

What is the experience of foster care mothers?

Yamile M. Martí Haidar

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Abstract

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Foster care parents are key members of the foster care system and have an immense responsibility to provide a new home, and a healthy, clean and nurturing environment for children who have been removed from their own homes. Several studies have been conducted that discuss the risks and protective factors of foster care children, parenting skills and training, as well as retention strategies. However, only a few studies focus on the experience of foster care parents, specifically mothers, and what prompts them to take care of this defenseless population. A qualitative phenomenological study of 30 foster care mothers served by Episcopal Social Services of New York City was conducted to attempt to understand the unique experience of this group by identifying sources of support, family environment, experiences, satisfaction and cultural socio-environmental factors that have an impact on their role. This research included a first qualitative phenomenological study interviewing fifteen non-kinship foster mothers and a second qualitative phenomenological study interviewing fifteen kinship foster care mothers about their experiences. The interview questions and themes of these two studies are informed by an ecological systems framework. A caregiver stress and coping model, as well as role theory, were applied to understand foster mothers' and their view of their role versus the reality of what they experience, taking into consideration the influence of their non-kinship or kinship status.

Among this group of foster care mothers, 20 foster care mothers identified as Latina encompassing the sub sample that was analyzed for the third study. The aim of

this study was to understand how culture manifests among Latina foster care mothers.

The research evaluates the role of empowerment theory and cultural constructs for this subgroup of Latina foster care mothers, and how both can be integrated into practice within the foster care system. The knowledge of the experience, challenges and views of foster care mothers elucidate important information for the provision of services and aid in the recommendation of interventions and future research for this population.

Additionally, this research leads to suggestions to enhance recruitment and retention strategies within the foster care system. By studying foster care mothers, the researcher addresses an important gap in the literature and enhances current understanding of this population.

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to each of the foster care mothers who shared their stories and the many that have not been able to share yet. I can only hope that this dissertation may become a small contribution to aid you in the instrumental role that you execute each day.

Dissertation Paper 1: What is the experience of non-kinship foster care mothers?

Introduction

Foster care is a system that has the mission to safeguard the lives of thousands of children every day. Foster care parents are key members of this system and have an immense responsibility to provide a new home, and a healthy, clean and nurturing environment for children who have been removed from their own homes. Few studies focus on the caretaking experience of foster care parents, specifically non-kinship foster mothers and what prompts them to take care of this vulnerable population. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological study of 15 non-kinship foster mothers served by Episcopal Social Services of New York City was conducted to attempt to understand the unique experience of this group by identifying sources of support, family environment, caretaking experiences, satisfaction and cultural socio-environmental factors that have an impact on their role. The interview questions and themes of this study are informed by an ecological systems framework. A caregiver stress and coping model, as well as role theory, were applied to understand foster mothers' and their view of their role versus the reality of what they experience, taking into consideration the influence of their non-kinship status. This study aims to contribute to the literature on foster care and service provision, by using the words of the non-kinship foster care mothers to gain understanding of the experience, challenges and benefits of their role. The data from this study could potentially inform further research and/or interventions to aid in recruitment, retention and reduction of multiple placements for this population.

Context and rationale

Approximately, 450,000 children are in foster care in the United States and 16,000 are in foster care in New York City (Administration of Children and Families, 2009, NYC Administration for Children's Services, 2011). However, according to the 50 state chartbook on

foster care, New York State has 30,072 children in out of home placements of whom 17,338 are placed in non-kinship foster care homes (The 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012).

Clearly, the statistics and data found on this population are not consistent; and this could be due to the way each agency defines the foster care population.

According to the New York State Office of Children and Family Services Foster Care statistics of 2009, the mean age of children in foster care is between 6 and 9 years old and the majority are male, but only by a slight margin (52.3% versus 47.7%) (NY State Office of Children and Family Services, 2009). Children are placed in a foster home in 53.5% of the cases and in a kinship placement in 25.2% of the cases. The racial/ ethnic breakdown of New York State children in foster care is 46.7% Black / African American, 21.6% Hispanic, 19.7% White, 0.6% Asian and 0.2% Native American (The 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012).

To become a foster care parent in New York State there are several requirements that must be fulfilled. These include: experience with raising children, ability to provide a safe environment, health clearance, criminal history record check, compliance with a home evaluation and participation in trainings (Office of Children and Family Services of New York State, 2011). Pre-service training of a minimum of 30 hours is required along with continuing training (The 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012).

The Office of Children and Family Services of New York State defines the role of a foster parent. Among these guidelines: 1) cooperating with the caseworker and the child's parents in carrying out a permanency plan, including participating in that plan; 2) helping the child cope with the separation from his or her home; 3) encouraging and supervising school attendance, participating in teacher conferences, and keeping the child's caseworker informed about any special educational needs; and 4) working with the agency in arranging for the child's

regular and/or special medical and dental care (Office of Children and Family Services of New York State, 2013) .

Given all of these requirements and the delineation of the role of a foster care parent, one could hypothesize that the responsibilities, challenges and expectations of this role are clear and that only foster care parents who comply fully with these characteristics are selected. However, the reality is very different. Problems in recruitment and with the requirements have been documented. For example, the United States Department of Health and Human Services report Recruitment of Foster Parents states:

- a) Recruitment efforts do not focus on families willing and able to care for the most challenging children. Recruitment is focused on volume of parents rather than on qualified parents that are equipped and willing to manage the difficulties that may arise,
- and b) Poor public perception and cumbersome requirements have a negative impact on recruitment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Recruitment of Foster Parents, 2002, p.1-2).

It is important to study foster care mothers since approximately 80% of children in foster care are diagnosed with a mental health disorder. This is a challenge for the child, the family (biological and foster) and the system (Schneiderman and Villagrana, 2010). Using the words of the foster care mothers understanding of the experience, challenges and benefits of their role will be gained.

Overarching framework-ecological systems

To study non-kinship foster care mothers it is important to take into consideration not only the individual's personal characteristics, but also all other aspects of a person's life that can influence decisions, motivations, beliefs and customs. Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1989) presented

ecological systems as a progressive study of human development. He believed that the human being, his interaction with the environment and circumstances ranging from personal to societal and political made up the context.

The ecological systems framework established various levels that impact a person's development and interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem is the most personal or intimate level (family composition) and the mesosystem refers to two microsystems that interact (professional attainment and parenting, parenting to a biological child versus foster parenting). The third level is the exosystem, which refers to external environments that influence the other levels (job, religion or community). Lastly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) discusses the macrosystem, which is the larger social and cultural context. This framework has been used to enhance understanding of various populations and it has informed the development of programs to better assist its subjects by identifying risk and protective factors derived from each level (Bongenschneider, 1996 and Lynch and Cicchetti, 1998). In this study of the experience of non-kinship foster care mothers this framework was used to guide the construction of the interview questions and to understand the themes that emerged across each level of human development.

Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) used an ecological systems framework to explore the impact on children who have experienced maltreatment, community violence and depressive and traumatic symptomatology. The findings indicated a relationship between levels of community violence and child maltreatment and between children's symptomatology and exposure to both personal abuse and community violence (Lynch and Cicchetti, 1998).

Bongenschneider (1996) also applied an ecological systems framework to a study of a youth program promoting positive youth development. The author believed that ecological systems could be the overarching framework for the application of the epidemiological risk-focused

model used to prevent heart and lung disease applied to human development. He assumed the same for the resiliency and protective process approach. Using ecological systems, community coalitions were built in Wisconsin that drew on the expertise of youth, parents, educators and community leaders to develop programs and policies for youth, thus integrating all levels of human development and considering risk and protective factors within each level.

This overarching framework allows for the study and application of how context and the complexity of human development can impact a population. In the case of non-kinship foster care mothers it allows us to examine how culture, income, profession, the larger foster care system, education and many others areas impact their role.

Stress and coping model

A foster care mother is not only a caregiver, but sometimes the first stable parenting figure for a child. Pearlin, Mullan, Semple and Skaff (1990) explore caregiver's stress and coping within an ecological systems framework in which socioeconomic factors, resources, social life, and mental health are considered. They identified two major components, coping and social support, as intervening in the reduction of the stress process.

To apply a stress and coping model to the study of mothers, specifically non-kinship foster care mothers, it is important to understand the concept of stress and coping. Stress has been defined as: "a state of arousal resulting either from the presence of socioenvironmental demands that tax the ordinary capacity of the individual or from the absence of the means to attain sought after-ends "(Lazarus, 1996, Pearlin 1983 and Menaghan, 1983 as cited in Aneshensel, 1992, p.16). Aneshensel (1992) views the concept of stress as relating to the conflict between perceptions, resources, roles, skills, values and beliefs.

The first component of the stress model is the *Background and contexts of the stress process* (Pearlin et al., 1990). The unique characteristics of an individual all come into play in the caregiver's assessment of stress. According to the authors, if a caregiver has access to formal and informal support and resources the interactions among these characteristics and contexts are less stressful. The second component, *primary and secondary stressors*, are the circumstances that are part of the caregiver's life in the context of taking care of someone (Pearlin, Aneshensel and Leblanc 1997).

Secondary stressors include *role strain* and *intrapyschic strain*. Role strain is a secondary stressor related to the pressures outside of the caregiver's role (Pearlin et al. 1990). The other type of secondary stressor is intrapsychic strain. (Pearlin et al. 1990). Intrapyschic strains are related to the caregivers' self-esteem and sense of mastery. When a new child enters a home it is an environmental change for the family and the child. Therefore, the caregiver's appraisal of her role and its impact needs to be considered..

Within the spectrum of the parenting experience there is also coping. Coping is part of parenting because it allows for adaptation and progress when faced with the common and difficult challenges of being responsible for a child's life. Pearlin et al. (1990) define coping as having three possible functions: managing the situation that causes stress, managing the meaning of the situation to reduce its threat and managing the symptoms that result from the stress.

Coping is difficult to measure. Unlike intelligence or skills, which can be tested, coping is viewed and analyzed based on individual circumstances, reactions and actions. An individual can manifest coping skills in a crisis situation or throughout time. Coping can also be present at the individual, family or community level. Therefore, there is value in educating and recognizing coping characteristics to help the individual confront future stressors (Richardson, 2002).

Continuous exposure to risks / stressors can promote coping as well as internal physiological or psychological coping strategies (Rutter, 2006). For example, a non-kinship foster mother's innate or developed coping skills can allow her to manage the stressful challenges and circumstances that might arise in a foster care placement due to emotional or behavioral issues of the child or handling the return of the child to the birth parents.

Coping does not negate the existence of stress, trauma or loss. Rather, as Folkman and Lazarus (1988) state it is a multidimensional process that relies on cognitions and emotions. Coping allows the person to manage the stress rather than surrendering to its effects. Therefore, a foster mother's ability to cope can change or mediate her relationship with the child, biological family or herself.

Previous studies on motivation, training and retention

Understanding the experience of non-kinship foster parents and what motivates them is one aspect of foster parenting that has been studied. Most studies about foster care parents' focus on motivation, satisfaction or challenges within their role, training and retention. Following are key findings on a sample of studies conducted with this population.

Table 1: Studies on Motivation, Training and Retention

Author	Rodger, Cummings and Leschied (2006)	Puddy and Jackson (2003)	Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi and Crittenden (2010)	Andersson (2001)	Rhodes, Orme and Buehler (2001)
Method	65 item Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey	Assessment questionnaire developed the MAPP/GPS Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting / Group Selection and Participation of Foster and /or Adoptive Families	Qualitative Study – focus groups and individual interviews	Interviews of children and foster care parents	Data from a National Survey of Current and Former Foster Care Parents

N	652 foster care parents	62 foster care parents in training vs. 20 untrained foster care parents	12 foster care parents	24 foster care families	252 families- 193 continue fostering and 59 quit
Place	Canada	USA	Australia	Sweden	USA
Key findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Motivation was a desire to become a parent and help children in harm. - The extrinsic factor of financial remuneration was not frequently chosen. -Internal commitment and sense of relevancy in becoming foster parent. -Retaining foster care parents is influenced by a good relationship with the agency staff. -Receiving positive feedback and feeling included by the agency were influential factors in foster parents' motivations and retention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Training does not adequately prepare foster parents to encounter the challenges -The knowledge of parenting skills did not change significantly among trained compared to non-trained parents -MAPP/GPS does not train parents in behavior management. -Training serves the parents more as a guidance to decide if they want to become foster parents than as a tool to learn how to be a foster parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Following themes based on their experiences: relationship with birth family, motivation, agency influence, relationship impact and attachment. -Struggle to understand their role -Experience as bipolar, within one domain foster care parents had both encouraging and disenfranchising experiences. -Parents whose expectations and motivations were not validated, considered quitting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four main motivations to become a foster parent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Sense of responsibility as a relative to take care of a child that is part of your family 2. Parents who cannot have children of their own 3.Preference to stay at home and work from home 4. Fill the void of the "empty nest". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reasons for quitting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Lack of support 2.Poor communication with caseworker 3. Lack of say in children's future 4. Difficulty with foster child's behavior Among foster care parents that quit they expressed more need for transportation, healthcare cost and day care

These studies were selected because they represent some of recurrent areas of study with foster care parents. The findings from the studies summarized in Table 1 suggest that most foster care parents have altruistic motivations. Within the spectrum of motivations, the literature shows that they range from personal reasons such as not being able to bear children, staying at home for work or filling a void. Some are rooted in the desire to help children or companionship.

These studies also show that although training is helpful it does not necessarily prepare the parents for the challenges they will encounter with the children and the larger foster care system. This could impact their retention as foster care parents. Also, their relationship with the

birth parents plays a factor as they consider whether to continue in this role.

Many foster care parents become disenfranchised with their role because of problems with the agency. All the studies stressed the importance of a positive relationship and clear communication with agency staff. Respondents expressed that they needed to feel validated and supported by the agency.

Most of the studies on this population are related to motivation and training. According to Rhodes et al. (2001) approximately 30% to 50% of foster care parents quit each year. Further in depth research would help to understand how best to recruit and retain foster parents and both the positive and challenging aspects that are part of their role. Also, existing studies discuss stress, role evaluation, training, and support, but do not go further in exploring what they mean to a foster parent.

Non-kinship foster care parents

Within foster care there is a sub group of parents, non-kinship foster parents, who are not biologically linked to the children, but who for a variety of reasons have decided to take on this role. Based on the documented challenges on recruiting and retaining and emotional and logistical difficulties that non-kinship foster mothers experience, it is necessary and useful to conduct a study that attempts to understand this specific sub-population. (Fisher, Burratson and Pears, 2005; Newton, Litrownik and Landsverk, 2000; Rubin, Alessandrini, Feudtner, Mandell, Localio and Hadley, 2004).

Lawler (2008) explores whether having a kinship foster parent vs. a non-kinship foster parent makes a difference in the relationship between child and foster parent for children who have experienced maltreatment. The author argues that there is a presumption that the biological link provides a better and more conducive environment for the child. Lawler (2008) states that

attachment relies on the foster parents expectations and interpretation of their role and of the child, not on the biological link. Lawler (2008) draws on sociobiological theory, arguing that biologically related foster mothers provide a predisposition for affinity and fitness in the relationship. Nevertheless, this had not been tested. Lawler's sample included maltreated children who were placed with either a non-kinship foster care mother or a kinship foster care mother. The impact of their participation in the Parent-Child Interaction Therapy was assessed using emotional availability scales. The study found that the biological relationship did not make a significant difference in the child's emotional availability.

Similarly, Metzger (2008) conducted a study to measure resiliency in children and youth in New York City differentiating between those placed in kinship and non-kinship care. For the foster parents the researcher used the Kansas Parental Satisfaction scale. The kinship foster parents reported greater satisfaction with the children and their relationship with them than non-kinship foster parents. However, both sets of foster parents had similar satisfaction ratings with themselves as parents.

The well-being of a foster child is key to his or her ability to cope. Altshuler (1998) collected secondary data from caseworkers interviews to analyze whether a child's well-being varied by kinship or non-kinship care. This study found lower levels of child well-being associated with kinship foster parents who identify problems in their ability to care for their child. Therefore, regardless of the biological link, the kinship foster parents' capability to exercise their role is not dependent on biology, but rather on their ability and competence to execute their role successfully.

Seldom is research conducted on the particular experience of non-kinship foster mothers and their attachment to the child. Most research focuses on motivation and training (Rodger,

Cummings & Leschied, 2006, Puddy & Jackson, 2003 and Broady et al., 2010). The literature on this population does not present how challenges manifest, how and what personal aspects of foster care parenting influence them and how foster mothers cope. This study will consider the multiple levels of their ecological context, their own personal stories, their culture, religious beliefs, financial situation and household circumstances, the stressors they encounter in their role, and their coping styles.

Role theory

When understanding a foster care mother's role as a caregiver the deficits and strengths within the execution of the role need to be considered. This population has a risk of role strain based on the discrepancy between the foster mother's own expectations, the expectations associated with the role and reality. The literature reviewed exemplifies that there is indeed a conflict between what foster mothers expected from their role and what is expected of them.

Therefore, to fully understand the role of foster care mothers, role theory has to be considered. Role theory has been used to understand a person's behavior and expectations based on the different "characters" they play throughout their lives. Role theory can aid in the thorough analysis of a person in relation to a specific task while considering their personal characteristics, social context and other aspects of the person-in-environment. Biddle (1986) stated: "Role theory concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behavior-the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and situations" (p.68). It helps to elucidate context in the stress and coping model which can be derived when analyzing an individual's different ecological systems. This aspect of role theory was considered when constructing the study of the experience of non-kinship foster care mothers

by recognizing that each of the foster care mothers will have a social identity and circumstances that influences her engagement in this role.

Major (2003) defines roles: “an expected pattern or set of behaviors associated with a particular position or status” (p.47). This definition suggests that any situation or event that can interfere with the expected pattern creates deviation that in turn can cause strains or stressors. Therefore, acknowledging and attending to role strain seems to be a realistic approach when recruiting and retaining these mothers.

Biddle (1986) explains that how "actors" view expectations, their self-efficacy and/or self-concept come into play when evaluating their role and their performance against their reality. Coping can be shown by the request for help, advice and services that can ameliorate role strain and can provide strength in challenging times. Nevertheless, coping is also an innate quality of a person, which shows how he or she can manage life circumstances. Coping becomes an essential quality to manage the role of foster care mothers. Role theory enables us to better comprehend and analyze the complexities that are attached to this population and the uniqueness of the role they represent within the child welfare system.

Methodology

Qualitative research is often viewed as the ideal method to conduct in-depth research of what people think, understand, view and perceive that might not be easily quantifiable (Razafsha, Behforuzi , Azari, Zhang, Wang , Kobeissy and Gold, 2012 and Creswell, 2007). According to Haverkamp and Young (2007) one of the purposes of qualitative research is to be practice oriented. The authors stated that practice oriented research aims to inform practice by using the data acquired to understand the particulars of a population, process, situation and provide further

information on the theme. The implementation of a qualitative study can capture the experiences of non-kinship foster care mothers and their motivations through their own voice. Razafsha et al. (2012) describes the major differences between the two methods noting that for quantitative research a hypothesis is established prior to conducting the research, the data can be operationally defined, is tangible and seeks consensus. In contrast, qualitative data concludes with a hypothesis, is inductive rather than deductive and seeks complexity. Therefore, it is through qualitative research methods that the intricacies and unique of the experiences of these women can flourish.

Maxwell (2005) characterizes qualitative research as “action research” because its focus on context allows for collaboration with the participants. The purpose of this qualitative research with non-kinship foster care mothers is to further understand their concerns, needs and experience, and to inform practice, recruitment and retention efforts for this population.

A phenomenological approach was chosen for the study of non-kinship foster care mothers because through it, the researcher can attempt to create meaning from the experiences (phenomenon) of a foster care mother. Phenomenology is defined as a method that allows the researcher to reveal the structures of experiences (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). Caelli (2010) discusses how phenomenology provides an opportunity for both the researcher and participant to engage in “interpretative awareness”. In qualitative research both the researcher and the participant are contributing to the data through their interaction and both seek and tend to reflect on the interpretation of the phenomenon post the research experience. The researcher of this study will share the findings and analysis with the participants and the agency to motivate them to reflect on the phenomenon. This would hopefully lead to concrete changes in the agency’s approach to the needs of this population.

Creswell (2007) summarizes two types of phenomenological approaches. Hermeneutic phenomenology describes and interprets a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen describes hermeneutic phenomenology as: "... a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence - sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudice and suppositional intoxications" (Manen, 2007, p.12). Additionally, Creswell (2007) explores psychological phenomenology. With this approach once a phenomenon is chosen for study, the researcher brackets out his own experiences and collects data from the participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This type of phenomenology focuses less on the interpretation of the research and more on the description of the experiences by the participant.

For the purpose of this qualitative study interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenology was used to both describe and analyze non-kinship foster care mothers' experience. Van Manen (1990) explains that in hermeneutic phenomenology the research is a mediator between the different meanings of the lived experiences. Therefore, in the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study of the experiences of foster care mothers the analysis focuses on both description and interpretation, but ultimately interpretation is given more emphasis. The data gathered from the interviews describes the sample of non-kinship foster care mothers while the analysis interprets their experiences.

Sampling and site selection

Access to a sample population of non-kinship foster care mothers was secured through the Assistant Executive Director of Child Welfare Services at Episcopal Social Services of New York (ESS). ESS works with more than 5,000 New Yorkers. Its mission is to help strengthen families, healthy development of children and youth and promote self-sufficiency. The agency has a presence in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn. This social service agency includes a

program that focuses on foster care and adoption, at two sites, the Bronx and Manhattan. ESS foster program encompasses the following areas/ services: 1. Family preservation program, 2. Foster boarding home and adoption program, 3. Group homes and supervised apartments for teens, 4. Preparing youth for adulthood, and 5. Supporting the health of children in our care. Indeed ESS seemed as an ideal agency for this study because of its comprehensive services within foster care and its presence in two boroughs of New York City, which had the potential to yield a diverse group of foster care mothers. Additionally, agency administrators welcomed the idea of researching this population and finding information that could enhance their services.

The study was presented to the agency as potentially being able to provide important information about the experience of foster care mothers, inform the agency's support programs and aid with retention and training. ESS has trainings and support groups for foster care parents. Recruitment was conducted through informal presentations during these support groups and trainings, and by posting flyers in both agency sites. On average, trainings or groups had 10 to 15 participants and the researcher attended at least 20 of these sessions. The study recruitment and procedures had the approval of Columbia University Internal Review Board.

Recruitment presentation and flyers were delivered in both English and Spanish to recruit Spanish speaking foster care mothers as well. The investigator's first language is Spanish. She is bilingual and fluent in both English and Spanish and therefore was able to recruit and conduct interviews in both languages. The ability to offer interviews in Spanish attracted a significant Latino population to the study.

