FOSTER PARENT'S MOTIVATIONS REGARDING FOSTER CARE: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY FROM SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract: *Institutionalized children's foster care is getting more momentum in India recently. Perceptions and motivations regarding foster care among foster parents are an area unexplored and the current study is indeed an attempt to look into it. Initial assessment of the sample population was done at home and their socio-demographic data was collected. After taking informed consent, the participants were given an open ended question, what motivated you to apply for foster care? to answer in detail in writing. Qualitative content analysis, a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation was used to analyse the data. The sample population consisted of 36 foster parents. The mean age of husband was 51.66 ± 6.58, mean age of wife was 44.83 ± 5.64 and average number of children in the family was 1.58 ± 1.02. Analysis of sociodemographic variables showed that out of 36 foster parents, 21 was belonging to Hindu religion, 8 belonging to Islamic religion and 7 belonging to Christian religion. Most of them belongs to upper middle class and resides in semi urban regions of Kozhikode district. The major motivational themes came out in the qualitative interview were altruism, deprivation, social response, sympathy, empathy, religious beliefs, prestige of the family and a way of meeting parental needs. The present study explored motivations regarding foster care among foster parents. The study found altruism as the most important factor motivating foster care among studied population. Further researches are needed to understand how different motivations affect the quality and continuity of foster care in the Indian context, so that an ideal foster assessment can be made by the concerned authority before entrusting the care of a child to the foster parent.*

Keywords*: Foster care, perceptions, motivations, foster parent*

1. Introduction

The concept of foster care is getting expanded worldwide and research shows that each year the total number of foster placement increases. But, the total number of foster parents does not increase at the same rate and over 57% of foster parents quit within five years from fostering [1]. Motivations of foster parents are known to predict the success or failure of foster care in terms of the total number of children fostered the number of years fostered and the development of secure attachments [2]. Motivations to foster arise from a person's theories about how life is and how life should be and if the foster care experience corresponds to that theory, the foster care experience is most likely to be good. Otherwise, foster parents can adjust their theory or quit fostering [3]. One of the ways to identify more parents with 'high foster care potential' in order to meet the growing need is by carefully studying the motivations of parents for fostering in different populations. Research has shown that the motivation for fostering varies in different countries and generally an intrinsic, child-centered and self-oriented motivations for fostering were associated with positive outcomes [4]. The concept of foster care system is in its infancy in India. There is a conscious effort from the government bodies like, The Central Adoption Resource Authority, to put priority on domestic and safe adoptions of children over institutional care and it has given the authority to states to expand their child protection laws, and to implement non-institutional care. The motivations that influence Kerala foster parents to enroll in foster care are not known.

2. Material and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted at Kozhikode district of Kerala state, India. The sample population was chosen from   300   odd applicants applied for foster care of children from Government Children's Home,, Kozhikode, where District Child Protection office   arranged summer foster care for the first time in 2016 .

Initial assessment of the sample population was done at home and their socio-demographic data was collected. After taking informed consent, the participants were given an open ended question, "*what motivated you to apply for foster care*?" to answer in detail in writing.

Qualitative content analysis, a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation was used to analyze the data [5]. During this process the researcher(s) scrutinize and compare the data. In this study, it involved reading, rereading and summarizing the initial data. Recurring words and phrases were identified and placed into categories, which were assigned descriptive titles, and emergent themes were identified.

3. Results

The sample population consisted of 36 foster parents. The mean age of husband was 51.66 ± 6.58, mean age of wife was 44.83 ± 5.64 and average number of children in the family was 1.58 ± 1.02. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio demographic variables (Continuous)

Variables	Mean ± S.D	Minimum	Maximum
Age husband (In years)(no=36)	51.66 ± 6.58	42.00	68.00
Age of wife (In years) (no=36)	44.83 ± 5.64	30.00	55.00

Analysis of sociodemographic variables showed that out of 36 foster parents, 21 was belonging to Hindu religion, 8 belonging to Islamic religion and 7 belonging to Christian religion. Most of them belongs to upper middle class and resides in semi urban regions of Kozhikode district. The findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Socio demographic variables (Categorical)

Variables			Sample population (n=36)
	Religion	Hindu	21 (58.33 %)
		Muslims	8 (22.22 %)
		Christians	7 (19.44%
	Socioeconomic Status:	Upper Middle	32 (89.44%)
		Lower Middle	3 (8.33 %)
		Upper Lower	1 (2.78%)
	Residence	Rural	16 (44.44%)
		Semi Urban	18 (50.00%)
		Urban	2(5.56%)

3.1 What motivated you to apply for foster care?

The qualitative interview with foster parents revealed multiple, varied and interesting themes that motivated them towards fostering children of children's home, Kozhikode. The major emerging motivational themes for considering foster care were described below:

3.1.1. Altruism

Altruism is considered as one of the   leading   motivating factor   for the foster care [6]. By definition, altruism is a helping behavior that benefits the recipient but provides no benefits and may incur costs to the provider [7].

