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How Do People Become Foster Carers in Portugal? The Process of Building the Motivation

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Abstract: Act no. 142/2015 highlights the importance of children out-of-home being placed in a family context. However, foster care continues to be an almost absent component in the Portuguese childcare system. In 2017, it corresponded to just 3% of out-of-home care. This research aims to contribute to the understanding of the reasons for becoming a foster family. It adopted a qualitative approach, using carers' narrative interviews and practitioners semi-structured interviews, inspired by grounded theory. Foster family motivation is rooted in altruism, affection for children and sensitivity to maltreatment. These factors, as well as personal life course and contact with out-of-home care, induce a predisposition to become a foster family. The quality of the support services and the care professionals' performance also reveal key elements.

Keywords: foster care; foster families; motivations; child welfare

1. Introduction

The European welfare states present different backgrounds and responses on childhood welfare, an issue quite visible in foster care. Nevertheless, in Portugal, it is expected that solid steps towards extending foster care will be taken, so that the child's best interests will be considered, and the right to grow up in a family context can be guaranteed, if the biological family does not meet conditions to provide essential care. Branco (2009, p. 19) strengthened the importance of the state role, arguing that "the role of the State is essential to ensure the right to social care and social protection for the citizens who haven't families or cannot benefit from family protection."

Foster care is weakly represented in the Portuguese protection system, nevertheless, it is considered the preferred response in the placement of a child, according to national and international recommendations and guidance reinforced by the amendment of the Portuguese law on the protection of children and young people in danger, Act no. 142/2015. Effectively, the 2018 report on out-of-home care reveals that in 2017, out of 7553 children in out-of-home care in Portugal, only 3% (corresponding to 246 children) were in foster care, reflecting the existence of 7307 children in residential care. These data confirm the Delgado (2007) argument that invisibility is one of the significant features of foster care in Portugal, expressing the relative ignorance of foster care in Portuguese society and its poor implementation as a public policy measure. This landscape is also observed in the work of the Portuguese scientific community.

The relevance of the study on foster families is grounded in the fact that much of the best and the worst of the adoption process and further development is due to the characteristics of the family that places the child (Amorós and Palacios 2004). Meeting them and understanding their motivations and expectations seems essential to support grounded public policy in this area and to create a knowledge base for the evolution of this public policy measure. This empirical research, drawing on a qualitative nature, belongs to a larger study on foster care in Portugal, which includes the experiences of foster families. It is based on narrative interviews with caregivers and semi-structured interviews with

professionals who belong to the support teams of foster care, and aims to answer the research questions: How and why do families become foster families?

1.1. Models of Social Welfare, Family Policy and Child Protection Systems

As a southern European country, Portugal, according to Esping-Andersen, is part of the corporate model welfare state, but a less developed version, together with other Mediterranean countries (Silva 2002). From the point of view of family public policies, this set of countries feature an underdevelopment of family benefits and family services (Silva 2002), and strong family values combined with a weak individualization and the absence of an explicit family policy (Portugal 2000; Wall et al. 2001). Branco (2009) emphasized the idea of the existence of a southern family model with a high level of family support and solidarity, which is supported by authors such as Guerrero and Naldini (1996), through the comparison of demographic and socio-economic indicators between southern and the other European countries.

Describing this family model, Guerrero and Naldini (1996) underline that the increase of the employability of women seems to be responsible for the decrease of the birth rate and the increase of marital instability. There is the persistence of some traditional traits, such as the value of marriage, low birth rates out of wedlock, low rates of divorce and high rates of young people living together with their parents, compared with other western European countries. The fact that young people in Portugal remain at their parents' home in adulthood may constitute a structural factor for the reduced number of foster families. The study findings of Schofield et al. (2000) in the United Kingdom, demonstrated that several families, called "second families", became foster families due to the autonomisation of their children (and the feeling of being capable to help a child grow up) seems to be congruent with this interpretation.

From the socio-economic point of view, in southern European countries, there are high rates of both unemployment and precarious and informal work, high rates of people working on their own, a significant number of small businesses and a large territorial heterogeneity. In this dimension, Leber and LeCroy (2012) stated that the (American) media suggested a correlation between the economic recession and the increase of child abuse and neglect, stressing that it has an impact on foster care, at minimum, due to government cuts in the field of child protection.

In Portugal and in the other countries of southern Europe, social policies are often structurally associated with the family unit and indexed to the family income, and simultaneously, with the devaluation of individual rights, low social benefits and small incentives to the families. With the increasing participation in the labor market, women have a double workday (Guerreiro 2011) because there is little sharing of domestic activities by the male. Then women almost exclusively complete not only household tasks as well as manage childcare and elderly care (Silva 2002). In these circumstances "women [in Portugal] accumulate an overhead of paid and unpaid work, which generates stress and some family conflicts." (Guerreiro 2011, p. 29). In this context, the promotion of part-time work, flexible work journey, protection of labor rights and leave of absence regime (Branco 2009) it will be desirable measures in order to promote friendly family policies. This set of aspects could work as incentives and support for families who become foster families.