Foster mothers that expressed interest were contacted by phone to confirm their participation. Criterion sampling was used for this study. Creswell (2007) described this as an ideal sampling for phenomenology because all participants represent people who have

experienced the phenomenon. Therefore, the only criterion for the sample was that these women were foster care mothers. Length of fostering, demographics, number of children did not determine if they would participate in the study. Approximately twenty five non-kinship foster care mothers responded to participate in the research. Therefore, only the foster care mothers who showed interest in participating were interviewed.

Foster mothers agreed to meet before or after their trainings. All participants were currently serving as foster care mothers through ESS. Participants in the study were paid \$25 for participating in the interview. Interviews were conducted in a private office at the agency, while the non-kinship foster mothers waited for the biological parents to visit with their children.

Fifteen interviews were conducted at ESS. Each interview lasted between thirty-five minutes to an hour. The interviews began with a list of questions regarding demographic and personal information such as country of origin, primary language, language spoken at home, civil status, children of their own and religious beliefs. An interview protocol was designed to help guide the conversation (See Appendix). The interviews included open-ended questions about non-kinship foster care mother's experiences, their challenges, motivations and appraisal of their role. All interviews were voluntary and conducted after written consent was given. All subjects agreed to the use of a tape recorder. Participants received a copy of the consent form with the researcher's contact information in case they had any further questions.

All interviews were transcribed and once transcribed there were compared to the original recording for accurateness. Spanish interviews were transcribed in Spanish for coding and analysis. However, only for purposes of writing the themes and quotes the Spanish interviews were translated to English. The same procedure was used by Shibusawa & Lukens (2004) when studying the aging population and cultural practices in Japanese culture. The authors recorded

the interviews in the original language, Japanese, transcribed it and coded in Japanese and translated the Japanese transcripts to English for the purpose of reporting.

Collecting the codes and themes from the original language in which the interviews were conducted allowed the researcher to experience what Caelli (2010) describes as “interpretative awareness” by connecting further with the participant in their primary language to understand the essence of the phenomenon.

Data analysis

Creswell (2007) describes the data analysis as a process of highlighting common and different experiences and statements that emerge from the interviews to explain the phenomenon. The author emphasizes that to seek the essence of the phenomenon the researcher must follow a process. Saldaña (2009) describes the first cycle of coding. He based his definition on Strauss and Corbin (1998): “Breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences.” (p.81). Creswell (2007) suggests dividing those codes into groups of meanings that create themes. For example, discrete codes related to becoming a foster care mother could be the loss of a child, loss of grown children and loss of a spouse. These codes could then be grouped into general themes of loss.

After organizing these themes a description is written to define the experience, thus leading to a thematic analysis. After the process of coding and description is completed the next step encompasses a careful explanation of the phenomenon, which is called the essence. For Creswell (2007) essence is based on the common experiences that provide an explanation of the phenomenon.

Creswell (2007) promotes a model to organize and analyze the data that consists of:

1. Developing a list of significant statements and then group them into themes, 2. Preparing a written description of these themes (textual descriptions), 3. Describing how these experiences happened, 4. Preparing a composite description that incorporates both the textual and structural description (p.159). Sharp and Ganong (2007) use this approach in their phenomenological study of the lived experience of White college educated women aged 28-34 who have not married. The authors transcribed and coded the data themselves; they then searched for data that explained the lived experience and grouped it into codes and eventually into themes. The authors provided examples and then described and analyzed the experience.

The researcher of this study first described the demographic and socio-environmental characteristics of the subjects. Then the data was organized and analyzed by creating a vertical column numbered 1 through 15 and a horizontal column that was categorized according to the questions (challenges, examples, motivations, perception of role, case information, demographics, etc.). As the researcher began collecting the data these categories expanded to add new themes and codes that emerged. Each interview was reviewed and the information recorded in the table by hand. Interviews were read twice, first as a whole and after the second reading the information was segmented into the columns for the analysis of the data. Examples that illustrated each code were included and referenced by page number of the interview. Through the second reading new codes and themes emerged. For example, the topic of companionship recurred frequently and after the first reading of the interviews companionship was incorporated as a sub theme of motivation to become a non-kinship foster care mother. The table allowed for the commonalities and differences within each section and across sections to be compared for all the participants. After careful analysis of the categories based on the interviews, themes began

to emerge from the data. A description of each theme was prepared and illustrated with examples.

Subjectivity and flexibility were essential to guarantee quality and rigor in handling and analyzing of the data. Morrow (2005) describes the importance of maintaining subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative research by stating: “I would argue that investigators always believe something about the phenomenon in question and that a greater grounding in the literature militates against bias by expanding the researcher’s understanding of multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon.” (p. 254). Other principles that Morrow (2005) highlights and that were followed in this study are: adequacy of data and immersion in the data. The researcher of this study verified answers and/or comments with the interviewees to assure adequacy of data. Seeking clarification, especially when discussing case related details or cultural nuances assured the researcher that the data collected was accurate. The researcher also learned about procedures, services and trainings of the agency to gain a better knowledge of the agency environment. Throughout the study all measures to ensure quality were integrated and followed.

Findings

A total of 15 participants with a variety of foster care parent experiences, ethnic backgrounds and ages were interviewed. The majority of the non-kinship foster care mothers identified were Hispanic of Puerto Rican or Dominican descent. Nine of the foster mother’s first language was Spanish, five English and one French. Their ages range from 31-66, the median age was 52. Four were single women, four widows, two separated and five married. With one exception all women had children of their own; on average they had at least two children. All except one mother practiced a Christian religion: Catholic, Baptist, or Pentecostal.

The women had been foster mothers for periods of time ranging from one month to 23 years, but on average they have been foster care mothers for five years. One mother had taken care of 63 non-kinship foster care children, but most of the mothers had experience with at least three children. An overwhelming majority of the children placed in the care of these mothers were Hispanic or African American, which is consistent with the data from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services of 2009 and the 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012 (NY State Office of Children and Family Services, 2009 and The 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012). Lastly, with the exception of three mothers, all had active placements at the time of the interview. Nine of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. A summary of the demographic and personal findings is shown in Table 2 below:

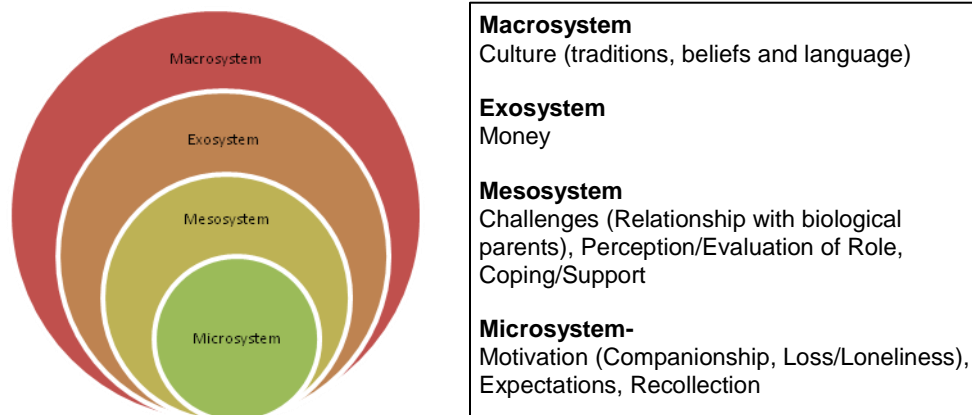
Age group	Number	Percentage
26-35	2	13%
36-55	5	33%
56-75	8	53%
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	2	13%
Hispanic	12	86%
Other	1	
Civil Status		
Married	5	33%
Widowed	4	26%
Divorced or Separated	2	13%
Single	4	26%
Have own/biological children		
Yes	14	93%
No	1	6%
Country of Origin		
Dominican Republic	6	40%
Puerto Rico	1	6%
USA	6	40%
Other	2	13%
Religion		
Baptist	2	13%

Catholic		11		73%
Pentecostal		1		6%
Other		1		6%
First language				
English		5		33%
Spanish		9		60%
French		1		6%
Languages at Home				
English		3		20%
Spanish		3		20%
Spanish and English		8		6%
French		1		6%
Years serving as foster mother				
< 1 year		2		13%
1-3 years		3		20%
4-10 years		8		53%
11-25 years		2		13%

Themes and descriptions

One of the most significant findings when coding and analyzing the data was how unique the experience was to each non-kinship foster care mother. However, the majority of the non-kinship foster care mothers seemed to assess their role positively and were motivated to help children in need. Through the description of the themes, examples of similar experiences and exact opposite views were found about expectations, challenges and financial remuneration, among others. Through the data analysis the following themes emerged that can be placed within the ecological systems framework.

Figure 1: The ecological systems and non-kinship foster care mothers



Microsystem- The background of the kinship foster care mother (age, family situation) forms the microsystem. Motivations to undertake this caregiver role, their expectations and how they remember the child/children coming into care are all considered factors that are part of this personal level.

Motivation to become a foster mother

The non-kinship foster mothers interviewed expressed two main motivations to become foster parents: 1) help children in need and 2) loneliness. Overall, most foster mothers felt compelled to help children that needed a home, love and attention.

Mom #1 illustrates the desire to help children when she states:

Well, when I found out that there were so many children who were all assigned in groups and who were suffering, since I am not working anymore, I don't work. I am disabled. I thought that I could use my time to help the children who were in need, and that is what motivated me to help the children who were in need.

Mother #12 said:

My wife and I do not have children of our own; but we knew we had the space and we could- we had the money. We have time. There is no reason that we could not take care of children and help them.

The women who expressed their need to fill a void faced a range of circumstances; some were widows, separated, had grown children or just felt lonely. Mom #1 says: "At the very

beginning when my children grew up, I felt that I really liked little children and wanted to hold little children so that was the first thing I think.” Mom #10 states:

In the first place, as I have a flat with three rooms and I was going to feel lonely, and I was not going to have anyone with me, and I also did it because I love children very much. She is a girl with a strong character, but I have been able to manage. I gave her all my love, because children need love above all.

One foster care mother decided to take on this role because she and her partner were contemplating adoption. Mom #12 stated:

So we thought we would try it. You know what I mean? We were thinking about do we want to maybe adopt? Did we want to do something else? Did we not want to have kids? We just weren't kind of sure what the best path for our family would be; but we were like well, we have things that we can offer to children who need a home. So let's start with that; and then we'll see what happens or if that's something for us or not.

Only one of the foster care mothers said that one of the motivations to become a foster care mother was financial: Mom #4: “To be perfectly honest it would help me out too. You know it would help me financially and it would help the kids.”

Companionship

Within the theme of motivation two important areas emerged: Companionship and Loss / Loneliness. Companionship was a theme throughout most of the interviews. Although companionship was found to be one of the reasons given as motivation to become a non-kinship foster care mother, it was also a recurrent theme when discussing foster care mothers understanding of their role and the child's role in their lives. Many foster care mothers shared that they already had raised their children and they had left home. Consequently, they felt lonely and taking care of a foster child provided them with company and “something to do”.

Mom # 10 says:

I do it because she's a company for me, because I'm alone. My daughter has her sons, one of them is 19 and the other one is 14. And my grandchildren live out of state, so I don't have grandchildren... My daughter tells me, 'No more boys'.

For Mom # 15 the feeling of companionship goes even further because she in the process of adopting the children: “They are my kids.” This expression of Mom #15 is not exclusive of non-kinship foster care mothers that are adopting, but many non-kinship foster care mothers expressed that these children become part of their families, their lives, especially for the mothers whose own children are not living with them.

Loss and loneliness

During the interviews the theme of loss and loneliness emerged. The majority of foster care mothers identified loss and/or loneliness as a reason that led them to foster. Fostering helped to fill a void due to loss. Three types of losses were identified: loss of a child, loss of a partner and loss of grown children due to living outside of the home. All of these losses can lead to conclude that they were grieving the loss of their former role and were trying to supplement it or substitute with their foster care mother role. These mothers all expressed difficulty adjusting to the loneliness and dealing with grief. The opportunity to be a foster care mother seemed to allow them to manage the grief and also regain a sense of purpose.

Mom # 14 exemplified this sentiment by stating:

I am going to tell you that since the time I have had the baby, my husband passed away and it has helped me a lot, having the baby. The suffering- I always feel a little depressed, but having to tend to the baby with her, well it has helped me a lot. It has been a big blessing for me because all this time that I have had her I have not felt so lonely with her because I have to tend to her.

Mom # 13: “Well, I figured I was a widow, my son was already married and I was by myself. I said I wanna become a foster mother: I always wanted to have a daughter. So I became a foster mother.”

Loss or loneliness was not only a significant theme in becoming a foster mother, but also a common link among the foster care mothers interviewed. Loss also became part of the

conversation for these women when they talked about returning the child to their biological parents and how they felt when this happened. Some mothers expressed that they knew from the beginning that they had to return the children and they prepared for that moment and others felt nothing could prepare them for the separation.

Mom # 5 says: "I am a widow and have experienced losing the ones I love, at first I did not know how you prepare for losing these children, after some time you understand that it is what it is."

Mom # 13 stated:

I am still not prepared. And when I met the parents and when I met the mother I did not like the mother, but I tried working with her. The father was nice, the girls were returned to the father, not the mother. And I still can't get over those two girls, I have got them right here (pointing at her heart) and it is very, very hard.

Expectations of non-kinship foster care mothers

Most non-kinship foster care mothers expressed they did not have specific expectations about the children regarding their emotional or physical state. Sometimes they did not even know the reasons why the children ended up in care. They all agreed that they would appreciate it if the agency had informed them further about the circumstances of the child: neglect, sexual, physical or emotional abuse and/or medical illness. This would aid them in finding the appropriate resources for the children and in better understanding their behavior or expressions and their own reactions. It is important to note that expectations may change over time due to length of fostering or a particular experience while fostering.

Mom #8 illustrates this general sentiment when asked what were her expectations of the child: "No. At first I had no idea. But I wondered how it was- the treatment from his mom. How does she care for them? If he was abused-after meeting the child you know the case, but not all of it."

Some mothers expressed feelings of fear, challenges, stress, while others believed they were ready, positive and hopeful. Mom #9 had a simple description: “One doesn’t know that (what to expect) until they get to your house.” Mom #1: “I was looking forward to doing it after all I signed up for it. I wanted it to be a great experience for me and the children.”

Mom # 4 stated:

I thought that it was going to be like you helped the kids and get them back home. Basically I did not get what I expected...The separation that the kids go through and other issues that they have. I was not familiar with all of the issues that they have. Health wise and the mental health problems. I did not know that to the extent to which it could affect a child you know in that deep level.

Mom#6: “It never crossed my mind like a child will come to my house with problems that I can’t deal with. That’s never crossed my mind.”

Recollection

One of the most unexpected findings of the study is how all of the non-kinship foster care mothers had vivid recollections of the day their foster care children arrived at their home. This did not vary based on length of years or experience as a foster mother. All of the mothers told the stories, vividly, as if they were describing the birth of a child. Non-kinship foster mothers would remember where they were when they received the call that foster care children were assigned, how they prepared their home and their excitement, as well as that of their family members.

Following are some examples:

Mom #2 who has been a foster care mother for 23 years remembers how she prepared for the first child that was placed with her. She stated: “I prepared everything, everything. Yes and I also prepared my kids. I told them, we will have a new member in our family.”

Mom # 7 remembers the day she received the call: “They phoned me and they asked me if I could come and look for her. So I came to look for her.”

Mom #6 remembers vividly the details of her first time being asked to take care of foster children:

They [the agency staff] just called me at two in the morning. Mrs. so and so, can you take in two children that we have here in the hospital? Can you take them in? How old are they? To know if I could have them in my house, because I can't have older children because I have no room. I have a – I bought a cradle and a bed, which is for small children. So how old are they? Two years old, and another one is ten months old, which is how old the boy was. Okay, yes, I can take them in. I never asked about the race, or the condition of the child, because that would become discrimination. If I say to her – oh no I don't want them because – no, that's – I don't ask about anything. I don't ask. The children need a home. I said I would open my home to children in need. I welcome them. That's what I have to do.

Mom #1 stated:

I remember she was all pink; she was 5 days old when they gave her to me. Tiny hands, full head of hair, she was adorable. I remember I had bought a beautiful pink blanket and once we got home changed her and sat looking at her all day. She has been with me for 4 years now.

Mesosystem - The themes identified at this level include: challenges, perceptions and evaluation of their role, and supports and coping. For example, while a foster mother receives coping and support from her family (one system) she can also feel that the agency (another system) is not assisting her. Thus, in this level personal and external characteristics can either be in conflict or balance each other.

Challenges

The majority of the women interviewed described challenges, especially in the following areas: the relationship with the biological parent and/or the agency, lack of knowledge and skills to cope with children's emotional or behavioral problems and feeling emotionally unprepared to return the child to the birth parent. They cite medical problems, undiagnosed mental health problems, behavioral issues, sleep disturbance, lack of meeting developmental milestones as

some examples of information about the child that they believe the agency should provide them and that many times they have to discover along the way. Several foster care mothers cared for children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or oppositional defiant disorder. Other children had severe asthma or conditions such as diabetes that required frequent monitoring. Some of these conditions place financial constraints on the foster mother. For example, children with diabetes can require specific dietary restrictions.

A foster mother stated her child had severe trouble sleeping and the agency never informed her or gave her advice on how to handle this situation.

Mom # 7:

Well, when they gave her to me, she had already been to four or five houses before. When they gave her to me she had that problem that she did not sleep, that she screamed a lot during the night, she wouldn't let me sleep. And even today she does not sleep and doesn't let me sleep well. Now, she is still screaming so she gets up from bed and she tells me 'Oh mom there is a snake, there is a snake'. When it is not a snake she has awful dreams. Later I found the girl has been physically abused when I took her to the psychiatrist to see what was wrong.

One foster mother shared that the diagnosis of attention deficit disorder in the girl she was caring for was very difficult and she was not prepared by the agency for the behavioral consequences / challenges of the diagnosis. Mom # 4 stated: "I sometimes start crying, I say: Lord, help me, give me peace to be able to continue with the girl." Another foster mother stated that her challenge was how time consuming it is to take care of these children: Mom #4: "Not being able to have any free time for yourself. It's just go, go, go. Especially when you have two children like mine. I have had kids with different issues, but the two I got now top the cake."

Relationship with biological parents

The relationship with the biological parent was challenging. Some foster mothers felt they lacked contact or opportunities to interact with the birth parent. They feel they are viewed as

“the woman who is taking away the love of my child”. When a young child calls his or her foster mother “mommy” this can cause tension between the biological and foster mother. Additionally, communication regarding religious practices, food, appearance (hair cut) emerged as areas of potential tension if not discussed with biological parents. Foster care mothers expressed that the agency needs to help facilitate those interactions and that communication among foster care parents and biological parents is extremely important to have a positive placement experience.

Mom #7 exemplified:

Difficulties with their mothers, each of them have their way of acting and reacting. Sometimes they are violent. No one wants to know about the foster mother. From the beginning they see you as the enemy. They think you want to take their child.

Mom#14 stated: “Sometimes you have conflict because you cut their hair and they [birth parent] don’t like it or cook something and now when they [foster children] go with them [birth parent] they [foster children] [don’t] want to eat that. But I just talk to them about it.”

Some non- kinship foster care mothers felt that the challenges they face are no different than being a biological parent. Mom# 3 stated: “I felt prepared for motherhood again and I treat them as my own children. I don’t only raise them, they are my children.” Mom#2 said: “The biggest challenge is to educate them, talk to them and be with them. That’s my biggest challenge.” Mom#7 shared her view: “There is no difference for me, because I am raising her as I have raised my own children. There is no difference for me.” Mom # 10 said: “I don’t understand why the parents don’t like me if I treat them as my own children.” Thus, some foster care mothers feel that biological parents should be more appreciative and understanding of their role.

Several non-kinship foster mothers regarded the biggest challenge in the separation and return of the child to their biological parent due to a lack of communication and understanding

from the part of the biological family. Mom #7 stated very simply: “But for example, the possibility that maybe someday her parents want to have the custody back, does create anxiety. I want them [the biological parents] to be healthy and stable before the child returns and I don’t think they are.” Foster care mothers who have difficulty with returning the children expressed that sometimes they have considered quitting or have taken time in between placements to recover. These expressions were emphasized by the mothers when discussing challenges and their relationship with the biological parents. Their general view is that both the agency and the biological parents could aid in the transition process.

Perception and evaluation of their role

All of the non-kinship foster care mothers felt they complied well with their role and that their role was about loving and being a mother to these children. Although, most foster care mothers know that their role was usually temporary they assumed the parental figure role as a mother rather than a temporary caregiver. They all had a sense of the responsibility and the influence that their role can have on the children. For example;

Mom# 8:

It is a responsibility greater than your life. It is not an easy chore. The most rewarding is to hear them saying mommy and you open the door they are happy and smile. It is beautiful. When the child loves you and accepts you, I think that is the best gift. To truly see you as their mom, sometimes they don’t learn to love you. I am happy when I achieve their attention.

Mom # 1 stated:

Some of them think these children need love and care and other people say ‘you are going to be in trouble; those kids come from bad places’ so they try to scare you. But some of them say no, taking care of them is a great thing... I think the agency would give me a good grade, they know I am qualified , they know I really like that and they know I have a space and I have the possibility to take care of children.

Nevertheless, most non-kinship foster care mothers shared that their role requires a lot of time and dedication and that they do not always feel appreciated by the larger foster care system, the agency or the birth parents. Non-kinship foster mothers evaluated their role as foster mothers as one well done, but not recognized by many outside of their family and friends. They feel that the majority of the time the agency and workers highlight their faults or what they have not complied with rather than all the positive things they have done or the progress of the child. Non-kinship foster care mothers explained that having reassurance and acknowledgement of their role really serves to motivate them to continue fostering.

Coping and support

Non-kinship foster care mothers expressed that their own family support serves as a coping mechanism to handle the stressors that they face. For example, if they are fostering multiple children the help of other family members is crucial in complying with appointments, support around the household and help in caring for them. Additionally, spirituality /faith served as a coping mechanism. In regards to support Mom # 5 stated: “My husband brings them in the morning. I prepare them. My husband brings them to school and picks them up from school.” Mom # 15 discusses family support: “Well, my husband is great support. And then my mom is my back up. He changed his work shift to help me, so he works from 5 pm to 1am so he is there all day until he leaves to work.” Mom # 14 found support in family: “I have had more support from my family, from my children and also from my babysitters.” Mom # 10 regarding coping and finding support: “What happens is that I go to church and that helps me a lot and I understand that for me that is important.”

One of the mothers spoke about her personality traits that help her cope with the challenges of being a foster mother: Mom # 2: “For example, I am charismatic and that helps me,

you know. Like, I tell you, I am very patient and sometimes I have to deal with people who are not like me ... I am very patient and I love kids.”

