we were horrible people, and that we didn't love him, and that we were only doing this for the money, and that the bolder he was …. that we would stop [pause] that we would put him out like …. we'd put him out …. this is what they told him …. and that when we put him out …. he would go back into foster care and that they would get him …. so that's what he was doing, he was coming home, and he was lashing out* [Mia, lines 292-306].

Sarah felt it was important to develop strong relationships with birth family members as this ensured they would then call her if they were experiencing difficulties. This was especially important for Sarah with regards to the child she looked after at weekends in respite care. Sarah did not feel her boundaries were stretched in this situation even though the birth mother had mental health issues and called Sarah when she was struggling. Sarah responded to this because she did not trust the professionals to do it:

> *'And I fought…I suppose for years with them …. saying that …. you know when they're busy, which we're all busy …. I'm not sitting here twiddling my thumbs wondering what I'm going to do for the day …. and I suppose I [pause] I got that through to whoever was there at the time, let me help her [birth mother], she doesn't use and abuse the system…it's just that when she's not well she might ring me, you know she might ask me to take [names child] …. em …. for the weekend, I could go down to collect them* [Sarah, lines 430-436].

Laura approaches birth family history as if the children are her birth children and she is protecting them from abuse. She can identify with children in care when they disclose experiences that were abusive when they were living with their birth family. Laura is sensitive to the information she receives and protective of the children because she knows what it feels like to experience fear and isolation as a child. There is also the sense that Laura is proud to be in the position of confidant and she eagerly discussed her interactions with the children in her care:

> *In the beginning …. well I know in the beginning when they came here the grandmother and mother had basically told them to disrupt the placement …. and whatever. I know by [names child in care] in particular …. for the first while he was waiting for us to hit him or do something to him. There was one time when he wasn't here long, and he got sick …. em …. and he got sick all over his bedroom. [Names other child in care] came down to tell me [names child] got sick and I went up and there was vomit everywhere and he was literally rocking back and forth in the foetal position. He told me afterwards that if that happened in his grandmother's house …. the two of them …. the grandmother and grandfather would have beaten him for getting sick somewhere in the house and not in the bathroom* [Laura, lines 1272-1284].

John was more confident during the interview when he discussed the support he offers the children in care and how he manages difficulties as they arise. John presented as resilient and supportive of children who have experienced challenges in their lives. John understands the bigger picture and is not fazed by disclosures of abuse or disruptive behaviour and will promote positive birth family contact if he can. John presented as quiet in demeanour, but there is the sense he could be strong in his expressions if it meant protecting the child in his care:

> *He [child in care] always talks when we are in the car. He just talks, and I just let him talk …. and it will be how they used to get beaten up …. how nanny [pause] grandad …. because grandad is huge …. he has hands like shovels. Grandad would hit you and he wouldn't need to use a weapon, but nanny would have to use a weapon to hurt you …. meaning a wooden spoon or a strap or something like that. We just let them go on and then say they shouldn't be hitting you with a strap …. they shouldn't be hitting you at all [names child] …. how mum used to let this happen. They came here hating their mum …. there were presents from mum that they weren't allowed [pause] it's not that they didn't want to open them, it was because we discovered they weren't allowed open them. Nanny had [damaged] mum's name …. mum is dirt, but dad is God almighty …. and mum's dirt …. now they love going to see their mum* [John, lines 1327-1342].

There is the sense from Veronica and Conor that they feel any negativity expressed by them about the father of the boys in their care would reflect on the boys and their background history. Although both Veronica and Conor actively promote a positive relationship for the boys with their father, and they understand their role as foster carers, a family unit has nonetheless developed for them in the fostering role with the boys fully integrated into their lives. Therefore, they consider the boys' father as a member of their family and speak about him accordingly. Veronica had a discussion with one of the boys about the reason they came into foster care:

> *You know like he'd say about his situation and dad told him lies … and whatever ….and I'd say …. but sure …. it might have been a white …. a little white lie …. we'll call that …. there might have been a little white lie …. maybe your dad was afraid to tell you what was going on or was worried about telling you the truth about what was going on and was just trying to make it sound better. You know it wasn't a lie to hurt you he was telling …. you know it's a lie and he's going …. oh …. okay …. you know …. so, like now he does say to me and [Conor] …. you know like he said to me one day …. do you think my dad will come back in six weeks and I said …. ah sure I don't know …. I'm sure he wants to come back …. like you know …. but …. I'm sure he's trying to or whatever …. and then he said to me a few weeks after that [Veronica] you're very honest …. even when I asked you about my dad you said …. oh sure …. but you didn't answer me [laughs] you didn't say yes or no to it* [Veronica, lines 887-896].

Conor has respect for the boys' father and appreciates that when the boys were placed with them, their father told them to trust their foster carers. He feels this gave the boys permission to build a relationship with them and to settle in their care. Conor presents as non-judgemental of the boys' father, but he also has a strong opinion on parents' rights and the impact this can have on children in care:

> *We knew with the three lads walking through the door with a smile on their face …. happy …. you know …. like …. they had [pause] they grew up with a good life …. you know …. just things went wrong on them …. you know they never had the [pause] the father was [struggles] no drink, no drugs …. you know …. nothing like that …. like …. you know …. just some bad luck …. a set of circumstances …. it wasn't any …. any …. like …. he tried his best to protect them all …. you know probably over protected them really …. but …. it was his own …. own mental health …. like …. I suppose that was doing it …. but everything was about them …. like you know …. that was …. you know …. he said …. and he is leaving …. he says to trust us two so* [Conor, lines 1491-1494, 1502-1505].

Rebecca was confused when life story work[6] was started with the child in her care, but it was compiled using Rebecca's birth family details. Therefore, Rebecca was concerned when information was gathered with the child in her care using her (Rebecca's) background information. Considering Rebecca's contentious relationship with her own mother, she was amused when she described her discussion with the child in care about life story work. However, she also felt background history should not be ignored or replaced. This suggests inclusivity from Rebecca and an acknowledgement that issues from the past should be addressed:

> *I said why did you do that …. like …. because [names child in care] came back and said …. oh …. we didn't know your mum's name to put her down on the family [tree] …. and I said why are you putting her down? I wouldn't put her down myself [laughs] …. I'd put her down alright [laughs] and …. em …. her social worker said she didn't really want to talk about her own [family] …. so, I'm going to [names child] this is not right …. you know there's history …. there's a birth cert to say that your mum gave birth to you …. and you have to …. like even last night …. for instance …. she said …. you know …. maybe I will see my mum again and she actually called her mum, whereas from February she says we'll call her [birth name]* [Rebecca, lines 990-1000].

Rebecca reflected on the responsibility of parenting a child in care. She wanted the child in her care to feel safe and to have a feeling of belonging in her home, but she also acknowledged the complexity of the care she provides:

> *But she called her mum and she said …. you know [Rebecca] as long as …. okay …. I'll call …. no …. what's it did she say to me? I will go and see her, but she says as long as you're my [pause] you're my mum, aren't you? I …. you know …. you're trying to tease it out and I said …. do you know what? She's your birth mum, let's call her your birth mum. She's the birth mum that sees you once a month and can call you beautiful, princess, baby …. and I said I'm the mum who's going …. where's your homework? Why is it not done? Why are you late? I'm the horrible mum and I [pause] and that's what it is …. you know and the family is then …. she says I'm your daughter …. now I had my own children and they don't call me mum in front of [pause] that was the one thing I couldn't [pause] I couldn't have* [Rebecca, lines 1004-1016].

[6] Life story work is often completed with children in care to help them to make sense of their past (Baynes, 2008).

Summary

Developing Identities gave an account of participants' approach to care and reflected on the challenges they experienced as approved foster carers. Their understanding of the role was influenced by their own subjective experiences which meant they approached the task of fostering in their own unique way. Their formative experiences also gave an indication of their emotional commitment to the children in their care and their resilience when they were managing complexities in their home.

Enactment of the Role

The last superordinate theme captures research participants' approach to the task of fostering with regards to their interactions with professionals, their acceptance of professional decision making, the changes that occurred with their own birth children, the shift in their family dynamics and their growing awareness of their development in their role as foster carers. Some of the participants identified with the role more than others, accepting and integrating the changes as they presented in their lives. This theme highlights the participating foster carers' understanding of decision making based on their approach to the task of fostering. Some of the participants expressed frustration with decisions regarding the children in their care and seemed to want to perform actions that were beyond their responsibilities, but their actions possibly became blurred because of their emotional connection to the children. They also allude to feeling on the margins of decision making which made their role feel isolating. *Enactment of the Role* yielded three subordinate themes which were: *Foster Carer Attributes, On the Edge of Control* and *What about our Children?*

Foster Carer Attributes

Laura, John, Conor, Veronica, Mia, Colette and Annie discuss the attributes that have assisted them in their role as foster carers. This theme considers their reflections as they discuss their approach to fostering and their developing skills in the role. This theme captures their feelings of confidence as they think about the characteristics that are helpful to them in their approach. The discussion also alludes to their status as foster carers which is important to them on a personal level and possibly to their family and the wider community. They give the impression their identity was enhanced by becoming foster carers even when they are not always positive about their experiences.

Laura reflected on John's approach to the task of fostering. She compared his parenting of their four children to his understanding of the needs of the children placed with them in foster care. She acknowledged his insight from his experience of the care system although she did

not always agree with his approach. However, Laura feels they have evolved together as foster carers and was very complimentary of John's capability as a foster carer during the interview for this research. Laura places a strong emphasis on John's approach to the children placed with them:

> *He would have been a much less strict foster parent than he was a parent. When the children were growing up, I would have been the softie and he would have been the strict parent, but that kind of completely reversed when we started fostering …. so, I'd say he probably had much more insight into what was going on with the kids and made a lot of allowances, maybe even has made too many allowances* [Laura, lines 841-847].

This next statement from Laura is powerful and suggests that becoming a foster carer gave her insight into her own needs as well as the needs of the children in her care. Laura is definite in her use of language and in her search for meaning. She compares her current self with who she was in the past, which emphasises her strengths. Laura relates her childhood experiences to her decision to foster and has embraced the role suggesting she is now in a position that gives her a sense of ownership and autonomy. She feels respected in the role and confident in the decisions she makes regarding the children in her care:

> *I think that what destroyed me as a child has really helped me as an adult and has helped me with kids …. like it has always been in here [puts hand on heart] that no child that is with me is ever going to be afraid of me. They're not going to be afraid to tell me what happened …. you know …. em …. and that's kind of [pause] the whole thing has kind of come together with me, and it has made me understand me* [Laura, lines 1550-1557].

As mentioned earlier, John presented as quiet in demeanour and did not strongly express his views during the interview. However, he willingly admitted his softer approach to the children in placement when Laura mentioned it. At times he presented as light-hearted suggesting his understanding of the children in their care was deep and he did not try to explain or justify his reasons for taking the softer approach. John also seemed confident admitting there were times he shouted or became annoyed for a short while:

> *Em …. just …. I think that's what basically made me such a softie …. is understanding where they are coming from. I'd try not to go too hard on them. I might have a scream at them every now and again …. then I'd go off, cool down and come back again [laughs]* [John, lines 835-839].

