BEING A PARENT OR O PROFESSIONAL?
THE FOSTER CARERS DESCRIBING THE CHILD'S CARE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: *Maternal assistance is a form of special protection of the child separated from the parents; A rich literature, evident from everyday life indicates a higher quality level of child care in this format than other forms of care. Insufficient number of foster carers invites reflection; Too few studies investigate the perception of foster carers about their work, the difficulties they face or the needs they have during such a complex process of caring for a child (Wilson, Sinclair, Gibbs, 2000). We conducted 5 focus groups with 30 participants, nurses aged between 29 and 58 years. We aimed to identify the way they perceive and describe their experience / profession, what are their grievances and what are the skills they must have in order to be considered a good parent. The findings suggest the existence of attitudes confirmed in other previous specialized works, namely, dysfunctions of the protection system, lack of support from social assistance structures, failure to focus on the best interests of the child in making decisions, etc. Dissatisfaction was reported regarding the status of the foster parent profession. It is recommended to be included in the DGASPC strategy, to increase the visibility of the foster care profession as an objective, to inform and sensitize the population about the specifics and complexity of this profession. We suggest ensuring the provision of support services, consultancy and counselling to maternal assistants and improving their dialogue with the staff of the social protection departments.*

Key word: *foster care; profession; competences; difficulties*

1. Introduction

In Romania, maternal care is the newest form of child protection that has developed as a response to the deinstitutionalization process. In 1998, the Government Decision no. 217/1998 on the conditions for obtaining the certificate, the attestation procedures and the status of the professional foster carer, our country has adapted to the needs of the social environment and has implemented the practice of foster care, so appreciated in Western countries. Interest in this social field has increased significantly from year to year, so that in 1998 the number of foster children rises to 479, the maternal care network is constantly growing reaching 3085 a year later and 3833 in mid-2000. The success of the implementation of the unique national strategy regarding the placement of children in foster care has differed from one county to another depending on the decisions taken within the county councils (Neamtu, 2006).

Figure 1. The dynamics of the growth of the network of professional foster carers (1998-2007)

The dynamics of the growth of the network of professional foster carers in the period 1998-2007

— Number of foster carers
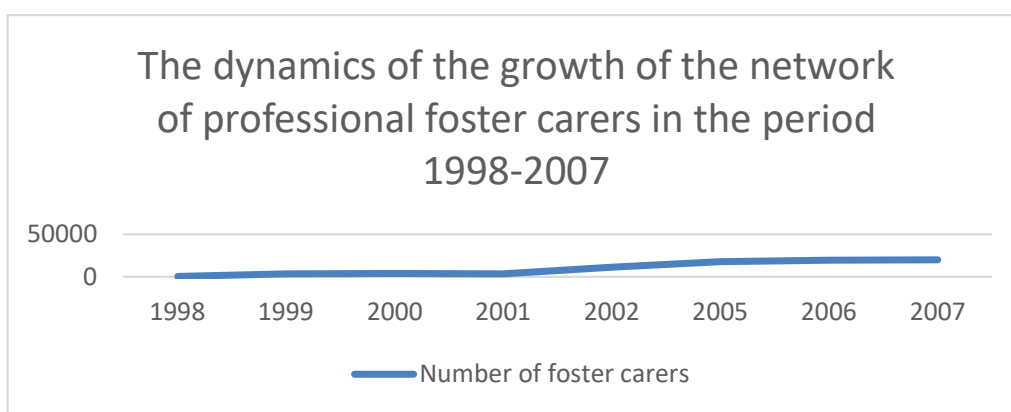
Source*: The professional foster carer's manual*

On June 30, 2021, 17498 children were placed with professional foster carers employed within the DGASPC, 51 children were placed with foster carers employed by accredited private bodies. There is a shortage of foster carers in each county, especially with the entry into force of the new regulation according to which the child up to 9 years old must be placed with a foster carer

Figure nr.2. Number of placed children in foster care; Number of foster carers (2014-2020)