Some non-kinship foster mothers expressed they received support from agency trainings which in turn allows them to cope with the various challenges. The majority felt the most useful resource the agency provided were the trainings. They acknowledged that the trainings address the issue of separating from the child and returning them to the biological parent.

Mom #6:

Yes, the trainings. They tell us everything, the different types, how do we have to treat them if they have been raped, everything, everything... They tell us that we can't give them too much love because we don't know when they will be returned to their parents.

However, several mothers felt that although the trainings discuss the imminent return of the child to their biological family it is not always enough preparation for that moment. Mom #13 says:

No let me tell you, this last case got me so upset, that I was gonna close my house because they should prepare you, you understand? I came to a visit with the girls on a Tuesday and the social worker tells me she needs to talk to me. She took me in a room and she tells me just like that that the girls are going to be returned to the father this Friday. I was not prepared for that.

Many parents don't view the agency as supportive regarding the emotional process of detaching from the child because they are not provided with adequate skills or time to prepare to manage that loss. Again, this could also be considered part of the theme of loss and loneliness, but the foster care mothers interviewed emphasized that the origin of this problem is that they are not receiving adequate training and support on coping. Additionally, some foster mothers really feel frustrated that the place they should turn for support is the least helpful. They expressed that their cases are constantly assigned to new caseworkers who are carrying an overload of cases. This situation truly affects the foster care mother and adds to the bureaucracy

to approve issues related to their cases, thus discouraging them. In respect to the impact of case overload, Mom # 4 states:

The workers. Their caseload is enormous when I looked into it. It's not fair I think for a caseworker to have 30-35 people on a caseload. And then they try to deal with everybody's issues. So they get overwhelmed just like we do.

Exosystem- Secondary stressors (work, agency policies, and financial issues) are part of the exosystem, which is related to the external environment. This level considers external forces that influence other levels. For example, this level relates to areas of societal, financial, legal or agency decisions that influence the individual and the execution of his or her roles.

Money

Some foster care mothers seemed to shy away from the topic of economic support and others preferred to comment on the financial remuneration as directly related to the child and not to them. The view of financial support of Mom # 3 is: "In the month and a half that they have been with me, the day before yesterday I got a check. Every child has to live with \$500... I found out yesterday. How do they pretend a child lives on that?"

Answering a question regarding if money is enough Mom # 5 stated:

It's not. It's 24 hours when you are with children for what they pay you and I don't think it's enough. I always tell people it has nothing to do with the money because most of the time what I do get paid for when the check comes, I go shopping for them.

The majority of non-kinship foster care mothers agree that the financial support is not enough, but that has not been a reason to quit.

Mom # 10 shared that financial support is always spent on the child and is not payment for their caregiving:

Well they don't provide any support, because they don't pay us to look after the children they give us. The money we receive is for the children's need and we do this because we like to be with the children, for love.

Mom # 15 stated:

That is something that in my case I would not do it for the money. I do it because as I was telling you, I like children. It is like I was telling you I am not rich, I am a poor person, I am alone and I don't have a husband. I was left alone, many years ago and I have always worked. I never expected to get the check from the children to pay my bills or anything. I have been a fighter and I have got enough to pay for my bills. It was never for the money.

Only one non-kinship foster care mother of the 15 interviewed acknowledged that her motivation was partially financial. Nonetheless, Mom #1 stated:

No, no...you can't pay all the expenses of the child because if you don't work, then it is enough because I will take care of him but if I work and they gave an amount to the child and in one month all that money is for the babysitter and how are you going to pay for the food and clothes? And children need to go out and have fun and every time you go outside, you have to spend money, if you take a taxi to go somewhere then if you work and you earn just some money, that money is to pay for rent and that money is not mine, because I'm alone and I have to spend all the money in my expenses and if you are with someone then that is okay because you will have the support of your partner.

Macrosystem- This level consists of the larger social and cultural context of the participants.

Cultural beliefs, values and practices and how they influence the caregiver are considered.

Culture- traditions, beliefs and language

For the purpose of this study culture will be guided by the following definition: "Culture is the way people express their patterns of thought, their phantasies, their dreams and their behavior, their values, beliefs, political, economical and religious, their rules of conduct" (Quallenberg, 2000, p.1). This definition seems appropriate for the study of non-kinship foster care mothers because it suggests that culture is not static and relates to person and environment. Most of the non-kinship foster mothers are caring for children that are similar in their ethnic or cultural background, but not all of them. When asked how their culture and ethnic background impacted their fostering, many of them expressed that they felt it added to their relationship and was beneficial for the child regardless of whether they shared the same cultural background.

Non-kinship foster care mothers stated that the difference in cultures or background exposes the children to different traditions, foods and customs. They also shared that they do not take a child based on his or her race.

Based on the definition of culture presented above, these mothers were expressing their beliefs, values, thoughts and practices, their culture, in very specific and unique ways. However, one element was universal: the presence of culture in the interaction with the foster children. It seems significant that foster care mothers who identified as Hispanic spoke more frequently about culture, food, religion and how they try to include the children in their cultural customs and practices. They did not necessarily view this as a challenge, but did discuss it in more depth.

Mom # 10 refers to her foster child who is Puerto Rican and states: “Well she is from Puerto Rico. I lived in Puerto Rico for about three years, so that (the difference in culture) had no effect on me because more or less I had some knowledge of the culture.” Mom # 6 stated: “I never ask about race or the condition of the child because that would be discrimination.”

Regarding if culture, race or language makes a difference in their relationship with the children foster mother #2 said:

We may sit in a chair and, but the race and color doesn't matter when it comes to loving a child, you know? You don't have to bring that, nothing about “she is black, she is white” No. We value that the child is okay.

Mom#7 stated that being in settings where a different language is spoken could be beneficial for the child: “And that is going to be good for her because she will know two languages, English and Spanish. I speak to her in Spanish which was the language she spoke at home and she learns English at school.”

Mom#11 is from South Africa and her first language is French. She explained that

different cultures or food are not a problem, especially because children adapt:

I felt such joy especially when they told me it was the first American; you know American come from here. I was a little scared. I said well, I don't know what she eats, but after this she is just an angel. She just adapts, she eats everything and it's so happy.

The relevance of the theme of culture among the kinship foster care mothers interviewed was prevalent and prompted a separate research on this topic.

Essence – Discussion

This study found that these non-kinship foster care mothers took on this role not for financial wealth or as a job, but rather companionship, adoption and filling a void. The mothers interviewed faced tremendous challenges regarding their working relationship with the agency, the relationship with the biological parents, medical and mental health conditions of the child and loss associated with a child's return to the biological parent. All of these categories, companionship, agency, loss, influenced the foster mother's role and could be located within the spectrum of the ecological systems model. The experience of non-kinship foster care mothers can be explored through a lens that encompasses deficits and strong points, which are part of parenting and can create meaning. The study supports the idea that a person's ecological system influences their caregiving role. Additionally this group of women encountered caregiver stress, specifically primary and secondary stressors, as well as role strain.

It is evident from the study that background and context characteristics and their impact on the foster care mother's appraisal of her role need to be incorporated in assessing the risk of stress. Assessing context and characteristics of a potential foster mother prior to the placement and during placements is key to retention. This could be accomplished through a more thorough initial interview process that not only gathers this information, but seeks the foster mother's

appraisal on how her unique circumstances could impact her fostering. Also, more adequate training and resources to manage mental health or health needs could ameliorate such primary stressors.

It was clear from the interviews conducted that non- kinship foster care mothers did seem to identify with the concept of the “empty nest” for a variety of reasons and viewed it as a motivation while emphasizing the importance of companionship. Fear of loneliness was a common thread for mothers who had grown children or had lost a family member, as well as the motivation to help children in need. Several quantitative studies have been conducted with foster parents to understand specific ideas of retention or perceptions of parenting (Andersson, 2001; Bates & Dozier, 2002; Broady, Stoyles, McMullan, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2010; Brown & Bednar, 2006; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). These studies consistently find that life changes, dissatisfaction with an agency, not feeling ready to commit, stressors and problems with the foster child can cause foster parents to consider quitting. Some of these are similar to the challenges that non-kinship foster care mothers identified in this qualitative study. However, one significant finding among the women interviewed is that most of them have continued to foster other children in spite of multiple challenges.

To further analyze the data of the qualitative studies of foster care mothers, a stress and coping model and role theory was applied. Pearlin et al. (1990) stress and coping model can be applied to foster care mothers. Their background and context (age, culture, network) influence their primary stressors (overload, dependency, problematic behavior of the child) and the secondary stressors (sense of competency, self-esteem, economic problems), which are real and prevalent in their roles. These mothers coping skills and supports are the mediators of managing such stressors and can make the difference in retainment and satisfaction of their role. Each of

the kinship foster care mother's undergoes as a caregiver this process of stress and coping; their personal situations, coupled with stressors and their ability to cope encompass their process of caregiving.

Role theory is relevant for this population because each non-kinship foster care mother has a distinct social identity and circumstances that have influenced her to engage in this role (Biddle, 1986). Nevertheless, the essence of their role can be defined in wanting to help children in need, fill a void, and give and receive love.

Role theory allows exploration as to how a person can interpret, execute and reflect on their own role. Most of the non-kinship foster care mothers interviewed believe they have done a great job in their role partially because they have been biological mothers themselves and their children have grown to be well and responsible adults and also because they are helping children in need. They view the loving response of the child is a testament to their positive execution.

Women who undertake the role of a non-kinship foster care mother play many other roles in their lives. They might be biological mothers, partners, aunts, grandmothers, employees and entrepreneurs. One or all of these roles can have an impact on how a person perceives their self-efficacy and their capacity to overcome stressors. The foster care mother role includes many challenges ranging from the mother's personal circumstances, to the agency, the foster care system, and the child's individual case. Therefore, acknowledging role strain seems to be a realistic approach when recruiting these mothers. For example, it would be useful to conduct a biopsychosocial assessment at recruitment to provide the agency with personal history including a discussion of existing stressors as challenges to their role as foster care mothers such as, unemployment, lack of child care or family support. Assistance on how to manage role strain becomes essential in retaining foster care mothers.

Biddle (1986) discussion of cognitive role theory focuses on expectations and their relationship to norms, beliefs and preferences. Non-kinship foster care mothers interviewed were very enthusiastic with their role, developed an emotional attachment to the child, but felt lack of support from the agency particularly regarding coping with the behavioral problems of the child. In many instances the expectation of the role did not match the reality.

From a strengths perspective, the ability of non-kinship foster care mothers to confront the challenges of their role and continue fostering, their coping skills need to be emphasized. The skill to reduce or manage role strain is essential for any person, but especially for someone who is accepting the responsibility of becoming a foster care mother. According to Pearlin et al. (1990), *Mediators of stress* are the third domain of caregiver's stress. Pearlin et al. (1990) describe that coping and social support are the most important mediators. Supports and strong coping skills can allow a foster care mother to reduce the stressful challenges of her role. Coping was defined as: managing a situation that could be stressful, understanding the meaning of such a situation and controlling the stress symptoms (Pearlin et al. 1990). In the case of foster care mothers, social supports can stem from her own family and extend to the foster care agency and these could help reduce role strain (Rodger, Cummings & Leschied, 2006 and Puddy & Jackson 2003).

Aneshensel (1992) states that a person's response to stress is directly associated with their self-efficacy and their ability to cope. Similarly to the concept of mediators of stress, Aneshensel (1992) explains that social support and coping are mechanisms that can ameliorate stress and that help reduce the impact of role strain. Therefore, according to the author an individual's self-efficacy which is relevant to the execution and evaluation of their roles, is directly related to the stress/strain they experience. Additionally, role clarity has been associated

with role efficacy (Bray and Brawley, 2002). If a person is clear on the expectations and demands of their role, there is likely an association with a higher efficacy in executing their role (Bray and Brawley, 2002).

When applying the concepts of stress and coping in this study of non-kinship foster care mothers, it is crucial to consider the population and how these characteristics can have an impact on the execution of their role. Based on the data of this study it could be argued that many mothers rely on coping mechanisms to overcome the everyday challenges of fostering. Therefore, coping could serve as a framework to explain how foster care mothers overcome caregiver stress and role strain. It is essential to study the caregiver's family history and emotional status to detect signs of coping skills. These characteristics to overcome adversity can be highlighted and reinforced in training for recruitment and retention of non-kinship foster care mothers, as suggested below.

Expectations seemed to be a substantial aspect of determining foster care parents engagement and experience. These women welcomed these foster care children as their own. They relied on their experience as mothers of their own children and their cultural values and beliefs to guide them through the process. They also acknowledged that it is a hard task to take care of these children, but one that provides immense satisfaction. They cope with challenges and adversity with support of family and also using the resources of the agency. For these mothers having the support and validation of their role by the agency was important.

Based on the data of this study it could be argued that many mothers rely on coping mechanisms to overcome the everyday challenges of fostering. Therefore, coping could serve as a framework to explain how foster care mothers overcome caregiver stress and role strain. It is essential to study the caregiver's family history and emotional status to detect signs of coping

skills. The characteristics that help to overcome adversity can be highlighted and reinforced in training for recruitment and retention of non-kinship foster care mothers, as suggested below.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the experiences of these women and seem to be essential to continue to recruit, aid and retain this population, reduce role strain and enhance coping skills:

Recruitment and placement

Recruitment could be carried out among parents who consider adopting, who are widows or no longer have children living at home. Agencies should target this population through flyers; recruit at retirement group meetings, and in meetings for parents who are considering adoption. To maintain this group of mothers in their role it is crucial that the agency clearly explains the expectations of the role – regarding attachment, relationship with biological parents, and agency compliance. Establishing these expectations clearly would also increase retention and help foster care mothers comply with all their mandates. This could be done during recruitment activities and through trainings and case management.

It would aid in recruitment and in the placement to discuss with the foster care mother the specific problems at the beginning of the placement: needs of the child, physical and mental health conditions and resources. It is in the best interest of the child, agency and the larger foster care system that foster care mothers are aware of any relevant information about the case or the child so as to better serve the needs of both. Additionally, retention might benefit from the disclosure of this information because foster care mothers would be more equipped to anticipate behaviors or circumstances and this could reduce foster mother's resignation due to behavioral problems, medical issues or associated situations that were unforeseen

Trainings and casework

Exploring the coping characteristics of non-kinship foster care mothers or the lack of seems crucial in shaping programs and interventions for this population. This could be done through trainings, interviews, home visits and support groups. Additionally, assistance in creating opportunities for more communication and relationship amongst biological and foster parents is important. There is a need when possible to enhance the communication between these two groups for the benefit of the child, the agency and the parents themselves. This might involve creating more opportunities for parents to meet at the beginning of the case and providing a safe space for biological parents to talk to the foster care parent. One suggestion is to conduct training regarding what to expect of the process, challenges, and behavior for both non-kinship foster parent and biological parent.

Adequate training, time and discussion is needed for the foster care mothers to prepare for the separation from the child. Although, this topic is discussed in training, most foster care mothers expressed they still did not feel prepared to return the child to the biological parents and sometimes the sadness and loss associated with the separation caused them to reconsider whether they would foster again. Therefore, more attention to this subject in trainings, but also with involvement from the caseworker and the agency on creating a non-traumatic transition for foster mother and child is essential. This could be done by allowing time and discussion in advance of the separation.

Retention

Incentivize the non-kinship foster care mothers by acknowledging and supporting the difficult job they face and assisting them through it would aid in retention. Creating incentives among

foster care mothers such as a raffle or prizes for complying with perfect attendance to visits, meetings or trainings and/or a luncheon to celebrate their role would encourage them and make them feel acknowledged. Also, creating a support group where foster mothers can present their questions to one another and share their stories would be reassuring. Such support group could be offered on training days.

Given the evolving nature of the foster care system, the enumerated challenges of being a foster care mother /caregiver, socio economic strains, supports, resources and ever changing life circumstances, the risk of role strain for a foster care mother in NYC or in any other city cannot be eradicated, but rather reduced or managed.

Limitations and strengths

A qualitative phenomenological study is not perfect. One of the challenges of such a study is making a distinction between narrative and transcript. It is in the narrative that meaning and understanding emerges. Caelli (2001) clarifies that each are distinct and that it is in the ability of the researcher to "derive narratives from transcripts" (p.278). Reporting the data gathered from the study is not sufficient, but rather creating the account of what happens, why it happens and how it happens is the task of the researcher.

Finlay (2009) describes an important limitation of phenomenology: "In the current climate, phenomenologists are challenged to recognize that any knowledge produced is contingent, proportional, emergent and subject to alternative interpretations" (p.17). Therefore, the same data could be analyzed differently by different researchers. The phenomenon of the experiences of non-kinship foster care mothers is not universal and can have alternate interpretations.

The aim of this phenomenological study was to present the essence of the experience of non-kinship foster care mothers by using their own words and examples. This could be viewed as the biggest strength of this type of research in that it is not static and is constantly evolving, as is the human experience. In the study of non-kinship foster care mothers, phenomenology could limit the ability to generalize results and draw conclusions over a population due to a small sample and findings being relevant to the specific group studied. Additionally, due to the nature of the sampling for this study it is possible that only foster care mothers who wanted to talk or are more engaged volunteered to participate. However, the findings illustrate common themes and experiences that can inform practice about this population and that can initiate further research of an understudied, but important part of the foster care system.

Implications for practice and policy

Once the agency recruits the foster care mother the challenges for both the mother and the agency include issues that impact the relationship, emotions and services for foster mother and child. This paper addresses an important gap in the literature. It serves to both enhance current understanding of this population and suggests ways to improve recruitment and retention strategies within the foster care system.

It is essential for foster care agencies to assess and foresee how primary and secondary stressors can impact a potential foster care mother within their recruitment efforts, through questionnaires, recruitment sessions and in-depth interviews. In order to do so, these agencies need to provide role clarity and a realistic portrayal of the stressors that might arise from the role of foster mother. This can range from general/common stressors to case specific situations. Training can serve to develop or strengthen self-efficacy, coping skills and resources that have been found to help reduce role strain and other challenging situations for foster care mothers. A

foster care agency's support and affirmation seems to be very significant in contributing to retention and to ameliorate role strain and increase coping and satisfaction.

This study has policy implications in regards to creating strategic plans to enhance recruitment and retention of foster care mothers. Concrete agency level policy implications are: to enhance recruitment among specific populations, conduct interviews prior and during placements to assess stressors and coping skills, and enhance trainings focused on the needs of the mothers. These policy implications have a direct impact on practice. The results of this study provide an initial portrayal of an underresearched and underserved population. The findings of this study highlight the importance of the role of a foster care mother and suggest concrete ways to attend to their needs both in terms of practice and policy.

Future research and program development

Based on this study, an integration of a stress and coping model that incorporates the needs and strengths of the mother, the child and the circumstances surrounding both, should be at the core of recruitment and retention efforts. The data from the study could serve as the basis to create a pilot intervention considering the themes and suggestions that emerged. It is important that such intervention measures progress regarding recruitment, retention and satisfaction with the non-kinship-foster care mother role. Additionally, program changes regarding training, recruitment, retentions strategies and resources, such as the ones discussed based on the experiences of the women in this study could be implemented and measured. An intervention and program development strategy that addresses the strengths and coping mechanisms of non-kinship foster care mothers while simultaneously acknowledging stress and role strain would help to confront the challenges faced by this population, reduce multiple placements and enhance the recruitment and retention of a larger number of non-kinship foster mothers.

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Appendix

Non- Kinship Foster Care Mother's Interview Protocol

Research Question: What is your experience as a non-kinship foster care mother?

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

This is a research study in conjunction with Columbia University School of Social Work. The goal of this interview is to understand more about kinship foster care mothers. As the consent you just signed mentioned, this interview and any information you provide is confidential and will be kept anonymous. I will report on the interview, but it will be written in general terms and never using identifying information. Today, I will be asking you some questions and learning more about you.

Do you have any questions or concerns?

Demographics

Name:

Phone number:

Age:

Country of Origin

Race/Ethnicity

Civil Status

Children of your own?:

Religion:

Questions

1. How long have you been a foster care mother?

· Probe: How many times have you done this?

2. How many foster children do you care for?

○ Probe: Ages? Nationalities?

3. What motivated you to accept becoming a foster care mother?
 - Probe: "Empty nest", work from home, altruism, charity, remuneration
4. What did you expect of your foster children?
 - Probe: regarding behavior, emotional state, interactions with you and other family members
5. Have there been any challenges related to being a foster care mother? If so, could you tell me what have they been or the most recent?
6. If challenges exists, how have you been able to overcome them?
 - Probe: What in your environment, personality helped you?
7. Are their positive aspects of being a foster care mother? If so, what are they?
 - Probe: Could you provide an example of a positive situation?
8. Can you describe what it was like when your first foster care child came into your home?
 - Probe: How did you prepare? Lessons learned?
9. Do you feel you have support?
 - Probe: from whom, what type of support?
10. How do you think others perceive your role as a foster mother?
 - Probe: Agency, other foster mothers, your family?
10. How has your parenting been influenced by your own culture: for example your language, your cultural/ethnic background, your values and beliefs on family?
11. What life experiences if any have influenced your foster parenting?

· Probe: Childhood, own parents, religion, culture, problems, trauma

12. Looking back, now that you have been a foster mother how do you feel about your decision to become one?
13. Would you act differently as a foster mother if the child you are caring for was a family member? Do you feel it would be a bigger challenge to care for a child that is related to you or rather it would easier?
14. What is the biggest benefit of fostering a child?
15. Is there anything else about your experience as a foster mother that you would like to tell me?

Thank you very much! I will be in contact with you.

Dissertation Paper 2: What is the experience of kinship foster care mothers?

Introduction

Kinship foster care mothers are a unique subgroup of the foster care system. They are the grandmothers, aunts, sisters, nieces who take on the responsibility, that they already feel as their own, to help their families. These women face a particular set of challenges because they are not as removed from the circumstances and context of the case as a non-kinship foster care mother. Therefore, it is essential to understand their motivations, expectations, challenges and strengths to provide adequate services for them and to create secure and nurturing placements for the children they care for. A qualitative phenomenological study of fifteen kinship foster mothers served by Episcopal Social Services of New York City was conducted to attempt to understand the unique caretaking experience of this group. An ecological systems framework informs the interview questions and themes of the study. A caregiver stress and coping model, as well as role theory, were applied to understand kinship foster mothers' view of their role versus the reality of what they experience, taking into consideration the influence of their kinship status. This study aims to contribute to the literature on foster care and service provision, by using the words of the kinship foster care mothers to gain understanding of the experience, challenges and benefits of their role. The data from this study informs further research and/or interventions to aid in recruitment, retention and reduction of multiple placements and elucidates important information for the provision of services for kinship foster parents.