Veronica discussed Conor's approach to the boys in their care stating he had the softer approach and she was the disciplinarian, although this was said with good humour and did not seem to perturb her. Conor then made strong statements about fostering the boys when he said he had not felt 'one hour' of stress since they were placed with him:

> *Just …. on certain things …. on certain things …. like you know …. they …. they know the boundaries with me as well. I'd be a very straight person …. I'd be …. you know …. wouldn't I? I'd be very straight and that …. the …. eh …. as long as they're happy …. you know …. that is …. you know as long as I know they're happy. If I think there's something going wrong …. straight away …. I'm straight in there …. like to say …. well …. look* [Conor, lines 164-168].

Veronica feels she has evolved as a person since she became a foster carer. She has embraced the role and has developed an understanding of the needs of the children in her care. Veronica is comfortable in this role and there is the sense she feels competent and is reassured in the relationship she has developed with the boys. Becoming a foster carer has benefitted her personal growth immensely and she is grateful to the boys for this:

> *Yeah …. the boys are [pause] I don't know …. they kind of make us the people we are too. They have helped us grow as much as we have helped them grow …. you know [*Veronica, lines 193-194].

Mia is honest as a foster carer and said she felt confident expressing her views because it is more important to her to have a clean house to give a good impression than what she might say. Mia does not elaborate on how she thinks this might be perceived by others. Mia also mentions good time keeping during this discussion suggesting preparation for an appointment or visit take priority over the discussion thereafter. Mia is strong in her explanation here and she makes no apologies for speaking her mind:

> *I can …. because the type of person that I am is …. I'm all mouth …. right …. and I don't care what I say. I know people don't like it, but that's the way I am …. em …. regarding …. like them [social workers] coming in and …. I didn't do it for you this morning [laughs] because I'm a bit scattered this morning …. that my house would have to be clean …. yeah …. no …. that's the way I would be thinking …. of my house. I'd be thinking is it warm …. is …. you know …. is there a nice smell in the house …. things like that …. so, what I say would be irrelevant* [Mia, lines 1291-1296].

Although Colette struggled to fully embrace her role as a foster carer, she felt fostering afforded her the opportunity to care for someone else and to give love even if she got nothing back in return. She wanted to foster so that a child could live with her as this seemed to feel more maternal to her than looking after children as a childminder. Colette does not feel she has a parenting style, but she will adapt her parenting to the child or young person placed with her in foster care:

> *It just kind of happened and I never thought I was parenting in a certain way. I never did think …. oh, this is what I'm doing …. oh, this is just rolling on, but when you're fostering you kind of have to sit back and look at it a little bit more …. in detail …. and then you realise …. ok …. yeah …. well that's …. or you read something from the training and think …. oh yeah …. that's what I'm doing* [Colette, lines 543-546].

Annie raised the issue of her status within the family as a foster carer, although she was scathing of calling it her identity. However, she liked that her nephew asked after the children in her care and told his friends she was a foster carer. This nephew lives on another continent and this seemed especially important to Annie, possibly because she did not think he would think of her in her fostering role when he was so far away. The emphasis Annie placed on her nephew's opinion seemed to contradict the importance of the role to her. However, it is important to consider that Annie had a difficult experience with the last young person placed with her with regards to her feelings of self-worth. She had not yet fostered another child when she discussed this issue during the interviews for this research:

> *I wouldn't say part of my identity, but I do be kind of shocked sometimes when …. em…. even my own nieces and nephews …. like …. eh …. I have a nephew that lives in [names area] and he might text me …. well, he texted me last night …. he sent me …. he has twins as well …. you know little videos and all …. around …. messing and what have you …. but …. em …. he'd often just out of the blue say to me …. em …. how's [names child] you know …. yeah …. when he was home there last year I was saying …. oh …. this is a different [names child] …. that was a different child and he said …. oh right …. fair play to you. He said I was telling my friends in [names area] about you the other day and all this …. and I'm kinda going why would you even …. but like it's a talking point …. my aunt is a [foster carer]* [Annie, lines 1072-1083].

On the Edge of Control

Annie, David, Colette, Rebecca, Mia, Veronica, Conor, Laura and John had varying degrees of interaction with allocated social workers and other professionals in their lives and their approach to fostering gave a strong indication of their sense of ownership in the role and trust in the decision making of others. There was a sense that research participants' autonomy was challenged at times, especially when they were stressed. However, there is also the consideration of how they present to professionals and if this presentation might affect decision making, and in turn their sense of identity as foster carers.

When Annie became distressed about ending the placement with the young person placed with her, she was reassured when her link social worker was willing to listen and negotiate, which was important for Annie to feel she was moving forward. She looked back at the two other teenage boys she fostered previously, and who successfully transitioned out of care from her home. She presented as wanting to foster again when the principal social worker and the link social worker met her to discuss the profile of children who might be placed with her in the future and she was open to their suggestions. She then became unsure about fostering a girl and this uncertainty continued when I met her for the second interview a few months later. However, Annie seemed to feel she had a choice, and this was important to her. Annie's language was reflective as she considered her options and she sounded relaxed about the possibility of other children being placed with her:

> *Last week …. remember I was saying I had an appointment to meet with [principal social worker] and [link social worker] …. last Monday morning so they were saying maybe a girl would be different and all …. you know …. and I [stumbles] I love girls obviously …. being one myself …. and em …. I suppose it worked out really well for the two [boys in placement previously] because …. em …. [daughter] and I have our own bathroom suite and [son] uses the main bathroom himself …. so, to share that with a boy is probably easier and it kind of works better if you know what I mean? Like I did say …. yeah …. a girl would be lovely for a change, but then afterwards I thought [of this]* [Annie, lines 163-169].

David presented as cynical towards professional decision making. He felt the children's allocated social workers were more concerned about ensuring they had their paperwork up to date than getting to know the children. David reiterated his frustration when he felt professionals behaved in this way:

> '*And so they're not familiar with the child and they make decisions with regard to that child …. like you know …. and the other side of that then is because of HIQA …. [Agency] staff [pause] their main concern is that the paperwork has to be right, so they seem to be doing full-time in an office …. whether they're in court or whatever …. but certainly not dealing with the children. Ticking the box and making sure all the paperwork is right rather than getting to know the child …. so, they don't know the child they're making decisions about with regards to the future of that child …. and like the fact that we are now fostering years we have plenty of experience of them making wrong decisions. Fair enough they do make right decisions, but they should never be making wrong decisions* [David, 351-359].

A theme that emerged with Colette throughout this research was the sense that she was conflicted regarding her commitment to fostering and this could be interpreted by professionals as non-committal. She presented as wanting to foster because she is nurturing, but then the need to protect her family and keep the status quo in their household seems to have superseded everything else. Maybe she was polarising competing needs and because of this she felt unable to fully integrate fostering into her life. However, there is the sense from Colette that she wanted to fully take on the role, but it was a constant struggle to make the right decision. Colette paused a few times as she described how this decision was made:

> *It was just.... [pause].... em ....the referrals that were being brought to us. Younger kids were brought....and I know....there must have been two young girls being brought and we were kind of [pause] they were under the age of [daughter] and we thought that would be better for her…to have younger coming into our house than older, but when the actual social workers came to talk and everything else [pause] we've a dormer bungalow so myself and [daughter] sleep upstairs so younger kids would be coming downstairs or we would have to move downstairs and everything else so [pause] the function of the actual building of the house worked for a teenager. [Teenager in care] has downstairs so basically all to herself* [Colette, lines 280-287].

Even though Colette then made the decision not to foster younger children, she still presented as never being sure about the direction fostering should take for her and her family. In this quote she described why younger children are a better match for them which

may again have caused confusion for the professionals working with her, especially with regards to her long-term commitment. Colette's use of language acknowledged that having a teenager in placement did not feel like she was extending their family unit which is what she wanted fostering to do:

> *That was the only thing we kind of assumed it would be a younger child. We thought that would work with our household .... we were very .... em .....weekends are very out and about ... outside walking or doing something. We are.....like as a family unit .... we like being a family unit .... and that we did at times think what's that gonna be .... when you're inviting another child into this .... you know what I mean..... you know that child doesn't have to be ... exactly a part of that unit as such …. but …. em …. that was the kind of thing .... well what are we going to do for the weekends..... you saw the caravan out there .... we do tend to go away …. you know…. [teenager in placement] has come with us the odd weekend..... sometimes, she'll go up to her sister or her siblings in [names area]* [Colette, lines 606-613].

Rebecca said she felt like she was 'always fighting' for therapeutic intervention for the children in her care. There is the sense she felt change in children's behaviour is rare and if there are improvements, they are temporary. This suggests she struggled to believe change can be permanent. There is also a critical sense of time with Rebecca. It is either too early or too late for services, but she rarely felt services were implemented at the appropriate time. Rebecca presented as a participating foster carer who is doubtful of lasting progress which gives the sense there is an on-going feeling of negativity towards professionals:

> *I sent an email off [pause] and when it was gone …. and I went to my own social worker …. saying you know we have a joint meeting.....and can we talk about what therapy you have now for [names child] because she is five and a half years in care …. and she has the same complex needs that she had five and a half years ago …. and the only thing we do is simmer these children …. so …. we get the good behaviour …. we get them into …. poor [names child] was like a wild animal when she came into care. You know …. so now you know her behaviour is better …. her jealousy is not. All those things are …. but they're separate …. her behaviour is good …. she's better in school …. so …. you know …. it's like you put a lid on the pot* [Rebecca, lines 877-888].

Mia understands her role as a foster carer requires her to adapt her parenting to meet the needs of the children in her care, but she also realises the importance of professional intervention and presented as feeling overwhelmed about the impact on children if there is limited professional involvement. Mia made several references to the need for support and

guidance, but she was also strong in her feelings towards certain decisions that were made. In this quote a sibling of one of the children in Mia's care was making her Communion and Mia struggled to maintain boundaries during an access visit with the children's mother even though the child is not in Mia's care:

> *Like even there last week …. ok …. ok …. I took the two girls to access last week and it was a different social worker that was there. I didn't know who she was …. and whatever …. and it was fine, and we went into the room and I had something to say to the mother and I waited until the social worker was in the room to say it …. just in case …. like you know …. and it was regarding the other child. She's not in my care, but she might as well be … she's here the whole time and whatever …. the older sister …. and she was so looking forward to getting her Communion stuff off the mother, but the mother hands my little one her birthday cake and the little one is standing there with her mouth open going …. mammy where is my Communion stuff …. because you know [sighs] and I was just looking at her and I was thinking …. seriously …. like …. this is going on too long. So, I got into the room when the social worker was there, and I said …. look [names birth mother] I said …. where's [pause] where's her stuff …. and she said …. oh, we're just getting the umbrella in bridal wear with her name on it, and the little one turns around and says …. but mammy everyone knows my name and I said [names birth mother] we really need to get the stuff this week …. every other child in her school has it …. I said …. she could have turned around and said it's none of your business …. you're not her carer or whatever, but she didn't …. no* [Mia, lines 278-293].