Colton et al. (2008, p. 879) stated that the vast majority of foster carers in the United Kingdom and in France are women, many of whom are single. This issue may constitute one of the obstacles to the development of childcare in Portugal and other countries of southern Europe, characterized as a system of passive subsidiarity in the relationship of state-families (Garcia and Kazepov 2002).

The State tends to assign much of the social responsibility to civil society, through the associations and private social welfare institutions, expecting that these will promote responses tailored to the needs of the population (Branco 2009). Many of these non-governmental organizations survive with complicated treasuries, recruiting volunteers often with no proper training. This privatization seems to be a current trend in several countries where private agencies are a resource that takes an important role in the social sector. However, as Wall et al. (2001) warns, even though non-profit social charities

increase on a regular basis, this increase is not sufficient to meet the needs of families, especially families with small children in urban centers.

Regarding the provision of childcare, in France and Finland, where public services of childcare have been established for a long time, there is a cash payment or tax benefits for caregivers who stay at home or to use to hire someone to take care of their child at home or for other kinds of assistance systems. In Spain and Italy, there is an appeal to migrant workers for domestic jobs corresponding to a low wage. The Netherlands introduced a combined model, valuing part-time work but keeping job social rights. In Sweden, the system of assistance, focusing on gender equality, features high-quality social rights being supported by the State. In the United Kingdom, the policies focus on the encouragement of entry into the labor market.

Gilbert et al. (2011) analyzed a set of ten countries, focusing on the role of the State in child protection when there is a case of mistreatment. They proposed the following clusters of countries: The Anglo-American countries targeted on "child protection orientation", the Continental and Nordic-European countries following a "family service orientation". These models are similar to Esping-Andersen's worlds of social welfare (Silva 2002), respectively the liberal regimes or Anglo-Saxon, corporatist or continental and social-democratic or Scandinavian. Portugal, according to Esping-Andersen, is included in the Corporatist model.

The differences between these two models are significant, namely, the professional teams feature and the profile of child protective organizations. In the countries where there is a family service orientation, there are multidisciplinary teams, which may include physicians, nurses, social workers and psychologists, among others. That framework is similar to the characteristics of the technical teams in Portugal. In countries that are oriented towards child protection, the professionals are social workers. Considering support entities, in Australia "child protection services may be administered by state or federal agencies, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, health organisations, or small community groups" (Lamont et al. 2010, p. 678) and in Canada, for example, the responsibility is mainly assumed by local authorities and nongovernmental organizations.

Gilbert et al. (2011) concluded, however, that there seems to be no apparent connection between the out-of-family rates and the guidelines of the protection systems. The age of the child at the time of placement seems to be one aspect in which there are significant differences. The child protection orientation tends to place the child at a given level of risk, based on the premise that younger children are more vulnerable than older children. In countries with a family service orientation, interventions mainly take the form of service to both the family and the child, and the child is only removed if these services fail. Gilbert et al. (2011), proposed an alternative model, called "child-focused orientation", consisting of a third and intermediate approach.

Despite the disparities between countries, international and Portuguese legislation and recommendations move towards the recognition of the importance of family. In the same vein the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (Assembleia da República 2005), Article 67 recognizes the family as a fundamental element of society. It is then relevant to characterize and analyze the scope of foster care in Portugal. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef n.d.), adopted by the General Assembly at the United Nations (1989) on 20 November 1989, was ratified by Portugal, on 21 September 1990. The Convention recommends that States recognize that the child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (p. 3).

1.2. Portugal: The Foster Care Reality in a Comparative Perspective

In accordance with Portuguese law on the protection of children and young people in danger, (article 46 of Act No. 142/2015 of 8 September), foster care consists of the "attribution of trust of the child or the young person to a natural person or a family, designated for this purpose, providing him/her with family integration and the provision of proper care for his/her needs and well-being and the education necessary for his/her integral development."

In Portugal, according to Delgado (2007), the foster care of children, from its genesis to the present can be characterized by four features: Invisibility, generality, humanitarianism and transition. Invisibility is the result of the relative ignorance of foster care by the Portuguese society, as well as the absence of its promotion by public bodies or civil society, and its lack of visibility in the media. The generality is due to the imprecision of the law concept of "foster family in professional residence" and also because carers are not given a distinction according to their functions and caregiving is not considered to be a career. The lack of both initial training for candidates and of continuous training for active foster families, as well as the low educational, social and economic levels of carers, address humanitarianism as another trait of foster care. The predictability of the return to their original family, without the sensitivity to the attachment (and dis-attachment) processes inherent to foster care, reveals the transitional nature of it.

Using the latest data released by the Instituto de Segurança Social (2018), in Portugal in the year 2017, of all the children that came out of residential care, just 9% (corresponding to 255 children) left through adoption. That year, 60% of the 246 children in foster care, (corresponding to 112 children) had been in that placement for six years. The developments in the number of children in foster care in the last decade are in a solid decreasing trend. In 2008 there were 918 children placed in a family context. Since that year the law has forbidden kinship as a sort of foster care, therefore the numbers have been declining every year. In particular about foster carers there are no current public national data, actually, Social Security only publishes information about children who get in alternative care. Reviewing the situation of children in care in general (including also residential care), over the last ten years it is possible to see a decrease too, which stands at 24%. A comparative analysis with other protection systems reveals that Portugal presents a disparate pattern within the European landscape.