Context and rationale

According to the 50 state chartbook on foster care, New York State has 30,072 children in out of home placements of which 7,449 are placed in kinship foster care homes. To place this data in context, approximately 450,000 children are in foster care in the United States. (The 50 state chartbook on Foster Care, 2012 and Administration of Children and Families, 2009). Based

on the national statistics 27% of children placed in foster care are in some form of kinship foster care arrangement (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

According to the New York State Office of Children and Family Services Foster Care statistics of 2009, the mean age of children in foster care is between 6 and 9 years old and the majority are male, but only by a slight margin (52.3% versus 47.7%) (NY State Office of Children and Family Services, 2009). Children are placed in a kinship placement in 25.2% of the cases. Other sources state that the percent of children in kinship foster care are 18.6% (The 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012). The discrepancies could be due to diverse definitions of kinship care placements. The racial/ ethnic breakdown of New York State children in foster care is 46.7% Black / African American, 21.6% Hispanic, 19.7% White, 0.6% Asian and 0.2% Native American (The 50 State Chartbook on Foster Care, 2012).

To become a kinship foster care parent in New York State there are several requirements that must be fulfilled. These include: ability to provide a safe environment, criminal history record check and compliance with a home evaluation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Pre-service training is usually required and kinship foster parents do receive payment for taking care of their relatives while in foster care (New York City Department of Aging, 2012).

The U.S Department of Health and Human Services delineates the three different types of kinship care:

- 1) *Informal kinship care*- the children are with a relative and there is no involvement of the child welfare system
- 2) *Voluntary kinship*-the children lives with a relative and the child welfare system is involved but does not have custody of the child and
- 3) *Formal kinship care*- when the state has legal custody of the child and the child welfare system places the child with a relative (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2010)

It is important to note that most statistics on kinship placements do not segregate placements by the categories described above

The agency clearly states that services are more likely to be available to formal kinship foster care parents than voluntary kinship foster care parents and that they vary state by state. The services include therapy/counseling, financial support, health insurance and respite care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Training for kinship foster care parents is not always a requirement; it varies state by state as well.

Kinship foster care parents have to struggle with the challenges facing any foster parent and in addition manage the fact that the child or children placed in care have been removed from the care of a direct family member. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the motivations, expectations and evaluation of their role could be slightly different than that of non-kinship foster care parents because of their close relation to the case and circumstances. For the purpose of further understanding kinship foster care mothers a conceptual and theoretical framework is applied in an effort to comprehend their experience and contribute to research and service provision for this underserved population.

Overarching framework-ecological systems

An ecological systems perspective considers the personal circumstances, beliefs and practices of the individual while also looking at the interaction within other areas of life and larger society. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains the various levels that encompass the ecological systems framework. The *microsystem* is the personal level (e.g. family, kinship relationship to the child), the *mesosystem* refers to two microsystems that interact (e.g. role as a kinship grandmother and role as a mother), and the *exosystem* refers to external environments that influence the other levels (e.g. job, neighborhood). Lastly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) discusses the

macrosystem, which is the larger social and cultural context.

Hong, Algood, Chiu and Ai-Ping Lee (2011) analyzed kinship foster care through an ecological systems framework. The authors reviewed empirical studies on this population and organized them according to the ecological systems framework. Among the results, Hong et al. (2011) identified caregiver child relationships, attachment and kinship family environment as part of the microsystem, while the mesosystem reflected the interactions of the kinship parent with the biological family. The exosystem was exemplified through the relationships of the kinship foster caregiver with their social support networks. Based on the authors' research, social supports reduced stress and mental health symptoms like depression among this population. Lastly, they discuss the macrosystem and highlight how social policies and race/ethnicity impact the caregiver relationship with the child.

To achieve a holistic understanding of kinship foster care mothers an ecological systems framework will be applied in this study. This framework allows for the data to be examined across each of the levels and informs case and agency programs by providing an in depth understanding of this population and its characteristics.

Stress and coping model

Kinship foster care mothers are not exempt from experiencing stress and exhibiting coping mechanisms. Therefore, assessing stress and coping is essential when working with these mothers. Pearlin, Mullan, Semple and Skaff (1990) explained there are several components of caregiver stress. The first component is the *background and context of the stress process*. Understanding the background and context of the caregiver is essential in situating and understanding behavior and interaction. Some of the areas considered part of the background and context are: culture, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. *Background and context of the stress*

process becomes significant for kinship foster care mothers because their unique and close relationship to the foster care case can have a direct impact on their caregiving experience. For example, a grandmother who is caring for her grandson, who was removed from her daughter's care due to drug use, could be facing stress not only due her new role as a caregiver but also because of her feelings regarding her daughter's struggle with drug abuse. Additionally, given the data supporting that often kinship foster care mothers are poorer, less educated, lack quality health and training than non-kinship foster care mothers their care could be directly affected by these factors (Hong et al., 2011, Scananapieceo and Hegar, 2002 and Zinn, 2009).

Primary and secondary stressors are the second component of caregiver stress (Pearlin, Aneshensel and Leblanc 1997). The events that are part of caregiving that could generate conflict or issues are *primary and secondary stressors* (Pearlin, Aneshensel and Leblanc 1997). The authors state that overload can contribute to primary stress. A primary stressor could be exemplified by the case of an elderly kinship foster care mother who has a diagnosed illness, is undergoing treatment and suddenly has the responsibility of taking care of a young child.

A kinship foster care mother could also experience *secondary stressors*. The authors make a distinction between *role strain* as a secondary stressor and *intrapsychic strain*. Both types are related to the demands and needs of the caregiver's role. A kinship foster care mother whose demands on her profession are affecting her foster care mother's role can be suffering from *role strain*. A kinship foster care mother who feels overwhelmed and questions her capacity to comply with all her responsibilities as a mother, foster care mother and wife can also feel *intrapsychic strain*. Pearlin et al. (1990) states that this strain is linked to self-esteem and the caregiver's perception of her competency.

One could assume that coping is a major part of overcoming a caregiver's stress

especially for kinship foster care mothers. These mothers often exercise coping skills by agreeing to become foster mothers of a child who is not only their relative, but has been removed from the home of their sister, niece, daughter, or other relative. Taking on this role is a way to cope, they are managing the situation. In addition they face the normal stressors of raising and being responsible for the child’s well-being. Coping has been considered an ability to overcome difficult situations or as having the capacity to manage adversity (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988, Murry et al., 2001 and Richardson, 2002). Coping is often immeasurable, manifests in various ways and could be innate to one’s personality or developed through time. This study wishes to understand coping characteristics of kinship foster care mothers and how they apply these skills.

Previous studies of foster care parents

Most studies that focus on foster mothers relate to the child’s well-being, attachment and training. They don’t always segregate foster care parents among kinship and non-kinship. Following are key findings on a sample of studies conducted among this population.

Table 1: Studies on Foster Care Parents

Author	Bick, Dozier and Moore (2012)	Harden, Meisch, Vick and Pandohie-Johnson (2008)	Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000)	Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk and Reid (2009)	Cole and Eamon (2007)
Method	Adult attachment interview, questionnaires	Background questionnaire, Parental Attitudes about Child Rearing, The Foster Parent Attitudes Questionnaire	Survey data of New York foster parents conducted in 1993	Intervention questionnaire	Interviews and surveys
N	56 foster care mothers	90 foster care mothers	650 foster parents	700 foster parents	189 foster care parents
Place	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA

Key findings	<p>Foster care mothers were classified :</p> <p>1. <i>Autonomous</i> state of mind in regards to attachment (expressive and reflective)</p> <p>2. A <i>dismissing</i> state of mind (minimizes the importance of attachment)</p> <p>3. <i>Preoccupied</i> state of mind (individuals who are bothered when discussing this topic).</p> <p>Foster care mothers who had an autonomous state of mind regarding attachment were more reflective of the intervention at all phases. The results emphasize the importance of the state of mind regarding attachment of foster care mother’s in relation to the execution of their role.</p>	<p>Level of attachment and commitment of foster parents’ aid in determining the quality of placement. Training and support are an essential component for foster care parents.</p>	<p>The study found that as support and formal training increased, foster parent involvement in promoting visitations with the biological family also increased. The results showed that most agencies do not offer training and support for this purpose in spite of showing that it is significant in maintaining biological parent child contact.</p>	<p>The training Keeping Foster Parents Trained and Supported, KEEP, was found effective in reducing child behavioral problems through changes in parents’ behavior and reduction of multiple placements. The authors claim that foster parents’ level of engagement was crucial for the effectiveness of the intervention</p>	<p>The study aimed to determine the prevalence, risk factors and social supports of depressive symptoms among this population of foster caregivers. The researchers found three main risk factors for depression among foster care parents: lack of good health, their own experience with child maltreatment and lack of time to carry on with all their responsibilities, role conflict.</p>
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These studies were selected because they represent some of recurrent areas of study with foster care parents. The results of the studies emphasize the importance of the commitment and level of attachment of foster care parents and its impact in the relationship with the child and their perception of their role. Factors such as attachment, motivation and self-reliance contribute to foster care parents’ attitudes towards their role (Harden, Meisch, Vick and Pandohie-Johnson, 2008). Studies also found the relevance of training in maintaining a placement, but also in engagement of biological parents and reducing child behavioral problems. Other studies

highlight the importance of training that encompasses practical skills to increase social understanding and empathy among maltreated children in the foster care system (Luke and Banerjee, 2012). In depth research on the experience of kinship foster care mothers would aid in providing adequate skills training and also in retaining their potential involvement as foster parents beyond the kinship case.

Kinship foster care parents

Training, licensing and other requirements are sometimes overlooked or waved for kinship foster care parents (Lawler, 2008). This can impact the experience and the ability of kinship foster mothers to deal with challenges. Harden et al. (2008) state that children in kinship care tend to receive less extensive services than non-kinship care cases. Therefore, the question arises as to whether the lack of training and services for kinship care foster mothers could impact the care of the children and their expectations of their role.

Le Prohn (1994) attempts to understand the role conceptions of kinship compared to non-kinship foster care parents. Consistent with other literature this study showed that relative foster parents tend to place a large emphasis on maintaining contact between the birth parent and child (Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk and Reid, 2009). In contrast another study suggests that biological parents have an easier relationship with non-kinship foster parents (Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer and Andries, 2012).

Le Prohn (1994) emphasizes that kinship foster parents could suffer from role conflict because they try to maintain both their role as a foster parent and a relative. Data on this and other studies confirms that kinship foster care parents tend to be less educated, older, poorer and receive less services than non-kinship foster care parents (Hong et al., 2011, Scananapico and Hegar, 2002 and Zinn, 2009). Personal characteristics of the foster family have shown to have an

impact, positive or negative, in relation to permanency status for a case (Zinn, 2009). For example, family income might be a determinant factor in considering adoption after fostering for several months or years. Research also shows that less involvement of kinship foster care parents in the child's behavioral and emotional problems was prevalent when compared to non-kinship foster care parents (Le Prohn, 1994). Based on these studies it could be hypothesized that kinship foster care parents are in a disadvantaged position and need more direct services than non-kinship foster care parents.

Kinship foster care parents lack of resources and inability to sometimes detach from their closeness to the case can impact their ability to care for the child. Hong et al. (2011) states that interventions for kinship foster parents should address specific strategies to manage emotional and behavioral problems that might arise. The authors explained that often children and kinship foster care parents view kinship care as safe and secure since they are in a familiar environment. However, this very fact that provides security can be detrimental with the compliance and handling of the formal processes attached with a kinship placement; visitation, court hearings, and management of child's behavior, among others.

Sociobiological theory suggests that as relatives, kinship foster parents would be more invested in a child's life and emotional state than non-kinship foster parents (Lawler, 2008). Although a sociobiological link is characterized as a benefit of kinship care, research has shown that it does not determine a child's well-being (Lawler, 2008). The author states: "A kin foster mother's care for a related child is presumed by genetic preservation and related nepotistic discrimination, whereas a non-kinship foster mother appears to require a variety of external supports and resources (p.1133). However, the author presents that this presumption is not always correct. Therefore, the author suggests that the same standards and services that a non-

kinship foster care parent receives should be provided to kinship foster care parents.

In a study conducted in Finland, Vanschoonlandt et al. (2012) found that multiple placements had a stronger negative impact on foster children's behavioral problems than their type of placement, kinship or non-kinship. Nevertheless, the results of their study suggest that children in kinship placements exhibit less problematic behavior, presumably based on protective factors of cultural and family preservation. When other variables such as number of previous out of home placements were considered, the type of placement was not as significant. Therefore, behavior issues might not be different based on relative or non-relative placements, but rather on the circumstances surrounding the case of the child. Nevertheless, the comfort of the familiar could be a powerful tool to ease the placement of a child in a kinship home.

Many of the studies differ in their findings regarding level of attachment of kinship parents, its impact on behavior and emotional state, but there is agreement that kinship foster parents tend to be disadvantaged in various areas (Hong et al., 2011, Lawler, 2008, Harden et al., 2008, Le Prohn, 1994, Scananapieco and Hegar, 2002, Zinn, 2009 and Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). Kinship foster parents are a vulnerable population taking care and becoming responsible for another vulnerable population. Based on the existing literature on kinship foster parents motivations, challenges, role evaluation and perception have to be considered in this study of the experience of being a kinship foster care mother.

Role theory

Role theory is ideal in analyzing and understanding the experiences of kinship foster care mothers given the plethora of roles they practice on a daily basis. Biddle (1986) stated: "Role theory concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behavior-the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social

identities and situations" (p.68).

Role theory helps provide a framework to explore how a person can interpret, execute and reflect on his or her own role. Biddle (1986) defines the *five perspectives of role theory*. The first is *functional role theory*. Essentially, Biddle (1986) describes functional role theory as behaviors that people engage in, but are prescribed and part of a set of norms and expectations. The author explains that this perspective is associated with an established system in which all characters conform to the norms that apply to them.

Symbolic interactionist role theory is explained and described as “gives stress to the roles of individual actors, the evolution of roles through social interaction and various cognitive concepts through which social actors understand and interpret their own and other’s conduct” (Biddle, 1986 p.71). *Symbolic interactionist role theory perspective* also incorporates context by stating that a person performs a role within a situation and that a person's interaction with their environment influences the role.

Structural role theory is another *perspective* discussed by Biddle (1986). Biddle (1986) describes these roles as “patterned behavior”, among them: networks, kinships and relationships. The author also presents *organization role theory*, which is similar to structural role theory because it is a predetermined role that is based on a structure that tends to be hierarchical. (Biddle, 1986). According to the author this perspective is often used in industrial settings, it applies to the role of formal organizations. Organization role theory is rooted in the idea that organizations are consistent and stable.

Lastly, Biddle (1986) presents *cognitive role theory*. Biddle (1986) states: "Many cognitive role theorists have also concerned themselves with the ways in which a person

perceives the expectations of others and with the effects of those perceptions on behavior" (p. 74). Biddle (1986) concentrates among cognitive role theory on expectations and their relationship to norms, beliefs and preferences. He explains that how the "actors" view expectations, their self-efficacy and/or self-concept come into play when evaluating their role and their performance against reality.

All of these perspectives of role theory could facilitate the understanding of roles within organizations, family, society and their own self-appraisal. Based on role theory and its perspectives, a kinship foster care mother could be in a constant quest to maintain a balance among her roles and attempt to succeed in each one of them.

Methodology

Qualitative research, and specifically phenomenology, can strengthen the analysis of the role of kinship foster care mothers through its purpose and its quest for in-depth understanding. Haverkamp and Young (2007) state: "In contrast to quantitative research with similar goals, qualitative research with this purpose aims to inform practice by providing rich elaborated descriptions of specific processes or concerns within a specific context" (p.274).

Perhaps the reasons why qualitative methods are appropriate for this study are explained by Maxwell's five intellectual goals of qualitative studies: meaning, context, unanticipated, process and causal explanations (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research is flexible, attempts to understand processes, focuses on quality and particulars and presents raw data. Qualitative methods are appropriate to study the experiences of kinship foster care mothers because one can explore first hand, without predetermined conceptions, the experience of this population, their intentions and the context of their experiences (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Qualitative

methodologies have been described as documenting reality or a circumstance through experience (Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007). Therefore, through learning about a kinship foster care mothers own experiences, essence and meaning can be exposed.

A phenomenological approach was chosen for the study of kinship foster care mothers because through it, the researcher can attempt to create meaning from the experiences (phenomenon) of being a foster care mother. Phenomenology is defined as a method that allows the researcher to reveal the structures of experiences (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). Caelli (2001) discusses how phenomenology provides an opportunity for both the researcher and participant to engage in “interpretative awareness”. For this study this will be accomplished by sharing the findings and analysis with the participants and the agency to contribute to a reflection of the phenomenon that would hopefully lead to concrete changes and implementations.

Van der Zalm and Bergum (2000) explained that phenomenology offers an ideal way to understand a concrete experience (i.e. kinship foster care mothers), the person in relation to others (i.e. kinship foster care mother relationship with child, other children in the household and agency), beliefs and practices (i.e. parenting philosophy), and the meaning of a person’s experience (i.e. kinship foster care mother’s understanding of their experience).

Creswell (2007) describes hermeneutic phenomenology, which is based on Van Manen’s conception of phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology describes and interprets a phenomenon. This type of phenomenology focuses on the interpretation of the research and places emphasis on the description of the experiences of the participant. For the purpose of this qualitative study interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenology was used to both describe and analyze kinship foster care mothers' experience. The analysis focuses on both description and interpretation, but ultimately interpretation is given more emphasis. The data gathered from the

interviews describes the experiences of this sample of kinship foster care mothers while the analysis interprets their experiences.

Lopez and Willis (2004) summarize the unique aspect of interpretation by stating: “The hermeneutic phenomenologist, rather than seeking purely descriptive categories of the real, perceived world in the narratives of the participants, will focus on describing the meanings of the individuals being-in-the world and how these meanings influence the choices they make” (p729). The goal of this phenomenological interpretive study of kinship foster care mothers is indeed to create meaning from the participants’ narratives and interpret how these meanings impact their role.

Sampling and site selection

Access to a sample population of kinship foster care mothers was secured through the Assistant Executive Director of Child Welfare Services at Episcopal Social Services of New York (ESS). ESS works with more than 5,000 New Yorkers. Its mission is to help strengthen families, healthy development of children and youth and promote self-sufficiency. The agency has a presence in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn. This social service agency includes a program that focuses on foster care and adoption, at two sites, the Bronx and Manhattan. ESS foster program encompasses the following areas/ services: 1. Family preservation program, 2. Foster boarding home and adoption program, 3. Group homes and supervised apartments for teens, 4. Preparing youth for adulthood, and 5. Supporting the health of children in our care. Indeed ESS seemed to be an ideal agency for this study because of its comprehensive services within foster care and its presence in two boroughs of New York City, which had the potential to yield a diverse group of foster care mothers. Additionally, agency administrators welcomed the

idea of researching this population and finding information that could lead to enhance their services.

The study was presented to the agency as potentially being able to provide important information about the experience of foster care mothers, inform the agency's support programs and aid with retention and training. ESS has trainings and support groups for foster care parents. Recruitment was conducted through informal presentations during these support groups and trainings, and by posting flyers in both agency sites. On average, trainings or groups had 10 to 15 participants and the researcher attended at least 20 of these sessions. The study recruitment and procedures had the approval of Columbia University Internal Review Board.

Recruitment presentation and flyers were delivered in both English and Spanish to recruit Spanish speaking foster care mothers as well. The investigator's first language is Spanish. She is bilingual and fluent in both English and Spanish and therefore was able to recruit and conduct interviews in both languages. The ability to offer interviews in Spanish attracted a significant Latino population to the study.

Kinship foster mothers that expressed interest were contacted by phone to confirm their participation. Criterion sampling was used for this study. Creswell (2007) described this as an ideal sampling for phenomenology because all participants represent people who have experienced the phenomenon. Kinship foster mothers agreed to meet before or after their trainings. Therefore, the only criterion for the sample was that these women were kinship foster care mothers. Length of fostering, demographics, number of children did not determine if they would participate in the study. Approximately twenty non-kinship foster care mothers responded to participate in the research. Therefore, only the foster care mothers who showed interest in participating were interviewed.

All participants were currently serving as foster care mothers through ESS. Participants in the study were paid \$25 for participating in the interview. Interviews were conducted in a private office at the agency, while the kinship foster mothers waited for the biological parents to visit with their children.

Fifteen interviews were conducted at ESS. Each interview lasted between thirty-five minutes to an hour. The interviews began with a list of questions regarding demographic and personal information such as, country of origin, primary language, language spoken at home, civil status, children of their own and religious beliefs. An interview protocol was designed to help guide the conversation (See Appendix). The interviews included open-ended questions about kinship foster care mother's experiences, their challenges, motivations and appraisal of their role. All interviews were voluntary and conducted after written consent was given. All subjects agreed to the use of a tape recorder. Participants received a copy of the consent form with the researcher's contact information in case they had any further questions.

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher and once transcribed these were compared to the original recording for accurateness. Spanish interviews were transcribed in Spanish for coding and analysis. The Spanish interviews were translated to English only for purposes of writing the themes and quotes. Shibusawa & Lukens (2004) used the same procedure when studying the aging population and cultural practices in Japanese culture. The authors recorded the interviews in the original language, Japanese, transcribed it and coded in Japanese and translated the Japanese transcripts to English for the purpose of reporting.

Collecting the codes and themes from the original language in which the interviews were conducted allowed this researcher to experience what Caelli (2010) describes as “interpretative

awareness” by connecting further with the participant in their primary language as a way to understand more fully the essence of the phenomenon.

Data analysis

Creswell (2007) describes the data analysis as a process of highlighting common and different experiences and statements that emerge from the interviews to explain the phenomenon. The author emphasizes that to accomplish the essence of the phenomenon the researcher must follow a process. Saldaña (2009) describes the first cycle of coding. He based his definition on Strauss and Corbin (1998): “Breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences.” (p.81). Creswell (2007) suggests dividing those codes into groups of meanings that create themes. For example, discrete codes related to becoming a kinship foster care mother could be based on family relationship or desire to help. These codes could then be grouped into general themes of motivation.

The researcher of this study first described the demographic and socio-environmental characteristics of the subjects. Then, the researcher searched for codes and statements that illustrate how the interviewees experience the topic. As the researcher began collecting the data these categories expanded to include additional themes that emerged. After organizing these themes a description is written to define the experience, thus leading to a thematic analysis. After the process of coding and description is completed the next step encompasses a careful explanation of the phenomenon, which is called the essence. For Creswell (2007) essence is based on the common experiences that provide an explanation of the phenomenon.