Laura, John, Veronica and Conor spoke about changes in allocated social workers or not finding the support beneficial. This was particularly about their sense of the needs of the children placed with them and their understanding of the intervention required to support them. In one such case, when one of the children placed with Veronica and Conor experienced difficulties from his past, their link social worker supported them to manage it and also suggested they attend a therapist to discuss approaches they might use to support the child in their care. This is a theme that has emerged with Conor with regards to his ability to show vulnerability or accept help and again here he resisted engaging with the therapeutic support offered:

> *You know …. [name] …. our link social worker …. [name] says …. eh …. how did you get on with [names therapist] and I says …. well she feels a whole lot better now I says [laughs]* [Conor, lines 1081-1082].

Although Veronica intervened with good humour, there is the sense she did not agree with Conor's approach and did not approach it in the same way herself. Veronica and Conor present as focused on the needs of the boys, but there is the suggestion that Conor would struggle if he was challenged in the care he provides:

> *[Link social worker] told [Conor] to become a social worker …. [Conor] should become a psychiatrist [laughs] …. [Conor] should take over, as [Conor] has the answer for everything …. so, [Conor] should do all these things* [Veronica, lines 1084-1086].

John presented as unrealistic in his expectation of professional involvement, but this statement from John also suggests he does not think that professionals could understand the complexities of fostering unless they experienced it. This possibly derives from his time in a group home and depth of feeling around the impact it had on his life. John made this statement near the end of the interview when he was reflecting on some of the decisions that have been made about the children placed with them, that he had not agreed with and he would change if he could:

> *I've always said to [Laura] that I think people who work for [agency] …. social workers and stuff like that …. as part of their training they should be made foster a child for a year [*John, lines 1645-1647].

Laura feels they are known as resilient fosters carers who can manage challenging behaviours, and this is often the deciding factor on the children who are placed with them. This is the image that Laura seems to want to portray, but she still sounded unsure as she described her resilience. She seemed to be protecting herself by emphasising their decision to provide short-term care even though she said she did not take the behaviour personally. Laura's repetition of 'you know' suggests she wants to be heard:

> *Because I think we are kind of quite resilient and I think ... em .... you know ... when a child is telling you .... insulting you and screaming I have ..... I certainly don't ever take any of that to heart. I just .... kind of ..... feel that [pause] and [agency] would have said it as well that we'd been identified as people who could really take the hardest of the hard. Em .... and I think we would say ... well .... we'll go ahead and see. Most of the children were coming in .... you know .... on a short-term basis .....so, we were saying we can certainly manage short-term ..... and then [names child] came. He was only supposed to be coming for two weeks and ended up here for 5 years* [Laura, lines 1108-1118].

What about our Children?

Participating foster carers acknowledged that integrating their identity as parents with their new identity as foster parents was more complicated than they anticipated. Their children's position in the family changed when they took on the role of fostering. There was a shift in the family dynamic especially when they parented the children in care in a way that was different to parenting their own children. There was a concern for Mia, Colette, Laura, John, Rebecca and Annie that their birth children were expected to integrate fostering into their lives even though they had not made the decision to become a foster family. They reflected on the meaning of this for their birth children acknowledging it was both a positive and a negative experience.

Mia described positive and negative influences on her children. Her son was 10 years old when they started fostering and Mia was not initially concerned that fostering would have a negative impact on him. However, she was unprepared for fostering because she thought she would be looking after children who would want to live with her family. Mia was so strongly influenced by her mother's behaviour when she was a child that she possibly had an unrealistic expectation of the children who would be placed with her with regards to their sense of belonging. Mia acknowledged her son witnessed volatile behaviour and was definite in her use of language when she discussed the impact on her son at a young age:

> *And he was seeing the anger and the frustration and [pause] what could you say? He [child in care] was a very violent little boy when he came here …. do you know what I mean …. but now this has all festered down* [Mia, lines 106-108].

Mia also reflected on the confidence her daughter gained coming from a foster family and although the experience was not how Mia had anticipated it would be, she was good humoured about it suggesting an openness to an alternative approach. Mia has learned from the challenges of fostering and this has most likely benefitted her in the support she can offer her children:

> *Look at …. I'm not going to say it was a good thing or a bad thing because [pause] it [fostering] showed my daughter how to stand up for herself …. not to be bullied and*

> *things like that. Em …. ok …… the other side of it [pause] probably [laughs] she learned about boys more than she should have [laughs again] but …. she's 21 [years old] now …. my daughter …. and she will [pause] if you ask her what it was like …. she was jealous of her [child in placement] because she took so much of my attention, but she [child in care] was a very good role model for her …. you know …. like …. she'd stand up now in front of a crowd in [agency] when they're training new carers and she would stand up there and speak to them …. whereas …. before …. she reckons she got the confidence from her …. do you know* [Mia, lines 133-140].

This next statement from Mia is strong and an indication of how emotionally exhausting fostering children with complex needs can be. There is the suggestion that she felt the needs of the foster children came before the needs of her birth children and she felt guilty about this. However, she can still clearly remember the exhaustion she felt trying to manage the children's behaviour in her home:

> *The behaviours, the challenges…. the frustration ... you don't realise what is going on with these children. You don't realise the impact it can have on your family. Em …. yeah …. there were nights we sat here, and you think …. what are we doing? Are we destroying our own children in the making of this … or what? There were times when …. you know …. you had to call the social workers here …. not very often …. but [pause] or then you'd just be so exhausted from the impact of the whole day that you had ….and you're thinking I haven't even said goodnight to my own child. I haven't even checked to see if he brushed his teeth. I haven't …. I can't get off the chair at this stage …. but …. oh yeah …. very challenging* [Mia, lines 1007-1014].

As already discussed, Colette's priority was to ensure she did not bring challenges into her home that would change their family dynamic or cause upset for her daughter. She considered the difficulties fostering might raise for her daughter more than the other participating foster carers. However, Colette's consideration of her daughter's needs highlights how difficult it is to combine the needs of children in foster care with the needs of birth children:

> *For us as a family … as in … when I say me I also think of [husband] as well …. I could deal with …. em [pause] …. for [daughter's] sake I couldn't deal with trouble …. as in physical trouble* [Colette, lines 847-848].

The impact of fostering on their birth children was a concern for Laura and John too. Both of them experienced volatile behaviours from adults when they were children, so they were concerned about exposing their children to anger or aggression. When Laura and John

reflect on their childhoods there is a sense of pride that they provided a better life for their children. Becoming a family who fosters was a positive experience too:

> *One of my concerns when we started out was that maybe the impact it would have on the children. Em …. I actually think it made us closer. It has made my kids nicer kids because they …. kind of …. understand how lucky they were in that they were brought up in a situation where there wasn't any kind of abuse or negligence. It certainly carved two of my children's careers* [Laura, lines 616-622].

When Rebecca's grandson was 2 years old, the child in her care (who was still with her at the time of this research four years later) made an allegation of inappropriate touching against him. Rebecca really struggled with this and the implications for her grandson if he was older. The fear for Rebecca was palpable, especially when the response she got from the social worker when she reported it was to minimise it:

> *The child [in care] hasn't dealt with what has gone on …. when [names child in care] made an allegation of [names grandson] at 2 [years old] saying that he wanted her to …. hold …. touch his [pause] …. that was on a Friday evening …. I couldn't …. I poured a glass of milk and two chocolate chip cookies for [child in care] and ran down with [grandson] to the bedroom and cried my heart out …. that she could do that. When I rang the social workers on Monday [pause] …. ah …. sure, she didn't mean it …. but, what if grandson was 10 [years old]? Now they didn't say …. ok …. now we need …. this is what we need to do* [Rebecca, lines 1144-1153].

This incident shocked Rebecca who had difficulty making sense of the reason the child in her care made the allegation. Rebecca may have been correct when she said the child in care was jealous of him. However, she was also aware of her family's vulnerability even though her grandson was very young:

> *I spent the whole weekend with [child in care] …. saying you have to tell me why you said it. She says to me at one stage …. I sat her on my lap, and I wanted to kill her, but she is only a child. Where did she get it? I sat her on my lap, and she says somebody told me if I said that about somebody, I could get them into serious trouble. She was spoilt …. she was jealous of him* [Rebecca, lines 1153-1158].

When Annie was struggling to relate to the young person who was moving into her house she relied on her son to intervene and assist in the relationship. This suggests there is sometimes a reliance on birth children for support in managing difficulties. This support was important to Annie and she seemed to consider her son a willing participant who had a role to play that was different to hers, but supportive of her in her role too. Annie presented as

protective of her children, but they were also protective of her which adds a layer of complexity to foster family dynamics:

> *[Names son] says …. come on [names child in care] I'll help you and he was …. like …. no tomorrow …. and I says no, you can't leave all that stuff in my car. There was only the seat for the driver left …. like the whole car was full of crap and the boot was stuffed as well and smelly and covered in dust. So [son] says come on …. and I said …. well I'm not. I said I'm after [pause] now for me to even say that to a child …. do you know what I mean …. on his first day official …. like …. I was thinking [swears] [Annie] you're losing your marbles …. do you know …. but it was the attitude sitting there watching me and I was walking up and down the road and I said to [social worker] I said it in front of [pause] I said will you get up and help us. I said it's all your stuff …. and eh …. he said later …. in a minute …. you know …. always …. and [social worker] says I think he's a bit emotional about leaving and I says …. well I don't [pause] I said that's the way he is …. he's just lazy…. so lazy …. oh my God …. but em …. [son] helped him move the …. take the stuff out of the car and it was in the hall and then he wouldn't bring it up the stairs so [son] helped him bring it …. and he just brought it in and threw it on the floor and that was it* [Annie, lines 239-250].

Summary

Enactment of the Role highlighted the participants' feelings of self-worth in the role. Their identity as foster carers influenced their interaction with professionals (including therapeutic intervention) and their trust in professional decision making. The participants were also aware of the changes that occurred in their family dynamic and the impact of fostering on their own children.

Chapter 7 – The Different Dimensions of Identity for Foster Carers

Introduction

This chapter considers the research findings through the lens of narrative identity. As a researcher, this lens assisted me to understand the core themes that emerged in the findings of the study. These relate to the dimensions of identity experienced by foster carers in their role, and include their individual identities shaped by their subjective experiences, and the identities that are imposed on them as 'ordinary' families who enter a system and are simultaneously required to adhere to statutory requirements and professional expectations. Therefore, narrative identity as a conceptual framework is useful to consider how the participants' made sense of their experiences and constructed their identity in the caregiving role.