Dynamics of the number of children placed in foster care / Dynamics of the number of foster carers
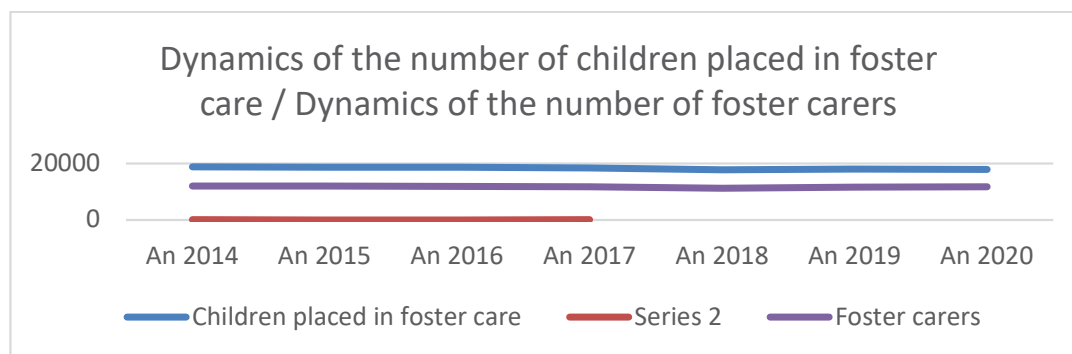
Source: http://andpdca.gov.ro/w/statistici/[1]

In a short time, foster care has become one of the most effective forms of protection (Dumitrescu, 2016; Humphreys et al., 2015) and leads to beneficial results for the child, although a shortage of foster carers can be observed (Smyth & McHugh, 2006) and due to an inadequate support system (Walter 1993), however, as Blythe, Wilkes and Halcomb (2014) have not observed, maternity care activities.

2. Background

The authors identify in a literature review study the main characteristics / conditions that foster carers find important in order to be good parents: Stable and balanced relationships in their family, adequate payment for the service they provide, cultural sensitivity, good relationships work, personality traits. The same study shows that the ambiguity of the role and the deficient relations with the staff from the child protection system, the lack of support services have a negative impact on the well-being of the foster carers; Murray et al., (2011) finds the same results; in the study or nurses claim the need for training and support in managing behavioural or mental health problems of children.

Although it was necessary to professionalize nursing (Wilson K, Evetts, 2006), nurses are not perceived as professionals but as mothers (Blythe et al., 2013); This conclusion also derives from Kirton's (2001) study which suggests that although the financial factor is important, the strongest motivation is the desire to raise a child. It seems that placement with a foster carer involves more consistent resources and funding than placement with a

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[1]National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions, *http://andpdca.gov.ro/w/statistici/[1]*

foster carer; this situation in the states shows that some kinship assistants (extended family, in Romania) may perceive this difference in status as either offensive or intrusive (Sykes, Sinclair, Gibbs, Wilson, 2002). Nurses reported discriminatory attitudes toward their profession, claiming they experienced social isolation and loss of status when they confirmed foster carer status (Blythe et al., 2012).

What do the research say about the experience of foster carers? What about raising children in this regime? Carbone et al (2007) concluded that children living in foster care reported more frequent physical, mental and developmental health problems compared to the general population (Blythe, Jackson, Halcomb, Wilkes, 2012). However, the impact of separation from the biological family is lower and the incidence of pathologies is significantly lower in children who were placed in the foster home compared to those placed in foster care (Dumitrescu, 2016). However, there are many questions that do not currently have an answer about this universe of raising a child in a foster home (Teculeasa, 2017; Macdonald, Turner, 2005); in a recent research conducted on the Romanian population shows that the majority of nurses describe an inner motivation for choosing to practice this profession (Neagoe, Neag, Lucheș, 2019).

Concerns about identifying the needs of foster carers have intensified with declining interest in the profession; the increasingly complex expectations that social assistance structures have from foster carers require the provision of initial and continuing education services and support services for these workers so that they feel prepared for the role of parent (Randle et al., 2016). The author recommends the involvement of social workers in promoting foster care, their valorisation.

3. Methodology

This study is a quality research which has the purpose of evaluating the perception of foster carers regarding the job of a professional parent to a child placed in a special protection programme.