Creswell (2007) promotes a model to organize and analyze the data that consists of: 1. Developing a list of significant statements and then group them into themes, 2. Preparing a written description of these themes (textual descriptions), 3. Describing how these experiences

happened, 4. Preparing a composite description that incorporates both the textual and structural description (p.159). Sharp and Ganong (2007) use this approach in their phenomenological study of the lived experience of White college educated women aged 28-34 who have not married. The authors transcribed and coded the data themselves; they then searched for data that explained the lived experience and grouped it into codes and eventually into themes. The authors provided examples and then described and analyzed the experience.

For the study of kinship foster care mothers data was organized and analyzed by creating a vertical column numbered 1 through 15 and a horizontal column that was categorized according to the questions (challenges, motivations, perception of role, case, demographics, etc.). Each interview was reviewed and the information recorded in the table by hand. Interviews were read twice, first as a whole and after the second reading the information was segmented into the columns for the analysis of the data. Examples that illustrated each code were included and referenced by page number of the interview. Through the second reading new codes and themes emerged. The table allowed for the commonalities and differences within each section and across sections to be compared for all the participants. After careful analysis of the categories based on the interviews, themes began to emerge from the data. A description of each theme was prepared and illustrated with examples.

Subjectivity and flexibility were essential to guarantee quality and rigor in handling and analyzing of the data. Morrow (2005) describes the importance of maintaining subjectivity and reflexivity in qualitative research by stating: "I would argue that investigators always believe something about the phenomenon in question and that a greater grounding in the literature militates against bias by expanding the researcher's understanding of multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon." (p. 254). Other principles that Morrow (2005) highlights and that were

followed in this study are: adequacy of data and immersion in the data. To accomplish adequacy of data, this researcher verified doubts regarding answers or comments with the interviewees. Seeking clarification, especially when discussing case related details or cultural nuances assured the researcher that the data collected was accurate. The researcher also learned about procedures, services and trainings of the agency to gain a better understanding of the agency environment and conducted an extensive review of the literature to expand the understanding of this population and prepare for a diversity of experiences. The analysis of the findings reflected the integration of these techniques and quality measures by staying true to the experiences of the kinship foster care mothers.

Findings

A total of 15 participants with a variety of kinship foster care parent experiences, ethnic backgrounds and ages were interviewed. The sample was composed of kinship foster care mothers who identified as Hispanic or African American/Black. For eight members of the sample, the first language was Spanish, six English and one Creole. Their ages range from 28-69, the median age was 52. Nine were single women, two widows, three separated and one married. Eleven women had children of their own; on average they had at least two children. The majority of the sample stated they practice a Christian religion: Catholic, Baptist, or Presbyterian.

The length of time that this group had served as foster care mothers varied from five months to 10 years, but on average they had been foster care mothers for at least two years. Most of the kinship foster mothers were taking care of one to two children; only one kinship foster mother took care of three. Lastly, with the exception of one mother who had adopted her grandchild, all of them had active placements at the time of the interview. Eight of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. The kinship foster care mothers interviewed represented

grandmothers, great-aunts, aunts, and cousins. Below is a summary of the demographic and personal findings:

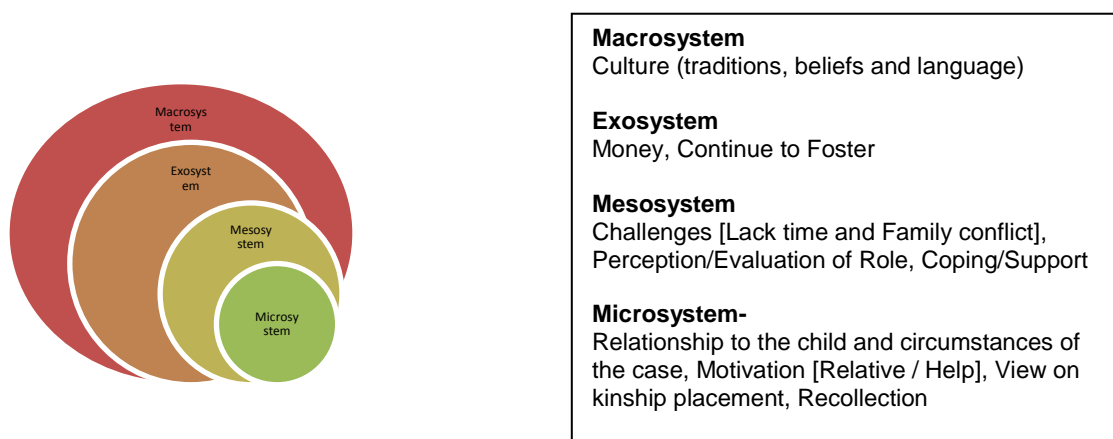
Table 2: Demographic Data Kinship Foster Care Mothers (N=15)			
Age group		Number	Percentage
26-35		3	20%
36-55		4	27%
56-75		8	53%
Race/Ethnicity			
African American		7	47%
Hispanic		8	53%
Civil Status			
Married		1	7%
Widowed		2	13%
Divorced or Separated		3	20%
Single		9	60%
Have own/biological children			
Yes		11	73%
No		4	27%
Country of Origin			
Dominican Republic		2	13%
Puerto Rico		4	27%
USA		6	40%
Other		3	20%
Religion			
Baptist		3	20%
Catholic		6	40%
Presbyterian		1	7%
Other		5	33%
First language			
English		6	40%
Spanish		8	53%
French		1	7%
Languages at Home			
English		7	47%
Spanish		5	33%
Spanish and English		2	13%
French		1	7%
Length of being a foster mother			
< 1 year		2	13%

1-3 years		8	53%
4-10 years		5	33%

Themes and descriptions

Kinship foster care mothers have unique circumstances that guide their individual experience and cases; however, there is commonality in their desire to help and support their family. The interviews showed that undertaking this role has both challenges and rewards. Additionally, their experience as a kinship foster care mother has influenced them, either to continue to foster non-kinship foster children or never to do so again. Through the data analysis several themes emerged that can be placed within the ecological systems framework:

Figure 1: The ecological systems and kinship foster care mothers



Microsystem: The background of the kinship foster care mother (family, biological relationship to the child, age) forms the microsystem. The microsystem for these foster care mothers includes evaluating the relationship with the child and circumstances of the case. For example, the kinship foster mother’s relationship to the child/children and how they ended up in foster care is discussed. Also, their motivation to undertake this caregiver role, their views on the placement

and how they remember the child/children coming into care are all considered factors that are part of this personal level.

Relationship to the child and circumstances of the case

The majority of the kinship foster care mothers interviewed were part of the child's life before they entered into care and were well aware of the circumstances surrounding the case. They all wished, regardless of the final outcome that the children would return to their parents, but some of them had to face that this was not an option. Five kinship foster mothers had adopted the children placed with them, while three of the fifteen mothers stated that they would not foster again once the children returned to their biological family.

The stories of how these children ended up in custody of their relatives are potentially traumatic and devastating for the child, but also for the kinship foster care mother. For example,

Mom # 8:

She [her daughter] was rebellious because we were the ones who called the police because of what we had seen, the conditions the child was in, and she never wanted to say what had happened. But I noticed that when she went to her boyfriend's house, the child always came back with bruises. So, I used to ask her and she would tell me that he had fallen. Children fall but not that much. He always had the bruises in the same place until the child was hospitalized during one week, so we decided to... She stopped talking to me for almost two years.

Mom #3 shared a similar experience:

I was expecting them to be in a better, safe place. That's what I was looking at. It's okay. They're with me. I knew my babies weren't going to be left in the shelter, babysitters because she [her daughter] would do that a lot. I would ask her where's the kids? She would come over with her friend. Where's my grand-kids? I wouldn't see them for a time, and she was always – she would leave them in the shelter.

Another kinship foster care mother was honest about her daughter's mental illness and incapacity to take care of her grandchildren. Mom # 15 said:

Yes, she always has had a lot of problems so she was constantly in hospitals due to relapses so they have been with me all the time. Yes, yes, I'm worried about her, I'm worried about her because she is mentally ill, she is bipolar and schizophrenic and she is very erratic with her mood. They go from one extreme to the other, for example right now I see her a little bit distant from her children and some days she is really caring so she goes from one extreme to the other.

Motivation to become non-kinship foster care mothers

A relative and helping

The majority of the kinship foster mothers interviewed expressed two main motivations to become kinship foster parents: 1) that the child was their family and 2) helping. The majority of the kinship foster care mothers felt that they had an obligation or a commitment to be there for their family and help to take care of these children. They also felt that they prefer the children to be placed with family rather than with a stranger. Some kinship foster care mothers expressed that they took on the role because they wanted to give the child a home, attention and security.

One common thread is that kinship foster care mothers were honest about their motivations.

Mom #1 exemplifies the sense of responsibility for a family member when she states:

I never thought about...but when my daughter's children were removed from her side I felt the obligation to take them in my home, I did not want them to go to a strangers home, so I decided to have the children.

In explaining how she accepted the responsibility to become a foster mom to her nephew,

Mom #12 said:

My brother spoke to me about it, because he had concerns way before, months before she [her sister] gave birth, around maybe March or something. And he expressed concern, because I guess I'm the only one that was stable in the family, and everyone else is trying to get back on their feet or they're just living, and so I thought about it and said, "Okay," and then when I spoke to her [her sister] about it she wasn't too happy and she was in denial about that they would take him away from her. But then when I went to see him at the hospital, she immediately asked me, "Well, will you still, they are going to take him away like you said, so would you take care of him," so I said yes immediately.

This kinship foster care mother was a foster child herself and felt compelled to help her nephew so he would not experience what she went through in the system. Mom#11 had a similar motivation, stating: “My niece was in the system, so that is why I wanted to take care of this niece. I did not want her to experience that.”

These two quotes exemplify that kinship foster care mothers who had personal experiences with the foster care system feel strongly about not having a family member be placed with a non-kinship foster parent. They both expressed that they had negative opinions of the foster care system and felt the child was safer with them.

To others helping, company and love were motivations for becoming a kinship foster care mother. For example, Mom #6 said: “I wanted to provide love and caring to that little person, that child and for me too because I wanted to have someone with me, I felt I needed that.” A grandmother also states that she wanted to help her grandson who was a teenager and had experienced multiple placements. Mom # 13 stated: “He kept coming back, and he kind of begged.”

There was one kinship foster care mother who expressed ambivalence about her role. Mom #4 shared her ambivalence about taking by stating:

Originally I did not plan to become no foster parent, but it’s like my cousin had her first and my cousin got to a point where she did not want to do it no more, so I have to wind up taking care of them to keep them from going in to stranger’s home.

Views on kinship placement

By virtue of already knowing the child and the circumstances surrounding the case most kinship foster care mothers felt they knew what to expect from the child regarding behavior, emotional problems, health conditions and family conflicts. Nevertheless, once they begin fostering they shared they did not feel they had all the information or preparation to deal with

their role as the formal caregiver to the child/children. Mom# 5 states that her view on the kinship placement was that it would be an easy process to adapt to because she works with children. Mom # 14 was expecting a shorter stay from her grandson:

Well, I didn't expect to have him that long. I thought it was just going to be temporary. I wouldn't mind babysitting, but I thought they would work their way to get him back. And then I asked my son and he said, "Oh, I'm trying to straighten up", but his son is still with me.

Some kinship foster care mothers view their role as an opportunity to offer the child something better than what they had been experiencing. Mom #8 shares: "I wanted his life to change. His life changed completely, he was in a safe place, with affection, a normal life for a child." These views clearly varied based on the individual circumstances of each family and kinship mother.

Recollection

Similar to having given birth to a child, kinship foster care mothers remember when the child first came to their care. This recollection could be due to their proximity to the circumstances surrounding the case or to their desire to take care of the child and provide a healthy environment or both. Also, some of the mothers remembered how they prepared emotionally or logistically. Following are some examples:

Mom #11 shared the difficulty of the moment when the child had to leave the biological mother:

I mean it was okay. It was okay. The hardest part was when their mama came over, when it's time for mommy to leave. That bothered me a lot because I know they are very attached to her. I know she never really left them like that. So that bothered me.

Mom # 9 shared the urgency of the placement:

Picking up and picking up because they brought her the same day that we went to court. The same day, they came and checked on the house. That same day, they brought the

baby over and we were cleaning up. One person brought me the crib and someone else brought me this and that...

For Mom #1 she remembered what she did when she received the call that the children were coming to her home:

Well, honestly to prepare myself I lock myself in my room and I say, God, it's been so long since – I have grandchildren -- but it's been so long since I have a baby. Changing diapers, I am sure that I want to do it, that I am able to do it.

Mom # 2 felt happy when she received the news. She stated: “Yes, it was really fast, I had two days to prepare everything before knowing she was coming. And we bought everything we needed, but it was exciting.”

Mesosystem – In this level two microsystems interact. The themes identified at this level included challenges, perception/evaluation of role and coping/support. Challenges can include undertaking the role of becoming a foster care mother while managing the emotional impact of having to take care of the son of a daughter who is a drug abuser or faces other life challenges. Perception/evaluation of role relates to how these women view themselves in their caregiving role and how others (agency, caseworkers, family, friends) perceive them. Coping and support are part of this level because they are not only dependent on the individual, but also on family, friends, community, agency and how these all interact to help the foster mother manage her role.

Challenges

Kinship foster care mothers identified two main challenges in caring for the children: lack of time and dealing with family conflict.

Lack of time

For several kinship foster care mothers they did not have time to plan to become a foster care provider and it was a sudden choice. Once they engaged in fostering the child, they realized

the demands of their role (appointments, court visits, visitation with biological family, and trainings) placed a strain on their time and their previous lifestyle.

Mom # 13 shared that her new role as a foster mother changed the way she lived: “I am sort of like an organized person; I don’t like disorder too much and he is the opposite. It is whole different generation.” For Mom # 8 she felt that the change eradicated her time and her lifestyle: “I don’t have my own life. I had to leave my friends aside to be able to be with the child.” Mom # 2 felt similarly:

You don’t have time to do anything, the child is first and anything and if you want to go to a party is very difficult because you have to look for a babysitter or someone who could take care of the child. Or to get ready, before it took me an hour maybe to get ready and now is like two or three hours to get ready. Also, you have problems to sleep. I don’t sleep like before and she wakes up every hour.

One kinship foster care mother who was older stated that the challenge for her was starting over.

Mom # 4 shared:

Yeah because it’s like I have not had a little child in my house in a long time. My kids are grown and sometimes I am like I must be crazy. This is to me like starting all over again, raising another child.

Family conflict

Another challenge that seems to be prevalent is the relationship with the family and the conflicts that might arise in the role of a kinship foster care mother. Some parents explained that their new role caused jealousy and sometimes anger amongst their relatives. Mom #3 exemplified this when discussing how she is adopting her grandchild and how her daughter reacted at first:

Yeah. Now, she is okay with it. She wasn’t at first I guess. But then again, she wasn’t – she never told me anything. But I guess it was like they’re – but then again, I guess the fact that my son put in her face telling her you know what? They’re being adopted by somebody you know, and you already – so it’s like wow. They got comfortable, and she

accepted it like wow, better for her. Now, she sees them, and she comes over. She's my daughter, but there was a time when she wasn't even – I was very angry.

Mom # 10 discussing the challenges of fostering her grandchildren:

Sometimes I feel sad. I don't have a problem with having the children, but sometimes I don't even know where their mother lives, where my daughter is. Sometimes before I used to talk to her, but now I don't hear from her when I call. She don't call me back, I don't know what is going on.

For Mom # 11 the challenge is managing the visits and her relationship with the biological family of the child. The following quote describes how the mother of the foster children violated the order of protection and the foster mother was afraid that she would be involved with the authorities and this could affect both the foster children and her own biological children.

Well, I didn't really know what I should do because she [biological mother] had an order of protection. So, at first I called the cops. And they took too long to come, for whatever reason. I waited downstairs for five more minutes and then I left because I didn't see them. I left. My niece, the one that was in the system, lives in the area. I walked in and she's like, 'Look. All you have to do is call the agency about them. Stop freaking out.' Because I was freaking out. I can't have my kids being put through that.

Perception and evaluation of their role

The majority of the kinship foster care mothers stated that they felt satisfied with their role as foster mothers. They expressed that it gave them pleasure to know that the children in their care were safe and doing well. Although their role was either temporary or could become permanent they expressed a sense of compromise and responsibility with it. For example; Mom# 8: "I raised three kids and I dedicated entirely to them and I think I would do the same for my grandson." Mom #6 evaluated herself well: "I honestly can tell you I am a very good mother for me that is a wonderful experience to live entirely." Mom # 4 shared how she views her role: "To me I don't judge myself as being her foster mother because people always say that's your mom.

No, I am not her mom, I am her aunt. I look at it as being her aunt, not like being a foster parent.”

Regarding others perception of their role, most kinship foster moms identify their role as a positive one that most people view as noble and a great contribution. Mom #14 shares how others comment on her role as a kinship foster mother: “A lot of people in the building say, “You one good grandma,” They're saying, “You have another baby again. You good because you help.” While Mom #7 describes others perception of their role with the following:

No, they see it – no - a lot of my friends tell me “oh you are going to do something good.” Everybody has told me the same thing, everyone, everyone. Most of my friends, but a part of my family are like ‘oh, I would not get involved in that’ and I tell them that the one who likes it is me, and the one who lives with me and you know how I am with children. Sincerely, I am honest, if you give me 20 kids to look after I will and without asking for a penny.

The kinship foster care mothers recognized the involvement of the agency in the affairs of the case and in the placement, but they don't feel that their role is evaluated and appreciated fully by the agency.

Coping and support

Kinship foster care mothers mostly consider two main sources of coping and support: their faith and their families and friends.

Mom # 2 shared that her support comes from some members of her family, but not the biological parents of the foster child:

Well, in my family I received the support first from God, then from my mother; she is there in a hundred percent, her parents [the foster child's biological parents] are there too but not in the way I want. I would like them to be more cooperative, since they know I take good care of the girl they don't feel the obligation of paying more attention to her because they see I'm doing really fine.

Mom # 3 shares a similar view:

Yeah. Well, my family does. They know I'm always good with kids. They know I've always taken care of kids. I think that's what God put me here for. To get me – yea. I've been taking care of my nephew since wow, no exaggeration; I was only 9-years-old. And ever since that, I've taken care of kids that weren't mine because for some reason, I'm always with kids. They always end up in my house, and I'm always taking care of somebody else's kids."

A few kinship care mothers also identified the agency as a source of support and assistance to cope with the stressors of becoming a foster care mother. Others felt the agency was not providing them what they needed or that the internal issues of the agency, such as bureaucratic processes or worker turnover affected their cases. Internal changes in the agency and/or constant changes in the caseworker assigned to the case made them re-tell their story and had to create rapport and navigate the agency bureaucracy for services. Mom #3 view of the agency's support is the following: "There's a lot of things that sometimes I would ask for help, and they slacked off."

For others the agency training was important and provided them with adequate tools and support. Mom # 7 shares:

I learn a lot. I learned some things in one of Angela's [the trainer] lessons that I did not know about. I even passed them onto my sister and my sister and I were very impressed, and I told her that is how I felt when I went to that class.

In reference to the support of the agency some kinship foster care mothers felt they had support, but the agency internal issues affected them. Mom # 11 said:

I loved the worker that they [the children] finally ended up with because in the beginning, they had nowhere to go. She was cool, but she ended up getting fired for whatever reason. I didn't care to know. Then the other worker that came, she was nice also. But she quit, for whatever reason, I didn't want to know. And then we ended up with this one and I liked him.

Exosystem- This level refers to an individual's external environment. For kinship foster care mothers this level relates to financial/work status and how it impacts their role as caregivers.

Additionally, external factors that contribute to their decision to continue fostering are considered.

Money

The topic of financial assistance was not frequently brought up by the kinship foster care mothers voluntarily. When questioned, the majority of them feel that money was not a driving force that motivated them to continue fostering. They shared that they would foster their relatives regardless of money. Some kinship foster care mothers felt that the financial help was welcomed and that it did contribute. Others mentioned it is not enough to cover all expenses.

Mom # 10 expressed her view of financial support: “Even what they give you [financial support for the child] is not enough, I said, if I am in my country, they are not gonna give it to me. I know, you know, when they give you that money for the month, you know, it’s not really, really enough, but that is okay for me.” Similarly, Mom # 6 stated: “No, I don’t feel it is enough because we do a lot of extra expenses and you can’t get that back.”

For Mom # 1 her role as a caregiver has helped her become stricter with her spending. She explains:

A lot of people don’t think it’s okay because they say – and it’s true, it holds you back because when I didn’t have the kids I would go to the casinos and I would go everywhere, so in that sense I couldn’t do it. There’s a group of widows at my church and we were always going to casinos and to lunch. From the moment I take these kids into my home, I am held back from a lot of things and spend the money right.

Mom #2 feels that her role is not dependent on the money she receives: “It has nothing to do with money, well, for me. They don’t give a great amount of money, so I don’t know why the people say this is about the money.”

Continue to foster

Eleven of the kinship foster care mothers shared they would foster children who were non- kinship and all of them shared they have no regrets in their experience as kinship foster care

mothers. Five of the fifteen mothers have adopted their kinship children and four are actively fostering non- kinship children. This is an important finding in regards to recruitment and retention. It is evident that for many of the kinship foster care mothers the experience of fostering has motivated them to continue doing so. Often kinship foster care mothers are viewed as temporary or for example, grandmothers who care for or adopt their grandchildren. These findings suggest that kinship foster mothers might be recruited to foster non-kinship children.

Mom # 1 decided to become a non-kinship foster care mother:

My two sons, they have been involved and they... they didn't want me to do this, they argue with me all the time but I think at least I have someone (non-kinship child) with me and I watch cartoons with him. I help these kids but they help me too.

It is important to note that three kinship mothers shared they would not continue fostering. One of the mothers expressed that dealing with family conflicts made her decide that this was her last experience fostering. Another kinship foster care mother stated that she was too old and had her activities and life scheduled and was not willing to shift her routine again. For this mother fostering required too much change in her routine and her life. Therefore, some kinship foster mothers view their role as temporary and their personal circumstances and experiences did not necessarily encourage them to continue fostering.

Macrosystem - This level consists of the larger social and cultural context of the individual.

Cultural beliefs, values and practices and how they influence caregiver are considered.

Culture

For the purpose of this study culture will be guided by the following definition: "Culture is the way people express their patterns of thought, their phantasies, their dreams and their behavior, their values, beliefs, political, economical and religious, their rules of conduct" (Quallenberg, 2000, p.1). This definition seems appropriate for the study of kinship foster care

mothers because it suggests that culture is not static and relates to person and environment.