In 2015 in Spain there were 20,172 children in foster families, including kinship care (Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad 2017). In England, 55,200 (73%) children looked after in 2018 were in foster placements, an increase in numbers from 53,010 in 2017 (Department for Education 2018). In Northern Ireland, the latest data from 2017/2018, state that 79% of children in care lived in a foster care placement (Department of Health 2018). Delgado (2011) revealed that at the international level, steps have been taken to ensure that foster care will have a growing expression. Particularly in France, where in 2006, the measure represented 54% of the placements and the system is evolving towards the professionalization of carers (who are part of the foster team), and to closer proximity with the biological family (putting the child whenever possible in their extended family). In Australia, Octoman and McLean stated (Octoman and McLean 2014, p. 149) that "foster care is one of the main interventions of support available to children". In Canada, in 2007 the number of children in foster care totaled nearly 70,000 (the number is increasing since 1992 when foster care included 40,000 children) (Doucet et al. 2018). In the United States in 2017, according to the government 442,995 children were in foster care[1].

A UNICEF project implemented in some regions of Bulgaria was active from June 2009 through February 2012, and in that period a significant increase in the number of foster care placements was observed (Sherbanov 2012), emphasizing that 198 children were in foster care in 2008 increasing to 1024 children in 2012. Eurochild organization disseminates reports on the process of de-institutionalization and childcare reform ongoing in 15 European countries (including Austria, Spain, Belgium and Estonia) and the data relating to 2016 confirms that the international trend is family-based care, therefore a family context. In Austria, in 2012, from the 10,000 children in out-of-home care, 40% were in foster care. In Belgium, in 2014, where 9697 children were in a family context, in foster care or in their extended family, (in percentage terms, the data varies according to the region, 40% in Flanders and 25% in Wallonia). In Spain, in the same year, 13,453 children (representing 59%) were placed in a family context. In the case of Estonia, 2015 data demonstrated that 1486 children

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[1] https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport25.pdf.

were integrated into a familiar context (of these, only 205 were in foster care); the residential care is represented by 1068 children in 38 institutions around this country. The campaign "Open doors for children in Europe" held in those 15 countries aims to support national efforts to develop child protection systems that strengthen families and ensure high-quality alternative family and community care, taking advantage of European Union financing and the policy to empower civil society. The second phase of this program ended in 2018 including some other countries.

In Portugal, the responsibility of foster care is assigned to the Social Security public services, and only one private foundation, working in two northern districts, Oporto and Braga has a partnership agreement with the Portuguese state. This situation gives rise to significant disparities in foster care dissemination across the country, registering a greater expression of foster care in the north region.

The availability and involvement of foster families are a key factor in the success of this element of child protection. The existence of foster families is crucial for the implementation of this component of child welfare system, by which the knowledge of these families and therefore this paper, will contribute to the process of recruitment, selection, training, monitoring and maintenance of carers because "the higher the satisfaction with the experience, the greater the chances to meet new families interested in foster care" (Delgado 2007, p. 55). Portuguese families who foster a child, receive per child a monthly €153.40 maintenance allowance and a compensation allowance of €176.89. In the case of a disabled child or a child with a chronic illness, the value of the maintenance allowance is doubled to €353.79. These families are still entitled to support and training. Carers are responsible for the development of the child and have to be available to work with the professional team, but they also must contribute to the birth family rehabilitation (Delgado 2016).

Considering the evolution of the concept, structure and organization of the family, a foster family is assumed to be a family, like any other. Progressively less bound by ties of blood, marriage, sexual partnership or adoption, the term family generally involves the group in which relationships are based on trust, mutual support and common destiny. Foster families are based as well on the basis of affection and security relations, particularly for the child fostered. Nutt (2006, p. 92) stressed that in these families "the active creation and support of emotional relationships are central to life in the personal and family domain; the search for satisfaction and self-satisfaction come through emotional connection and communication". It is understood that the quality of the attachment established between the child and the foster family is essential for mutual wellbeing.

As the child has the ability to attach to several adults, what matters is to promote an adequate transition (from the point of view of both the child and the foster family), considering the transitory nature of this measure. For the family who fosters a child in a situation of danger, there is an individual, marital and family satisfaction by the exercise of parenting and fraternity with the new family member. Adults make the well-being of this child a priority, sometimes to the detriment of their own well-being. However, as in any family, the exercise of parenting is a challenge. It should be noted that a foster child has a complex life history, so the child and her/his family characteristics and other contextual factors cannot be neglected. Often the family plays the role of a repairer, an almost therapeutic role.

Stressful situations, emerging in all families, may occur at various stages of the placement and will depend on the family resiliency. The family cohesion, the belief of systems and coping strategies help families to cope with adversity and stress (Kalil 2003). In foster families, stress levels may be higher, so it is important to consider the monitoring and technical support that they can and should be provided. Even though the foster families are recognized as competent by the services, they often feel powerless as they do not have the full powers of biological families. The family system in foster care is complex, it has more subsystems, including the child, the biological family, professionals and other services, which are integrated into the ecosystem.