The Identity of the Family who Fosters in Ireland

In this research, the participants' understanding of their motivation to foster included personal and subjective accounts of their deeply personal experiences. They focused mainly on their childhood experiences which were emotionally raw and sometimes difficult to articulate, but they also experienced loss as adults which informed their decision making processes. Therefore, their construction of their identity in the caregiving role became synonymous with meaning making. This created a complex phenomenon as motivation to foster then specifically related to their unique perspectives. Looking at how they made sense of their experiences, narrative identity theory, as proposed by Paul Ricoeur (1913 - 2005), suggests this theoretical approach is one way of considering the question of personal identity. Ricoeur examined how the history of life is constantly refigured by the stories we tell about our lives. In light of this, he concludes that narrative identity is fragile and life is a fabric woven by the stories we construct about ourselves. These narratives we recount are inspired by both historical and fictional aspects of our culture. Narrative is, therefore, a social and cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, narrative identity can be assigned to both an individual and a community, as the history of a community becomes a person's identity. For

Ricouer, understanding comes by way of interpretation and reinterpretation, which is constant but never truly finished (Dohnalova, 2021).

Dunlop et al (2023) further observe that narrative identity refers to what individuals want in relation to others and how they interact with or feel about others. Narrative identity posits that individuals use stories both to make sense of experiences in the social world as well as different representations within themselves (Dunlop et al, 2023). Pasupathi (2001) argues that an individual's personality is understood within an interpersonal context. In this research, that interpersonal context shaped how the participants interpreted and made sense of their interactions with others. Furthermore, it influenced their trust in others, their communication style and the expectations they brought to their interactions. McLean et al (2020) and Adler et al (2017) observe that narrative identity matters for some of the most important components of the human condition. Perhaps the most fundamental component is psychological well-being. Adler et al (2017) further observe that individual differences in how stories are told about important life experiences reflects current well-being and predicts well-being over time.

Schofield et al (2013) note that in foster care both 'parent' and 'foster carer' have role characteristics and expectations which are understood differently by individuals in their personal and cultural contexts. These roles must be understood as providing meaning and purpose to individuals' lives. However, the traditional attention afforded to foster carers is on recruitment and retention rather than on understanding how they negotiate their roles within their family or their community. This means the relational context of foster families can go unnoticed (Orme and Combs-Orme, 2014; Heslop, 2019). However, there was a strong emphasis in the findings of this research on adverse childhood experiences or traumatic events. Waterman (2020) observes there has been increased recognition of the potential for stressful life experiences to disrupt identity functioning in adolescence and adulthood. Crossley (2000) notes '*our routine 'lived' sense of time and identity is one of implicit connection and coherence. This sense is severely disrupted in the face of trauma and it is in*

such contexts that stories become important as a way of rebuilding a sense of connection and coherence' (Crossley: 2000: 10).

The fragile nature of identity for foster carers emerged as the strongest and most influential finding in this research. It is the coherence of their life story that is of relevance to them in how they approach the caregiving role. This is mirrored in the opinion of McAdams and McLean (2013) who describe narrative identity as an individual's life story that is internalised and evolving. This life story integrates the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose (McAdams and McLean, 2013). Thorne (2004) adds that identity is a slowly evolving life story and the capacity to construct a coherent life story requires an inclination to draw meaningful connections across one's past, present and anticipated future. Even though cultural narratives are included, the material of the life story is unique to each person because each individual's lived experience represents a unique configuration (Thorne, 2004).

Intergenerational Influences

Narrative identity emphasises the subjective nature of personal experiences, but more importantly the understanding that individuals have of their identity through the narratives they construct about their lives. The influence of intergenerational influences emerged strongly in the findings of this research highlighting the unique and deeply personal nature of lived experience. This adds a complex layer to understanding how foster carers construct their identity in the caregiving role. Barber (2000) argues that values, beliefs and attitudes expressed in the family of origin are important aspects on how children are raised in families and have significant effects on their subsequent formation of their own family. In this research, there is a strong emphasis on the family in environment where parenting styles are influenced by the participants' experiences in their own childhoods. There are foster carers in this research who experienced what Verhage et al (2018) describe as less sensitive and more disrupted caregiving as children. Others experienced adversity in the

form of early trauma and life stressors which McDonnell and Valentino (2016) observe have pervasive influence on adult functioning. For example, Laura never wanted a child in her care to feel the way she felt as a child. Rebecca identified with the more difficult life path from her experiences which manifested in her wanting to look after children with more complex needs '*give me the worst child to foster…the child that nobody wants is the child I want.'* These experiences are mirrored in the opinion of Burke et al (2021) who note that the specific pathways through which adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact parents in their role are multifaceted. ACEs are sometimes considered 'ghosts in the nursery' where the 'unremembered past' can play a role in how parenting behaviours develop and are maintained through generations (Burke et al, 2021: 1).

Some of the foster carers in this research discussed their memories of the environment in their family home when they were growing up. Egeli and Rinaldi (2016) suggest the environment that parents create for their children will be predicted by their social competencies. Therefore, parenting styles influence children's social development (Egeli and Rinaldi, 2016). This point resonates with the findings of this research because although foster carers' experiences are unique, a pattern of motivation emerged from some of the participants which was guided by experiences they felt were inspiring. For example, Mia refers to her mother's altruism when she was a child as a strong motivating factor in her decision to become a foster carer. Veronica and Conor were strongly influenced by Conor's mother's opinion of their suitability to become foster carers. They said she '*put a name to it.'* Furthermore, Veronica's mother placed a strong emphasis on building and maintaining a family unit because she was raised in an orphanage. These findings are mirrored in the opinions of Tamasova and Barnova (2019) who observe that children learn most from their parents' behaviour. They want to be like their parents and therefore imitate not just their positive, but also their negative behaviour patterns.

Children are born into particular social environments and societies. For their healthy emotional development, the character of their family environment and the appropriateness of the applied parenting styles are important. They have an impact on emotional education and have the potential to affect children's emotional development which carries into adulthood (Tamasova and Barnova, 2019). Bengston (1975) and Barber (2000) further note that socialisation and social control are two important ways that parents influence their children's behaviour. Through socialisation, parents influence how their children w*ant* to behave. Parents' preferences for their children can shape the children's attitudes, beliefs, and intentions. Parents and children also share similar traits because of their shared position, background and experiences. Similarly, children may behave in accordance with their parents' preferences simply because their own opportunities were shaped by the same social forces (Bengston, 1975; Barber, 2000). In this research the participants' family of origin was the determining factor in how they constructed their own families. This would suggest that intergenerational influences is a particularly critical point to consider for children who are parented by foster carers because the carer-child relationship does not have a shared history.

Practitioner and Practice Focused Discussion

Sensitive Caregiving

If the previous discussion is considered, then foster carers awareness of their parenting styles and influences is vital to enable them to provide sensitive care for children who join their families. When the foster carer and child in foster care do not have a shared history then the carer must interpret the child's signals alongside the child adapting to a new and different parenting style. However, when families become approved foster carers, introducing a child to their existing family system can be a major transition. Besides the relationships they are expected to develop with the child, foster carers must learn to adapt to their new role, set boundaries and develop a new sense of family (Lanigan and Burleson, 2017; Mallette et al, 2020).

In this research foster carers' approach to sensitive caregiving emerged as a powerful theme. Understanding how foster carers navigate this journey is important too because there is the assumption by professionals and the system that foster carers know how to provide sensitive care to children who join their families. O' Neill et al (2012) observe this complexity in fostering and note that parenting is an interaction between the child and caregiver relationship which impacts on placement stability and mediates the effects of child and caregiver characteristics (O' Neill et al, 2012). Similarly, whilst there is limited variation in commitment expected in biological dyads, the opposite has been found in research on foster care dyads (Dozier and Lindhiem, 2006; Jacobsen et al, 2018). This means there is an emphasis on a foster carer's ability to become emotionally involved in meeting a child's needs (Euillet et al, 2022).

It emerged in this research that foster carers know there is an emphasis on their ability to connect with children, but they also put pressure on themselves feeling they should know how to build these relationships. Hence, the meaning of sensitive caregiving is a challenging concept and it emerged as such in this research especially with regards to what it means for foster carers in their developing relationships with the children in their care. Holmes (2023) notes that narrative identity relates to an individual's capacity to recount how they have explored, changed, or learned something over the course of their lives. This is relevant to the participants' experiences in this research as they had vastly different experiences when children were placed with them. However, all the experiences related to their conceptualisation of the children's needs and their subsequent responses. Annie became upset when she felt taken for granted by the young person in her care whereas Laura and Mia felt protective of the children in their care and acted accordingly. Laura suggested to a child who was struggling to regulate his emotions at school that they escape together through the back entrance. Mia attended an access visit with the intention of challenging the social worker on a birth mother's actions.

Biringen (2008) and Van Andel et al (2015) refer to foster carers' emotional responsiveness and affective attunement to a child's needs as the ability to show age-appropriate emotional signals (Biringen, 2008; Van Andel et al, 2015). However, this research highlights that foster carers are not always prepared for the challenges they experience when children join their families. Browning (2020) discussed the manner in which children present and the feelings this can trigger in foster carers can overwhelm their capacity to sustain a nurturing stance in the care they provide. Adams et al (2018) observe the importance of exploring how foster carers deal with challenges. It is about how they interact with others and what they hope to gain from the relationships. The findings of this research also suggest foster carers expect to manage complex behaviours, but sometimes the challenges were in relation to their own value systems which they did not anticipate. These presenting issues were complex and created unexpected feelings for foster carers and they responded with emotion.

When these circumstances arise, Cicchetti and Garezy (1993) believe that some individuals can maintain competent functioning despite an interfering emotionality. This approach emphasises the dialectic that exists between successful adaptation and the struggle associated with this process (Cicchetti and Garezy, 1993; Jamison, 1993). However, it is important to acknowledge the struggle for foster carers in managing these complex situations. There are psychological and social factors, for example coping style, cognitive flexibility and social support that are associated with resilience to adversity (Southwick et al, 2005; Baratta et al, 2013). An early study by Garmezy and Rodnick (1959) explored children in poverty and the theory of 'cumulative factors' contributing to outcomes was established. They proposed that personality traits of individuals are not the sole source of an outcome. Rather, it is a product of both internal and external factors. This combination of psychosocial elements and biological predispositions combine as risk and protective factors that help to define what is now known as resilience (Garmezy and Rodnick, 1959; Garcia-Dia et al, 2013).

Habitual Behaviour

Intergenerational influences and sensitive caregiving open the discussion around exploring habitual behaviour of foster carers. Habitual behaviour gives an indication of how foster carers develop relationships with children in their care. According to Harkness (2019), in the context of foster care, a key element of that environment is the relationship that develops between the foster carer and the child. In this research the participants described their plan to integrate children placed with them into their existing family environment. However, it did not always turn out as they hoped possibly because it is the child in care who decides how they will respond to their new foster family routine. In assessment prospective foster carers are asked how they will manage this transition for the child, but in reality they can only introduce a child to the family system they know and have created from their own experiences. In my years in practice this was one of the most frustrating issues to emerge for foster carers when a child joined their family – if the child seemed to avoid integrating into *their* family routine. This often caused confusion for foster carers as their understanding of their role is that the child will want to become a part of their family because they came from a family system that was not meeting their needs. However, it was the only family system the child knew and understood. In this research Laura and Mia in particular made reference to their thinking as prospective foster carers - that children would want to stay with them because they came from abusive or neglectful experiences. However, they soon realised that integrating children into their families was far more complex.