Kinship foster care mothers tend to discuss less the impact of culture as a factor in their fostering since they usually share the same cultural background as the children. When asked if and how culture had an impact on their experience as kinship foster mothers invariably they established that it was the same because the child was part of their family. Mom # 9 feels that culture for her manifested in religion, traditions, and food. She stated:

I take her to church, a lot and now it's happened that I when I take her on Tuesdays – it's like a healing circle and she's gone in the middle and starts clapping and singing. I always take her... and the traditions as well... always during Christmas and those things we did in Puerto Rico, we do them at home.

Mom # 15 shared how her cultural background has an impact in her care for her grandchildren. The following is her description:

Yes, because Latinos are very close to their children, we protect our children so much and I think sometimes we are kind of overprotective. The Latino customs are like these, we want to have our married children in our home and sometimes we don't let them grow up but I feel okay because I was raised in that way too, yes.

Kinship foster care mothers do continue to maintain the same cultural traditions: food, holidays, language, which they have always practiced. Although they are not necessarily going through a process of acculturation with the child they do rely in their cultural beliefs and values to parent. Most kinship foster care mothers noted that they are motivated to become foster care mothers because of family. Latina kinship foster care mothers stressed the concept of family and how family supports one another. The influence and manifestation of cultural beliefs and values about family are tangible among this population. The relevance of the theme of culture among the kinship foster care mothers interviewed was prevalent and prompted separate research on this topic.

Essence – Discussion

This in depth study of the experience of being a kinship foster care mother demonstrates that this is a unique population due to their proximity to the case, coming from the same family and culture as the child, usually having prior access to the child and biological parents and knowing patterns of behavior and emotional issues prior to assuming care.

For kinship foster care mothers their challenges are rooted in their ability to negotiate their role and their time while being immersed in the case specific circumstances. A kinship foster care mother will most likely have difficulty adjusting to her new role as a caregiver if, for example, she is granted the care of her grandchildren based on the fact that her daughter lived in a shelter with the three children and lost her parental rights. The kinship foster mother suddenly becomes the sole caregiver and at the same time remains concerned about her own daughter's well-being. This reflects the role negotiations and conflicts that arise from their immersion in the case.

The majority of the kinship foster care mothers expressed clear expectations about the length and responsibility of their role. Some of the kinship foster care mothers believed theirs would be a temporary placement while others knew that most likely it would be a permanent placement. Many of the kinship foster care mothers had little opportunity to reflect on taking this role because of the urgency of these placements. Once the children are with them they can begin to create expectations about their role. The interviews suggest that indeed these kinship foster care mothers want to help the children feel safe and nurtured. Many recognized that they were not prepared to take care of these children or had been "out of practice". Nevertheless, they took the challenge.

Each kinship foster care mother exhibited different and unique circumstances that contributed to their willingness to take on this role. However, the essence of their role can be defined in wanting to help their families and visualizing fostering as their duty rather than a choice.

Kinship foster care mothers are generally motivated to acquire this role to provide a familiar, safe environment for the children who already are their family. Regardless of their own personal situations, health, work, partners, and children of their own they become foster care mothers. For some kinship foster care mothers the role requires them to adapt to new responsibilities and others view it as the same role they had before.

Kinship foster care mother's capacity to take on several roles is one that they have to master in order to not suffer from burnout. Kinship foster care mothers faced many roles that are directly and indirectly associated to the case or child. Each of these roles has a unique set of responsibilities and emotional attachments, while at the same time they are interlinked. The ecological systems framework aids in understanding this population since all levels of an individual interact and are intertwined. Therefore, a kinship foster care mother's personal and social context and sources of stress and coping should be considered when assigning a case and as the situation is subsequently monitored.

Pearlin et al. (1990) stress and coping model can be applied to kinship foster care mothers. Their background and context (age, kinship, culture) influence their primary stressors (overload, role strain, problematic behavior of the child) and the secondary stressors (sense of competency, self-esteem, economic problems), which are real and prevalent in their roles. These mothers coping skills and supports mediate such stressors and can make the difference in retainment and satisfaction of their role. Each of the kinship foster care mother's undergoes

stress and coping; the process reflects their personal situations, coupled with stressors and their ability to cope which encompass their caregiving experience.

All of the roles of a kinship foster care mother can cause role strain. The kinship foster care mothers interviewed expressed feeling exhausted because they were fulfilling multiple roles and responsibilities and each of them had their own emotional and physical strains. Additionally, invariably the proximity to the case and to the biological parents of the child placed a strain that can be considered a strength or challenge for these women.

Biddle (1986) defines the *five perspectives of role theory* and in each of these principles we can locate the experience of kinship foster care mothers. The first is *functional role theory*. Essentially, Biddle (1986) describes functional role theory as behaviors that people engage in, but are prescribed and part of a set of norms and expectations. Kinship foster care mothers often are expected to take the role of foster care mothers because it is assumed that family would be the first resource for the children.

Symbolic interactionist role theory is another perspective (Biddle, 1986). Byrne and Heyman (1997) state that a symbolic interactionist perspective has to do with a social world in progress; it relates to roles, people and environment that constantly change. Kinship foster care mothers who eventually adopted the child in their care undergo a symbolic interactionist role in which their roles intermingle with one another. For kinship foster care mothers, *a symbolic interactionist role theory perspective* could be useful in understanding their role because it allows for discussion of their "performance" within the context of their role as a partner, biological mother, foster care mother, caregiver and potentially an adoptive mother within the same household.

Structural role theory is another *perspective* discussed by Biddle (1986). This perspective focuses on roles that are determined based on a person's status in a relationship or situation. This pertains to kinship foster care mothers because they have to identify as parents of the child in care and indeed they also carry on their role as a relative of the child.

Organization role theory is another perspective, which is similar to structural role theory because it is a predetermined role that is based on a structure that tends to be hierarchical. (Biddle, 1986). Within the child welfare system, a kinship foster parent's role is supposed to be clearly delineated by the agency and the courts. However, the larger foster care system and agencies are constantly changing- caseworkers, requirements, appointments. Therefore, the foster care parent has to navigate these changes while trying to abide by the expectations of her role within the system and the particular agency.

Lastly, Biddle (1986) presents *cognitive role theory*, which is based on the balance between the expectation assigned to a role and a person's behavior. How a kinship foster care mother view expectations, their self-efficacy and/or self-concept come into play when evaluating their role and their performance in that role.

An important conclusion from this study of the experience of kinship foster care mothers is the need for balance amongst all their roles. The balance between the "actor" and his or her context is essential. Balance relates to how the different ecological systems levels interact, how foster care mothers manage stressors and challenges and how they evaluate their role and promote stability for themselves and the children they care for. Marks and MacDermid (1996) state: "In other words, role balance is both a behavioral pattern of acting across roles in a certain way and a corresponding cognitive-affective pattern of organizing one's inner life of multiple

selves" (p.421). Balance is important to achieve for a kinship foster care mother because of the expectations of the role and the reality and ambiguity that surrounds the case and the family.

According to Nordenmark (2004) the presence of multiple roles has the potential to enhance well-being because people are involved in multiple social settings, resources and environments that can contribute to positive self-image and life circumstances, especially because the individual feels purpose. Reid and Hardy (1999) express similar findings, but they add the caveat that multiple roles have to be organized and the person performing those roles should feel satisfied with their "performance". The kinship foster care mothers in this study describe how they manage multiple roles and try to seek balance. However, for kinship foster care mothers to achieve role balance they need supports, self-efficacy and coping skills that will allow for strong, healthy interactions and realistic expectations within the performance of each role.

Kinship foster care mothers many times have to manage the emotional turmoil of knowing that their grandchild, cousin, niece or nephew has been removed from the care of their parents and the tense situation this can create among family members. Therefore, the unique position within the family of the kinship foster care mother should be recognized and managed accordingly by the agency. The agency staff has the task of incorporating this sub-population of kinship foster care mothers to the agency and clearly explaining the expectations of their role and also the strains and challenges they face as a family member. Unique groups of support or trainings to manage family interactions, dilemmas, emotional processes that arise from their direct involvement in the case should be held. Most of the kinship foster care mothers interviewed view their role less formally than non-kinship foster care mothers. This could be due to their biological relation to the child. Nevertheless they rely and seek help from the agency for

specific services. Several kinship foster care mothers felt a lack of support from the agency in helping them cope with the behavioral/ emotional problems of the child or the stressors they were experiencing with their caregiver role.

Foster parent engagement is important in the success of implementing interventions and training. Conducting an assessment of their risk and protective factors of the foster care mother is also crucial. Risk and protective factors should be assessed at the time of placement because they can have an impact not only on the caregiver, but also on the child. Additionally, supports for dealing with risk factors should be provided while promoting the foster mothers strengths and coping skills. Trainings and services are essential for these women.

Each kinship foster care mother's particular context has repercussions for her role performance. An elderly grandmother living by herself and with an established routine versus a young cousin who works and has supports for day care have very different experiences of fostering their family members. Regardless, of their love or affection for the child the sudden impact on the lives of the kinship foster care mothers should be assessed prior to placement. Some of the mother's interviewed expressed that they suddenly became caregivers by need rather than by choice. By accepting this role, these women demonstrate coping through their ability to manage stressful and crisis situations. Therefore, working from a strengths perspective that elaborates on their skills to cope and manage challenges should be incorporated by the agency.

Personal, familial, social expectations are all part of the caregiver role of a kinship foster care mother. Role theory can help explain this population's experience. Role theory considers not only the person and others perceptions of their role, but also how their role interacts within other levels of their lives. Biddle (1986) states that roles do not necessarily only adhere to

expectations and: “may reflect other cognitive processes as well as normative expectations” (p.71). Kinship foster care mothers can have clearly delineated expectations of their role: length, responsibilities, but the ever-changing nature of human beings and emotional attachments could make them deviate from established expectations. The data and the analysis of kinship foster care mother’s roles have led to recommendations for enhancing recruitment, retention and services for this sub-group.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the experiences of these kinship foster care mothers. Each of these can be reinforced throughout the placement.

Recruitment and placement

The agency should assess the background and family contexts of the kinship foster mother. This would aid in understanding their link to the case, their emotional attachment to the child and biological parent. It would also lead to ideas for providing adequate training to help manage the requirements and stressors of their role. The staff and kinships foster mother should also discuss case specific problems, needs of the child, physical and mental health conditions and resources. Lastly, it is important to lay out clear expectations of their role – regarding attachment, relationship with relatives, and agency compliance. Clearly establishing these expectations would also increase retention and help kinship foster care mothers comply with all their mandates. This could be done during recruitment and through trainings and case management.

Training

Training should be focused on assessing the coping skills of kinship foster care mothers, which could aid in shaping programs and interventions for this population. Social workers and

clinical staff should be trained to assess coping skills in various settings including trainings, interviews, home visits and support groups. Additionally, they should provide support and counseling for kinship foster care parents who are dealing with the emotional ramifications of a relative losing their child temporarily or permanently to the child welfare system or to them.

Retention

It is important to incentivize the kinship foster care mothers by supporting and acknowledging the difficult job they face and assisting them through it. Just because they are family members it does not mean they do not need the support and the positive feedback.

Limitations and strengths

This qualitative phenomenological research study of kinship foster care mothers contributes to the limited literature on foster care parents, highlighting their challenges, involvement in care and assessment of their role. The findings offer ideas for the provisions of services and of recruitment and retention for this population.

One of the challenges of a phenomenological study is making a distinction between narrative and transcript. It is in the narrative that meaning and understanding surges. Caelli (2001) clarifies that each are distinct and that it is in the ability of the researcher to "derive narratives from transcripts." (p.278). Reporting the data gathered from the study is not sufficient, but rather creating the account of what happen, why it happens and how it happens is the task of the researcher.

Finlay (2009) describes an important limitation of phenomenology: "In the current climate, phenomenologists are challenged to recognize that any knowledge produced is contingent, proportional, emergent and subject to alternative interpretations "(p.17). This could

be viewed as a limitation because the same population could be analyzed differently by different researchers. Therefore, one could conclude that since the experiences of these kinship foster care mothers are subject to alternate interpretations they cannot be generalizable. However, the aim of this phenomenological study is to present the essence of this group of kinship foster care mothers by using their own words and examples to promote understanding of the population. Phenomenology can limit the ability to generalize results and draw conclusions over a population due to a small sample size and its findings being relevant to the specific group that was studied. However, the findings illustrate common themes and experiences that can inform practice about this population and that can initiate further research of an understudied, but important part of the foster care system.

Implications for practice and policy

Prior to assigning a kinship foster case the agency needs to assess the circumstances surrounding the case, the ability of the potential kinship foster care parent to be a parent regardless of their relationship or attachment to the biological parent of the child. Issues of time, ability to care of a child after years of not being a caregiver or not having any experience as a caretaker are all factors that should be considered. Once the kinship foster care parent is selected the agency must provide adequate trainings and services as well as continuing to assess the fitness of the placement.

The agency should evaluate through questionnaires, recruitment sessions and in-depth interviews the primary and secondary stressors as well as the strengths of the kinship foster care parent. Emphasis should be given to the emotional attachments and relationship that exist with the biological parents of the child they are caring for and how such relationships might impact placement and judgment. With this information, services and supports can be designed that

adequately address the needs of all involved. Most kinship foster care mothers stated they felt a lack of affirmation by the agency about their performance. Recognition by the agency would improve levels of satisfaction, the kinship foster care mother's self-concept and evaluation and perhaps lead them to foster non-kinship foster children in the future. Recognizing and attempting to reduce role strain, assessing needs and circumstances of this population to adequately provide for them has direct implications for practice and policy that could potentially enhance the care and well-being of the child.

Future research and program development

The results of this study can inform the design of a pilot intervention for kinship foster care mothers. The intervention will be designed using the specific needs and themes that emerged from the study. The intervention should measure progress regarding retention, easing of family conflict and time management and perception and evaluation of the role by the kinship foster care mother and the agency. It is essential to acknowledge not only the sources of stress for this group of care providers but also their strengths: their strong familial bond, their desire to help and manage difficult emotional circumstances. Designing an intervention and developing programs that highlight their unique characteristics could aid in providing much needed support for this population and improve support for those in their care.

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Appendix

Kinship Foster Care Mother's Interview Protocol

Research Question: What is your experience as a kinship foster care mother ?

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

This is a research study in conjunction with Columbia University School of Social Work. The goal of this interview is to understand more about kinship foster care mothers. As the consent you just signed mentioned, this interview and any information you provide is confidential and will be kept anonymous. I will report on the interview, but it will be written in general terms and never using identifying information. Today, I will be asking you some questions and learning more about you.

Do you have any questions or concerns?

Demographics

Name:

Phone number:

Age:

Country of Origin

Race/Ethnicity

Civil Status

Children of your own? :

Religion:

Questions

1. How long have you been a foster care mother?
 - Probe: How many times have you done this?
2. How many foster children do you care for?
 - Probe: Ages? How are they related to you?

3. What motivated you to accept becoming a kinship foster care mother?
 - Probe: family, altruism, charity, remuneration
4. What did you expect of your foster children?
 - Probe: regarding behavior, emotional state, interactions with you and other family members
5. Have there been any challenges related to being a kinship foster care mother? If so, could you tell me what have they been or the most recent?
6. If challenges exists, how have you been able to overcome them?
 - Probe: What in your environment, personality helped you?
7. Are their positive aspects of being a foster care mother? If so, what are they?
 - Probe: Could you provide an example of a positive situation?
8. Can you describe what it was like when your first foster care child came into your home?
 - Probe: How did you prepare? Lessons learned?
9. Do you feel you have support?
 - Probe: from whom, what type of support?
10. How do you think others perceive your role as a kinship foster mother ?
 - Probe: Agency, other foster mothers, your family?
10. How has your parenting been influenced by your own culture: for example your language, your cultural/ethnic background, your religion?
11. What life experiences if any have influenced your foster parenting?
 - Probe: Childhood, own parents, religion, culture, problems, trauma
12. Looking back, now that you have been a foster mother how do you feel about your decision to become one?

13. Would you act differently as a foster mother if the child you are caring for was not related to you? Do you feel it would be a bigger challenge to care for a child that is not related to you or rather it would be easier?
14. Does your family relationship with the child impact your care?
15. Would you foster a child that is not related to you?
16. What is the challenge of fostering a child who is a member of your family?
17. What is the benefit of fostering a child who is a member of your family?
18. Would you consider fostering non kinship children?
19. Is there anything else about your experience as a foster mother that you would like to tell me?

Thank you very much! I will be in contact with you.

Dissertation Paper 3: How culture manifests in the experience of Latina foster care mothers? : A careful understanding of how culture and empowerment intersect for Latina Foster Care Mothers

Introduction

The preamble to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers states:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. (NASW, 2008)

Empowerment and culture are intrinsic components of social work since they can play a significant role in the population one serves. Parents often find comfort in their cultural heritage and traditions, and drawing upon experiences, situations and languages that are familiar can empower them to face challenges and stressors. Thus, an understanding of the relationship between empowerment and culture becomes vital in providing support to foster care mothers coping with their role. This paper evaluates the role of empowerment theory and cultural constructs for women, specifically Latina foster care mothers, and how both can be integrated into practice within the foster care system. A qualitative phenomenological study of 30 foster care mothers served by Episcopal Social Services of New York City was conducted to attempt to understand the unique experience of this group by identifying sources of support, family environment, experiences, satisfaction and cultural socio-environmental factors that have an impact on their role. Among this group of foster care mothers, 20 foster care mothers identified as Latina encompassing the sub sample that was analyzed. The aim of this study was to understand how does culture manifests among Latina foster care mothers. For Latina foster care mothers personal expectations coupled with invalidating societal, political and cultural notions of Latina women can affect their sense of self and worth. This study of the experience of Latina foster care mothers sheds information on how culture and empowerment impacts these women, both for those who serve as kinship and non-kinship caregivers.

Empowerment theory and foster care mothers

Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy (1997) state that empowerment is intrinsically linked to the profession of social work. Empowerment is a theory than can be applied to many individuals confronting different circumstances as expressed by: “Women, people of color, the chronic mentally ill, the elderly, poor families, and the developmentally disabled are among the many groups who can benefit from efforts to enhance their personal, interpersonal and collective power.” (Kemp et al., 1997, 52) For these authors, empowerment is about people and their socio environment, which includes culture.

Kemp et al. (1997) present the dimensions of empowerment. First the authors discuss the importance of *participation* based on the notion that people must engage as active participants of change for themselves and in society. This participation can take the form of *client-worker partnerships*, which should reduce the natural power dynamic that occurs, for example, between a social worker and a foster care mother. The partnership is based on working together as advocates, consultants and collaborators. Additionally, participation can be practiced through *client-client partnerships* that can be rooted in alliances or groups. Such groups of foster care mothers promote shared stories and mutual support.

Education is the second main dimension of empowerment. Developing knowledge about collaboration, resources, problems and possible solutions is a key component of this process. Education is not one-sided, from the social worker to the client. Both the social worker and foster care mother can learn from one another, from skills to lessons based on experience. Within the foster care system, education and training serve to better prepare the foster care mother to face the challenges and the formal responsibilities she has towards the child and the child welfare system.

Empowerment also requires *critical reflection*. Critical reflection can be interpreted as a process in which one ponders and evaluates life circumstances. Critical reflection can lead a person to take concrete actions. Kemp and her colleagues (1997) explain that *transformation of perspectives* occurs through critical reflection, through a change and evolution in how to address the challenges of everyday life. Critical reflection has the potential to be present within any role and it can be promoted and guided by the service provider.

Additionally, the authors discuss *competence-building in clients and communities*. This is a result of interactions among different perspectives and reflections in the relationship between person and environment. Foster care mothers have the potential to acquire skills and knowledge that can transform and create change, which could be considered the last dimension:

social/environmental action. Social/environmental action encompasses the accomplishments that foster care mothers and their foster children achieve through this empowerment process, but also the ability to access and utilize the resources they have available. All of these aspects of empowerment can enhance a foster care mothers' caregiving and promote a collaborative and informed relationship with the caseworker, agency and larger foster care system.

The influences on empowerment theory

Empowerment theory is in turn influenced by various other theories. Kemp et al. (1997) believe that empowerment contains aspects of the strengths perspective. The strengths perspective promotes the notion that the positive aspects and the potential of a person are the areas in which they should focus to overcome difficulties. Resilience is part of this perspective because a person can draw strength from the way they survive adversity. Therefore, empowerment draws from the strengths perspective the belief that everyone has positive aspects that can be emphasized and should be used in the process of regaining power in their lives. The

authors critique the strengths perspective because to be empowered means to acknowledge not only the positive, but also learning and internalizing from one's vulnerabilities. This is significant when working with foster care mothers because there are hurdles involved not only in recruiting and retaining them, but also in terms of assisting with the emotional and logistical difficulties that they experience (Fisher, Burratson and Pears, 2005; Newton, Litrownik and Landsverk, 2000; Rubin, Alessandrini, Feudtner, Mandell, Localio and Hadley, 2004).

Other significant frameworks or models that contributed to empowerment theory are ecological systems, risk and resiliency and social networks and support (Kemp et al., 1997). The authors argue that ecological systems theory considers the importance of the environment to the individual. Considering how both risk and resiliency factors influence empowerment is important because this allows a shift from the negative (risks) to the positive (resilience) when promoting the potential of the individual. Richardson (2002) stated that the understanding of resiliency can be derived from studying the circumstances and experiences of survivors or individuals who have faced difficult circumstances. Continuous exposure to risks/stressors can promote resiliency as well as internal physiological or psychological coping strategies (Rutter, 2006). Among coping mechanisms, there are social networks and social support. Both promote participation and integration and can create a sense of belonging for the individual.

Theories based on a critical constructivist approach are considered as well (Kemp et al., 1997). Within this approach, the perspective of *meaning and environment* serves as a medium to understand and make sense of oneself and one's environment. Kemp et al. (1997) emphasize that the social context of a person plays an important role in a person's capacity to become empowered. History and social realities are not defined by the person, but by the circumstances. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) also explain how empowerment is a concept that relates to the

individual within larger society. For the authors a person's empowerment process is developed through negotiations between the person and its environment. They exemplify this through a comment by a geographer, David Harvey, who stated: "...oppressed populations have little power over "space" but they can and do construct "place" and it is through the construction of and attachment to places-home, neighborhood, community- that poor and oppressed groups create identity and meaning." (Kemp et al., 1997, 68). This concept of *constructing place* would be ideal when working with foster care mothers. *Constructing place* relates to supports, sense of belonging and community. Agencies and caseworkers can aid foster care mothers in *constructing place* by working with them in establishing a system of support that would allow them to reduce their stress and manage the challenges confronted every day. Foster care mothers rely on the agency, family, community to define their environment and construct place. The foster care agency can promote a sense of belonging, by creating a *safe place* for the foster care mothers within the agency to voice their concerns and their challenges while also validating their work.