Delgado (2008) argued that the creation of an association of foster families could prove essential to representing the interests of carers at different levels of decision-making. An association would be able to create services that can meet the particular needs of foster families and offer the appropriate

support for the success of each placement. This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of foster families, in particular, their predisposition, motivations for fostering and expectations, among others.

2. Materials and Methods

Based on a qualitative approach, the empirical design of the present study was based on both narrative interviews with 10 foster families and semi-structured interviews with 3 practitioners from support teams, as well as an analysis on family files. The primacy attributed to narrative interviews is based on the words of Delgado (2013, p. 170) who suggested that "it would be interesting to collect narratives of the foster families that would allow us to deepen our understanding of their motives..." In the narrative interview, the generative question was used to give impetus to the discourse, but a script was created at the end with a list of certain points of interest to be addressed, namely: The identification of the interviewee(s); basic data on the foster child; reasons for becoming a foster carer; how they first knew about foster care, who proposed it; if they already knew the child; and expectations, among other aspects.

The collection of the empirical data used audio recording and later transcription, and was carried out between December 2015 and April 2016, in the Portuguese districts of Braga, Porto and Lisbon (by one of the authors, who was a doctoral student under the guidance of the second author). The selected districts met the criteria of maximum variation and convenience (Flick 2005), considering the geographical distribution of foster families in Portugal. There were 130 h of content recorded.

The main research question is how and why families become foster families.

2.1. Sample

The theoretical sampling was made up of 10 families, who were supported by two different organizations: One, the Regional Agency of Social Security, and other, the only NGO allowed to implement foster care, *Mundos de Vida* Foundation. This study is not intended to achieve a statistical representation, but significant sampling of the diversity of situations found in the scope of foster care in Portugal. Thus, the sampling process was carried out using the maximum variation criterion, including a few cases, but as different as possible, to illustrate the amplitude of variations and differentiation in the field (Flick 2005), complemented by the criterion of convenience, related with the facilitation of on-field access.

In terms of participants selection criteria, it followed a decision based on both literature and analysis of the family processes. The sample comprises of families: (i) With biological children in the household; (ii) with independent biological children; (iii) at the first placement; (iv) at the second or more placement; (v) with a placement cessation; (vi) fostering children with disabilities; and (vii) who leave foster care. Regarding the sociodemographic characterization of the social actors who constitute the sample, the Portuguese nationality was verified, the average age of the caregivers at the time the foster experience began is centered at 42 years old, and the average age at the time of interview is centered at 46 years old. Participating families have children, namely in cohabitation, at the time of fostering; however, at the time of the study, two families had autonomous children. They had previous experience with children either through the education of their own children or through contact with other children, as nephews, children of their friends and friends of their children. Half of the participants had previous experience with children at school or residential care. The male adult works full-time and less than half of the caregivers have a stable job. In some cases, it is by choice. They expressed the need to give priority to their foster children, as they require availability and admitted the difficulty in reconciling a job with placement necessities. The education level of caregivers is significantly basic, and the monthly incomes are in the range of €1000 to €2000.

In order to omit the identification of the participants, codes have been created, namely "FF" (foster family); "MV" (FF accompanied by the Mundos de Vida); "SS" (FF accompanied by Social Security); and "Ex" (no longer a foster family at the time of the interview) as can be observed in this article in some interview excerpts.

Regarding access to the families, there was a collaboration with the professional teams who support foster families. The collaboration was namely regarding the location for some of the interviews. The other interviews were carried out in the house of the participants or another place. As these were intensive interviews, the average interview time was more than 1.4 h. Of the cases carried out, 50% were family interviews, including the female and male caregivers, with the purpose of promoting participant diversity.

The three professionals interviewed work for the teams of these two organizations, referred above. Social Security has 18 regional agencies, but a significant part of them no longer have a foster care service. We selected the region with more placements. Its foster care team is composed by the two participants of this study. The third professional participant is the coordinator of the two teams of Mundos de Vida. This social worker has worked there since the very beginning of the foster care service.

2.2. Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the data adopted the orientation of grounded theory, in order to create a theory, following Charmaz (2006) orientation. The study proposes to make recommendations for practitioners and for public policies supported by a new and grounded theory that is borne of scientific evidence. The theory is 'grounded' in the data and the narratives of participants contain very abundant data.

Using the software MaxQDA12, the theoretical coding was performed, initially very close to the data, with line-by-line coding, and later with focused coding. At the same time, initial and advanced notes and diagrams were used to support the analytical interpretation.

In the course of an in-depth analysis, exploring each incident in detail, a few categories and subcategories emerged, namely consisting of: "Predisposition for foster care"; "the valuation of the family institution"; "ambition of realising personal desires"; "the discovery of the foster family"; "initiative to foster a child"; "foster care as an occupation"; and "altruism as personal satisfaction," among others.