In practice I often pondered the approach of foster carers when they were introducing children into their families. They welcomed the children with enthusiasm, but sometimes there were hidden meanings in behaviours or actions that were important to foster carers, but not to the children in their care. For example, how foster carers celebrate special occasions or how they plan gatherings. It emerged in the findings of this research as important too. Colette placed an emphasis on family time and she hoped the child in their care would want that too. Similarly, Veronica and Conor embraced the family unit that

evolved for them when the three boys were placed in their care with regards to their new emerging role as parents. Veronica and Conor made reference to the boys in their care as ‘our son’ several times during the interviews for this research. This highlights the sensitive nature of lived experiences and the strong emphasis the participants placed on the formation of their own families.

Meetoo et al (2020) observe that everyday life can assist to understand how the habitual, routine ‘everyday’ can potentially show how ideologies of care and parenting are embedded in everyday practices. Morgan (2011) further notes that family practices encompass the mundane, routine, habitual or ‘normal’ things we do. Thus, the challenge for foster carers in this context, especially at the commencement of a placement, is to consider what constitutes habitual behaviour in their family and how the routine of their daily lives might appear to children who join their family. This is before they get to know the children’s care needs or develop an understanding of their complex behaviours. Baker and White-McMahon (2014) note foster carers can start to communicate a child’s importance to them by encouraging interactions which could be as simple as a greeting or a query about their day.

Taylor (2012) observes that foster carers can help children to feel valued with praise and rewards. Harkness (2019) notes how the interconnected aspects of safety, trust and love are integral to the foster carer-foster child relationship highlighting the importance of developing these key aspects in the caregiving role. However, this approach requires acute awareness from foster carers as Danner et al (2008) describes how many of our goal directed behaviours are performed habitually, while Phoenix et al (2017) note the invisibility of the ‘habitual’ and exploring the habitual in family homes, which is typically a private space where the normative or routine is largely unarticulated, is particularly difficult (Phoenix et al, 2017; Meetoo at al, 2020). Scott (2009) suggests that because everyday life is often seen as trivial, it can be easily forgotten or omitted from research. However, it has emerged as important in this research as it is linked to how foster carers negotiate their roles within the family.

Conflicting Identities in the Caregiving Role

Foster carers are accustomed to being monitored and they are responsible for the intimate details of care for children. Their relationships to regulations and standards shapes their daily lives, but their role straddles the formal and informal as they are also socially, culturally and economically situated and their understanding of care derives from that positioning (Nutt, 2006; Meetoo et al, 2020). It emerged in this research that foster carers have aspirations of the role from their own internalised, evolving story before they even start the process of inquiry. When they enter the system their role is to '*provide a safe, secure and stable home environment for the most vulnerable children and young people in our society*' (TUSLA Publications, 2022: 20). However, what this research suggests is that while prospective foster carers have insight into the needs of children, they might not perceive the challenges involved in the role which Murray et al (2011) observe goes well beyond the normative experiences of parenting. The participants of this research had a conceptualisation of the care they should provide, but in the absence of concrete experiences of caring, they relied on their own experiences to project the needs of children in the care system. This would suggest they were enmeshed in experiences far removed from the system they entered as foster carers even when some of them had experienced the system as children.

The literature review addressed how the assessment of prospective foster carers is the first critical engagement of all family members who will be involved in the life of a foster placement and the foster family serves as the context for deciding on their suitability to take on the role (McCracken and Reilly, 1998). However, this research suggests prospective foster carers can struggle to fully engage in the assessment process when they feel the questions posed during the interviews are personal, but not relevant to their motivation to foster. The *National Guidance for Foster Care Assessment* is the framework used to assess prospective foster carers in Ireland. Under this framework, assessing social workers consider applicants' ability to foster as a form of risk assessment (TUSLA Publications,

2015). Therefore, the assessment process is a form of risk mitigation of applicants' suitability to provide quality care.

This is a systemic requirement with regards to professional decision-making. However, in this research it emerged from the descriptions the participants gave of their engagement with the assessment process that families may not think systemically. Furthermore, it could be argued that an identity is imposed on foster carers when they enter the system. This relates to the statutory obligation that requires foster carers to attend meetings, work as part of a team, facilitate birth family contact and engage in therapeutic intervention. In this research the participants understood the statutory obligation required of foster carers when they enter the system. However, they did not have a clear understanding of what that meant for them in the role especially when their own values were challenged by either professional decision-making or court direction. It is also a reminder that the fostering assessment might be the first time prospective foster carers attempt to make sense of their previous experiences which is a complex task in itself besides trying to grasp the nature of the system.

The assessment process, therefore, can create feelings of ambiguity if prospective foster carers struggle with the requirements of the assessment to evidence base their potential strengths and weaknesses (TUSLA Publications, 2015). This context emphasises the central role of social workers in the recruitment, selection and support of foster carers (Gilligan, 2019). Ebsen (2018), in a discussion on decision-making in social work, asked questions pertinent to social work practice, and which resonated with me as a former practitioner in the Irish child welfare system and foster care system. He asked what social workers consider as important information, which data were relevant, and how did they systemise and analyse it? What happened when information was gathered and judged and in the end put into a decision of doing something? (Ebsen, 2018). Ebsen was talking about decisions that are made about children and families, but the same questions apply to assessing social workers who are deciding if prospective foster carers are suitable candidates to provide quality care

for children.

Questions that are core to approval of all types of foster care ask what children need and what constitutes a good family experience for them (Dibbens, 2010; O' Brien, 2012). However, this systemic lens means the focus is on what prospective foster carers can offer children in care and the system rather than what they bring to the role. This complex interplay between what they bring to the role and the requirements of the system emerged strongly in this research. It highlights how the system has the potential to cause stress for foster carers even though the goal is to ensure meeting the needs of children is paramount (Cooley et al, 2015; Murray et al, 2011). The systemic lens might also explain why the level of engagement required of prospective foster carers in the assessment process can evoke feelings of consternation and vulnerability which was the case with some of the participants in this research. The findings indicate foster carers do not embrace the identity imposed on them by the system, and they already have a sense of what the role means to them before they even apply to become foster carers. If this is considered through their lenses, then it becomes clear why they felt some of the questions posed during the assessment were irrelevant or repetitive, but intrusively so. Furthermore, in creating this ambivalence some of the participants of this research became concerned during their fostering assessment that their experiences would be misinterpreted. This in turn might have implications for them in their desire to take on the role of fostering and for the development of trusting relationships with professionals in the future.

Foster Carers' Understanding of Professional Decision Making

The provision of foster care in Ireland operates within a complex system of many moving parts (Gilligan, 2019). Therefore, foster care is a complex phenomenon characterised by dynamic aspects as well as the structuring of multifaceted relationships which include the foster family, child in care, birth family and professionals (Migliorini et al, 2018). Foster carers enter the system as 'ordinary' families with an understanding of the role which

developed from their own subjective experiences. These experiences were deeply personal and superseded any learning they gleaned from the assessment process. However, social workers also enter the system as individuals with their own subjective experiences. Their social, cultural and political contexts alongside their professional experience and attitude may all affect their judgement (Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008; Graham et al, 2015). This is before collaboration and consultation with others within the organisation become involved in the process (Graham et al, 2015).

Furthermore, it would seem that the legal and risk management responsibilities of many child welfare systems has a major influence on overall orientations as there is a constant push-pull dynamic between the quest for early intervention with children and families and the demands of on-going risk management and protection (Devaney and McGregor, 2017). Another consideration is noted in a study by MacDonald and McSherry (2013) who addressed adoptive parents' experience of unplanned birth family contact in adolescence. The study raised an interesting issue with regards to how families necessitate a stretching of their boundaries to admit birth family (or professionals) who might represent a threat to their personal investment in the child's well-being or their identity as parents (MacDonald and McSherry, 2013). This issue is also mirrored in the findings of this research as the foster carers in this study managed change depending on how they constructed their identity in the caregiving role. It also highlights that whilst foster carers understand the circumstances of the child in their care with regards to legal status or the purpose of birth family contact, they do not have knowledge of the hierarchy of the system nor are they always prepared for the challenges to their identity. This could be because they are not involved in decision-making. Geiger et al (2013) note that although it may seem obvious that foster carers should be involved in decision-making processes that involve the children in their care, it can be complicated considering the multiple stakeholders involved in child welfare decision-making.

Professional Support and Training

Formal supports for foster carers in Ireland are provided primarily from the individual social worker and this support is highly variable across the different areas (Midgley at al, 2019). There is a provision for support and training of foster carers in the National Standards for Foster Care (2003). Standard 15 titled *Supervision and Support* states*:*

> *Approved foster carers are supervised by a professionally qualified social worker. This person, known as the link worker, ensures that foster carers have access to the information, advice and professional support necessary to enable them to provide high quality care* (Department of Health and Children, 2003: 35).

Standard 16 titled *Training* states:

> *Foster carers participate in the training necessary to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to promote high quality care* (Department of Health and Children, 2003: 37).

In recent years support and training have become more focused and foster carers can access training both online and in person from a wide variety of sources including the Child and Family Agency, the Irish Foster Care Association and training schedules are also provided for foster carers from private fostering agencies. However, the focus of this research is on foster carers' understanding of the purpose of support and training. Foster carers have a complex task that entails both parenting and agency requirements (Rhodes et al, 2003; Vanschoonlandt et al, 2012). They routinely navigate the system in place for the children in their care while working as part of a team (Geiger et al, 2017; Lietz et al, 2016). However, it emerged in the findings of this research that foster carers experience conflict in the role which started as prospective foster carers in assessment and extended to their relationships with professionals.

Some of the participants had feelings of ambivalence with regards to professional opinions. This point is mirrored in a study by Mallette et al (2020) who observe that when foster carers perceive communication with their allocated social worker as inadequate, it can lead to them feeling unsupported and that there is a lack of recognition of their role. Sometimes foster carers and social workers have different views of the role of fostering too which leads to

concern that social workers do not appreciate the care they provide (Cooley at al, 2017; Lanigan and Burleson, 2017; Mallette et al, 2020). This is important for allocated social workers to consider when they are offering support. It emerged in this research that foster carers can feel vulnerable, but they presented as detached, dismissive or obstructive instead. These experiences can impact foster carers' capacity in managing complexities and their interaction with professionals might subsequently become the aspect of their self-knowledge that reflects how they think about themselves (Brown and Marshall, 2006).

Self-esteem was originally defined as a unidimensional construct that refers to an individual's sense of competence. However, it was later described as the evaluation an individual makes regarding him or herself and one's sense of competence and personal worth in dealing with life's challenges (Randal et al, 2015). This is a complex construct for foster carers as previous research has shown that high self-esteem individuals' feelings of self-worth are more stable and less subject to situational influences than those with low self-esteem, possibly because their self-views are held with greater certainty and clarity (Brown, 2010; Brown and Marshall, 2006; Campbell and Lavallee, 1993; Brown and Brown, 2011). The findings of this research highlight how background history and educational opportunities can influence foster carers' feelings of self-worth. This in turn influences their understanding of the need to engage with support mechanisms or to attend training. Foster carers' perceptions of their relationships with professionals varied in this research too and again suggests their conceptualisation of these relationships was influenced by their subjective experiences.