Empowerment should aim at creating multiple alliances for the individual, such as: client-worker, neighbor and community, which in turn create more power and strength to affect change. It is important to consider that most of these aspects of empowerment integrate culture as an essential component of the socio environment, experiences, challenges, stressors and supports of an individual.

Bernal and Enchautegui-de-Jesus (1994) view empowerment as: "A participatory process, empowerment suggests a study of individuals in their social, historical, political, economic and cultural contexts" (p.539). Therefore, empowerment is not an isolated process but rather one that occurs influenced by the individual's environment and context. A foster care mother relies on her capacity to manage challenges and daily issues based on her own self-

determination, her cultural values and social context which contribute to manifest empowerment as she executes her role.

Following is a more in depth understanding of how empowerment and culture intersect, specifically regarding women. It will be furthered exemplified with the cultural values and perspectives that emerge from the qualitative phenomenological study of the experience of Latina foster care mothers and how these cultural components can contribute to empowerment among these women.

Intersection between empowerment and culture

Education, collective participation and competence building could empower Latino women to create social and environmental change within the parameters established in their culture. Gutierrez (1990, 1995) explores the concept of empowerment and how it can be applied to women of color. The author states that empowerment is a process that should increase personal, interpersonal and political power to gain the strength to make one's own choices. Empowerment is rooted in the concept that every person has control and strength, and that some people just need to develop the security to exert those qualities. Women of color tend to suffer from both racism and sexism; they face lower socio-economic status, lower levels of education and a lack of representation in politics, institutions and corporations (Gutierrez, 1990,1995). The author believes the lack of access to opportunities is partially a cause, as well as an effect, of the powerlessness of women of color and this is also evident among Latino women (Zavala-Martinez, 1987, Flakerud & Nyamathi, 2000 and Diaz-Lazaro, Verdinelli & Cohen, 2012).

Therefore, empowerment is a combination of education, community involvement, advocacy, skills and personal and societal influences. Gutierrez, Oh and Gilmore (2000) emphasize that empowerment theory shows that power materializes through social interactions.

If empowerment is promoted among Latina foster care mothers, while considering their cultural values and beliefs, these women will feel more prepared and certain to undertake the caregiver role. They will feel support to manage the challenges of fostering, while honoring their origins and the cultural values that guide their conduct.

Women can feel empowered or disenfranchised within their cultural context (Zavala-Martinez, 1987, Diaz-Lazaro, Verdenelli and Cohen, 2012, Flaskerud and Nyamathi, 2000 and Bernal and Enchantegui-de-Jesus, 1994). A study of Puerto Rican women and their struggles showed that women have to be understood within a social, economic, personal, historical and political perspective (Zavala- Martinez (1987). The author mentions that Puerto Rican women, as well as other Latina women, are described as passive, submissive, loud and hysterical. Focusing on mental health, Zavala-Martinez (1987) explained that there are significant findings in the literature that support the idea that lack of power within a cultural context can be linked to psychological problems because the individual is already vulnerable in his or her socio cultural environment. Similarly, Diaz-Lazaro, Verdenelli and Cohen (2012) observe that Latina immigrant clients in psychotherapy face complexities rooted in their power struggles within their status as immigrants, their traumatic experiences, losses and the gender conflicts embedded in their culture. Additionally they argue that women are expected to behave according to traditional cultural roles and that this further limits their sense of power. The authors attribute this powerless experience to the fact that Latina women are oppressed by an external system and by their socialization process which is very much influenced by culture (Zavala-Martinez, 1987 and Diaz-Lazaro, Verdenelli and Cohen, 2012). Furthermore, the authors recognize that having an intrinsic cultural model of the ideal woman taught since early childhood, and living in a culture where women are not fully equal to men, can promote powerlessness. Therefore, culture can

directly influence a Latina's concept of empowerment since research shows that as a group they are at a disadvantage due to social constructs that include racism and discrimination, among others (Zavala-Martinez, 1987, Flaskerud & Nyamathi, 2000 and Diaz-Lazaro, Verdinelli & Cohen, 2012).

The intersection of culture and empowerment and how it impacts women goes beyond Latino culture and is present in other cultures as well. Deshmukh-Ranadive (2006) presents domestic violence as a struggle between space, power and empowerment. Empowerment is commonly seen as a positive result of strengthening people to overcome struggles and be released from limitations. However, in some cultures it can bring more violence or difficulties into a person's life. Deshmukh-Ranadive (2006) established that for many Indian women if they involve themselves with micro-credit groups or small businesses to expand their work opportunities, they can be labeled as adulterers and can be beaten. Attempting to acquire education can also be seen as a challenge to the established hierarchy of Indian society. Women's efforts to empower themselves through education and the workforce are regulated by socio cultural internalized norms that evaluate these efforts as negative and even radical.

Similarly to the previously presented view of Indian women being oppressed, Briegel and Zivkovic (2008) argue that in Middle Eastern culture, women can be viewed as financially powerless. The authors conducted a study with women nationals of the United Arab Emirates, UAE, regarding their views about money, education, religion, etc. The study participants stated that they joined the study voluntarily, and the population included women who were married, single, professional and students. The authors found that seventy-nine percent of women manage their own money and eighty-eight percent of women do not pay household bills. Rather they spend their money on clothing, luxury items and sometimes they contribute to the household

income by choice. It is important to consider that education from preschool to college is free to all UAE citizens and this signifies none expenditures for educational purposes.

It appears from these findings that women in the UAE are financially empowered in that they have freedom and choice on how to spend their money. Nevertheless, when culture and religion are considered, then financial empowerment seems less of a choice. Ninety-five percent of the women who were surveyed expressed that religion influences how they spend their money. The Muslims' holy book, The Koran dictates not only their religious believes, but also the way they live, their customs and rules. The Koran specifies that men are obligated to financially sustain their wives, children and to pay for the maintenance of the household. Women admitted that they depend on their husbands or the men in their lives for guidance regarding their finances. Most women said that there is not a tradition of saving or making long term plans for money. Additionally, the women who participated in the study agreed that success for Arab women means to manage their home, children and work. This study presents a very liberal perspective on how women are able to spend their money in the UAE. However, the liberties of women in the UAE are governed by their religion and cultural traditions. This exemplifies the intersection between empowerment and culture because women's empowerment in the UAE is clearly guided by cultural constructs of how a woman can behave and conduct herself._

Thus, culture and traditions have to be examined as constraints or parameters of freedom and choice that can hinder or promote the process of empowerment for women across the world. Following is a comprehensive view of Latino culture and families in order to understand how cultural constructs intersect with empowerment for Latino foster care mothers.

Latino cultural constructs

According to the United States Census Bureau, the term “Latino” was first introduced in the 2000 Census. In 2010 the United States Census Bureau found that 16% of the United States population were people who identified as Hispanic or Latino. Since the number of Latinos in the United States is large and growing, this group requires attention in health and mental health settings. “Latino” is a term that encompasses a very diverse and large number of cultural traditions and ethnic backgrounds. The U.S. Census defines Latinos or Hispanics as: “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (U.S Census, 2010). It is crucial to understand the diversity and complexity of the Latino culture.

For the purpose of the discussion culture will be guided by the following definition: “Culture is the way people express their patterns of thought, their phantasies, their dreams and their behavior, their values, beliefs, political, economical and religious, their rules of conduct” (Quallenberg, 2000, p.1). The author chose this definition precisely because it relates to the fact that culture is constantly changing. When discussing Latino culture and values among families or caregivers several concepts arise: *familismo*, *marianismo* and *respeto* (Ayon & Aisenberg, 2010, Calzada, 2010, Inoa Vazquez & Rosa, 1999 and Del Gaudio, Hichenberg, Eisenberg, Kerr, Zaidler & Kissane, 2013). These three concepts might seem derived from a static view of culture that defines Latinos in a certain way. However, the discussion of such concepts in the literature and based on the findings of this study will demonstrate that these concepts evolved through acculturation, new generations, and diverse manifestations among Latinos.

Latinos often have a strong sense of *familia* (or “family”) and are known for being expressive. Dependency on the family is an important element of Latino culture (Hardy-Bougere,

2008). Inoa Vazquez & Rosa (1999) present *familismo* as a term that refers to how family (includes both nuclear and extended family) is fundamental to an individual. Lugo Steidel & Contreras (2003) compartmentalize *familismo* into two realms, attitudinal and behavioral. The authors view attitudinal *familismo* as a belief that family comes first and there is family interconnection and loyalty, while behavioral *familismo* showcases these beliefs. It is generally agreed in the literature that *familismo* reflects a collective rather than an individualistic outlook about the self and family (Ayon & Aisenberg, 2010; Del Gaudio et al., 2013). Relying on a large family network can be crucial in the role of a caregiver and/or parent and offers support to overcome or manage stress and challenges. Halgunseth, Ispa & Rudy (2006) describe *familismo* as the desire to maintain strong family ties and a strong source of emotional and physical support.

Familismo is guided by a larger construct: *respeto*. *Respeto* refers to deference or respect for others. Halgunseth, Ispa & Rudy (2006) describe *respeto* as a fundamental value in childrearing and a basic component of how Latinos are raised to treat others. *Familismo* and *respeto* have implications for service provision because they are linked to how a client relates to their own family and others, explains family interactions, values and practices (Calzada, 2010). For example, a program that aimed to integrate the cultural values of *familismo* and *respeto* in Latino parent training identified collaboration and flexibility as key components of the clinical process when working with this population (Calzada, 2010).

Marianismo refers that a woman's place is in the home, devoting her time to her duties as wife, mother and family member (Del Gaudio et al., 2013). Other authors define *marianismo* as: "a cult of female superiority and the expectation that women are capable of enduring all suffering" (Inoa Vazquez and Rosa, 1999). *Marianismo* is the implied code of conduct for

Latina women. It is based on reverence to the Virgin Mary, her humility, purity and virtue (Cofresí, 2002). *Marianismo* can shift among Latinas that have undergone an intense acculturation process and acquired new perspectives on their role as women, mothers, partners and professionals. This group of women might not identify with *marianismo* or adhere to its stricter cultural norms of staying home, becoming a mother or taking care of the family. Rather acculturated Latina women may guide themselves by the general constructs of *marianismo* in regards to its importance on values, beliefs and family, but not as a directive for behavior. *Marianismo* is not only present within acculturation, but also it has a significant presence in psychotherapy. Cofresí (2002) conducted a study on the influence of *marianismo* on psychoanalytic work with Latinas regarding transference and countertransference. The author states that it is often in the dynamic of therapy that role conflict is manifested regarding what is expected of a Latina woman and her true self.

These three cultural values and beliefs, *familismo*, *respeto* and *marianismo*, have an immense impact on individuals, their family and on childrearing practices. Below are illustrations of how these cultural constructs are present among Latino families.

Latino families

Cultural norms and values are integrated and influence family dynamics and caregiving. Aranda & Knight (1997) reviewed the literature on ethnic minority caregivers and state that culture and ethnicity play an influential role on the stress and coping process of Latino caregivers of the elderly. They discuss caregiver's burden and also poor health. They highlight that Latinos rely on their kinship networks for support, *familismo*, and are more likely to seek informal supports than organized services. Role strain is also prevalent among this population since culture, socioeconomic status, minority status and acculturation can pose as stressors and place

caregivers in a disadvantaged position. The authors concentrated on Latino caregivers of the elderly, but the findings can apply to Latino parents or caregivers of children as well.

Halgunseth, Ispa & Rudy (2006) studied parental control among Latino families. The authors report that direction and modeling, protection and rule setting are intrinsic elements of parental control for Latinos and are rooted in *familismo, respeto and educación*.

Ayon & Aisenberg (2010) conducted a grounded theory study to explore the experiences with the child welfare system among Mexican families in Southern California with open child welfare cases. The authors found that workers were limited by the agency structure and parents felt they could not establish a personal relationship with their caseworkers. The need for a more personal, *personalismo*, relationship between worker and client was emphasized. Such engagement would allow the worker to go more in depth in the case and would encourage a more trusting and open relationship on behalf of the family. When working with Latino families the construct of *personalismo* and *respeto* must be incorporated to create engagement and rapport.

Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Jaccard, Johansson, Bouris and Acosta (2007) identified five essentials of Latino parenting practices through a study of focus groups of Dominican and Puerto Rican mother-adolescent pairs in New York City. These included: “Ensuring close monitoring of adolescents, maintaining supportive relationships characterized by high levels of parent-adolescent interaction and sharing, explaining parental decisions and actions, making an effort to build and improve relationships, and differential parenting practices based on adolescent’s gender” (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). The authors believe these essential components of parenting for Latinos are rooted in *familismo, respeto, personalismo* and *simpatía*, friendliness. Interestingly, the authors found that both warmth and parental control were present throughout the relationship with the adolescents, but rather than being punitive, parental control focused on

communication and expectations regarding responsibility and adequate conduct. This finding has implications for practice since the authors suggest a need to integrate Latino cultural constructs in interventions that target parenting. They highlight the finding that parenting is highly influenced by culture, beliefs and values and understanding its impact/influence in parenting practices needs to be assessed by service providers.

Research is also concerned with how acculturation affects parenting among Latinos (Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, Kurtines and Szapocznik, 2012). Younger generations might acquire new values and beliefs that are in conflict with those of the older generations. This can make it difficult for parents to manage behavior and relationships with their children. Santisteban et al. (2012) explain that *familismo* can ameliorate behavioral problems. The authors found fewer externalizing behaviors in children among Hispanic/Latino families whose parenting practices reinforced *familismo*: involvement, discipline and engagement. Therefore, when working with various generations of Latino families traditional values and cultural concepts should be encouraged without forgetting to acknowledge the impact of acculturation on the younger generations.

Latino parenting practices need to be acknowledged within the child welfare system so that child welfare workers can make sensitive and informed decisions about a case. Alzate and Rosenthal (2009) evaluate gender and ethnic differences for Hispanic children referred to child protective services. The researchers found gender differences in cases of child maltreatment among Hispanic versus non-Hispanic children. For example, Hispanic boys were more likely to be physically abused than non-Hispanic boys. Additionally, there were differences in maltreatment behavior between Hispanic girls and boys, which could be rooted in cultural beliefs. The authors argue that Hispanic boys are socialized to be strong and physical leading to

behavioral problems, while girls are encouraged to be subdued and mature which could lead to potential neglect. This study promotes an evaluation not only of cultural components and their influence on parenting, but also how they can manifest in gender differences.

Based on the previous studies it could be argued that cultural matching in foster care should be beneficial because it can reduce conflict based on different beliefs and value systems. Brown, George, Sintzel and Arnault (2009) conducted a study in Canada for which 61 foster care parents were interviewed. One of the main questions was: “What are the benefits of fostering children who have the same values, beliefs and traditions as you?”. Foster care parents identified that cultural matching could aid the child to maintain and hold their values, to feel secure, to experience a smoother transition and to lower stress. Additionally, foster care parents felt that similar cultural beliefs and backgrounds promoted an easier relationship and transition process for the child. There is limited literature on culture and fostering. However, the studies reviewed certainly emphasize the importance of assessing, respecting and integrating cultural beliefs and values in the foster care system.

Within families: foster care and culture

Studies have been conducted to analyze how culture can impact interventions for foster care children. Weiner, Schneider and Lyons (2009) discuss the implementation of three different interventions to manage traumatic stress symptoms among a racially diverse sample of foster care youth. The authors did not find differences among the interventions based on ethnicity. Nevertheless, the providers of the intervention had to consider cultural nuances and behaviors in the delivery of their interventions, ranging from language to rapport building. Therefore, assuring cultural sensitivity when applying interventions to foster care parents and children, could maximize the intervention results.

Rosenthal & Gelman (2010) found that Latino caregivers of patients of Alzheimer's disease felt burdened when they lacked knowledge of the condition, treatment and resources and faced obstacles such as language barriers or legal status. These burdens are easily translatable to foster care mothers and the challenges they can face related to caregiving and their cultural context. For example, a foster care mother who is willing and able to care for children, but only speaks Spanish could face challenges if the agency does not provide bilingual services. Even when principles of *familismo* and *respeto* are upheld, the everyday impact of culture and socio environmental factors can promote caregiver stress among Latino caregivers. A further example of this is Ceballo & colleagues (2012) study of Latina mothers' parenting in high risk neighborhoods. The authors conducted a qualitative study of 49 Latina mothers. The results indicated that parenting styles among Latina mothers were guided by the following principles: monitoring, physical and social withdrawal from the neighborhood, engagement in positive activities and encouraging parent / child communication. The parents always tried to maintain cultural principles, focusing on the importance of *la educación* for their children and *estar pendiente*, maintaining awareness of their children's emotional and physical state. All of these cultural components can impact care and service provision. Affirming practices that endorse cultural values and beliefs is also a form of empowerment. Service providers should acknowledge cultural beliefs and practices during individual sessions with foster care mothers, celebrate the diversity among the foster care mothers and children at the agency and incorporate culture as an empowerment tool in their trainings. The following study describes how culture manifests among Latina foster care mothers.

Study of the experience of Latina foster care mothers

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was chosen for the study of the experiences foster care mothers because through it the researcher can attempt to create meaning from the experiences (phenomenon) of this population. Phenomenology is defined as a method that allows the researcher to reveal the structures of experiences (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). The implementation of a qualitative study can capture the experiences of foster care mothers and their motivations through their own voice. Razafsha et al. (2012) describes the major differences between the two methods noting that for quantitative research a hypothesis is established prior to conducting the research, the data can be operationally defined, is tangible and seeks consensus. In contrast, qualitative data concludes with a hypothesis, is inductive rather than deductive and seeks complexity. Therefore, it is through qualitative research methods that the intricacies and unique of the experiences of these women can flourish.

For the purpose of this qualitative study interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenology was used to both describe and analyze foster care mothers experience. Creswell (2007) states that hermeneutic phenomenology describes and interprets a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen (1990) explains that in hermeneutic phenomenology the research is a mediator between the different meanings of the lived experiences. Therefore, in the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study of the experiences of foster care mothers, kinship and non-kinship, the analysis focuses on both description and interpretation, but ultimately interpretation is given more emphasis.

The study of the experiences of foster care mothers yielded a large number of Latina foster care mothers and the general theme of culture and its significance emerged from the initial

analysis. Thus, the aim of the analysis of this sub group is to understand how culture is experienced or manifested by these women.

The initial study of the experience of being a foster care mother was analyzed using hermeneutic phenomenology. However, the data on manifestations of culture for Latina foster care mothers will be analyzed through a psychological phenomenological approach. This type of phenomenology focuses less on the interpretation of the researcher and more on the description of the experiences of the participant (Creswell (2007)). Creswell (2007) encourages this approach because of its structure. He describes systematic steps such as: selecting an individual or shared experience of a phenomenon (manifestations of culture among Latina foster care mothers) and collecting data. Therefore the analysis of how culture manifests among this sub group is aligned with what Creswell (2007) defines as a phenomenological study: “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept (culture) or a phenomenon” (p.59).

Sampling and site selection

Access to a sample population of non-kinship foster care mothers was secured through the Assistant Executive Director of Child Welfare Services at Episcopal Social Services of New York (ESS). ESS works with more than 5,000 New Yorkers. Its mission is to help strengthen families, healthy development of children and youth and promote self-sufficiency. The agency has a presence in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn. This social service agency includes a program that focuses on foster care and adoption, at two sites, the Bronx and Manhattan. Indeed ESS seemed as an ideal agency for this study because of its comprehensive services within foster care and its presence in two boroughs of New York City, which had the potential to yield a diverse group of foster care mothers. Additionally, agency administrators welcomed the idea of researching this population and finding information that could lead to enhance their services.

The study was presented to the agency as potentially being able to provide important information about the experience of foster care mothers, inform the agency's support programs and aid with retention and training. ESS has trainings and support groups for foster care parents. Recruitment was conducted through informal presentations during these support groups, and trainings, and by posting flyers in both agency sites. On average, trainings or groups had 10 to 15 participants and the researcher attended at least 20 of these sessions. The study recruitment and procedures had the approval of Columbia University Internal Review Board.

Recruitment presentation and flyers were delivered in both English and Spanish to recruit Spanish speaking foster care mothers as well. The investigator's first language is Spanish. She is bilingual and fluent in both English and Spanish and therefore was able to recruit and conduct interviews in both languages. The ability to offer interviews in Spanish attracted a significant Latino population to the study.

Foster mothers that expressed interest were contacted by phone to confirm their participation. Criterion sampling was used for this study. Creswell (2007) described this as an ideal sampling for phenomenology because all participants represent people who have experience the phenomenon. Therefore, the only criterion for the sample was that these women were foster care mothers. Length of fostering, demographics, number of children did not determine if they would participate in the study. Approximately forty-five foster care mothers responded to participate in the research. Therefore, only the foster care mothers who showed interest in participating were interviewed. Foster mothers agreed to meet before or after their trainings. All participants were currently serving as foster care mothers through ESS. Participants in the study were paid \$25 for participating in the interview. Interviews were conducted in a

private office at the agency, while the non-kinship foster mothers waited for the biological parents to visit with their children.

Thirty interviews were conducted at ESS. Each interview lasted between thirty-five minutes to an hour. The interviews began with a list of questions regarding demographic and personal information such as, country of origin, primary language, language spoken at home, civil status, children of their own and religious beliefs. The interviews included open-ended questions about non-kinship foster care mother's experiences, their challenges, motivations and appraisal of their role. All interviews were voluntary and conducted after written consent was given. All subjects agreed to the use of a tape recorder. Participants received a copy of the consent form with the researcher's contact information in case they had any further questions.

All interviews were transcribed and once transcribed there were compared to the original recording for accurateness. Spanish interviews were transcribed in Spanish for coding and analysis. However, only for purposes of writing the themes and quotes the Spanish interviews were translated to English. The same procedure was used by Shibusawa & Lukens (2004) when studying the aging population and cultural practices in Japanese culture. The authors recorded the interviews in the original language, Japanese, transcribed it and coded in Japanese and translated the Japanese transcripts to English for the purpose of reporting. Collecting the codes and themes from the original language in which the interviews were conducted allowed the researcher to experience what Caelli (2010) describes as “interpretative awareness” by connecting with the participant in their primary language to understand the essence of the phenomenon.

Data analysis

This study is based on what Kilson, Dow, Calabrese, Locock and Athlin (2013) describe

as a re-analysis of the interviews. A purposive sample (sub –sample that included the 20 participants who identified as Hispanic/Latina in the original database of 30 interviews) was selected. For the study of the sub population of Latina foster care mothers, data was organized and analyzed by creating a vertical column numbered one through twenty and a horizontal column that was categorized according to the questions. For this study data that showed manifestations of cultural beliefs, values and practices was coded. Creswell (2007) describes the data analysis as a process of highlighting common and different experiences and statements that emerge from the interviews to explain the phenomenon. The author emphasizes that to accomplish the essence of the phenomenon the researcher must follow a process. First, the demographic and socio-environmental information is described. The next step is to search for codes than can eventually become themes. Saldaña (2009) describes this type of coding as part of the first cycle of coding. He based his definition on Strauss and Corbin (1998): “Breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences.” (p.81). Creswell (2007) suggests dividing those codes into groups of meanings that create themes.