For many respondents the altruistic behaviour was inculcated from the childhood as they saw the suffering in the society especially in the context with the children. It got 'nurtured up' as they matured and a ' sacrificial life' they wanted to offer to the people who suffer.

"From the childhood I used to feel that I must keep aside a part of my life for children in distress. I was keeping up that spirit always in one corner of my mind".

The personal gain of the altruistic behavior is often mental satisfaction, which was gained through the gratitude of the person who benefit from the particular help or support, as participants mentioned:

"….. used to show gratitude to me which would make me happy, so I thought of going ahead with the decision of foster care".

"--By helping parentless children in their education, I could feel their love and gratitude intensified and those thoughts made us to think about foster care"

But what facilitate altruism is a matter of further research.

3.2. Deprivation as a factor promoting altruism:

Childhood experiences could shape motivation for care and protection of vulnerable children. Although the respondents haven't disclosed all their painful experiences at childhood, such as abuse, neglect or dependency, such experiences might have positively motivated a good number of respondents towards foster care.

"My bitter childhood experience (which I hesitate to disclose) motivated me to take the decision of bringing a foster child to home for summer holidays."

Unpleasant experience of childhood days turn this decision making process. Poverty ridden life in the childhood along with the deprivation of basic necessity was found to be an attribution for the foster care. For some the combination of factors such as neglect, poverty, struggles of life for material deprivation, might motivate to support the other fellow being in struggle. "My father left us during our childhood days and all of us (children) at family struggled a lot".

3.3 Social response or social consciousness / Common Group Identity

Some of the respondents felt that it is their social responsibility to support those children who are uncared by their parents. They felt the arrival of a new child to their homely atmosphere like adding

one more child to their children.   Some of the helping activities by the respondents in the past provided them with 'new insight' to go ahead with further supporting the socially deprived and denied with facilities of 'smooth' life. Such initial help and support are also seen as 'added responsibility' and the 'societal expectations' further compel them to look for such activities.

" When I saw the paper news about summer foster care, I felt happy to give love and affection to an "Orphan child" for few days. Above all the child (foster) would be a company to my kids at home".

The statement has two things in its interpretation. The common perception of institutionalized children being 'Orphan' is a 'normalized' thought for many and could be a part of labeling. The   gain for some of the respondents out of the foster care as a companionship for one's own children. It might mutually benefit, over and above the vacation is the time for the parents on heavy duty do not get free time in   Indian scenario (Especially those employees under government senior staff, since it was the time for the state elections to are yet to complete and the duty hours and responsibilities are normally increased, posing a thread upon the reduced attention to the children who are already on vacation). Respondents also used to denote the children at the institutions are as 'Orphan' , ' such kids' and they felt it's their social responsibility to provide ' Love' and 'affection' towards such children.

3.4 Sympathy and empathy

Sympathy and empathy was identified as factors motivating foster care. The two terms was used interchangeably by the respondents in order to express their feelings while opting for the foster care. "….felt sympathy for those children in the institutions. So I wanted to support them".

"I felt sad about those children who have no place to go and I perceived the psychological trauma they are undergoing as my own, as if it is happening   to my kids".

3.5 Religious teaching

Religious beliefs and teachings   influences the lives of the majority of the people and it was identified as a motivating factor for foster care. For those who are motivated by religious beliefs, fostering a child can be seen as an act of fulfilment of what they 'studied' or 'were taught by sages' or 'learned in the scriptures' and they express it as an act of 'thanks giving for the benefits/blessings they received from God'. The respondents who had formal religious studies either in the childhood or early adult hood wanted to keep up the spirit of their religious beliefs through foster care.

3.6 Prestige and pride of family

Family prestige and pride was also identified as a motivating factor for foster care. Certain families in certain localities are powerful and they often want to play a wider role in the society by protecting cultural values and promoting charitable activities. But, in the current social scenario they often find difficulties in finding proper channels to express their good intentioned activities. Furthermore, due to the socio-economic development of the population of Kerala at large, very few people approach traditionally powerful families for help, which some families view as a sign of their reduced power over the society.

"….supporting others in need is a powerful tool to maintain family prestige. But, no one approach us these days. We saw foster are as an opportunity to keep up the lost prestige and pride of our family". Such motivations also reflects the underlying paradigm shifts in the mindset of the society at large as the charitable behaviour has become wider, which initially was restricted to people belonging to the same community or same locality and used as a tool in extending influences over the society.