3. Results and Discussion

The Process of Motivation for Being a Foster Family

The voices of the foster families were collected through narrative interviews in consideration with the maximum variation of the situations and the characteristics previously described. It was not so much the individual family trajectories, but rather the result of the relationships between analytic categories and subcategories that emerged throughout the interview procedure of the participants. They illustrate the processes experienced and the meanings attributed by the foster families, with particular attention being paid to each word, from the stage prior to fostering until the moment of the interview. This is because "the word is a world of meanings and relationships" (Pais 1999, p. 22).

The results of this research allowed us to argue that the motivation of families to foster a child in situations of maltreatment is rooted in the values of altruism and is supported by the affection for children and the sensitivity to the lack of protection that affects many children in Portugal. It was noticed, however, that altruism is not unconditional, considering the importance given to ensuring that fostering is complementary to their family well-being. Therefore, it is possible to establish limits by making it clear that the disposition for foster care is re-evaluated whenever childcare affects the family balance in a sensitive way.

The foster families who are, still to date, supported by Social Security began the process of foster care with a different legal framework. In the previous legal framework, there are situations in which the initiative for foster care came from a social worker, as an invitation, perhaps in an emergency need, to place a child. On the one hand, the emergency could be due to a situation of a mistreated child or, on the other hand, without any family problem, there was the need to accommodate children with

disabilities coming from a distant place to a special education school referred in the locality of the foster family.

> "He [a boy] was beaten by his mother's mate. At the time the services said—*He stays there tonight* [at a neighbor's home], do you mind? And then they became a foster family ... " (Team A).

> "They started to have foster kids coming from [municipality] Viana, hearing impairment, and they are located near that [specialized] school, they [foster kids] were there, but they were going home at the weekend, the parents were not bad parents!" (Team A).

The foster families within this framework may have had little information about what foster care is before the procedure. They may have a somewhat fantasized perspective of foster care, ignoring the implications and requirements of the foster care process. The requirements of foster care are multidimensional, in particular, the challenges are the contact with the family of origin of the foster child and in relation to the services, specifically juridical services.

> "I think families have a rather romanticized and poetic view (...) they are not aware that this has many implications in fact: *I have to go to court, receive in my house the father who beat John [fictitious name], and be able to tell John that your dad is getting better, he likes you, we'll work with him, he'll even have lunch with us, there are things that have already changed*. This is demanding. [...] This is of a level of exigency and complexity that some families are not aware of." (Team A).

However, the training developed by the professional teams for new caregiver candidates aims to promote knowledge and preparation for foster care. The team recognizes that the families tend not to clearly know what the impact that foster care will have on their personal, family and children's lives,

> "Even with a lot of training and information that the team may give to the candidates, the reality is that the families are not always available or are not always aware of the impact that foster care will create in their families, in their family dynamics, and in their children." (Team B).

By analyzing the narratives of the foster families in Portugal (including the foster care that uses the current legal framework), the motivating factors for becoming a foster family observed in this qualitative study are in line with other national and international studies, notably by Schofield et al. (2000), Delgado (2013), Howell-Moroney (2014) and MacGregor et al. (2014), that highlight the altruistic values focused on the child or on the contribution to society, the desire to promote a good home for the child, to provide love for a child and a home to a child that is institutionalised, to help a child with special problems and to help the community/society in providing adequate levels of protection and development to children. The participants in this study expressed the reasons to foster:

> "Essentially because I really like children and I was used to having children at home." (FCMV3—Foster Carer supported by Mundos de Vida team, caregiver, unemployed, 48 years old).

> "I like children very much, I like to give affection, I like to help". (FCMV5 caregiver, family helper, 42 years old).

Another aspect that is also at the basis of the disposition for a family to become a foster family is the valuation of the family as the indicated context for the primary socialization of children, thus giving them the right to grow in a family. Caregivers understand that as a measure of child protection, foster care is more personalized, individualized, affectionate and suitable for a child than the residential care. They often know the reality of residential care well or otherwise know people who work in institutions, arguing that in this response, children have less comfort and attention:

"I think a child in a foster family is much better than in an institution, has more affection, more everything than in an institution. In an institution, there are many children and you cannot give the necessary attention to each one." (FCMV2 caregiver, operational assistant in schools, 41 years old).

In this sense, the caregivers try to ensure that a child is not placed in an institution, even when the placement they experience is very complex and there are moments that generate demotivation. The family functions as a unit that must be preserved. This premise is also applied to the promotion of the child's bonds with her/his family of origin, including siblings, parents, grandparents and uncles. To this aim, they make efforts to comply with visitation schemes and to create excuses for their parents' fault, when it occurs. They try to help the family of origin, enabling them with educational suggestions and strategies, as they are concerned with the return of the child and therefore his/her well-being. They are aware that a competent family can provide her/him with proper care.

"We were told there was a great connection to each other [between the adopted child and her sister]. (...) -And now?! We were going to separate two sisters?" (Caregivers of FCMV3, unemployed, 41 years old and optometrist, 39 years old).

"We got on well with the social worker, so that A [foster child] did not move away from her brothers, it was a family ... We wanted A [foster child] to not disconnect from the [biological] family." (ExFCCPCJ—Foster Carers supported by Child Protection Commission, who do not foster anymore, caregivers, teachers of cooking, 38 and 39 years old).