This opens the discussion on how foster carers present to professionals which might influence the support or training that is offered to them. However, this research suggests there is more needed to understand their motivation and identity in the caregiving role. Butler and McGinnis (2021) note that foster care provision is underpinned by an ecological practice framework focused on assessing needs, competencies and protective factors that sustain

foster family functioning. Resources need to be targeted at supporting the needs of the family in environment when they are faced with adversity and must adapt to challenges (Butler and McGinnis, 2021; Flynn et al, 2006; Walsh, 2016). The findings of this research further indicate there are times when foster carers can feel undervalued when they are managing complexities in their home. When communicating with professionals there is the possibility foster carers become more assertive over time, but there are others who could become dragged into draining conflict (Maclay et al, 2006).

A consideration from the findings of this research is that there are often feelings of ambiguity attached to foster carers' understanding of the support they should receive. Their perception of support and professional involvement differs too depending on how they construct their role. However, the support they receive is also diverse which complicates matters. This highlights how the challenges or struggles for foster carers in the caregiving role could be misinterpreted when they are working alongside professionals who do not know them and are unaware of their background history. This research also suggests that integrating their identity as parents with their new identity as foster carers is more complex for foster carers than they realise when they decide to take on the role. The shift in their family dynamics becomes complicated especially when foster carers are required to parent children in care differently to how they parent their own children. Fearnley (2020) observes that foster carers draw on their internal resources when they start fostering while at the same time building networks. Foster carers' ability to manage different circumstances, to problem solve, build resilience and maintain relationships are all important to success in foster care (Fearnley, 2020).

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the research through the lens of narrative identity. Foster carers' understanding of the role emerged as complex and deeply personal and the findings relate to how their identity was constructed and the factors that comprised this

evolution. Intergenerational influences and habitual behaviour featured strongly and gave a sense of foster carers' capacity for sensitive caregiving. The research highlighted how taking on the caregiving role can be conflicting for foster carers and it is important to develop a strong understanding of the meaning of the role for them at the beginning of the process. The findings also emphasise that there are differences between what foster carers bring to the role and the requirements of the system. These nuances significantly impacted their approach to care and understanding of the needs of the children who joined their families. Their relationships with professionals, and their understanding of the need for support and training, was affected by this too.

Chapter 8 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Providing sensitive care for children during a time when they need it most is a fundamental component of fostering. Children with multiple needs require care that goes beyond standard parenting practices and foster carers must be prepared for this when children join their families. The role of fostering is complex and multifaceted, but there is no specific study in Ireland that sought to understand foster carers' experiences on an in-depth level. Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore the life experiences that influenced foster carers' motivations to foster to examine how their experiences shape their identity in the caregiving role. The goal was to identify how their understanding of the role informs the care they provide and the relationships they develop with the children in their care. By developing an understanding of the complexities foster carers experience in the role, it might also assist social workers to comprehend the challenges which is important for sustaining foster carers in the care they provide. The research questions are:

1. In what way do personal life experiences influence a foster carer's decision to take on the role of fostering?
2. How do foster carers integrate their identity into the caregiving role?
3. How does their understanding of the role inform the care they provide for children placed with them?

Conclusion

A number of important themes emerged from the interpretative analysis that identified similarities across the participants' experiences. These were included in the four superordinate themes which were *Complex Family Dynamics, Conflicting Identities, Developing Identities* and *Enactment of the Role.* The analysis of these themes highlighted the influences in foster carers' lives that added different dimensions to the narratives they build of their identities. The participants' reasons for taking on the role of fostering were deeply personal and suggested there were significant factors in their own childhoods that

shaped their decision making processes. Although they were aware of the impact of their previous experiences on their outlook and the direction they wanted to go in their lives, they did not always link how this might affect their developing relationships with children in their care. Sometimes, there were intergenerational influences in their values, attitudes and beliefs that were to the forefront of how they constructed their understanding of the role. These attributes were significant in terms of how they made sense of the isolation or trauma experienced by the children who joined their families. The emphasis in this research was on 'ordinary' families who decide to foster, but 'ordinary' families often have extraordinary experiences suggesting they might be vulnerable in the caregiving role.

This research addressed the historical and socio-cultural context of foster care provision in Ireland. The changing landscape of how child protection is perceived has impacted on the role of fostering. The public domain of child protection has become intertwined with care being provided in the privacy of a family home. A professional language of risk has developed and a fear around ensuring the welfare and protection of children. This language has seeped into how foster carers are assessed and the systemic requirements that are addressed with them in the fostering assessment. One issue this research has highlighted is how prospective foster carers' conceptualisation of the role differs from the statutory requirements for children in care. Thus, when families become approved foster carers, their understanding of the extra tasks required of them might not be the same as the professionals working alongside them.

During the process of becoming foster carers, the questions posed during the assessment caused conflict for some of the participants. It seemed they felt there was an identity being imposed on them by the system, and this identity was different to what they wanted to bring to the role. They felt unprepared for what was expected of them and this raised the question about the rapport that prospective foster carers build with their assessing social worker. Furthermore, when the participants started to develop an understanding of their role, they

experienced challenges in how they prioritise care. For example, what was their attitude to disruptive behaviour or birth family contact? Did their own experiences in childhood make them more protective of the children in their care? Their approach further captured their feelings of self-worth in the role and their capacity to provide sensitive care for children, as there were times when their emotional wellbeing was triggered by their previous experiences. Similarly, the mundane, habitual every day activities that go unnoticed in foster carers' day-to-day lives can have an impact on how children are integrated into their foster families. The relational context of foster families often goes unnoticed, which means closer attention could be given to how family members negotiate their roles. This is important for support and training too.

Concluding Statement

The fragile nature of foster carers' identity emerged as the strongest and most influential theme in this research. There was a coherence to the narratives they built of their identities that were made up of their past experiences, how they are living today and their hopes for the future. They had a clear goal in wanting to become foster carers which was sometimes challenged during the assessment process when their narratives did not align with the requirements of the system. This highlighted that 'ordinary' families might need support to weave their new identity as foster carers into their lives. Furthermore, they should feel autonomous in the role whilst they are adhering to statutory requirements, rather than feeling an identity is being imposed on them. This points to the possibility that professional understanding and sensitivity towards foster carers would go a long way to ensuring they had all the support and training they need to embrace the caregiving role.

Conceptual Understanding of Foster Carer Role Identity

Role identity in foster care is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that involves deeply personal, subjective and emotional factors. Foster carers construct their identity in the caregiving role from their own subjective experiences. In this research interpreting these

complex dynamics through their lenses provided a space to reflect on how foster carers make sense of their experiences within an interpersonal context. That interpersonal context shaped how they interpreted and made sense of their interactions with others. It also emphasised the challenges for them in the role and the nuances that might go unseen but influence their approach to care.

Strengths of the Research

Using IPA in this research permitted an in-depth exploration of foster carers' lived experiences on their own terms. The idiographic and interrogative investigation of this phenomenon added to the body of knowledge by allowing me as a practitioner-researcher to embrace the essence of their experiences. The focus was on personal and subjective accounts which gave foster carers the opportunity to share their unique experiences through their lenses. This highlighted nuanced information not easily identified with quantitative research methods. IPA accounts for personal perceptions, values and beliefs. There is also a possibility that many of the experiences of foster carers in this research mirror those of foster carers in the general population. If this is the case, then it creates a space for discussing the challenges and complexities of fostering in a different way.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this research encourage a re-examination of how to engage prospective foster carers in a discussion about the value of sharing their experiences to create a space that allows them to feel heard and their experiences acknowledged during the assessment process. If there was a stronger focus on understanding their experiences and motivations to foster, this might then give an indication of their emotional availability and capacity to provide sensitive care. It is important to note that the focus should be on their awareness of the needs of children rather than the statutory requirements for children's needs.

Specifically in the context of the system in Ireland, the assessment framework could be augmented by changing the format. The first section could be moved to a later date so that personal experiences, thoughts and feelings could be captured with prospective foster carers early on when there is an opportunity to develop rapport and trust with them that gives them a sense of belonging in the role.

Families have ascribed roles and responsibilities long before they become families who foster. These roles might not be articulated in assessment as they may not even be aware of how they developed in the first place. However, it is important to tease out the foster family system with all family members as this research emphasised the interplay between what foster carers bring to the role and statutory requirements.

Take time to explain the structure of the fostering assessment and the relevance of the questions that will be posed during the assessment process. Link the discussion to their own experiences and understanding of the role. This emphasises the need for link social workers who are experienced, sensitive and willing to nurture prospective foster carers during this process. This should lead to the development of strong, trusting relationships between foster carers and professionals that provides on-going opportunities to discuss complex and challenging topics after their approval.

Observe prospective foster carers' expectations of fostering as they might create ambivalence for them as approved foster carers with regards to their conceptualisation of the role.

Support and Training

Ensure newly approved foster carers understand the role of professionals and the time is taken to explain the requirements of the system to them. All foster family members are supported regularly both together and separately. Training is tailored to meet the specific

needs of foster carers and they feel they are involved in the plan for their on-going development.

Policy Implications

If the framework used to assess prospective foster carers could focus on strengths and potential instead of the current deficit-based model that is a form of 'risk assessment' of applicants, then they might feel more valued in the role they are taking on. The use of a visual imagery technique in this research generated in-depth discussions with the participants on their complex and deeply personal reasons for deciding to take on the role of fostering. Their engagement with this technique, compared to their response to the questions posed during the assessment, gave food for thought with regards to alternative ways of communicating with prospective foster carers.

The current assessment framework is a broad model that is systemic in its approach to gathering information. A model that incorporates reflection with prospective foster carers could enhance their awareness of the complexity of the role and provide a safe space for them to develop an understanding of the meaning of sensitive caregiving.

There is more emphasis placed on the experience of link social workers who undertake fostering assessments. Consideration should be given to how social workers assess foster carers when they have previously worked in child protection. What is their perception of how prospective foster carers present? Furthermore, if possible the same link social worker who assesses prospective foster carers then supports them when they are approved as this will provide the best opportunity for the development of trusting relationships with professionals.

On-going training is provided to link social workers to give them space to consider the complexities of prospective foster carers' experiences and what that means for them in their developing identity. All social workers who are assessing, training or supporting foster carers

attend training on the qualities and skills required of them to reflect with prospective foster carers on their lived experiences. It is foster carers' conceptualisation of their role that is the key to professionals developing an understanding of their approach to care. This should lead to more constructive conversations about the task of fostering.

There is merit in considering if it would be worthwhile to provide training to prospective foster carers for a half day/full day before they start the fostering assessment. The training could focus on the importance of reflection and explain why they are asked to share their personal experiences, and what it means for them and the children who might be placed with them in the future. The findings of this research highlight how intrusive the participants felt the assessment process was for them on a deeply personal level. Therefore, if they are given the space to make sense of it before it starts, and they are given examples of experienced foster carers' views on the process, they might develop a more in-depth understanding of its relevance.