3.1. Objective
1. The description maternal assistants give about the experience of taking care of foster children
2. Identifying the caregiver's perception of the skills and qualities needed to practice the profession of "professional parent"
3. Identifying the difficulties encountered in the procedure of care in the maternal system

3.2. **Participants.** The 5 organized focus groups were attended by 30 people, women aged between 29 and 56, with an average level of

education (86%) or higher (14%). Only 7 participants cared for the child in the absence of a partner. In only two cases has the experience of caring for a child with a disability been reported.

Table 1. Overview respondents.

Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Female	30	100
	Male	0	0
The number of children taken into foster care over time	1 children taken into foster care	4	13,3
	2 children taken into foster care	6	20
	3 children taken into foster care	5	16,6
	4 children taken into foster care	4	13,3
	5 children taken into foster care	3	10
	6 children taken into foster care	1	3,3
	7 children taken into foster care	1	3,3
	8 children taken into foster care	2	6,6
	13 children taken into foster care	1	3,3
	15 children taken into foster care	1	3,3
	16 children taken into foster care	1	3,3
	17 children taken into foster care	1	3,3
Type of foster family	single-parent family	7	23
	biparental family	23	77
Years of experience as a foster carer			
Source of environment	Rural	11	36,6
	Urban	19	63, 4

3.3.Methods

5 Focus Groups were organized with 6 participants each, identified through personal networks initially, then by applying the snowball technique. They are all employees of the general directorate of social assistance and child protection, maternal assistants with different seniority in raising the child. Each Focus Group has been registered. The data collection period was January-March 2021. All participants were women. The interview guide included questions aimed at achieving the above objectives.

3.4.Results

Description of the experience of caring for the child in foster care, made by the foster carers;

We identified a number of concepts commonly used by nurses included in the study that describe the experience of child care. Study participants tend

to describe the experience of raising a child using concepts that describe emotions: love, dedication, fulfillment, satisfaction; caring for the child gives them a feeling that they describe as "alive", which gives them meaning and fills their lives. 26 of the participants associated the experience of raising the child with satisfaction, 28 of them perceived that this activity gives them a meaning and that it has an almost sacred meaning / purpose; for 17 of the respondents, the ability to give oneself to another child and to dedicate one's life to raising and saving another child is indispensable. The concept most used by the respondents was fulfilment (emotional, professional) and the least used but with a strong psychological significance was the accompanying one. Without using this exact word, the respondents' representations about their path regarding the care for a certain period of time of a child converge in this direction.

Figure3. *Concepts associated with experience in the profession of foster carer*
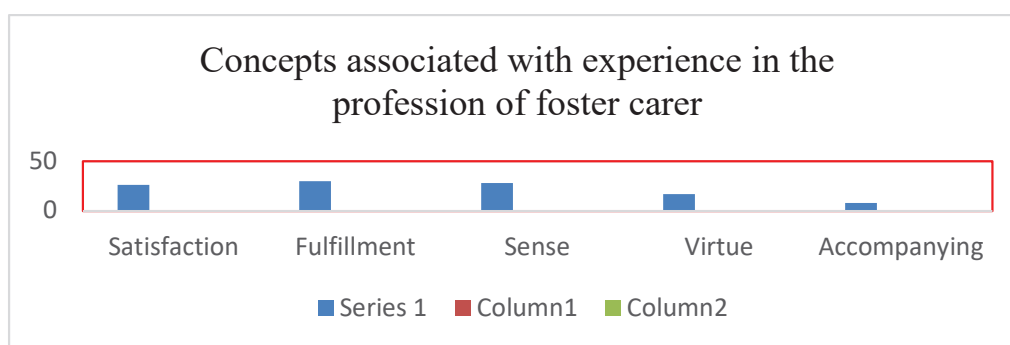
The term love was the most commonly used; "The condition of raising a child in placement (especially in placement) is the ability that the foster carer has to offer love" The other participants confirmed without any deviation.

„I have the feeling that I am doing a good thing, that I am saving someone's life ... this also helps me to understand and accept the fact that I will break up with this child one day "

"... It bothers me a lot when people suspect that I take care of the child for money ... this is not a profession like any other .. first of all I am a mother..even if I accompany him in his upbringing only for a while .."