These families have difficulty imagining themselves without children nearby. All have children, and even couples with only one child constantly relate to other children, namely, friends of their children, sons and daughters of their friends or relatives, children in catechetical ministry, and students, among others. According to the present study, these aspects, associated with a personal and professional life course, and contact with the residential or other contexts of lack of protection, are factors that contribute to the predisposition for different types of families to become foster families.

"My vocation [to be a foster family] comes from the fact that I have never had a mother. Never felt what mother's love was." (Caregiver of FCSS2, 62 years old, domestic worker).

"My son, who is eleven years old and in the fourth class, came home with a pamphlet "Need Hugs", and told me: -The teacher said that all parents should consider fostering because the children need a family and to be happy. -Well, they do Y [her son], and your mother knows that, because your mother works with children and sees it in her daily life, unfortunately. That got me into the idea, so I called the Mundos de Vida" (FCMV2 caregiver, operational assistant in schools, 41 years old).

"I think in the institutions where they end up ... I'm sceptical, my father worked for a long time in an institution and told about situations that I recorded. Heavy situations and it was an institution of nuns. Things that no one would like. Those kids were going to get lost. A [foster child] could never grow up in an institution" (FCMV5 caregivers, family supporter, 42 years old and electrician, 45 years old).

Watching children experiencing mistreatment tends to create greater sensitivity and feed the predisposition to help and care for children. This contact with the lack of protection feeds their preoccupation with the unsatisfied needs that they observe and motivates them to act to bring about change for the children and in society. They see themselves as a resource and feel that their own inactivity would make them uncomfortable and sorry.

"They [students] see me as a person who is there to help them. I have kids coming to me. I stopped training them, but they are my friends, I commit myself. The experience [foster] was good in that aspect, openness to the young people who need our support, I am not there to criticize them" (exFCCPCJ caregivers, cook teachers, 38 and 39 years old).

This feature of the previous contact with child deprivation contexts is less of a focus in international literature and does not feature in Portuguese literature on foster families (highlighting the relevance of this research to the study of foster care). In addition to the biographical component, the contact with experiences of a lack of protection appears to be a suggestive explanatory element, namely for non-professional foster families. In fact, some studies demonstrate the influence of the professional trajectory of caregivers, such as nurses, teachers or other professionals linked to the social area, whose job was related to child or families in need (Schofield et al. 2000). Other studies also point out the importance of the knowledge of foster families and foster families constituted by adults who were the children of caregivers in the past as motivating factors (Nutt 2006; Del Valle 2008; Delgado 2007). This is not evident in the present study, since only one caregiver had known a foster family in their professional context. She projected the desire to help a child more intensively in the future, since in her daily life she observed many children in need both from the emotional and satisfaction of basic care point of view. The other participants began to meet foster families only after entering the process of recruitment and training in foster care.

Advocacy for the cause of foster care, such as that developed in a particularly active way by the Mundos de Vida Foundation, however, will only have an impact when the predisposition to be a carer is already anchored in the potential applicants. This study demonstrates that the participants in the process of sensitization and recruitment that this organization performs were previously predisposed to participate in the support of a child in need, in a more or less conscious way. The dashboard sand brochures they find, with appealing images of children, act as a catalyst that stimulates the desire to foster a child or may induce the desire to become a foster family. This is sometimes expressed by their children.

The positive experiences from foster children and foster families shown in videos from the Mundos de Vida, feed and reinforce the predisposition, leading to the final decision to become a caregiver.

The empirical data also reveals self-centered motivations, since fostering a child can be a means to satisfy the ambition to fulfill personal desires. Some caregivers admit that fostering may represent the possibility of having a daughter, considering that they only had boys:

> "The girl ... the girl I never had; I do not know if you understand me ... I have a boy, I never wanted to have more" (FAMV4 caregiver, domestic worker, 44 years old).

> "It was through the poster with a girl. We have two boys, and that's where the joke started -So having a girl would be funny!" (FAMV5 caregiver, family supporter, 42 years old).

Nevertheless, these caregivers also foster boys and no differentiation in the treatment is observed. There is a great affection for girls, and when foster families experience a difficult placement, characterized by a challenging boy, the social workers should reflect whether fostering a girl would be more comfortable.

Being a foster family can still provide the only son or daughter a fraternal relationship with a supposed brother or sister that they never had before:

> "I have only one daughter, but the house at the weekend and on vacation was always full ... My husband loves children and my daughter too. (...) She wants to buy presents for them (foster children) with her allowance, but I do not allow it." (FAMV3 caregiver, unemployed, 48 years old).

One of the support teams interviewed focused on a pedagogical reason for the involvement in the foster care, aimed at transmitting values of altruism and solidarity to their children:

> "They have essentially a solidary motivation, the feeling of helping and helping to a child (...) and also a temporary help (...) And also the pedagogical reason, they want to teach their biological children the values." (Team B)

Foster care can also contribute to family well-being, self-esteem, a sense of social utility, and may even prevent depressive states by giving meaning to everyday life. In that sense, it can be a daily occupation and a companionship.