There is training provided to all social workers on the importance of inclusivity and communication with foster carers. There should be a general understanding of what information should be shared about children in care and how it is shared.

Future Research

Future research on the approach to recruiting foster carers in Ireland could explore the viability of the current assessment framework in capturing the complexity of prospective foster carers' experiences.

It might be interesting to explore how the findings of this research transfer to the general population to gain an understanding of how well the claims are supported by other foster carers. Conducting comparative research might add to the findings of this study to further inform the development of the role of fostering in Ireland.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Core Competencies

Competencies for Foster Carers

Under BAAF guidance foster carers are expected to achieve and maintain the following competencies.

1. Caring for children

1.1 An ability to provide a good standard of care to children which promotes healthy emotional, physical, sexual and intellectual development.

1.2 An ability to accept the individual child as he/she is.

1.3 An ability to work closely with children's families, and others who are important to the child.

1.4 An ability to set appropriate boundaries, and manage children's behaviour within these, without the use of physical or other inappropriate punishment.

1.5 A knowledge of normal child development and an ability to listen to and communicate with children appropriate to their emotional age and understanding.

1.6 An ability to promote a young person's development towards adult status.

2. Providing a safe and caring environment

2.1 An ability to ensure that children are cared for in a home where they are safe from harm or abuse.

2.2 An ability to help children keep themselves safe from harm or abuse, and to know how to seek help if their safety is threatened.

2.3 An ability to recognise the particular vulnerability to abuse and to discrimination of disabled children.

3. Working as part of a team

3.1 An ability to collaborate with other professional workers and to contribute to the department's planning for the children/young people.

3.2 An ability to communicate effectively.

3.3 An ability to keep information confidential.

3.4 An ability to promote equality, diversity and rights of individuals and groups within society.

4. Own development

4.1 An ability to appreciate how personal experiences have affected themselves and their families, and the impact that fostering is likely to have on them all.

4.2 An ability to use people and links within the community to provide support.

4.3 An ability to use training opportunities and improve skills.

4.4 An ability to sustain positive relationships and maintain effective functioning through periods of stress.

Appendix 2 – Criteria for Assessment of Applicants

The criterion for assessment begins with an initial inquiry to foster by either phoning the agency prospective foster carers wish to foster with (this can be the Child and Family Agency or a private fostering company) or they can complete a form online giving basic details. They will then be contacted by that agency and possibly invited to attend an information evening. However, all applicants are visited in their home by a social worker. The visit is an introduction to fostering with further information given on the criteria for assessment which is broad and includes applicants' availability and flexibility, physical and mental health, their own children's needs (if they have children), bedroom space, transport and reasons for wanting to become foster carers (all these issues are further discussed in assessment). If the applicants are deemed suitable candidates then the assessment begins when there is an available social worker to complete it. Once it begins, the assessment must be completed within sixteen weeks unless there is a valid reason for the delay (TUSLA Publications, 2015).

Appendix 3 – Contents of the Assessment Report

The first section of the assessment report is written up as individual profiles of both applicants if a couple are being assessed. This is Part 1 of the assessment report.	A brief summary, pen picture and personality of prospective foster carers. The individual applicant's family of origin includes parents, siblings and other significant family members. Their relevant experience in relation to foster care is analysed which includes separation, loss, addiction and mental health.
Significant childhood experiences.	A narrative synopsis is given with regards to those who have influenced the applicant's development.
Identity.	This section refers to an applicant's personal, social background, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, language, spirituality and religious orientation.
Education and employment.	Analysis of experiences.
Criminal convictions (if any).	Analysis of suitability to foster.
Health.	Analysis includes physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing.
Leisure and recreational activities.	Applicants' hobbies and interests.
Part 2 of the assessment report is completed as a 'current circumstances' section.	This includes current adult relationships and household members' relationships. Comments and observations are also made of other household members including adults and children. A pen picture is provided of each adult or child in the household (no more than 300 words per person).
Childlessness and limitations on family size.	This issue is explored.
Social and support network.	Includes integration into the local community.
Accommodation details.	Where will a child in foster care sleep and have space for their belongings? Is there enough room for them to play and have quiet time if they need it. A Health and Safety checklist is also completed.

Local services.	Neighbourhood and community and its suitability for children.
Finance.	Attitude to money, how finances are managed and applicants' awareness of the purpose of the fostering allowance.
Becoming a foster carer and assessment of parenting capacity.	Motivation – why do the applicants wish to foster? Their experiences of caring for children – in what way do their experiences indicate they might now be able to parent a child in care? Expectations about fostering – to what extent are their expectations of foster children realistic? How will they meet the competing demands of any children who might be placed?
Experience of diversity.	How have the applicants addressed diversity in their own lives and how will they promote the child's cultural and religious heritage?
Impact of fostering.	What are the anticipated change to applicants' lives and lifestyle following accepting a child into their home and what plans do they have for addressing this? What will be the impact of fostering on the everyday lives of other household members and in particular on their own children.
How will a foster child experience living in this family?	What are the applicants' expectations of the characteristics, ages and number of children they hope to foster?
Birth family contact.	How will they manage contact and their relationship with the children's families? Are there restrictions to their involvement in contact with the children's families? (TUSLA Publications, 2015)

Appendix 4 – Regulations and Standards in Foster Care

Training of Prospective Foster Carers

Applicants are required to attend training as a compulsory component of their fostering assessment. The training consists of eight sessions and each session is approximately three hours long. The training is called Foundation for Fostering and was developed in partnership between the Heath Service Executive (now the Child and Family Agency) and the Irish Foster Care Association in 2007. The training is delivered to all prospective foster carers and takes place during the fostering assessment. The Irish Foster Care Association note '*it is recognised that the course may be delivered to foster carers throughout the Republic of Ireland at different stages of their assessment and approval process. The timing is partly determined by the number of fostering applications received in a particular area and by the availability of social workers and foster carers to deliver the course. In some areas there will be a policy of undertaking assessments and running training courses in tandem* (Irish Foster Care Association, 2007: 10). The eight sessions run in sequence and the titles are as follows:

Session 1 What is fostering?

Session 2 Working with the HSE (now the Child and Family Agency),

Session 3 Child development and attachment,

Session 4 Common behaviours of children in care,

Session 5 Safe care and your family,

Session 6 Birth families and contact,

Session 7 Taking care of children who foster,

Session 8 Moving children (Irish Foster Care Association, 2007).

Summary, Analysis and Evaluation of a Fostering Assessment

Applicants should know how the assessment is going throughout the process. If any difficulties are encountered they are informed of the reasons for this and given an opportunity to reflect on the matter in question. In these circumstances an interim report can

be prepared for the Foster Care Committee (FCC)[6] if the matter cannot be resolved with the applicants. An interim report is compiled after the assessing social worker receives advice from the team leader and principal social worker. If the assessment proceeds without difficulties arising, the assessing social worker provides a summary, analysis and evaluation of the applicants' suitability to foster. The assessing social worker identifies the applicants' strengths and weaknesses under the four core competencies which are:

1. Caring for children
2. Providing a safe and caring environment,
3. Working as part of a team,
4. Own development (See Appendix 1). (TUSLA Publications, 2015).

The assessing social worker then makes a recommendation to the FCC on the applicants' suitability to be placed on the panel of approved foster carers. The assessing social worker is supervised by their team leader throughout the process. Before the assessment report is submitted to the FCC the applicants read the report and if they are satisfied with the contents, they sign it. There is also a section at the end of the report for the applicants to make corrections or add information to the report. All assessment reports must be signed and dated before being accepted for consideration by the FCC (TUSLA Publications, 2015). There is an FCC in all seventeen TUSLA Integrated Service Areas (ISA). FCCs provide governance in foster care services and the aim of the committee is to act as a guide and support in the work undertaken in fostering assessments. The FCC Policy, Procedure and Best Practice Guidance (2017) states FCCs are '*an essential part of a collaborative process which aims to ensure that children in care are placed in foster families who are deemed to be capable of meeting their assessed needs'* (TUSLA Publications, 2017a: 6).

Members of the FCC are appointed by the Integrated Service Area Manager of the Child and Family Agency and membership is reviewed every three years. The essential members of the committee include the chairperson, deputy chairperson, secretary, principal social worker, social work team leader, child protection social worker, link social worker, foster

carer and a representative from the voluntary sector. It is also desirable to have a director of nursing, clinical psychologist, independent fostering agency professional, alternative care manager, adult who grew up in foster care, pre-school services, paediatrician and child care leader on the committee. It is the role of the FCC to make the final decision on whether or not applicants should be approved as foster carers from all service providers (TUSLA Publications, 2017a).

Reviews of Foster Carers

Reviews of foster carers are required under the National Standards for Foster Care (2003) and are considered a key component with regards to ongoing monitoring of support and training of foster carers. The first review is held one year after the first child has been placed with the foster carers after their approval. Subsequent reviews take place at three yearly intervals after that. Reviews primarily consider the performance of foster carers, their training requirements, significant changes to their circumstances, their health and the adequacy of support and training provided. The link social worker prepares a report for the review in consultation with the foster carers and other household members. In preparing the report, the link social worker elicits opinions from the foster carers, their birth children, the children in care, children's allocated social worker(s) and birth parents. Reviews record training undertaken by foster carers and outline the actions to be taken by them and the agency with regards to support and training for the next three years. Review meetings are attended by the foster carers and their link social worker and chaired by a social worker at managerial level. Review decisions are recorded and the report is presented to the FCC by the link social worker and their team leader/manager. Foster carers may be invited to attend the meeting depending on the circumstances of their review (Department of Health and Children, 2003).

Appendix 5 – Participant Information Sheet

An Exploration of Motivation and Role Identity of Foster Carers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Researcher details – my name is Maria Daniels and I am a social work practitioner and researcher currently undertaking a PhD in Social Work at University College Cork (UCC).

Purpose of the study – as part of the requirements for the PhD I must carry out a research study. The research plans to explore with foster carers their motivation to foster, what their expectations were of fostering as approved foster carers, and how they feel their motivation influences their sustainability to provide continuing care. Foster care is complex and caring for children who have suffered trauma and are separated from their birth families can be emotionally demanding. It requires foster carers to give a lot of themselves to understand and meet the needs of the children placed with them. Motivation is individual and personal but important for foster carers in terms of resilience. The reasons any of us take on a task is based on why we want to do it – our reasons or motivation. The purpose of this study is to explore that motivation in more depth. From the study I also hope to develop an understanding of what foster carers feel should be asked of motivation during the assessment process.

What will the study involve? The study will involve two meetings with me to explore the questions in more detail and to gather data for the research. The interviews should take 1.5 – 2 hours approximately and can take place either in your home or a location chosen by you, for example a nearby hotel where a private room will be booked. The methodology underpinning the research is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is an approach to interviews that attempts to portray detailed personal experiences. IPA is concerned with exploring experiences in its own terms and is particularly interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on a particular significance – in this study that significance was when you started fostering.