Identifying the caregiver's perception of the skills and qualities needed for a good caregiver

Invariably, the respondents talked about the ability to give love, care, sensitivity (100%) and patience (100%) the main qualities / competencies of

a good foster carer. Other absolutely necessary qualities would be the acceptance of differences (90%) and honesty (60%, ie 18 respondents). The need to be honest was identified with the sour respondents caring for children placed with biological children; In this context, honesty referred to the ability to treat all children to the same standards. They acknowledged that they had experienced situations of internal conflict and that they had encountered problems with other family members (grandparents, partner, children) regarding the undifferentiated treatment of foster children and biological children. Other qualities mentioned were altruism (70%), optimism (93.3%). What drew attention to the approach of this topic was the fact that the respondents qualified as qualities what seemed rather coping mechanisms: detachment capacity and resilience. They completed the picture of the qualities of the foster carer who is constrained by the nature of the service she provides to "protect her soul".

The protection factors used by foster carers refer to the ability to detach when the child is reintegrated into the family or adopted. This involves building a vision in time:

"*When I took in the first child, I had no strategy in mind ... I raised him, I loved him ... when I separated from him it was the most traumatic experience I had. I realized that I had to prepare for this moment and I built a strategy for the moment of separation ... but it didn't fully work. Today, after the tenth child placed in the placement, I got upset; My vision of what I do (to raise children) is one that helps me when I have to break up with them ... I am a companion, a guide, a saviour for a while on their way ... Doing what I do, fulfil a desire of God, to give love and care to the other; because that's what it's about ... a foster carer does not make money caring for children* "

A unique method of getting used to separating from a child was found by one of the respondents who asks the child to call her mother, referring to the biological mother or the adoptive mother if it is the case as a mother. She believes that this differentiation will help the child to clarify himself with different roles and associations of the affective type name and therefore, to prepare him for the reality he is living.

Highlighting the difficulties identified in the care procedure in the maternal system

A key point of foster care status is the discriminatory mentality and attitude; a common perception of the respondents is that the choice of this profession is based exclusively on the financial criterion. This fact was also highlighted by the study of Blythe et al., (2012) which indicates the stigmatization of social workers and their social isolation. However, 14 women participating

in FG have experienced positive situations in terms of the appreciation and quality of relationships with the parents of the schoolmates of the child in the placement, for example. Some of them encouraged relationships between children. 4 of the women talk, however, about the discrimination of the child by the child's teachers themselves. An observation made almost unanimously refers to the regulations regarding the relationship of the foster carer with the child for whom the adoption procedure has started.

" A competition is created between the adoptive family and us (the foster carer); they perceive us as a potential danger ... the child is not encouraged to want to see us even though he expresses his desire to look for us and see us again".

Another discussed aspect was related to the moment of the child's reintegration in the biological family (which is a priority for the child protection direction); they believe that it is often not in the best interest of the child to return to the family of origin. Often this will only deceive and unbalance him because, it often happens that the parent cannot assume parental responsibilities, and end up leave him again citing childish reasons.

"*.... after great efforts to reassure him and create comfort and stability, we find out that the family wants him back, although we believe that the mother conceals and displays a certain state / availability and desire for the case manager, and another towards us ... We feel (the family of the foster carer) that everything we have built is falling apart but the worst thing is the fact that the child will suffer again*"

A consideration frequently discussed or approached in the literature is related to the financial one; the respondents of our study show that although this is a very important criterion, it is not defining; however, there are difficult situations (illness of the child, special needs, accidents) that emphasize the need for more consistent support.

"We have been sacrificial parents twice ... we often spend our money and do everything for the child; then he returned to his family, and after almost a year he still came to our house ... but he already had many problems ... he was no longer the child we raised ... he smokes, swears, lies ... had many behavioural problems "

Indeed, Separation from people for whom they have formed an attachment is very stressful for children and can have a long-term impact on their development, threatening the success of foster care in some cases (Selwyn et al, 2015). These situations are also a source of stress for all actors involved in the process, the families of the foster carer, the adoptive family.

Respondents to our study believe that these transitions are not always focused on children's needs. Boswell & Cudmore (2014) show that a number of problems arise from the practice and emotion that the adoptive parent offers to this transfer of care.