"My mother is eighty-two, and she loves the little one [foster baby]. My father, unfortunately, cannot see, but he likes to grab him on his lap, and then he starts to do things to him and he laughs. It makes my father happy, it was a self-esteem for my father, because he was going into depression for losing his view. The boy came to bring him joy despite not seeing him" (caregiver of FAMV1, hairdresser, 51 years old).

Nutt (2006) noticed in her study that a participant, whose mother committed suicide, chose the children as her fundamental meaning of life. Without them, she would be depressed. Foster care gave her a sense of life. Howell-Moroney (2014) observed self-centered motivations, such as the desire to be loved by a child, in almost half of the participants in his study. He also noted that he found more self-centered motives in people who had no religious motives. The literature (see Maeyer et al. 2014; Rhodes et al. 2006) illustrates that motivations can be child-centered reasons, self-oriented reasons and society-oriented reasons; however, most families are involved in foster care for child-centered reasons.

Fostering can be also a way of gaining self-esteem, gaining an emotional reward, healing the wounds of the past or gaining a competent form of employment (Schofield et al. 2000). Satisfying the desire to "fill the empty nest" when the biological children are older, the lack of hope of adopting a child, and the desire to provide companionship for the child are other motivations mentioned in the literature (MacGregor et al. 2014). In the present study, none of the families were interested in foster care in relation to "empty nest syndrome" or an interest in adoption.

Regarding economic gain, often the dominant social representation of foster families in Portugal, no evidence has been collected to support this possible finding, which is consistent with the results of other studies (see Nutt 2006; Doyle and Melville 2013). As the results indicate, at first instance caregivers do not manifest economic interests, stating that money does not matter. They tend to suggest that the value of the expenses for the child are greater than the benefits they receive from the government.

They believe that children who are placed deserve unconditional love and are beyond the benefits they receive. Still, it can be observed in the testimony of a professional and a caregiver that there may be candidates with economic interests, especially when they consider foster care as the replacement of a job.

"When this economic crisis broke out a couple years ago, it was frequent at Social Security, it was common to see people signing up as a foster family or a nanny. The motivation was economic, they were in a situation of unemployment and this could be a [way of] life (...). Nannies who are going to be unemployed, asked. I suggested to talk to Mundos de Vida, but the motivation was economic." (Team A)

Only one of the participating families presented a discourse that could be close to this motivational logic:

"He [husband] said -Since you're alone [husband working out of the country] at home, besides having a companion, having a job... it means working hard, we can see it by ours [biological children], I have a twenty-year-old son" (FAMV4 caregiver, domestic worker, 44 years old).

In their testimonies, the participants do not seem to regard foster care as a way to professionalize women, they focus more on the domain of personal and family fulfillment and/or as a healthy occupation.

"I was such in a [bad] moment that I told my mother -I have to look for a part-time [job]. Because since my [child] left [died]... When my daughter was here [alive], I had a lot of work, a child with cerebral paralysis bedridden gives a lot of work. I was feeling very isolated, with

nothing to do. When D [foster child] came to me it was like air, fresh air. I was saying—I have to leave home, because I am damaging my [children]. My children came home: -Mother, are you sick today?" You don't look okay... " (FAMV1 caregiver, hairdresser, 51 years old).

Delgado (2007) pointed out that the trend that is taking place at the international level is professionalism, despite the apprehensions that can be verified with regard to the disappearance of the informality and altruism that characterize foster care. As pointed out by a professional, it is not the fact of receiving money, compared with the performance and the retribution of the expenses associated with the child "that makes the measure less affectionate." This dimension has an added significance when taking into account the limited compensation that foster families in Portugal receive from the Social Security—a reward for community service and a reimbursement for the increase in family expenses with the child placement. As mentioned previously, in financial terms, families receive, for each child, by month €153.40, plus €176.89 (the amount doubles if the child has a disability or chronic illness). Foster families experience personal sacrifices in economic terms that they should not have. The need for the reinforcement of fiscal, social and labor benefits and the reimbursement of expenses appears to be unanimous aspects in the discourse of both caregivers and professionals interviewed.

"This will not be the factor [low economic and fiscal support] for families not to foster, but this will also be a reason for families to think twice." (FAMV3).

"[there is a need] to greatly improve the support system to the foster families, from the remuneration system, therefore the value that is paid, the tax system ..." (Team B).

"One of the important issues that will weigh, is the economic component, very little is paid, [...] we know that a child costs money." (Team A).