A visual imagery technique will also be used where you will be asked to provide an image or symbol that represents your motivation to foster, with the resultant images or symbols used as a catalyst for discussion. I am trying this technique to see if images trigger memories or emotions that allow for deeper insight into your lived experiences. I am hoping that for the first interview you can provide this image or symbol (it can be both) to begin your interview. If you are a couple fostering, if you could provide separate and individual representations that would be best, and we can then discuss both of your perspectives on why you decided to become foster carers.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to take part because you are approved foster carers and, therefore, specifically suitable to provide data for my study.

Do you have to take part? No, your participation is entirely voluntary. Before you participate you will be asked to sign a consent form, which is attached to this leaflet. You can keep this information sheet and a copy of the consent form. You have the option of

withdrawing before the study commences, even if you have agreed to participate. You can also discontinue after the interviews begin. Similarly, you can withdraw your permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give? The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. It will be available to me and my research supervisors. It will be securely stored on an encrypted laptop and on UCC's One Drive. On completion of the study the data will be retained for a minimum of a further ten years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisors, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The thesis may be published on the TUSLA (Child and Family Agency) hub and the study may be published in a research journal.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage there will be negative consequences for you in taking part in this study. However, exploring your life experiences that influenced your decision to become a foster carer may be a sensitive issue for you, or heighten your awareness of the issues discussed.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview I will discuss with you how you found the experience, and how you are feeling. If you subsequently feel distressed you should contact your link social worker or your GP.

Who has reviewed this study? Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC.

Any further queries? If you need any further information you can contact me. If you agree to take part in the study please sign the consent form overleaf.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to read this information, and I look forward to your participation in this research project.

Appendix 6 – Participant Consent Form

Title:

An Exploration of Motivation and Role Identity of Foster Carers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Outline of Research:

This research will explore the motivation of foster carers to take on the caregiving role and consider what their understanding and expectation was of the role as approved foster carers. The underlying assumption is that foster carers understand their motivation and become aware of the complexities of fostering as they go through the assessment process. This research plans to question these assumptions and to explore if their expectations changed over time.

I.....agree to participate in Maria Daniels' research study. The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing, and I am participating voluntarily. I give permission for my interview with Maria to be audio-recorded. I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, either before it starts or while I am participating. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed: _____ Date: _____

PRINT NAME: _____

Appendix 7 – Interview Schedule

Interview 1

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Now that we have read the Participant Information Sheet and the consent form, we can begin the interview. As you know this is a study about foster carers' motivation and role identity and how your experiences have influenced you as foster carers in the care you provide for children placed with you. It would be great to start with a little background information on your lives as foster carers just to get to know you, and then we can talk about the specifics of the study.

General Background about your history in fostering.

- When were you approved as foster carers?
- How many children do you have in placement with you?
- How old are they?
- How long are they with you?
- What type of foster care do you provide?
- What is going well in fostering at present?
- What are the struggles?
- How many children have you fostered in total?
- Do you have children of your own?
- How old are they?

Use of Visual Imagery

I want to use a visual imagery technique as a creative way of interviewing you. I hope to explore what motivated you to become foster carers, but the reasons are different, individual, and personal for everyone. Sometimes images triggers memories or emotions that words do not. Also, as a practitioner-researcher I am aware that social workers and foster carers are experienced interviewers and interviewees, so this is more creative and a different way of expressing yourselves. What I would like you to do is to think about what motivated you to become foster carers, and then provide photos or images of what that means to you. It can be anything or anyone as I am planning to use the photos or images only as a catalyst for discussion, but I will not be taking them with me.

Question 1

How would you describe your initial motivation to become foster carers?

Prompts

- Can we look at the photos or images you have provided?
- Can you tell me the story of these?
- Why do these images remind you of fostering?
- What do you feel when you look at these images?
- Which one of you first suggested you consider fostering? (for couples)
- Why did you want to do it?
- What was your thinking at the time?
- (To second participant) What did you think?
- How would you describe your motivation?
- Would you have considered fostering at all if not for your husband/wife/partner?
- What are your thoughts on your motivation now?
- If you were to use two or three words to describe yourself as a foster carer, what would they be?
- What does being a foster carer mean to you?

Question 2

Were there life experiences that influenced their motivation?

Prompts

- Do you think your childhood or life experiences influenced your decision to become a foster carer?
- Can I ask what were those life experiences?
- Were you aware of the impact on you of your life experiences when you applied to become a foster carer?
- How did your experiences influence you?
- Do you think your previous experiences influence how you care for the children placed with you?
- In what way?
- Have you ever thought about the reasons why you parent the way you do?
- Were there challenges to your parenting style with children in care?
- What were the challenges? If not, why not?

- How did you manage to overcome them?

Question 3

Has your motivation to foster changed over time?

Prompts

- Have your reasons for becoming a foster carer changed since you were approved?
- Has your perspective on fostering changed?
- What is your motivation since you gained experience in fostering?
- Why did your motivation change? (if it did)
- If it did not change, why not?

Question 4

How was motivation explored during the fostering assessment?

Prompts

- How was motivation explored during your fostering assessment?
- Were you given an opportunity in assessment to explore your motivation?
- How much emphasis was put on motivation?
- How much time was given to teasing out why you wanted to become foster carers?
- Were both of you given the opportunity to think about your different perspectives and reasons for becoming foster carers?
- Were both perspectives linked together to tease out your reasons for deciding to foster?
- Who decided the time was right for you to foster?

Question 5

What were your expectations of fostering once you were approved as foster carers?

Prompts

- Let us move on to when you were approved as foster carers. What did you expect from fostering once you were approved?

- Did you know what to expect?
- Were you prepared for the task of caring for someone else's child?
- Was your expectation different to the reality?
- Did you feel prepared for the role you were taking on?

Question 6

Did these expectations of fostering change over time?

Prompts

- As you gained experience in fostering did your expectations change?
- What were the differences as you gained experience?
- Thinking about then and now – what would you say are your expectations now?

Question 7

What sustains foster carers in providing continuing care?

Prompts

- Why do you continue to foster?
- What sustains you?
- What are your most important supports?
- Has it ever become so stressful you considered giving it up?
- If yes, why didn't you?

Question 8

Retrospectively what do participants feel should be asked of motivation during assessment?

Prompts

- During your fostering assessment what do you think should have been asked of your reasons for wanting to become foster carers?
- Do you think it is important to explore motivation in assessment?
- Do you think your reasons for becoming foster carers influenced your understanding of, and attitude towards, fostering when you were approved?

Question 9

What do participants feel is the purpose of exploring motivation in more depth in assessment?

Prompts

- Do you think exploring your motivation in foster care assists TUSLA to understand the care you will provide when children are placed with you?
- Do you think teasing out your motivation would help TUSLA to understand your beliefs, experiences, influences, awareness, and approach to life?
- Thinking about your assessment now did you realise then that foster care is complex and to become a foster carer means opening your home to a lot of changes?
- Do you think motivation is linked to how you approach fostering?
- Were you aware of the life experiences that influenced your decision to foster?

Appendix 8 – Gatekeeper Information Sheet

Title of Study

An Exploration of Motivation and Role Identity of Foster Carers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Outline of Research

I would like to invite you to assist me in conducting a research study. This research is required in fulfilment for a PhD in Social Work at UCC. I am conducting the research on a part-time basis over six years and I am currently in fifth year. Before you decide to assist me, you need to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it would involve for you and for the participants. Please take time to read the following information carefully to decide whether or not to facilitate the research.

I am a social worker in a Fostering Department with seventeen years' experience recruiting, assessing, training, and supporting foster carers in the alternative care system. From my many interactions with foster carers I became interested in the complex nature of foster care, but in particular the motivation of individuals and families to take on the role of fostering. This research plans to explore with foster carers their motivation to foster, in particular the life experiences that influenced their motivation and how their identity in the role informed the care they provide for children placed with them.

Foster care is complex and caring for children who have experienced trauma and are separated from their birth families can be emotionally demanding. It requires foster carers to give a lot of themselves to understand and meet the needs of the children placed with them. Motivation is individual and personal but important for foster carers in terms of commitment and resilience. The reasons any of us take on a task is based on why we want to do it – our reasons or motivation. The purpose of this research is to develop a more in-depth understanding of what that means for foster carers.

The methodology that will be used is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is an approach to research that attempts to portray detailed personal experiences. IPA is concerned with exploring experiences in its own terms and is particularly interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences takes on a particular significance – in this study that significance was when participants started fostering.

A visual imagery technique will also be used where participants will be asked to provide an image or symbol of what fostering means for them, with the images or symbols being used as a catalyst for discussion. I am trying this technique to see if images or symbols create a space for foster carers to feel they decide the direction the interview takes which might provide deeper insights into their experiences. For reasons of confidentiality the images or symbols will not be removed at the end of the interview.

The aim of the study is to explore the motivation of foster carers to take on the role of fostering to examine how they construct their identity in the caregiving role.

The objectives of the study are;

1. To gain an understanding of the motivation of participants to become foster carers.
2. To explore what expectations they had of fostering when approved as foster carers.
3. To gain insight into how motivation is explored during the assessment process.
4. To raise awareness of the importance of understanding motivation in foster care, for foster carers and the system that recruits them.

I would like your assistance in recruiting up to four foster families from the area to participate in the research. The inclusion criteria is that all participants must be actively fostering, but it does not matter for how long. All participants will be interviewed twice some months apart. The interviews should take 1.5 – 2 hours approximately and can take place either in the foster carers' home or a location chosen by them, for example a nearby hotel where a private room will be booked. This is an in-depth analysis of motivation and meaning making in foster care, so two interviews are needed for depth of analysis. The gatekeeper role is simply to agree that foster carers can be recruited in your area and to make contact with the relevant professionals to recruit them, as interested participants will be contacted directly by me.

Recruitment of participants can be by letter, email or if a link social worker chooses to contact foster carers by phone. I only need you to recruit two foster carers at a time because I have decided to transcribe the research interviews myself, and this is a timely process. If I have contact with more than two families at a time, they will be waiting too long for a follow up interview. If participants agree to participate their details are forwarded to me. There is a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for all prospective participants which I will post to them if they are still interested in participating after I have spoken to them. Participation is entirely voluntary and the anticipated risks of taking part in the study are minimal as the research questions will only probe if the participants are comfortable with the process. Similarly, they will be fully informed of the interview schedule before beginning. However, if a participant became upset, I would sit with them and then decide if it was appropriate to proceed. I would also link them with supports from their link social worker or GP if necessary. Any issues of concern raised will be reported or managed in line with Children First guidelines and the Tell Us at Tusla policy.

All information gathered will be stored securely on UCC's OneDrive, and all consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. I will be the only person with complete access to the participants' information. My supervisors will have some access during supervision and the analysis stage of the research. Also, participants may be directly quoted in the research write up. However, all identifying information will be removed and all participants will be given a pseudonym.

The final dissemination of the research will include the thesis that will be submitted to UCC and copies will also be given to the agencies who gave consent to recruit foster carers for

the research. The findings may be used to present at conferences, as journal articles, for future publications or used for teaching purposes.

Thank you.