With all the coping mechanisms involved, the study participants refer to the moment of separation from the child as devastating, a source of suffering and anxiety. The experience of caring for several children also helps them overcome this moment; for some the complexity of the act of care is determined by a lot of dysfunctions of the protection system that produce limitations and frustrations. These have reinforced the great benefits of placing a child along with their own biological children. They believe that they learn and practice Christian values, such as love, acceptance, giving, forgiveness. Respondents unanimously state that the willingness to get involved in raising children separated from their families is the desire to change someone's life for the better, to guide them on their way to find an adoptive family (perception also confirmed by MacGregor et al., 2006). Lack of information about this profession, poor transparency, failure to promote maternity care as a profession with special status are factors that weaken its prestige and indirectly damage the image of nurses.

4. Discussion

The present study confirms previous research (Murray et al., 2011; Blythe, Wilkes and Halcomb, 2014) on the most important needs of foster carers and the issues that affect their well-being. Romanian social workers - participants in the study expressed that the strongest motivation for involvement in childcare activities is to bring happiness to change children's lives, which confirms a study conducted in 2006 by MacGregor and colleagues. (et al.,) In all the focus groups, it was proposed / suggested the development of information and awareness programs for the situation of the child separated from the parents and for the status of the foster carer. According to them, the perception of the vast majority is that being a foster carer means "making the parenting profession a paid role, being understood as a profession."

A dysfunction of the system is represented by the regulations regarding the return of the child to the family of origin; One conclusion of the respondents would be that the family, as a risk factor, rarely turns into the family as a protective factor. However, the return of the child to the place from which he was taken is in itself a basic principle in the protection of the child.

This qualitative research, which included 30 women nurses, highlights the relevance of the perception of what it means to be a nurse and what are the conditions for it to be considered "good". They need to be listened to when

the child's reintegration into the family is decided; they also need support and care alternatives during certain breathing periods because they are in great need. According to previous research (Ahmed et al., 2015) the creation of an environment of safety, security and love are the necessary conditions for achieving an optimal level of satisfaction from the child's perspective; all respondents associated raising the child with these characteristics, recalling that the balance and support of their own family make this goal possible.

5. Recommendationfor practice

The obtained results show that there is a need for an increase in the visibility of foster carers and for an increase in the prestige of this profession. The large number of children in need of foster care remains constant despite social policies to prevent abandonment (Triseliotis, Borland, Hill, 1998). Under these conditions, the foster carer remains the most valuable solution for the child separated from the parents.

Some observations of the nurses included in the study attracted attention because they were very vocal:

- ✓ *" We do not raise children for money; raising these children does not bring us much financial gain"*
- ✓ *" No child replaces the other"*
- ✓ *" Instead of being understood as parents, we are perceived as people who make a business / profession out of it; this is why we are set aside"*
- ✓ *" There is a need for more support from the social assistance departments"*
- ✓ *" We need time to breathe ... some children have health problems or special needs and managing these situations induces a very high state of stress.*

6. Strengths and limitations

The experiences of parents, be they social parents, are as diverse and complex as possible and are mediated by a multitude of variables. The merit of this paper is the analysis of a less approached subject that requires, it seems a great deal of attention; as the respondents themselves stated, "we are satisfied and happy that someone is interested in what we are doing." We identified gaps in the knowledge regarding the experience of nurses in the Romanian literature of the challenges they face. Due to the subjective nature of the data we investigated, we used the group interview / focus group as a method and qualitative analysis, appropriate in this context (Steenbakkers,

van der Steen, &Grietens, 2016). The limit of this study is given by the non-generalization of the results, although the investigated subjects constituted a heterogeneous group (different age groups, differentiated educational level, large variation of the number of children placed: from 1 child to 17, different experience, different background).

7. Conclusions

Maternal care, as it is perceived by the poor, is a practice that is more than a profession; it is a doubling of the parental status, it is a huge challenge because it starts from the premise that it cannot be exercised apart from the total dedication and involvement of the soul. However, it is a relationship "that has a term of validity" and for this, foster carers train complex psychological mechanisms.

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