In conclusive terms, as illustrated in Figure 1 "The Producer Factors of the Motivation to become a Foster Family", the motivation of people to become foster families is rooted in the values of altruism, supported by affection for children and sensitivity to the mistreatment of children. These factors, associated with personal and professional life path, and contact with residential care or other contexts of mistreatment, produce a predisposition for families to become a foster family. The motivation expressed by their children is a significant catalyst in applying for foster care. There are no indications of economic interests in foster care, although some participants in this study (both a carer and a professional) admit the existence of caregivers attracted by the financial benefits. The costs to care for the child tend to be higher than the social benefits received.
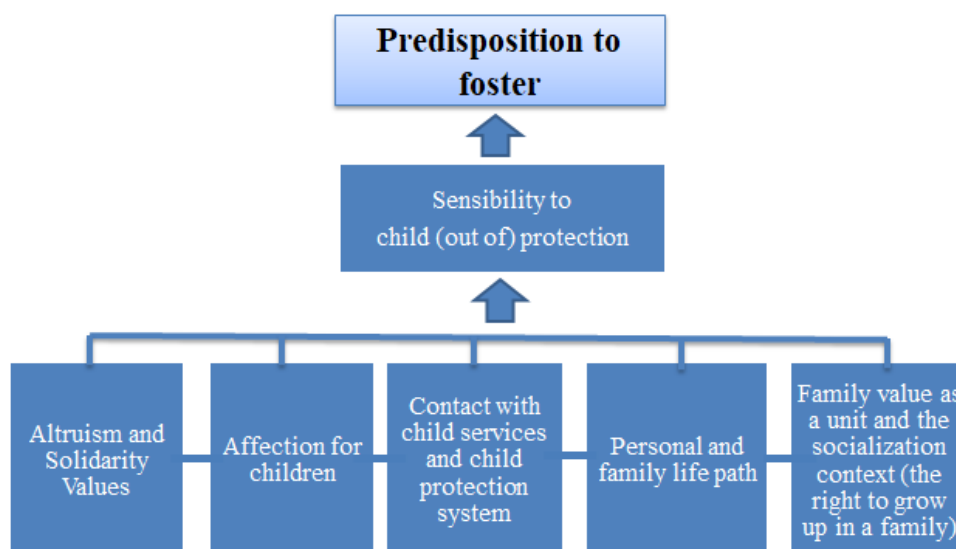

Figure 1. The Producer Factors of the Motivation to become a Foster Family.

Finally, it highlighted that the campaigns of information on foster care performed, play as agents of sensitization. However, we support that this predisposition to become a foster family exists previously. When candidates for being a foster family look at the dashboards and brochures with both foster care information and appealing pictures of children, the desire to foster come out clearly. Positive reports of experiences with foster children and foster families in videos nourish and reinforce the predisposition, leading to the final decision to apply. Thus, the evidence gathered by the present study suggests the importance of the diversity of approaches and instruments used in the diffusion and advocacy of a family dynamic for children and young people in danger.

4. Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Based on the results, it can be argued that the motivation of the foster families in this study demonstrates that there is no evidence for concerns about the intentions of applicants, therefore we highlight the importance of extending and reinforcing foster care in the Portuguese protection system as a privileged response in the placement of children. The reasons for fostering are based essentially on the values of altruism and there is no evidence of economic or employment interests, as feared by professionals. A deeper understanding of the profile of carers and ex-carers will allow the adoption of strategies to attract potential candidates, namely the awareness and involvement of the children of potential caregivers in the decision-making process of the application.

The quality of support services and the performance of care professionals are key elements in the success of the implementation of foster care, in raising awareness, in recruitment campaigns and in the selection, preparation and maintenance of candidates. It is clear when the participants talk about the professional intervention, that in Portugal, the genesis and the practical implementation of the measure have significant disparities to the current legislation, namely when analyzing the practice of the Social Security service.

This research intends to constitute a contribution to protection policies, models of social welfare and to professional practice, suggesting: (i) The implementation of policies that translate into positive practices at the local level with real investment to fulfill the right to grow up in a family context, for all children, unless it is not considered suitable to their best interests; (ii) the need to move towards the implementation of current national and international legislation and recommendations; (iii) the promotion of studies and data collection from all actors in the family, children, families of origin, foster families and professionals; (iv) the realization of new protocols between the Social Security and the NGO to implement the measure; (v) awareness and adequate information, both for the population and for professionals working within the framework of the child protection system (in particular the courts, Social Security, Child Protection Commission, and associations, among others); (vi) the dissemination and promotion of a positive social image of foster care and of foster families through the media; (vii) investment in the recruitment and maintenance of experienced foster families for greater flexibility in response/offer of placement in the family and specifically in different types of family care; (viii) valuing and encouragement to foster families and professionals with training, supervision, tax, social and labour benefits and reimbursement of expenses (a unanimous suggestion of the caregivers and professionals interviewed); (ix) consideration of the initial expectations and predefined criteria of the foster families in the matching phase; and (x) maintaining regular contact for an adequate follow-up and keeping the motivation of the families available and trained.

Due to the qualitative and intensive nature of this study and as it was based on a sample consisting of a limited number of cases, this study does not aim to generalise its results to the universe of foster families, but rather to contribute to their knowledge and reinforce the need for the Portuguese scientific community to contribute to breaking the relative veil of ignorance that hinders the system of protection of children at risk in Portugal.

Future research in this field may not only aim to carry out extensive studies to ensure the representativeness of this population, but also to explore other dimensions that have been less present in the literature, such as the relationship between the performance of vocational monitoring systems

and the satisfaction and renewal of the willingness to remain a foster family, bringing empirical evidence to policymakers and professional actors involved in the field.

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