After organizing these themes a description is written to define the experience, thus leading to a thematic analysis. For this study, as the researcher began collecting the data these categories expanded to include themes that emerged in the process. After the process of coding and description is completed the next step encompasses a careful explanation of the phenomenon. Each interview was reviewed and the information recorded in the table by hand. Interviews were read twice, first as a whole and the second reading segmenting the information into the columns for the analysis of the data. Examples that illustrated each code were included referencing page number of the interview. The table allowed for the commonalities and

differences within each section and across sections to be compared for all the participants. After careful analysis of the categories based on the interviews, themes began to emerge from the data based on the review of the literature. Creswell (2007) states: “phenomenology requires at least some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions, and these should be identified by the researchers” (p.62). Therefore, the themes emerge as part of the data, but are based on the literature related to the phenomenon being studied. Themes that appear in the literature regarding Latino culture were used to describe the manifestations of culture of these foster care mothers. Once these descriptions are presented a careful analysis of their meaning and how they relate to culture is discussed. The descriptions are limited to the phenomenon being studied: manifestations of culture among Latina foster care mothers. Additionally the differences, if any, between kinship and non-kinship foster care mothers are presented in the findings.

Demographics of Latina foster care mothers

A total of 30 participants with a variety of foster care parent experiences, ethnic backgrounds and ages were interviewed. However, for the purpose of this study the focus will be on the 20 Latina foster care mothers that identified their race /ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino (the two most common countries of origin were the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico). Fifteen of these foster care mothers identified their first language as Spanish and only one stated that she spoke both English and Spanish. Their ages range from 28-69, the median age was 56. Regarding their civil status there were eight single women, five widows, three separated and four married. Seventeen women had children of their own; on average they had at least two children. The length of time that the women had served as foster care mothers varied from one month to twenty-three years, but on average they have been foster care mothers for five years. Seventeen interviews were conducted in Spanish.

The majority of kinship Latina foster care mothers tend to be in the age range of 60-69; their country of origin is Puerto Rico, are single and have children of their own. They identify Spanish as their first language and as the language they speak at home. The majority of non-kinship foster care mothers are younger, age range of 46-59 from the Dominican Republic, are married or single, have children of their own, identify Spanish as their first language, but speak both English and Spanish at home. For both groups the number of years that they had served as foster mothers was between one and 10 years.

Table 1: Demographic Data Latina Foster Care Mothers (N=20)

Age group	Non-Kinship N=12		Kinship N=8	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
28-45	2	17%	2	25%
46-59	8	66%	2	25%
60-69	2	17%	4	50%
Ethnic background				
Dominican	6	55%	2	29%
Puerto Rican	5	45%	4	57%
Colombian	1	9%	1	14%
Civil Status				
Married	4	33%	0	0
Widowed	3	25%	2	25%
Divorced or Separated	1	8%	2	25%
Single	4	33%	4	50%
Have own/biological children				
Yes	11	92%	6	75%
No	1	8%	2	25%
Country of Origin				
Dominican Republic	6	50%	2	25%
Puerto Rico	1	8%	4	50%
USA	4	33%	1	14%
Colombia	1	8%	1	14%

First language				
English/Spanish	1	8%	0	0
Spanish	8	66%	7	88%
English	3	25%	1	14%
Languages at Home				
English	1	8%	1	14%
Spanish	3	25%	5	63%
Spanish and English	8	66%	2	25%
Years serving as a foster mother				
< 1 year	1	8%	0	0
1-3 years	3	25%	5	63%
4-10 years	7	58%	3	38%
11-25 years	1	8%	0	0

The themes relating to culture among Latina foster care mothers

General references to ethnic background, language and customs

As to whether culture, race or language makes a difference in the relationship with the children, non-kinship foster care mother #2 who is Dominican said:

... the race and color doesn't matter when it comes to loving a child, you know? You don't have to bring that, nothing about "she is black, she is white" No. We value that the child is okay.

Non-Kinship mom#7 stated that being placed in settings where a different language is spoken could be beneficial for the child: "And that is going to be good for her because she will know two languages, English and Spanish. I speak to her in Spanish which was the language she spoke at home and she learns English at school."

Latina foster care mothers spoke frequently about language, food and religion as elements of culture. Mom # 3 who is from Colombia and a non-kinship foster mother stated:

Well, in that aspect [cultural matching] I don't see any effect because I came to this country when I was 22 years old [She is 56 years old now]. We eat American food, but

also Latin food. I am raising them in Spanish in my home and they have early intervention services and I want them to be bilingual.

Non-kinship foster mom #6 expressed a relief when children of Caribbean descent were placed in her care because she viewed them as having similar customs and culture:

There is something very good in the fact that their parents are from the Caribbean [Jamaica] and we are too [Dominican]. The food, the flavors of our food, our family customs are very similar and that makes it a bit easier.

Only one Latina foster care mother highlighted the difference in culture as a problem for the biological parent. Non-kinship foster mom #8 explained:

I am Dominican and my husband is Puerto Rican. Not many parents [biological parents]- as in the case of the child presently- want to mix races or cultural traditions [In reference to a placement that is not the same culture between foster and biological parents]. I had problems with his mom because we are Latinos and she is African American. She did not want her child to learn Spanish. I thought the more languages and cultures they are exposed to, the better. Because the culture and values are important.

Invariably non-kinship Latina foster care mothers stated that culture has an impact on their fostering experience. They admit that cultural matching is easier, but that if the children are from a different culture they view it as a learning and enriching experience. Only one non-kinship foster care mother referred to culture and ethnic background as a problem in terms of relating to the biological parents.

Kinship foster care mothers did not seem to discuss the impact of culture or ethnic background as much as non-kinship foster care mothers. This could be partially due to the fact that they don't see it as a determining factor in their experience since the children are already part of their family and share the same customs and values. However, they did express the importance of upholding traditions, values and customs with their child relatives.

Kinship mom # 9 feels that culture for her manifested in religion and traditions. She

stated:

I take her to church a lot and now it's happened that I when I take her on Tuesdays – it's like a healing circle and she's gone in the middle and starts clapping and singing. I always take her... and the traditions as well... always during Christmas and those things we did in Puerto Rico, we do them at home.

Marianismo

Regarding her view of her role as a kinship foster mother Mom #17 from the Dominican

Republic states:

I was born to be a mother. I was raised by my mother and grandmother to learn to be caring, useful in the house, to become a professional if I wanted it, but to never forget the fortune of becoming a mother. That has been and will always be my most important role.

Kinship mom #12, who is Puerto Rican, illustrated *marianismo* with the following statement:

Well, you know. Well in the times I was growing up I was always a mother because my mother had to go to work and she left at 5 a.m. and came back at 6 p.m. so I was in charge. We were eight brothers [siblings] and I always took care of them, of preparing them for school. At 13 I knew how to cook. You had to iron, you had to do everything. So I have always – and then I worked caring for the elderly, I have always liked it. That's something I have always liked.

Kinship mom #4 describes how marianismo influences all her life:

As a woman you want to do it all. I went to school, got my degree, got married, had kids, worked, and now have grandkids. Very different from my mom, who worked 24 hours at the house with me and my siblings. It was a different time. Now I have to take on the role of the foster care mother for my grandchildren. I try to make time for everything, but is not easy to find balance and especially with this sudden situation with my daughter and her children. It is hard.

Non-kinship mom #5 shared she was raised to be a mother:

I grew up raising my brothers and sisters and the kids from el “barrio”. I knew how to be a mom by the age of 14. We were eight kids at home. I went to school; I became a secretary and had my kids at 23. My first job is a mom, then my household and then my real job and now I have become a grandma and a foster mother.

Non-kinship mom #20 expressed her views on what being a woman looks like:

When she [foster child 10 years old] came to me she looked like one of the boys, she was disheveled, always wore pants, did not know how to sit or talk like a girl. She has three brothers and her mother was not around and she asked me if I could buy her dresses and make her hair. I sat with all of them and told them the rules of the house, but I had to devote some time to show her ladylike behavior [“comportamiento de una señorita”]. She is now wearing dresses, loves to do her hair, and helps me around the house.

Marianismo is manifested equally amongst non-kinship and kinship foster care mothers.

All mothers acknowledged how womanhood is upheld among Latinos and how it has influenced their upbringing and how they raise their children. Some mothers expressed the challenge of creating balance between the idealism of *marianismo* versus the reality of all their roles and the challenges that they face.

Familismo y Respeto

Expressing the importance of family non-kinship mom # 1 from Puerto Rico stated:

I teach the kids to respect their elders, to treat people with consideration and to follow the rules of this house while they are with me. I acknowledge they might have had different rules with their biological parents, but they need to respect my house. I learned to be that way from my parents, they were very big on ‘respeto y reglas’ [respect and rules].

Non-kinship mom #19 stated that she believed that rules are essential in the household and that the first thing she taught the children was to learn to respect their elders and respect each other. Non-Kinship mom #10 expressed something similar when she shared:

These children [foster care children] come into your home, your family and become your family. It is important to maintain the same values and rules that you have for your own children. My children know that they have to respect me and to follow my rules. With these children [foster care children] you have to teach them, they might come from a family with different family values, but if they are going to be part of this home they had to learn ours. It is good for them, gives them a sense of belonging.

Non-kinship mom #13 refers to the value of family:

Familia es familia. If my husband and I decided to take care of these kids is because we honor family, we were taught the value of it and we can do it so why not make other children feel the same way. In the Dominican Republic you help each other out in your

house, with your kids. We are doing the same even if the kids are not Dominican we are opening our home to kids who need a family.

Kinship mom #18 expressed the following regarding family: “She is my niece and Latino families look after each other. I was not going to let her be alone in a strangers home when she is my family”. Kinship mom # 15 shared how her cultural background has an impact on her care for her grandchildren. The following is her description:

Yes, because Latinos are very close to their children, we protect our children so much and I think sometimes we are kind of overprotective. The Latino customs are like these, we want to have our married children in our home and sometimes we don’t let them grow up but I feel okay because I was raised in that way too, yes.

Kinship mom #9 who identified as Latina shared how she upholds family traditions and respect in her household:

My parents raised me to care, to be there for my family, to help each other out. We always had dinner together and the girls work in the house, *amas de casa*, and the boys work outside. We dressed conservatively and behave like *señoritas*. I try to teach my grandchildren to do the same.

Non-kinship foster care mothers recognized the importance of *familismo and respeto* as standards of conduct and values that they upheld in their homes prior to having foster care children. For kinship foster care mothers these cultural constructs are the basis for becoming a kinship foster parent, “family is family”. Kinship foster care parents also uphold these values and cultural traditions in their households.

Marianismo, Familismo y Respeto

The three concepts of marianismo, familismo and respeto could not be better summarized than by non-kinship mom #7: “I am a mom, grandmother and now a foster mother. I set the rules and I keep this family together. That is what I do every single day.”

Latina foster care mothers shared that their cultural background strongly upholds the concept of family. Kinship mom #4 described it as: “Una gran familia.” This mom repeated this concept when she said she would not have been able to care for her grandchildren without the support of her family and that she would like them to grow up always feeling that support and presence. Kinship mom # 9 said that she disciplines and raises her niece as she did her own children with respect, love, compassion and loyalty towards your own people. She stated that they are part of the same family and family has to be together and she would have never allowed the children to be removed to a stranger’s home. Kinship mom # 15 is from Colombia and has custody of her grandchildren due to her daughter’s illness. She shared:

Los amo, they are my life. My family is my life. I cannot understand how someone cannot take care of their family. It’s hard, and it’s a new process for me, but that is what you do for family, you care, you help and you show up.

Discussion

Foster care parents are often a difficult group to maintain and retain in their role (Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Therefore, evaluating how culture can impact the foster care parent is critical. When asking Latina foster care mothers how their culture and ethnic background impacted their fostering, many of them expressed that they felt it added to their relationship and was beneficial for the child. All the Latina foster care mothers agreed that they could teach the children placed in their care, regardless of kinship or non-kinship status, to either understand or value the Latino culture.

Most Latina foster care mothers shared that they were raised in close families, in which the presence of their mother was important in their upbringing and they tried to emulate this for their own children and foster care children. Several of the Latina foster care mothers had

informal experience as child care providers based on the woman's role in the household. They helped their family members take care of one another.

The Latina foster care mothers interviewed wanted to help their families and keep the children safe and nurtured, they believe that they had a calling or a desire to help children in need. Latina foster care mothers shared that cultural values and beliefs are part of family life and expressions and expose children to different traditions, foods and customs that could be beneficial in their lives.

Aside from agreeing that culture is part of parenting and valuable, for these Latina kinship and non-kinship foster care mothers the concepts of *familismo*, *marianismo* and *respeto* were present and practiced in their parenting. However, they experienced culture and cultural constructs in different ways.

Latina non-kinship foster care mothers that are not culturally matched described their efforts to try to integrate the child to their customs, values and beliefs and negotiate with them and their parents so as to achieve a balance between familiar and unfamiliar cultural practices. They feel that usually the child is willing to learn and adapt. However, the biological parents sometimes have a conflict with their children being placed with a family of a different culture. Latina non-kinship foster care mothers try to acculturate the children to their cultural customs and practices, but at the same time the foster mothers respect that the child might practice different cultural customs and belief systems. They did not attempt to impose their culture but rather share it with the children placed in their care. Values such as *familismo* and *respeto* are upheld in their households, which could mean integrating and helping the child manage a different set of rules and behaviors than what the child had encountered previously.

Latina kinship foster care mothers take on this role because they want to help their family; some even view it as an obligation to their loved ones. These mothers face tremendous challenges regarding the emotional impact of the case in their relationship with their family members and in their lives. They are a unique population due to their proximity to the case, coming from the same family and culture as the child, often having prior access to the child and biological parents and knowing patterns of behavior and emotional issues prior to assuming care. For kinship foster care mothers their challenges are rooted in their ability to negotiate their role and their time while being immersed in the case specific circumstances. Nevertheless, for them cultural values and beliefs don't pose a challenge. Coming from the same cultural background offers an initial and continuous benefit and tool to build and strengthen their relationship with the children and potentially with the parents of the children. Latina kinship foster care mothers tended to refer less to the impact of culture, but continue to maintain the same cultural traditions: food, holidays, language that they have always practiced. Latina kinship foster care mothers stressed the concept of family and how family supports one another. The influence and manifestation of cultural beliefs and values about family are tangible among this population

Latina foster care mothers showed values of *marianismo*, *familismo* and *respeto* throughout the stories of their experiences. Those values influenced their interactions with the children in their care regardless of their kinship or non-kinship status. They viewed cultural values and norms as a customary part of their parenting practices. In many cases, cultural values were present long before the children were placed in their care via their attachment to their own cultural practices as parents, which in turn motivated them to either take care of their family members as kinship caregivers, or take care of children who need a safe, loving environment.

All Latina foster care mothers saw their culture as a support and strength that they could use to reinforce parenting practices and provide a framework for the child to grow and flourish regardless of the ethnicity/cultural background of the children placed in their care. Latina foster care mothers felt that the agency should place more emphasis on communication with biological parents and caseworkers. They encouraged more discussion on how cultural norms and traditions can play a role in placements. Regardless of the challenges or strengths that culture can promote in a foster care placement, Latina foster care mothers invariably rely on cultural beliefs and values to parent.

Understanding empowerment and cultural constructs among Latina foster care mothers

The Latino women interviewed in the study of the experience of both kinship and non-kinship foster care mothers showed strength and a desire to be present and resourceful for their families and the children placed in their care. They have a strong sense of family, responsibility and dedication to their role as foster care mothers. They rely on their faith, supports and culture to help them manage the everyday challenges they encounter.

How an agency, a caseworker or an individual views culture can make the difference in feeling empowered. For example, among researchers the concepts of *marianismo* and *machismo* have been considered derogatory for women. They can be viewed as suggesting that women are valued less than men and that women's only role is as a caretaker, wife and mother (Inoa Vazquez & Rosa, 1999 and Cofresí, 2002). However, it could be argued that *marianismo* promotes a woman's role as a devoted and loving mother. Therefore, cultural constructs can serve to empower or disfranchise women and they need to be acknowledged when providing services. Service providers cultural sensitivity training should not only be based on learning

about a culture, but on recognizing how cultural beliefs and practices can either serve as tools for the benefit of the client or deterrents for how the client manages specific circumstances.

Perkins & Zimmerman (1995) states that empowerment-oriented interventions should aim to improve personal circumstances and provide a space for personal and collective advancement. The authors add that Rappaport, who is considered a leader in the empowerment field, advocated that this theory should be used as a “guiding principle of community psychology” (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995, 577). Service provision should promote empowerment and culture as a “guiding principle” for all work with Latina women, who as previously stated, are a vulnerable population. The intersection of culture and empowerment should be addressed among Latina foster care mothers because they have the responsibility to care for another vulnerable population.

Recommendations to promote empowerment and adequate cultural practice

The following recommendations are based on the experiences of these Latina foster care mothers and should serve to promote empowerment among this group and to enhance appropriate and inclusive cultural practices. The recommendations are also based on literature that discusses the intersection between empowerment and culture. All of the following will aid in recruitment and retention of this population and their placements and will ultimately benefit both foster mother and child:

Group work and problem solving skills

Gutierrez (1990) suggests that the best way to work on empowerment is in a small group modality. Small groups can allow foster care mothers to help one another and support each other. Clinicians should focus on providing a safe space for foster care mothers to evaluate their circumstances and express their beliefs and cultural practices. Trainings and support groups

could be created to allow for a safe space to discuss problem solving skills that can arise while fostering and that can include issues with biological parents, the agency, the child's behavior and culturally driven parenting practices.

Communication between clinician and client

A clinician should accept the clients' definition of the problem, promote specific skill building exercises, identify the client strengths and find resources (Gutierrez, 1990). It is important to examine how lack of empowerment affects the client, at an individual level, based on personal dynamics, and within society. Additionally, considering cultural context adds to the ability to evaluate a client's sense of empowerment.

Storytelling

Chadiha et al. (2004) argued that critical consciousness can be created through storytelling. Based on real stories, Latina foster care mothers can have significant and open discussions about their particular circumstances and re-evaluate experiences more objectively. At the same time they can have a space to share their strengths and struggles. Writing these stories could be therapeutic for the foster care mother, while reading them could aid a stranger that is experiencing something similar or is considering becoming a foster care mother. Therefore, forums within the agency where they can share their stories, a writing group or journaling group, could be therapeutic.

Empowerment and culture driven therapy

Diaz - Lazaro, Verdinelli and Cohen (2012) discuss the use of empowerment feminist therapy for Latina immigrants. Empowerment feminist therapy promotes working with the

personal and social identity of Latina clients, understanding their socio political history, establishing a positive therapeutic interaction and valuing their perspective (Diaz - Lazaro, Verdinelli and Cohen, 2012). An important component of this type of therapy is: “the client is encouraged to be active in being a social change agent” (Diaz- Lazaro et al., 2012). Culturally driven therapy could be a tool to create a synergy between empowerment and culture when working with Latina women.

Recognizing Strengths

Draucker (1999) focuses on the need for therapists to recognize the strengths and resources that women bring to their own therapeutic experience. A solid client/clinician relationship that can empower women is encompassed in Draucker (1999) statement: “Women were concerned mainly with the therapist’s respect for their individuality, their life choices, and their ability to heal.” (Draucker , 1999, p.25).

The application of empowerment is characterized by working from a collective perspective and using others experiences and supports as a basis for the disfranchised to understand that they are not alone. Additionally, education, including skills, including information about basic rights and choices, is instrumental in allowing women to visualize that they have control over their decisions and their lives. Foster care mothers need to be educated, guided and supported in their role. Clinicians should exercise cultural sensitivity when working with Latina foster care mothers. Culture can be used as a strong resource by acknowledging its influence on foster care mothers and their caregiver role.

Conclusion

Empowerment approaches draw on mechanisms to enable individuals to acquire freedom and to make choices and decisions for themselves. Many times a woman’s sense of control and

worth has been diminished or eradicated by constant harassment and belittling of their persona, just because of their gender. More so, women have lacked adequate and equal representation in society and politics, thus their historical and social place influences their ability to engage in gaining power. Their cultural beliefs and values also can cause strain or challenge them in their roles, one of which could be as a caregiver. Latina foster care mothers are not exempt from these experiences.

Empowerment for these foster care mothers can be promoted through skill building, group connections and support networks, resources, education, policies, community and political involvement and cultural considerations. Helping professionals have the opportunity to serve as key collaborators in the empowerment process of women by integrating culture into this process.

Social workers and health professionals working with Latino families or caregivers should undergo cultural sensitivity training. However, in reality, this effort will not be sufficient because all cultures and subgroups are not always considered and because culture is not static. Therefore, a simple and efficient way to address the role of culture in parenting and specifically in foster care is for the service providers to ask the client to share insight on their cultural practices and traditions in order to honor, respect and integrate these into the working relationship. This approach to interactions between agency, clinician and Latina foster care mothers will not only be culturally sensitive, but would aid in empowering them.

Culture and empowerment are multi-layered concepts that have many ramifications for social workers and health professionals and should be considered within the context of the child social welfare system. Language, communication and sensitivity to social and cultural constructs are key elements in the provision of care for Latinos families because all can directly impact care.

If empowerment is, as Perkins & Zimmerman describes: “a vital construct for understanding the development of individuals, organizations and communities” (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995, 571) then both practitioners and researchers should incorporate this concept in working with a growingly diverse Latino population. Foster-Fishman, Salem, Chibnall, et al (1998) discuss how the researcher should recognize the uniqueness of a person’s or community’s empowerment process, since there is not a global measure for empowerment. It seems that there is a need for further research on how empowerment and culture intersect with one another. Scheyvens & Leslie (2000) explain that involving clients in research can serve as an empowerment mechanism for the participants. Thus, this study of the experience of foster care mothers tries to encourage client participation and involvement by presenting the results to the participants and the agency in hopes of promoting education, support and action.

The inclusion of culture and empowerment in service provision should be used to build preventive method/ skills rather than as remedial tools. Hence, both can become conventional forms of action rather than uncommon corrective approaches.

Every Latina foster care mother can experience hardships and physical or mental health problems and parenting challenges, but empowered mothers whose beliefs and cultural values are recognized and acknowledged will be better equipped to manage adversity. Increasing Latina foster care mother’s individual power and their potential power in politics and social circumstances via the recognition of their cultural values and beliefs will allow them to take command and have a choice on how to effect change, which can be translatable to providing adequate care for a vulnerable child.

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