3.7 Satisfying the parental demand

Satisfying the parental demands to reduce loneliness and boredom was also identified as a factor, which motivated parents to foster children. The foster child was expected to change home atmosphere positively by meeting one of the unmet needs.

" We leave home regularly in the morning for work and children attend school all the day. We usually return in the evening. Our parents and grandparents remain home throughout and they often feel lonely and bored. Hence, we thought of foster care. We felt that the foster child can reduce their loneliness and boredom."

4. Discussion

The sociodemographic profile of parents who were motivated for foster care, their perception regarding foster care and different themes that motivate them towards foster care were explored in the current study. Different varied and interesting motivational themes   came out through this study from altruistic behaviour to meeting unmet parental needs.

Why people become foster parents can be explained by the resource theory, which suggest that the more resources possessed by a person, the more likely they are to be given to others [8]. Therefore, as shown in our study, families with more resources (higher education, higher income, being married, having time, having parenting experience, having social support and working in a helping profession) are more likely to start fostering.

Foster parents report multiple reasons to become a foster parent, broadly grouped into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations come from within the individual, such as a values, standards and personal traits. Motivations driven by an anticipated reward or by the fulfilment of expectations from others are called extrinsic motivations [9]. Another categorization of motivation for foster care is into child-centered and self-oriented motivations. Child- centered reasons focus on the child's needs. Self-oriented reasons are centered on the foster parents' needs [9]. Studies in American foster parents mainly reported child centered reasons such as wanting to help a child, wanting to provide a child with love and a good home, wanting to provide a home to a child who would otherwise be in an institution, which is consistent with the current study [9]. Around 50% of the American foster parents also believe foster care is a way to do something for the community [9].

For a majority of the current study population, the motive behind foster care was altruism. The foster care workers gave foster parents with motivation as altruism (child-and society- oriented) a high performance rating in foster care [10]. Certain emotionality arise all of a sudden when encountering suffering of others, motivates people to act selflessly to relieve suffering, which can be termed as

altruistic motivation, which remain sustained for a long period and might also lead to empathy in long run [11]. From the study results, it can be argued that certain emotional actors leading to empathy is essential in producing altruistic motivation and it might act as an important mediator resulting in helping and other prosocial behaviours [12]. Feelings such as sympathy and empathy also motivate people to work towards relieving the suffering of vulnerable sections of the society, also thought to result in altruistic behaviours [13]. Furthermore, the mental reward of helping someone in need, in the form of satisfaction, often reinforce altruistic behaviour [14]. Socialisation is another factor leading to altruistic behaviour, as literature found socially excluded people less empathetic than people with socialisation [15]. Responding to the social cause and terming it as one's responsibility could be a part of the social norms, and act as a compelling force towards altruistic behaviour.

The study also found that most of the study population belongs to middle-age. Consistent with the existing literature, our study also shown that altruistic behaviour is more often found among the middle-aged people [16].

Religious beliefs and adherence to religious practices were also found as a motivational theme in our study. The literature suggests that, though no direct linkage was found between religiosity and helping behaviours, it could act as a motivating factor promoting prosocial behaviours [17].
The study also found satisfying the parental demands to reduce loneliness and boredom as a factor which motivated parents to foster children, which is a self-oriented motivation. Literature suggest that such self-oriented motivations were related to worse out-comes in foster care. When parental motivations were 'wanting companionship' or 'wanting to be loved by a child' and related to other foster parental needs, it realised in fewer foster placements and resulted in more placement disruptions and movements [9].

As a society, the population of Kerala, participated in various reforms targeted at helping the vulnerable sections of the society, which might have inculcated helping behaviours into the current generation from early childhood from elders in the family, leading to empathetic attitude towards underprivileged sections of the society, including children of children's home [14]. The current study also showed that the people of urban and semi-urban areas provide more helping hands towards foster care than those at the rural areas [18]. But the level of information regarding the summer foster care reaching the remote rural areas and the reasons for the lack of motivations among the rural population needs to be studied further. Furthermore, apart from altruistic behaviour, rewards also motivate people towards prosocial activities such as foster care. But, does proper care and protection of children happen in a reward oriented atmosphere is a question needs to be studied.

5. Conclusion

The present study explored perceptions and motivations regarding foster care among foster parents. The study found altruism as the most important factor motivating foster care among studied population. Further researches are needed to understand how different motivations affect the quality and continuity of foster care in the Indian context, so that an ideal foster assessment can be made by the concerned authority before entrusting the care of a child to the foster parent.

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